

Argentine dockworkers strike over co-worker's death

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A sixty-year-old longshoreman drowned on May 12 at 4:30 in the morning at the Port of Rosario, in Argentina's Paraná River. His fellow workers responded by declaring a strike. The dockworker, Juan Oscar Contreras, was a night-shift casual worker.

He slipped from on top of a truck that was at the edge of the dock; a temporary bridge had been placed between the truck and the ship that was being unloaded. Other workers immediately lifted him out of the water but could not revive him. The port has no emergency squads, equipment or ambulances.

Workers denounced port authorities over unsafe conditions that exist throughout the facility, and initiated strike action. One worker pointed out that, while there are life vests in the facility, none of them are distributed among the longshore workers. According to one eyewitness, management tried to dress Contreras's body with a life vest.

Cesar Aybar, head of the local trade union, the Sindicato Unidos Portuarios Argentinos (SUPA), declared: "Sadly, between 4 and 5 in the morning, one of our fellow workers died. We have been denouncing for a long time the way that things are done; the port is not in the conditions it needs to be in, in terms of hygiene and safety." Aybar said that this was the third dockworker fatality at Puerto Rosario.

The national federation of longshore unions, FEPA, indicated that it was considering a national strike over the worker's death, which it described as an "assassination," a result of the port's negligence. "Our organization totally backs the work stoppage organized by the United Dockworkers of Rosario (SUPA Rosario) and demands an exhaustive investigation on this worker's death," it stated.

Both SUPA and FEPA are corporatist organizations with a long history of corruption and betrayal of

workers' struggles. Both organizations are accomplices in what amounts to decades of deterioration in Argentina's logistical network, of which the ports are an important part. The Rosario Terminal is a major exporter of cereals, sunflower seeds, soybeans, vegetable oils and processed agricultural commodities.

Argentine ports, once government property, were privatized in the 1990s, under the pro-business administration of Peronist president Carlos Ménem. The major ports, such as Rosario, were taken over by multinational agribusiness conglomerates, including US-based Cargill and Bunge, Dreyfus (France), COFCO (China), Glencore (Switzerland), and Vicentín and AGD (based in Argentina). Vicentín is one of the owners of the Port of Rosario Terminal, where Contreras fell and died.

These owners exercise oligarchic control over the ports and their workers. Government agencies keep no independent records of the exports of cereals, oils and other agricultural products; they rely on what the companies volunteer to report.

Argentina's ports were privatized together with other parts of the country's logistics supply chain, including railroads and airlines.

The work stoppage takes place in an atmosphere of open rebellion among Argentine workers. In January, Rosario dockworkers ended strike action over the sacking of 25 dockworkers and attacks on wages, along with company-imposed speed-ups.

Other sections of the working class currently carrying out protest strikes and strikes over wages and working conditions include subway workers and educators. Many of these uprisings take on a spontaneous character and are in opposition to the trade union bureaucracies.

On Tuesday, Port of Rosario management refused to

meet with a government arbitrator and locked out the port workers. Two hundred trucks have been prevented from entering the terminal, as the company (Valentín) attempts to pit dockworkers against the truck drivers. Port of Rosario Terminal head Leonardo Feltrinelli cynically claimed that Contreras's death had been merely "a fatality" and gave guarantees that safety procedures had "been verified" by the company.

According to a spokesperson for the SUPA union, "the company refused to give in to the arbitrator's suggestions and declared that the work would take place as it saw fit." Describing operations at the port as "very poor" in terms of infrastructure, hygiene and safety, the SUPA bureaucrat called on the provincial governor to intervene.

Neither SUPA nor any of the port unions have called for an extension of the work stoppage at the Port of Rosario Terminal to all the other terminals and ports, isolating the Port of Rosario workers. It now appears that dockworkers will be back on the job toward the end of this week, even though nothing seems to have been resolved.

Argentina is in the midst of an inflationary debt crisis and is very dependent on its export revenues; yearly price increases exceed 100 percent. Its finances have been taken over by the International Monetary Fund, which is demanding ever-increasing austerity policies on behalf of national and international vulture funds. These include a drop in imports and attacks on workers' living standards.

Over 40 percent of the population now subsists below the poverty line. A recent report from the Catholic University in Buenos Aires indicates that, since the pandemic began in 2020 there has been a dramatic increase in youth hunger (among those under 17 years of age) as well as increases in extreme hunger. This, in a nation that continues to be one of the world's leading providers of agricultural foodstuffs. Increases in government food aid and other programs for the poor are quickly eclipsed by price increases.

Agricultural monopolies play a huge role as the Argentine economy struggles to resolve its financial implosion.

In an attempt to deal with the inflationary crisis, the current administration created a soy-bean-based peso-dollar exchange. Exporters that deposit their dollars in Argentine banks are guaranteed an exchange rate that

exceeds the official peso price of dollars. Yet exporters are very much part of the flight of dollars out of the country, routinely depositing their dollar profits in tax havens across the world.



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