Argentina: The death of ex-president Carlos Saúl Menem

Rafael Azul
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Argentine ex-president Carlos Menem died on February 14 at the age of 90. Menem's health had deteriorated significantly since June 2020, due to persistent bacterial infections.

Widely hated by Argentine workers for his destruction of jobs and living standards in the 1990s, his death evoked tributes from the country's Peronist President Alberto Fernandez and Vice President Cristina Fernandez Kirchner, as well as from the right-wing ex-president Mauricio Macri and other Peronist and Radical Party leaders.

While the various parties and fronts that represent the politics of Pabloism, Morenismo and Guevaraism, such as the pseudo-left FIT and its main constituents the PTS (Socialist Workers Party) and PO (Workers Party), distanced themselves from this cynical spectacle, they avoided any mention of their own complicity and political betrayals that facilitated Menem's rise to power and consistently blocked the revolutionary struggles of the working class.

Pabloism and its Argentine variant, Morenismo were founded upon a nationalist rejection of revolutionary Marxism and an irrevocable break with Trotskyism and the Fourth International. Both were based on the denial of the revolutionary role of the working class, endowing other forces—the middle class, the peasantry, the national bourgeoisie—with the task of fighting imperialism and achieving socialism.

While these forces today condemn the Menem administration for its neo-liberal economic policies and its pardons for the leaders of the military dictatorship for the kidnapping, torture and murder of left-wing workers and youth, they don't mention their own proposal for a general amnesty in 1980, in the waning years of the dictatorship, or their history of support for the Malvinas War, when they urged the working class to support it in the name of anti-imperialism, national unity and a so-called "democratic revolution," peddling the illusion that it would lead to socialism.

Despite tactical and political differences, the bourgeois governments that ruled Argentina during this entire historical period had one aim in mind, to strangle the revolutionary movement of the working class.

In the 1970s neither the Peronists nor the military junta (1976-1983) had been able to fully contain the struggle of workers, despite the savage repression by the military rulers.

In 1981, in a desperate attempt to unite Argentines behind it, the military launched the invasion of the Malvinas islands (Falklands) in 1981.

Its defeat ended military rule and was followed by the election of Radical Party candidate Raul Alfonsín. With the collapse of the Argentine Peso and hyperinflation, by September 1988 the working class was in open revolt, and Alfonsín was forced to call for early elections. The ruling class turned to Menem and the Peronists.

The Menem administration, Argentina's third instance of Peronist rule (1945-55, 1972-76, and 1989-99), constituted a nationalist corporatist and rabidly anti-socialist response by the ruling class and Argentine military to suppress the upsurges within the working class. To this day, Peronism works in close collaboration with the corporatist trade union bureaucracies and the pseudo-left tendencies to this same end.

A member of the Peronist (Justicialista) Party, Menem ruled Argentina between 1989 and 1999. During the 1988 elections, Menem, the scion of a landowning family in the Andean La Rioja province, and right-wing governor of that region, had presented himself as the "candidate of the poor," a continuator of the social welfare and nationalistic policies of the early years of Gen. Juan Peron's rule in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the midst of a debt crisis and hyperinflation, such measures were impossible under capitalism. Once in power, Menem put in place the policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund and Wall Street vultures.

Demonstrating his government's continuity with the policies of the military dictatorship, in 1990 Menem named Domingo Cavallo to his cabinet. Cavallo had held various posts under the junta, including head of the Central Bank. The day of his appointment, the Buenos Aires stock market

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responded with a 30 percent jump in stock value. Cavallo's appointment was also welcomed by the IMF and Wall Street. Cavallo continued the economic work of the military regime, proceeding to privatize the economy and impose a "made in Wall Street" neo-liberal plan for the economy.

By 1994, 90 percent of state-owned firms had been privatized, and brutal austerity measures drove one-third of all Argentines below the poverty line. In addition to mass unemployment, the job market was transformed with the rise of casual and part-time gig work.

Menem's decade was characterized by privatizing state-owned industries, such as the YPF oil company, the national airlines and the telecommunications system, as well as the lifting of subsidies and tariffs to liberalize foreign trade. His policies, akin to those implemented by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the US, created a wave of mass unemployment—officially 30.9 percent in 1996 (over 4 million people)—and wage cuts. The national pension system was also privatized, following the Pinochet model in Chile, and the labor market liberalized. Austerity measures were imposed to control inflation, further attacking jobs.

Additionally, the Menem administration allied itself with US imperialism, sending Argentine military forces to participate in the first Persian Gulf War and facilitating arm sales to right-wing regimes in Latin America. He also pardoned those found guilty of torture and murder during the military-fascist dictatorship. In this he counted on the support of the CGT trade union federation, whose leaders were also implicated in the formation of the right-wing deaths squads of the 1970s and which actively suppressed the class struggle.

The working class strongly rejected Menem's policies with strikes and protests. In 1993, there was the "*Santiagazo*," a mass protest in which public employees in Argentina's poorest province, owed back wages, set fires to government buildings and the homes of several local trade union and political officials. The rebellion lit the fuse to a social powder-keg, an explosion of anti-government protests, strikes, marches, factory occupations, road blockades, soup kitchens, and other forms of protest, in addition to the general strikes mentioned above. The workers' rebellion encompassed the entire territory of the country. The Menem administration countered with brutal police repression.

The *Santiagazo* exposed the right-wing pro-big business nature of Menem's government, and its willingness to use state repression to impose the policies of banks and financial capitalists, to increase exploitation, impose general poverty on the working class, and generate a "surplus population" of disposable workers at the mercy of the profit interests of big business, the IMF and Wall Street.

Menem's policies were a direct betrayal of his campaign promises to the working class—his pledge to adopt the nationalist economic policies of the first Peron presidency. His administration continued and completed the work the military dictatorship and the Alfonsín government, in the context of world crisis, the collapse of the previous models of state intervention, import substitution and concessions to the working class, and the collapse of nationalist economic models internationally, including, most significantly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Argentine economic and social crisis took place in the context of a global capitalist crisis that included Mexico's economic implosion, the "Tequila crisis" of 1994, and the Asian currency crisis of 1997.

The ability of Menem and the ruling class to control the explosion of working class resistance rested heavily upon the role of the corporatist trade unions aligned with Peronism, as well as the Stalinist, Pabloite and Morenoite tendencies.

After two decades with Menem in power—he had tried to alter the constitution to gain a third term in office—the Peronists suffered a crushing defeat at the polls, reflecting the broad disgust with the impoverishment of the majority of the population, ever-widening social polarization and the soaring unemployment that characterized the Menem era.

By the end of Menem's presidency, 13 million Argentines, out of a total population of 27 million, were classified as poor by the government's own standards, while one study showed that the profits of the 500 most important firms in Argentina increased by 69 percent between 1993 and 1997.

Menem's successor, President Fernando De la Rua of the Radical Party, presided over barely two and a half years of more austerity for the working class and concentration of wealth among a narrow financial oligarchy before he was toppled by a mass revolt by Argentine workers in December 2001, forced to flee the Casa Rosada, Argentina's presidential palace, aboard a helicopter.

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