Tire workers die of COVID in Argentina after pseudo-left-led union enforces return to work

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In a matter of five days last week, two workers at the tire factory of the Argentine company FATE died of COVID-19 after the Tire Worker Union (SUTNA) led by the Partido Obrero (PO; Workers Party) collaborated with management and the Peronist government to keep the plant operating despite growing outbreaks.

Víctor Sotelo, 42, passed away on Tuesday and Javier Gimenez died on Saturday, both due to COVID-19.

Workers immediately called attention to the SUTNA's responsibility, with one writing on the union's Facebook page, "Gentlemen, adopt different measures; don't come looking for votes from your co-workers, they are risking their lives and those of their families. I'm greatly saddened by what happened to Javier, a great friend and co-worker who passed away today from Covid…"

With hundreds more that have been infected at the FATE, Pirelli and Bridgestone plants where the SUTNA is present, the pandemic has exploded the claims of the Partido Obrero and its pseudo-left partners in the union leadership that they represent a "combative," "left" and even "revolutionary" alternative to the right-wing Peronist bureaucrats that dominate the Argentine unions.

At the service of the multinationals and the Argentine oligarch and owner of FATE, Javier Madanes Quintanilla (whose net worth was listed as $1.6 billion in 2018), the SUTNA and its pseudo-left leaders used their radical phraseology as a tool to better suppress opposition among workers to keeping the factories during almost the entire pandemic.

This week, beyond a minute of silence for Giménez, the union refused to even shut down the plant where there is clearly an ongoing outbreak.

Just like the openly right-wing unions, the SUTNA not only failed to mention that Gimenez died of COVID-19 in its official statement, but the union did not even report the death of Sotelo, who worked as a contractor for a third party.

While competing for the SUTNA leadership from the Partido Obrero, even the union officials that belong to the Morenoite Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas (PTS; Socialist Workers Party) have joined the union's secretary general Alejandro Crespo, a longtime Partido Obrero official, in seeking to deflect blame from the union.

On Saturday, the PTS members of the SUTNA Steering Committee, Victor Ottoboni and Enzo Pozi, along with the union delegate at FATE, Hernán Minguez, wrote a piece reporting both deaths and indicating that Giménez got infected inside the plant.

"The position adopted by the national leadership of the SUTNA and the San Fernando branch, controlled by the [PO-led] Black List was to guarantee production," they wrote, adding that the union "does not place as its first priority protecting the lives and health of the families of its members and does everything possible to prevent disrupting production."

Without providing any explanation, the PTS website, *La Izquierda Diario*, took down the article shortly after it was posted and uploaded a new version on Sunday without the above-cited passages or any mention of the active role of the union in herding workers into the plant. Instead, the article complains of the "lack of intervention" by the union and its "grave error" in not convoking an assembly of members and a meeting of the Steering Committee this month—a complaint that shamelessly seeks to provide an alibi for the PTS and other forces on the Steering Committee.

After over a year of keeping the plant open, the PTS union officials cynically write that "tires are not only nonessential, but these companies have enough stock for months." They add, "many co-workers think that we should not be working."

Instead of fighting for these demands of the rank-and-file, however, the PTS officials ultimately propose another avenue that may ultimately be acceptable to the corporations: a 15-day shutdown to disinfect the plant and test all workers, only to send them back into the factories under the promise of vaccinations.

While mouthing slogans about "workplace democracy" and opposing the union bureaucracy, the Argentine pseudo-left organized in the PO and PTS and their electoral alliance, the so-called Left Workers Front (FIT), have been thoroughly exposed by the pandemic. Constituting an instrument for preventing workers from freeing themselves from the shackles of the union bureaucracy and their pro-corporate policies, they have assumed a direct role in enforcing a policy of mass social murder.

While the SUTNA leadership seeks to pin the blame solely on the government, the union's drive to reopen began last April 2020, even before the government lifted its brief and initial lockdown.

Last year, bowing to pressures by the corporate and financial oligarchy, Peronist President Alberto Fernández ordered the gradual reopening of workplaces starting on April 13, 2020, while extending the official "quarantine" until April 26. Ht sought to mask this homicidal policy by asking companies to demonstrate that they could "guarantee the isolation and distancing among workers" before re-opening.

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Anticipating this, the SUTNA leader Alejandro Crespo issued an open letter as early as April 3, 2020, with a short protocol "to re-start the activity in conditions that will protect the health of all workers."

The measures did not go beyond those that were already proving to be fatally inadequate at workplaces all over the world. The list included temperature screening; distancing rules in the entrances, workstations, changing rooms and transportation; frequent cleaning; masking; hand sanitizer; sending workers home with symptoms and notifying workers about positive cases.

While knowingly endangering the lives of workers for profits, the Partido Obrero repeatedly declared in its publications, union and party activities that the SUTNA protocol provided an example for the "safe" reopening of other nonessential workplaces, most recently of schools. As the Partido Obrero wrote last August, when the government was initiating its campaign to reopen schools, "The solution to this crisis is easily implemented and with effective results: safety protocols in every workplace and activity… just like the SUTNA comrades have been doing."

A few days earlier, on August 5, a FATE worker wrote on the union's Facebook page that these measures "are worthless. More than 50 infected. The only thing that can save us is to shut down the factory for a while."

Whenever anger surged over infections, however, the SUTNA implemented one-day "Hollywood" strikes as a safety valve, while isolating the tire workers from other sectors in Argentina and internationally facing the same situation. To no effect, a mere 24-hour strike was even carried out when Bridgestone fired two workers in January to intimidate growing opposition over the refusal of the company to even follow the existing protocols.

Last August 14, with a euphemism worthy of management, the Partido Obrero wrote that these partial strikes had achieved "the isolation of more than 700 cases" at the tire factories.

Most recently, on May 20, 2021, the government decreed a new "lockdown" while classifying several manufacturing sectors as "essential," but not tire production. This measure was not taken until daily cases and deaths in the country had already increased fivefold since March.

Workers refused to work on Friday, May 21, only to be ordered by the union to return to work after a "lightning hearing" with Pirelli, Bridgestone and FATE, along with government officials.

In a cynical statement dated May 23, after the government issued a special decree to include tire production as "essential," the SUTNA rushed to place the responsibility for future infections and deaths on the workers themselves.

"In these complex times, all tire co-workers must keep acting with the greatest responsibility and compromise, understanding that the worker' organization is the one that has guaranteed (and will continue to guarantee) the safety, purchasing power, respect and interests of all workers in the tire union," the SUTNA wrote.

This statement greatly angered the workers, with several expressing on social media the need to shut down the plant and denouncing SUTNA for betraying them. "Health is what matters now; we must stay home; there are infections every day at the factories. It takes them a weekend to turn the tables against workers," one wrote on the union's Facebook page.

Facing this growing opposition within the plant, the SUTNA unwisely took a page from their FIT "comrades" in the teachers' unions, who have been using the demand of priority vaccinations to enforce a homicidal return to school policy.

Similarly, the SUTNA posted a series of illustrations demanding vaccines for their members, but workers were quick to identify this not only as an attempt by the union to deflect responsibility, but also to divide the tire workers from workers in other sectors.

A FATE worker, Anibal, wrote, "Even immunized, we could still take the virus to our homes. That already happened to a lot of us!" Another commenter wrote, "Truck delivery drivers like me are also essential and we are out on the streets every day without a vaccine." And another added: "What is the difference with my husband who works in construction or my sons-in-law, or those in the markets, etc. etc… all of us workers are in the same situation."

Workers need new forms of organization that will take it as given that the interests of workers are not compatible with those of management or the trade union bureaucracy and will oppose capitalist exploitation and its imperative of lining the pockets of the financial oligarchy. These committees will not base their demands on what the corporations claim they can afford, but on what is necessary to protect the lives and well-being of the entire working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*, has issued a call for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Such committees have already been established in auto plants and among Amazon workers, teachers, bus drivers, tea plantation workers and other sectors in the United States, Europe, Australia and Sri Lanka.

These committees are fighting to take the response to the pandemic out of the hands of the ruling class and its lackeys in the unions and into the hands of the working class, on an explicitly scientific and international, that is, socialist basis. We urge workers in Argentina and internationally who agree with the necessity of this initiative to get involved today.

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