

Over one million march in defense of Argentina's universities as Milei brutally represses protests

Rafael Azul
24 April 2024

Every day the harsh austerity measures being pursued by the government of fascistic President Javier Milei bring Argentina closer to all-out class war.

Popular opposition to these policies, which enjoy overwhelming support from international finance capital and in Washington, erupted Tuesday with an over-million-strong student protest movement filling the streets of Buenos Aires and other major cities. The demonstrations were called against the Milei government's proposed cuts in funding for the country's public universities, which have threatened to force the closure of the prestigious Universidad de Buenos Aires and other institutions.

After having sought to minimize the significance of this movement in recent weeks, the government was compelled to backtrack in the face of the mass outpouring, insisting that it was intent not on closing universities, but rather on monitoring their budgets. In his ultra-right-wing election campaign, Milei had promoted private universities as superior to public and advocated a voucher system to shift funding away from the public institutions.

Whatever tactical shift in its rhetoric in the face of the mass student protests, the Milei government remains committed to enforcing its austerity program and on using naked force to ram it down the throats of the Argentine working class.

On April 10, along downtown Buenos Aires' 9th of July Boulevard, scores of government police and gendarmes brutally repressed a demonstration demanding food. The thousands of demonstrators were attacked with tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets and outright beatings.

The demonstrators had rallied outside the former

Ministry of Social Development, which President Javier Milei dissolved and turned into a department of the new Ministry of Human Capital. They defied the recently imposed prohibitions against marches and rallies that block traffic to demand food for the nation's thousands of soup kitchens recently deprived of government aid.

Another demand of the protesters was an end to increasingly arbitrary suspensions of subsidies for the unemployed.

While demonstrators were nursing their wounds and people were still being detained, municipal and federal officials celebrated the attack on social media. Milei, who was visiting Miami during these events, applauded the police and gendarmes, indicating that the attacks on the working class, the poor, and the press will continue and accelerate.

Milei's economic shock therapy policies are targeting the working class and middle class, causing widespread misery and hunger across this nation, while the economic elites, oil and mining companies, and agricultural bosses are allowed to hide their dollar profits in overseas banks, with Milei's approval.

Milei's strategy consists in abolishing social programs and bringing back conditions of exploitation not seen since the beginning of the 20th century. As soon as he took over the presidency last December, he devalued the peso by 50 percent, eliminated price controls for public transit, electricity and other essential goods and services, and initiated an on-going wave of layoffs of government workers. While provoking a spike in inflation and unemployment, his administration ended subsidies to soup kitchens across the country.

This program is now backed by US imperialism, the

International Monetary Fund, the Argentine oligarchy, and vulture hedge funds around the world. On April 10, the World Bank, which represents the interests of world imperialism, added its name to the above list declaring that Milei's austerity was "painful but necessary" to bring Argentina out of its crisis.

On April 19, Milei attended a yearly business conference at the Llao Llao ski resort in the city of Bariloche, Rio Negro province. The conference brings together Argentina's top CEOs. Milei was blocked from using the Bariloche airport and forced to detour by protesting government workers demanding an end to the layoffs and the restitution of wage increases and defending the right of retirees. The protest took place in defiance of a massive police presence.

At the conference, the president gave a speech applauding as "heroes" those CEOs who manage to evade government taxation ("the clutches of the state") and send their dollars overseas; "You laugh but I see it this way. I would recommend buying dollars in black, so they don't have to pay a lot of stupid taxes to finance the useless," insisted Milei.

No doubt, for Milei, the "useless" are workers, students, small farmers, and less affluent sections of the middle class.

Milei's free market capitalist economics have a lot in common with the "Chicago Boys" supposed remedies adopted by Chilean military dictator Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s, which involved destroying government retirement systems and privatizing government businesses and public education. Today, Argentine government officials openly accuse public school teachers of "indoctrinating" students against free markets and capitalism.

As with Pinochet, Milei's counter-reform will require dictatorial measures.

This is the result of a succession of governments which have sharply increased socio-economic inequality, including both Peronists and open right-wingers who contributed to this through greater indebtedness to Wall Street and the IMF, as well as inflationary policies. Milei inherited an economy in which over 40 percent of the population lived in poverty, and 32.5 percent of the 6.5 million workers with jobs could not make ends meet by the end of 2023. Now, poverty has increased to 60 percent, and the median wage has fallen below the cost of living.

The tradition of mandatory, free, and non-religious schooling open to all children, which has existed in Argentina since the 1880s, is now being questioned by government officials who have suggested that parents may want to have their sons and daughters work and help with household finances, rather than go to school.

In addition to the thousands of government workers that have been fired, Milei limited wage increases in February and March to 14 percent, far short of the 37 percent inflation during that same period. Tens of thousands of workers see the need to work extra hours.

On Monday April 22, substantial cuts were announced in government funding for the National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts (INCAA), and the elimination of several of its production units. In the words of the decree signed by INCAA President Carlos Pirovano, the new rules will promote "a structure that leads to more agile mechanisms and processes" in the context of lower costs.

As workers and students enter into struggle, the trade union federations CTA and CGT have called for a national strike to pressure Congress and Milei into giving up on these brutal austerity measures. The transportation workers union will carry out a strike on May 6 for three hours as a prelude.

Milei already faced a 12-hour national strike on January 24, which saw 5 million workers stop work and more than 1 million join demonstrations across Argentina. While workers have repeatedly shown their will to fight to the last consequences, the union bureaucracy and their pseudo-left allies are directing their struggles toward isolation and defeat.

It is necessary for workers to become conscious of the international significance of their struggle against Milei. They must form independent organs of struggle, workers' committees that reach out to every section of the working class across Argentina and throughout the world.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact