

Argentina's political crisis deepens with attempted assassination of Vice President Cristina Kirchner

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Last Friday, September 2, a far-right extremist attempted twice to fire a pistol held centimeters away from the face of the vice president of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who ruled the country from 2007 to 2015, following a one-term presidency of her late husband, Nestor Kirchner.

The gunman was identified as Fernando Andrés Sabag Montiel, 35 years old. Born in Brazil, he was naturalized and a resident of Argentina since 1993.

Footage from the assassination attempt shows that Montiel has a number of Nazi tattoos, and he has been identified by authorities as a far-right sympathizer. So far, police have revealed no wider organizational links.

Yesterday, the leading judge in the case sealed the investigation just after ordering the arrest of Montiel's 23-year-old girlfriend, Brenda Uliarte, identified as a supporter of the far-right Argentine House member Javier Milei, an apologist for Argentina's 1976-1983 fascist-military dictatorship. Shortly after the attack, Uliarte posted a social media video dissociating herself from it, but ranting against "corruption," in a backhanded endorsement of the action.

Also yesterday, Security Minister Aníbal Fernández offered his resignation to President Alberto Fernández after it was revealed that the gunman's cellphone had all the data erased under unknown circumstances after its seizure by security forces.

The attempted murder came in the midst of an extraordinary political crisis. On August 22, Kirchner was charged with corruption in the so-called "Vialidad" case, accused of favoring a fraudulent building company in dozens of construction projects in her native Patagonian state of Santa Cruz when she was president between 2007 and 2015. The Prosecutor's Office has called for her to be imprisoned for 12 years and banned from holding political office.

The gunman infiltrated a crowd of supporters who have held a vigil below her private apartment in the upscale Recoleta neighborhood since the indictment, and was greeting her as she returned home.

Minutes after the attack, President Alberto Fernández decreed a holiday for the next day and called on Argentines to support

"democracy" and repudiate the attack. Authorities report that 500,000 demonstrators rallied against the attack in front of the presidential palace, the Casa Rosada, on Saturday.

The attempted murder and the indictment of Kirchner, a former president associated with the so-called "Pink Tide" of bourgeois-nationalist governments in South America in the early 2000s, take place against the backdrop of a crushing social and political crisis in the country. It has seen the ruling Peronist Justicialista Party hemorrhage support and lose the control of the Argentine Senate for the first time in the party's 80-year history last year. The crisis also saw the far-right, led by Milei, win 1 million votes and enter Congress for the first time.

In August, Argentina suffered a sharp acceleration of monthly inflation to 7.4 percent, setting annual inflation on a path to surpass 90 percent by the end of the year, and potentially hit three digits—the highest anywhere in the world. Poverty stands at over 40 percent, with just under 10 percent of Argentines facing food insecurity. A recent Caritas charity report revealed that 60 percent of Argentines have been poor at some point during the last 10 years, and 30 percent of them have been poor for the whole of the last 10 years.

Meanwhile, inflation has been compounded by criminal speculation by major soy, wheat and corn producers, who have withheld grain from the market, betting that the government will be forced to devalue the national currency, the peso, eventually leading to an explosion of profits from exports.

The political response to the social catastrophe on the part of the Peronists has been utterly reactionary. Having lost over 6 million votes between 2019, when it was returned to power, and the 2021 midterm Congressional elections, the government has steadily moved to the right, reneging on each and every election promise in order to meet payments on a massive US\$45 billion IMF loan.

Shortly before Kirchner's indictment, on August 3, the fractured Justicialista party had agreed on the nomination of Speaker of the House Sergio Massa for a new economic "super-ministry" bringing under its control the Development and Agriculture, Grains and Fishing portfolios. Massa, a former

right-wing Peronist and favorite of big business, became the third Economy Minister in a month, after the Kirchner-appointed Silvina Batakis resigned less than a month after taking office. The nomination of Massa made President Fernández all but a figurehead.

One of Massa's first announcements was the end of energy and water subsidies equivalent to 1.0 percent of the GDP, in an attempt to bring the budget deficit to less than 2.5 percent of the GDP next year and fulfill the conditions dictated by the IMF. Only yesterday, Massa announced the government will allow large grain exporters to trade dollars at the rate of 200 pesos to one, while the official currency exchange stands at only 130 pesos to one, providing big agriculture the windfall profits they have demanded, at the cost of generalized hunger. The special exchange rate is being justified as a means of rebuilding the country's foreign currency reserves and stabilizing the peso, which the government claims will eventually bring inflation under control. It was announced less than 24 hours before Massa was due to fly to Washington to take new IMF orders.

Under these conditions, the prospective presidential candidacy of Kirchner in the 2023 elections has become an ever more urgent matter for the Argentine ruling class. In the almost ritualistic theatrics of Peronism, Kirchner has been a critic of the IMF deal, railing against President Fernández for not being "up to the task" of leading Argentina out of the crisis. For over two years, she has made public declarations opposing cabinet policies, and her son, Máximo, the leader of the Peronist block in the House, quit his leadership in March claiming he was not "fit" to lead the Peronist delegation in voting on the measures demanded by the IMF because he did not believe in them. Shortly after, the current deal being enforced by Massa was approved with the votes of his tiny Renovation Front Party, and the opposition, including the traditional electoral opponents of Peronism, the century-old Civic Radical Union.

Kirchner has been keen to be photographed alongside Massa during office hours, attempting to claim credit for any gains he makes in restoring the "confidence" of the imperialist overlords of the Argentine ruling class, while keeping a safe distance from the brutal austerity that allows her to once again claim the long-exhausted mantle of Peronist nationalism and reformism.

After being indicted a fortnight ago, she was quick to raise the personal connections of prosecutors and judges with her right-wing billionaire successor, former president Mauricio Macri, who engineered the current IMF deal. Her defense pointed to numerous pictures of the prosecution team enjoying parties at posh Macri properties that should disqualify them from the case, but were ignored by the court.

At the same time, she claimed the real target of the prosecutors was "Peronism" and workers' social rights, with the case concocted to hurt her election prospects. As vice president and head of the Senate, she enjoys wide immunity. Even if the case reaches a speedy conclusion, any enforcing of the sentence against her requires a two-thirds Senate

supermajority vote that the Peronists can easily bar, except for an internal party coup. However, the charges will impact her political standing, including within the cutthroat Peronist political disputes, possibly opening the way for more open alignment with Massa's program.

There is no doubt that Peronism, as an integral part of the corrupt Argentine bourgeois state machine, has committed and is currently engaged in countless crimes against the Argentine working class—of which the IMF-dictated austerity is one of the most brutal. At the same time, its populist rhetoric has attracted the ire of the most ruthless elements within the ruling class, who fear the party may lose control of workers trapped within its countless corrupt unions and "grassroots" organizations. This has been made abundantly clear by the targeting of Kirchner by both prosecutors and a fascist assailant in such a short period.

Furthermore, the ominous revelation that critical data for solving the case, the records on the gunman's phone, have been lost raises serious questions about whether the security forces themselves collaborated with or are covering up the attack.

The rise of the far-right is not by any means an exclusive Argentine phenomenon. On the contrary, it has been the rule in every country, with the ruling classes preparing to drown in blood the rising opposition of workers to war, inequality, poverty and the unnecessary mass death and disability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a capitalist party, Peronism fears the independent action of workers infinitely more than fascist violence. It has already proven so by exterminating its own left-wing under the government of Isabel Perón in 1975-1976, decapitating the working class and leaving it defenseless in face of the fascist-military coup of 1976, which led to tens of thousands of political murders.

The current political crisis makes ever more urgent that Argentine workers break with Peronism and all its pseudo-left apologists such as the Patria Grande Front of Juan Grabois and the United Left and Workers Front (FIT-U), and build a new socialist and internationalist political leadership—an Argentine section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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