

Strikes and mass protests led by teachers erupt across Argentina

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In the Argentine province of Salta, on the border with Bolivia and Chile, the local legislature has rammed through a law that criminalizes any form of social protest that may restrict other freedoms, including strikers' picket lines, roadblocks and mass gatherings.

The misnamed "Citizen coexistence and conciliation" law is aimed at repressing an ongoing mass upsurge by teachers and healthcare workers in Salta, which has involved six weeks of wildcat strikes, roadblocks across major mining routes, and mass demonstrations.

Similar bills are being discussed by legislators in neighboring Jujuy, where teachers have been striking for over a week and leading demonstrations that have faced heavy repression.

Even before the law was passed, educators in Salta were repeatedly and brutally attacked by police, while suspected strike leaders were singled out, persecuted and arrested.

On Saturday, a "self-convoked" assembly of workers, organized in defiance of the union bureaucracy that opposes their protest actions, voted to continue the strike and mobilizations and reject an offer made by Salta's right-wing governor, Gustavo Saenz, which would have raised the starting monthly wage for teachers to 203,000 pesos per month and ignored all other demands.

This is well below the 320,000 pesos (or US\$662, according to the more accurate black market "dollar blue") and automatic cost-of-living adjustments demanded by teachers in accordance with the cost of the basic basket of goods. Strikers have also demanded the revocation of what they've called the "anti-picketing law," the dropping of all charges against the 19 strikers who were arrested and later freed, and major budget increases.

While teachers across Argentina are being repressed by state and federal authorities even without such legislation, the fast-tracking of the anti-picketing law by Salta authorities in response to demands by business groups represents a warning to workers across the country and internationally. The bill was backed by legislators from both main factions of the political establishment, the coalition of Peronist President Alberto Fernandez and those belonging to the openly right-wing coalition led by former President Mauricio Macri. Governor Saenz has backed both factions.

Forty years after the fall of Argentina's savage military junta, and in the context of financial demands from the International Monetary Fund and Wall Street, as well as the political demands of US imperialism to align behind its confrontation with Russia and China, the ruling class is once again responding to the growing struggles of the working class with a turn to dictatorship and police-state repression.

Currently, striking teachers are mobilizing in seven of Argentina's 23 provinces (Jujuy, Salta, Misiones and Formosa in the north; Santa Cruz and Chubut in the south; and Buenos Aires in the center). Protests are taking place independently of and in opposition to the trade unions that claim to "represent" them.

Teachers are raising vital demands over wages and working conditions as Argentina's chronic inflationary crisis has accelerated and is predicted to reach 150 percent this year, severely impacting poverty rates and teachers' living standards, even as share prices are skyrocketing on the Merval stock market index.

What is also at stake in these struggles is the defense of public schools and public hospitals, whose services and infrastructure are seeing a rapid deterioration to finance this transfer of wealth to the ruling elite.

Striking Chubut teachers have described deplorable conditions in their Patagonian schools, for example, with classrooms that lack heating and the absence of transportation for students. Teachers also describe being owed months of back pay and not being able to pay their rent and utility bills.

A recent report from Buenos Aires' Catholic University (Universidad Católica Argentina, UCA) shows a record number of citizens in poverty, 18 million or 43 percent of the population. Over 3 million, or 8 percent of the population, face food insecurity. These numbers have been increasing since 2010. Government welfare allotments have not kept up with the increasing poverty rates.

Teachers are also demanding more money for in-school nutrition programs that have not kept up with the increasing poverty and hunger that teachers witness among many of their students. Another demand is that child psychologists be hired to meet student needs; teachers report more students with psychological problems, including depression.

The waves of educator protests and strikes, in this nation of 46 million, have been uninterrupted since the reopening of schools in 2021 (after closing at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic). This greatly affected teachers and students' health and lives. In poorer districts, teachers were forced back to work in old, sometimes collapsing schools, in conditions where social distancing is impossible and when many students and teachers had not been vaccinated. These areas also lack sufficient clinics and hospital beds.

The reopening of schools caused dramatic increases in COVID-19 infections, from 2.3 million in March 2021 to 5.5 million at the end of the school year (December 2021) and 9 million in March 2022.

The provincial and federal governments responded to workers' demands with the same excuse—"there is no money"—while increasing repression and relying on the betrayals by the corporatist trade union apparatus.

One month ago, teachers in Santa Cruz province mobilized and demanded a national strike. Since then, educators, transit workers and dockworkers have gone into struggle, raising the specter of the Cordobazo of 1969, which triggered one of the biggest popular insurrections in Latin American history. This revolutionary crisis was betrayed by the Peronist trade union bureaucracy and parties and their Stalinist and Morenoite satellites, who channeled opposition behind illusions in the Peronist government and set the stage for the 1976 coup that installed a brutal US-backed military junta.

On May 30 and 31, following weeks of wildcat strikes, tens of thousands of teachers, healthcare workers, public employees and their supporters carried out mass demonstrations and roadblocks across Salta, called the "21st Century Salteñazo" in the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12*, alluding to 1969.

As it did 54 years ago, the Peronist trade union bureaucracy is working today to suppress the emerging upsurge across Argentina. Meanwhile, each major pseudo-left party is calling for conferences of their own factions within the teachers' trade unions for emergency discussions.

Ultimately, each tendency seeks to channel the protests behind their own maneuvers with sections of the ruling class. This was demonstrated by the appeal by the Partido Obrero and the Morenoite Workers Socialist Movement (MST) to "all the left and all involved in struggles" to participate in a "national plenum" in Buenos Aires ahead of the presidential elections this year. While both parties are campaigning for their own slate within the so-called Left Workers Front-Unity (FIT-U) coalition, the event will discuss how to "unite the forces of all popular struggles" and present "an alternative for power."

This means that they are escalating their efforts to form a coalition with sections of the Peronist ruling party. This has already involved joint demonstrations under a fraudulent "united front" with the forces around the Peronist presidential candidate Juan Grabois, the government official Emilio Pérsico and the movements they lead.

In Salta as elsewhere, the Socialist Workers Party (PTS), also part of the FIT-U, is appealing to the Peronist union bureaucracy of the CTA, which supports the Fernandez administration, to call for a general strike. Meanwhile, the Salta Teachers' Classist Tendency of the pseudo-left party *Política Obrera*—a faction thrown out of Partido Obrero and led by Jorge Altamira—has been playing a major role in directing the self-convoked workers behind talks with the right-wing Governor Saenz.

On May 31, after the mass demonstrations, the Tendency wrote in a statement: "Let Saenz himself receive us, recognize our elected and revocable delegates as the exclusive representation of teachers and let him fulfill immediately our list of demands since he has the power to do it."

Workers need to oppose these opportunist proposals, which will only lead to new betrayals. There is nothing that will be resolved by personal appeals to Governor Saenz, any other governor or President Fernandez, all of whom have made clear their commitment to further impoverish workers and let social infrastructure and services collapse against the will of the working majority. All of them must be brought down by the working class, organized independently of all Peronist and pseudo-left factions of the union bureaucracy.

Above all, workers need to understand that their movement is part of a global resurgence of the class struggle against capitalism and war, whose costs and effects are being placed on the backs of workers everywhere. Teachers and other sections of workers fighting in Argentina can only defend their social and democratic rights through an international struggle with their class brothers and sisters globally. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is fighting to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees as a democratic organ to coordinate and execute this necessary counteroffensive of the working class globally.



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