

Argentine retirees savagely assaulted for protesting benefit cuts

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On Wednesday March 12, federal and municipal police forces corralled and attacked thousands of pensioners, workers, and soccer fans protesting in Buenos Aires' Congress Plaza Square. The onslaught, ordered by the administration of President Javier Milei, was one of the most brutal acts of state repression since December 2001, when massive marches and protests by workers forced the President Fernando de la Rúa to resign and flee the presidential palace on a helicopter, during a financial crisis that left 3 million unemployed and triggered thousands of bankruptcies.

Wednesday's protest was one in a series of recurring weekly rallies by retirees demanding an end to cuts of public social security pensions, the restoration of medical benefits for retirees and protection against inflation. Retirees have seen a drastic attack on their living standards as a result of the austerity measures of the far-right Milei administration. Each week the protests have gotten bigger; this week the pensioners were also joined by Buenos Aires transit workers.

All the evidence points to a provocation by the Milei administration aimed at justifying an escalation of attacks on the right to free speech and other democratic rights.

Security Minister Patricia Bullrich sent in more than 1,000 police, an hour and a half before the start of the demonstration at 5 pm, with orders to chase away those who were already arriving at the rally site and prevent others from entering the square. The outcome was a furious battle that lasted into the early morning. The police fired several thousand rounds of rubber bullets and scores of tear gas grenades. The police also brought in pepper spray guns and truck-mounted water-cannons.

Scenes that appeared on Buenos Aires' Channel 5 news showed a police provocateur planting a firearm in

the middle of the square. Protesters also documented on social media police abandoning a police car with doors open, in a failed attempt to provoke vandalism.

The repression of pensioners, who were supported by trade unionists and soccer fans from several clubs, resulted in 672 wounded and 114 arrests. Those detained were freed several hours later, but are still facing charges.

Among the seriously wounded was pensioner Beatriz Blanco, 87, beaten by police with a baton. A video shows Blanco falling to the ground, while the policeman who caused her injury disappears into the crowd of police. A 14-year-old girl was burned by tear gas.

Press photographer Pablo Grillo was grievously injured when he was struck in the head with a tear gas grenade. He remains in serious condition following cranial surgery. A video went viral of Grillo kneeling while photographing the protesters and being hit by the tear gas grenade. The videos show a police officer taking aim and firing on Grillo.

As the protest continued, many demonstrators revived the chant of 2001: "*Qué se vayan todos!*" ["All of them must go!"], demanding the resignation of Milei and Security Minister Patricia Bullrich, along with the entire political establishment.

Alejandra Bartoliche, vice president of the Graphic Reporters Association (aRGra), declared that this is not the first time since Milei took office that the press has been targeted by the police. "We need press freedom, like the Constitution states; because it is not just Pablo. For the last year and a half, we have been asking the security forces not to target us, not to keep hurting us."

Bartoliche reminded her audience that the firearm used against Grillo had been banned in 2010, following the police killing of Carlos Fuentealba, a chemistry

professor, during a 2007 demonstration by educators in the Neuquen province. Fuentealba was shot in the back of the head while sitting in the backseat of a car as he left the rally, struck by a canister that broke the rear door window and killed him.

Bullrich abolished the ban in 2024, together with other limits on the use of repression against street protests and pickets, effectively re-establishing the “Security Doctrine” used in Latin America during the Cold War. This doctrine allowed “whatever means necessary” to defend the interests of the capitalist state and combat left-wing opposition. The Security Doctrine provided for the use of lethal weapons against protests and strikes. Bullrich now cynically refers to it as the “doctrine of the good cop.”

On Thursday, across the Plata River in Montevideo, Uruguay, hundreds of journalists protested the assault on Grillo, showing their solidarity with the retirees and demanding the overthrow of President Javier Milei.

In Buenos Aires, also on Thursday, scores of press photographers, staged a photoshoot across from Argentina’s *Casa Rosada* government house protesting the police repression and the attack on Grillo, calling for the resignation of Patricia Bullrich.

Anticipating much larger protests Wednesday, March 19, which are expected to include members of trade unions that did not participate on March 12, including public employees, along with supporters of Peronist and left political parties, the Milei administration is preparing more repressive measures, which include setting up barriers around the Congress and Argentina’s government house. Milei and Bullrich have vowed that the government will continue to deal with these protests with an iron fist, and not “step back” from repressive measures employed on March 12, including the use of less-lethal weapons that can kill or maim workers.

Last Friday at an Agricultural Exposition [ExpoAgro], with Bullrich at his side, Milei left no doubt where he stood when he insulted retirees who have lost their medical benefits, their meals, and whose income loses buying power each passing day:

In matters of security, people have to pay for what they do; the good guys are those in blue [police] and the sons of bitches that cover their

faces, damage cars, burn cars, and threaten all the people because they do not want to lose their abusive benefits; those are the bad guys.

The fascist president, who is mired in the \$Libre cryptocurrency scandal, has appointed corrupt judges to the Supreme Court, imposed an IMF loan deal by emergency decree, and is moving headlong to establish a police state dictatorship. The constant praise for Milei from Donald Trump, other heads of state and oligarchs around the world makes clear that this is part of an international process in response to the unraveling crisis of global capitalism, extreme levels of social inequality and the intensification of the class struggle.



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