

Pseudo-left union in Argentina imposes sellout contract on tire workers after following nationalist strategy

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On Friday, the Argentine Tire Workers Union (SUTNA) led by the pseudo-left Partido Obrero (Workers Party) shut down a week-long strike and announced a meager deal with the tire companies before any vote by the workers.

On a video posted on social media, Alejandro Crespo, a longtime Partido Obrero official and secretary of the union, presented the deal as a “victory” that “resolves the conflict” and marks a “historic day.” Then he invited workers to merely “celebrate” the deal during an assembly the following day.

The agreement, mediated by the Peronist government of President Alberto Fernández, vowed to maintain “social peace, abstaining from any measure that could affect in any way production at any of the plants of the respective companies.”

Immediately, the politicians, union officials and publications of the Partido Obrero and its coalition partners of the “Left Workers Front-Unity” (FIT-U) launched a social media campaign celebrating the deal as historic and presenting the SUTNA and Crespo as the best leadership that workers can hope for.

Amid this campaign and having had their wages frozen for months despite rampant inflation, workers ratified the agreement during a mass assembly on Saturday.

The one-year agreement stipulates an automatic adjustment to official inflation applied each quarter plus a 10 percent increase above inflation in June 2023, as well as a bonus of 100,000 pesos (US\$674). The deal affects about 3,000 tire workers at the plants of the multinationals Pirelli and Bridgestone and the Argentine company FATE, all located in Buenos Aires.

From any angle, it was a sellout deal that enforces poverty wages, which are paid in rapidly depreciating pesos, while companies continue to massively increase their export revenues in dollars. As indicated by the SUTNA itself, its members make on average 120,000 pesos (US\$805) per month, which was exactly the official poverty line for an

average family last month.

The automatic increases will not actually correspond to the real cost of living. Based on official inflation statistics, the contract initially cites a 66 percent yearly raise, but the basic staples and services that constitute the poverty line increased annually by 87 percent, according to the Focus Market firm. In other words, the deal will actually plunge workers deeper into poverty.

Moreover, economist Luis Campos of the CTA Autónoma union reported that tire workers have seen their real wages fall 25 percent since 2013 and remain among the lowest paid industrial workers in the country. The SUTNA also reported that wages represent only 2 percent of the final price of the tires, but the deal it calls “historic” will ultimately reduce this percentage.

In this situation, it is irrelevant what wage offer management put on the table. The insistence by the SUTNA and its pseudo-left apologists that the goal was to defeat the 38 percent wage offer only testifies to a conscious effort to advance a deal that would comply not with what workers needed, but with what was acceptable to the companies.

The demand that first ignited the struggle was the return of double pay on weekends, but it was simply dropped by the SUTNA in the negotiations.

None of the other concerns expressed repeatedly by workers throughout the struggle was fought for by the union. This included opposition to what workers call the “American system” of working seven days and getting two off, while management forces workers to change shifts from one week to the next. The “historic” deal also discarded the prime concern of workers of not being able to spend quality time with their families.

On the other hand, several workers expressed safety concerns, primarily that they must breathe the toxic fumes of burning rubber for eight and a half hours each day with no protection.

On this subject, it must be recalled that the SUTNA led the

effort nationally to reopen factories after a brief shutdown during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as April 3, 2020, amid wildcat strikes across Europe and North America to shut down production, Crespo sent a letter to FATE, Pirelli and Bridgestone proposing a series of insufficient measures to re-start production.

Soon after the SUTNA worked out a deal with management and the government to herd workers back into unsafe plants, workers began reporting hundreds of infections. On June 26, one worker wrote poignantly on the union's Facebook page: "Tire workers need, above all, to decide democratically if we must work or not in this health context, since it's evident that tires are not essential goods."

For a short interval, the union was compelled to call daylong strikes to protest outbreaks, but this did nothing to stop them.

Overall, after six years under the leadership of the Partido Obrero, tire workers have seen nothing but a drop in already poverty-level wages, the despotic rule by management, and ongoing deadly working conditions.

The fact that the contract battle extended for five months reflected the overwhelming opposition of the rank-and-file to these conditions.

The strategy of the Partido Obrero leadership was characterized by a failed nationalist perspective oriented to the union bureaucracy and the Peronist government.

During the first four months, the SUTNA called for partial 24-to-48-hour "Hollywood" strikes, which only served as an escape valve while minimizing the impact on the companies. However, by mid-September wildcat strikes began erupting at Bridgestone and anger toward the useless strikes was growing.

In response, SUTNA called a march on the Presidential Palace on September 22 under the slogan of "Demanding the government to shoulder its responsibility in the conflict." Crespo then called for an indefinite strike at the three companies and set up camp at the Labor Ministry. It must be stressed that all of these decisions were being made bureaucratically from the top down.

Some media reports point out that at this point workers battling inflation in other sectors began arguing that "we should do the same." But, at no point did SUTNA or its pseudo-left apologists call on workers across Argentina to break free from the union bureaucracies and expand the struggle independently. Instead, they told workers to continue appealing to those union bureaucracies and the government. This only served to underpin their authority over workers and create illusions that these capitalist institutions can be pressured to advance the interests of workers.

When the corrupt Camioneros and Argentine Workers

Central (CTA) bureaucracies tied to the Peronist government gave empty statements of solidarity while keeping their members on the job, the SUTNA leadership and FIT-U outlets expressed their appreciation.

Earlier this year, the SUTNA leadership voted to leave the CTA and take steps to join the General Confederation of Workers (CGT). The arguably more right-wing Peronist leadership of the CGT responded by calling on the government to quickly suppress the struggle at SUTNA.

The dead end of the Partido Obrero and FITU's nationalist perspective was on full display. In response to the increased imports by the tire companies to counteract the effects of the strikes within Argentina, Crespo responded—in his own words—by "requesting the corporations and the government [pledge] explicitly and in writing to avoid importing any tire covers that could be produced within the country."

Ignoring the globalized nature of capitalist production, the SUTNA leadership did not appeal to workers internationally, but instead to the corporations and the bourgeois government that represents them. Such a perspective is anathema to socialist internationalism, let alone Trotskyism, which the Partido Obrero claims to represent.

The SUTNA's counterpart in Brazil, the SINTRABOR, sought to provide a cover for their shared nationalist strategies by sending a letter as late as September 27 to the CEO of Bridgestone, demanding he "meet the demands and proposals of workers" and "not provoke a larger conflict at a regional and global level." However, at no point was there an actual effort to mobilize workers in Brazil in support of the strike in Argentina.

The alternative to this pro-capitalist and nationalist strategy and the alliances among right-wing bureaucracies is the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, about which the pseudo-left parties and unions across Latin America have been entirely silent. The IWA-RFC recently saw the addition of the Tire Workers Rank-and-File Committee in the United States, whose foundational statement declares, "It is high time we open lines of communication with our brothers and sisters around the country and internationally and fight for what we need, not what the corporations and unions say is 'affordable.'"



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