

Argentina's Milei hails the Pinochet coup: A government in crisis turns to dictatorship and nationalism

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On September 3, Argentine President Javier Milei delivered two speeches. In the morning, in Santiago, Chile, he told the Fifth Regional Meeting of the Madrid Forum, an international assembly of fascist forces, that the 1973 military coup against Salvador Allende had opened four decades of prosperity. That night, flanked by his entire cabinet on national television, he announced sanctions, decrees and a naval base in defense of Argentina's claim to the Malvinas islands.

The two speeches were deeply connected. A government whose austerity program is feeding economic crisis and mass discontent is reaching simultaneously for the rehabilitation of the military dictatorships and for nationalist chauvinism. Both are directed against the working class, and both deepen Argentina's subordination to American imperialism.

Another speech two years ago provides the key to understanding Milei's politics in class terms. In January 2024, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, he delivered a fascist diatribe that was greeted with thunderous applause by the oligarchs. Elon Musk praised him. The *Wall Street Journal* ran his speech under the headline that he had given the Davos crowd "a Spine Transplant."

Now, with the rise of the AfD in Germany and the far-right globally, as well as Trump's ongoing efforts to undermine the constitutional order in the US, the normalization of such politics is well advanced. What Milei says today, he says as the voice of a financial oligarchy that has concluded it can no longer rule through democratic forms.

The Santiago speech was filled with fascist tropes, from describing parliamentary opposition in Argentina as "a coup d'état" to boasting of deporting more than 10,000 people last year and 14,000 so far this year, and making a nod to the "great replacement" theory—claiming Spain's government was clearing the way for "the foreign hordes that will end up replacing them."

"After the overthrow of the communist Allende"

His most significant remarks, however, were his tribute to 1973. Milei told the Madrid Forum:

Chile is an emblematic place because with its recent history it reminds us of the immense value of waging the cultural

battle. After the overthrow of the communist Allende, Chile entered a period of stability and growth that extended for more than 40 years and, thanks to that, Chile was without any doubt the envy, in economic terms, of the entire region.

What Milei describes as "stability and growth" was a reign of fascist terror. On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military, with the direct assistance of the CIA, US military intelligence and the Nixon administration, bombed the presidential palace and installed the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. Some 3,000 workers, students and socialists were murdered or disappeared. Tens of thousands were tortured in the National Stadium and in clandestine centers across the country. Congress was dissolved, parties banned, unions smashed.

This apparatus of terror existed for a definite purpose: to impose, at gunpoint, the free-market program drawn up by the "Chicago Boys" trained under Milton Friedman. Privatization, deregulation and the destruction of wages could be carried out only after the working class had been physically decapitated. That is the real content of the "Chilean model" Milei celebrated in Santiago, a week before the coup's anniversary, standing beside President José Antonio Kast, a lifelong defender of the dictatorship.

Milei then turned to the 2019 mass uprising in Chile:

The whole country was plunged into an unprecedented wave of left-wing violence, which left dozens dead between 2019 and 2020, because the leftists, at a certain point, believed they were right to use violence to carry out their policies.

This is a brazen falsification. It was the Chilean state that killed dozens of protesters and shot more than 400 of them in the eyes, on top of the thousands detained and tortured.

It is fitting that Milei combines the 2019 repression with his tribute to the coup. At the time, President Sebastián Piñera launched a state of emergency that put soldiers on the streets against demonstrators for the first time since Pinochet.

The Malvinas card

Hours later, Milei went on national television to claim his government would pursue control over the Malvinas. He claimed that “winds of change” favored Argentina’s claim, citing Trump’s remark that Washington might reconsider its position recognizing Britain’s control of the islands, which it calls the Falklands.

In fact, Trump’s comment was rather noncommittal: “I always review every position. That’s just one of many.” Asked by GB News whether he would aid Britain in a dispute, Trump was dismissive, complaining that the UK “weren’t there to help me” over Iran.

The absurdity of Milei now wrapping himself in the flag is underscored by his long-standing self-description as an admirer of Margaret Thatcher, who ordered the sinking of the General Belgrano, killing 323 Argentine sailors. He adopted the sovereignty posture only months ago amid rapidly falling approval ratings and coming elections.

The historical precedent is unmistakable. In April 1982, the fascist-military junta, economically bankrupt, facing a working class returning to struggle after brutal repression, invaded the islands. The Peronist and Stalinist leaderships that had just been clubbed into submission marched to the Plaza de Mayo behind Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri. And the revisionist Nahuel Moreno, who had broken with the International Committee of the Fourth International and was living in exile, called on his supporters to join the “military camp” of the junta, refusing to raise a single independent class demand. Hundreds of conscripts died for a regime that had disappeared 30,000 people, as a national cause became the instrument through which workers were bound to their own executioners.

Once again, the entire Argentine political establishment is closing ranks behind the “cause of the Malvinas.” The Peronists, who denounce Milei’s austerity by day, echo his territorial claims without qualification. So do the Moreniste organizations.

The Trotskyist position is the opposite. Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution establishes that in countries of belated capitalist development oppressed by imperialism, the democratic tasks—the expulsion of foreign domination among them—cannot be entrusted to the national bourgeoisie. Only the working class, fighting for its own class power, can carry them through as part of the world socialist revolution.

The British seizure of the islands in 1833 and the Royal Navy’s war of 1982 were colonial crimes. But the struggle against imperialism can only be waged by a working class that maintains irreconcilable political independence from its own bourgeoisie.

Milei’s speeches are a measure of the crisis of his government. Milei’s disapproval rating stands near 65 percent, while 64 percent now reject the claim that his economic “shock therapy” policies are necessary despite the pain, and 65 percent say the sacrifice will not prove worthwhile—figures that were evenly split at the start of the year.

The wholesale dollar broke 1,500 pesos despite heavy Central Bank intervention to prevent a devaluation of the peso, and the country risk index rose more than 20 percent in August. Tax revenue is falling as consumption-linked sectors contract, and in June the government missed its IMF fiscal target for the first time. Some 30,000 small and medium enterprises have closed and hundreds of thousands of jobs have been slashed.

Last week the government imposed a minimum wage of 383,800 pesos, below the official indigence line and below what the employers themselves had offered.

Meanwhile the “anti-corruption” president is engulfed in scandal:

the \$Libra cryptocurrency fraud, in which forensics reportedly show him speaking with a lobbyist five times in the minutes before the launch; the disability agency bribery case, in which 19 have been indicted and a leaked audio alleged kickbacks of \$500,000-\$800,000 monthly; the chief of staff’s use of the presidential plane; a former official arrested with \$2.5 million in cash, drugs and spying equipment; his ex-campaign chief Fernando Cerimedo facing multiple charges in Bolivia.

Amid these scandals, the Trump administration saw no fault in celebrating the Drug Enforcement Administration’s world summit in Buenos Aires, with DEA chief Terry Cole praising Milei’s policies “against drug traffickers and against terrorists” as a “model for the region.” What is meant by this is the subordination of security and foreign policy to US imperialism and its war preparations against China.

Confronted with four general strikes since taking office, Milei’s government has answered opposition with the “anti-picket protocol,” mass arrests, and the gassing and clubbing of pensioners in front of Congress. Even the celebrations that followed Argentina’s World Cup victories in July were met with rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon in Buenos Aires, Córdoba and other cities.

Under Milei, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population controls fully a quarter of the nation’s wealth, while the bottom 50 percent, suffering the full impact of his government’s “chainsaw” austerity, is unable to afford basic necessities of life.

It is within this fundamental social context that the Argentine president’s celebration of the torture regimes of Pinochet and Videla must be understood. They are no political aberration or personal eccentricity, but a revealing expression of the drive by the bourgeoisie, in Argentina as throughout the capitalist world, to bring political forms of rule in line with underlying social relations.

With the vast concentration of wealth at the top, even as wages, pensions and public services are decimated, democratic forms of rule become increasingly unviable. The result is a turn to fascist methods everywhere: Trump’s drive to consolidate a presidential dictatorship in the US, the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the political heir of Nazism, and the coming to power of far-right governments from Argentina to Colombia.

The same social contradictions driving the ruling class to resurrect the murderous methods of Pinochet are moving workers and youth into struggle across the Americas and internationally. What is required to defend basic democratic rights and defeat the drive to dictatorship is the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class, armed with a socialist and internationalist program directed against dictatorship, war and the capitalist system that gives rise to them both.



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