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Argentina: Buenos Aires police attack striking transit workers

On Tuesday, Buenos Aires subway workers, who had been carrying out partial strikes over wages, were attacked by the metropolitan police inside the tunnels of the H and E lines. The workers intended to block the departure of trains until noon that day.

The action is part of an intensification of popular protests and labor strikes provoked by the combined effects of the austerity policies of Argentina's soaring inflation and mounting debt crisis.

Under orders from Buenos Aires Mayor Horacio Rodriguez Larreta, scores of helmeted riot police, equipped with batons and full-body shields and firing rubber bullets, invaded the subway tunnels, pushing the workers deeper inside them. Sixteen workers were arrested, including Nestor Segovia, leader of the AGTSyP, popularly known as the "Metrodelegados," a dissident union not recognized by the government.

The police attack is the latest in a series of aggressive provocations against these workers, who complain of arbitrary suspensions, of being blamed for equipment breakdowns, and of being denied the right to the union of their choice. Militant workers and delegates of the AGTSyP have been repeatedly dragged into court.

The union that the city and the company recognize, Unión de Transporte Automotor (UTA) agreed to a 15 percent wage hike this year, in three payments. Already in the first five months of this year, inflation has been over 9 percent (a yearly rate of over 20 percent). Capital flight and devaluation of the peso with respect to the US dollar and the Brazilian real (Brazil is Argentina's main trading partner) are expected to accelerate

inflation over the rest of this year. By the time the workers receive each of their three raises, they will have already been eaten up by inflation, leaving them with a decline in real wages.

In October, utility rates, which have been raised repeatedly as the government winds down government subsidies, will be hiked another 15 percent. However since they are tied to the value of the US dollar, some observers expect the increase to be closer to 30 percent, further fueling inflation and impoverishing subway and most other workers.

The metrodelegados do not recognize the UTA, a Peronist union, and reject the agreement between it and the government.

Following the riot police attack, the workers decided to shut down the entire system until their fellow workers were released. They also picketed the jail where their comrades were held. The city justified its repression, declaring that the striking workers represent only a small minority of subway employees represented by the UTA.

The workers' response on Wednesday was the total shutdown of all the subway lines in this metropolitan area of 13 million people.

The repression of subway workers comes on the heels of an assault by 2,000 police against 300 workers at the Cresta Roja meatpacking plant in Buenos Aires province, to dislodge them from the entrance of the plant where they were protesting the suspension of 1,000 workers by the new owners of the firm.

The riot police attacked the workers with rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon. Two workers were arrested; two others were injured by the tear gas.

The Argentine Labor Ministry and the trade unions that represent workers at the plant had approved the mass layoff. This is not the first indication of what is to come. Last December Buenos Aires police assaulted a mass protest against the new pension laws that raised the age of retirement and slashed benefits for 40 percent of the population, including the elderly, children and the disabled.

Following the attack on the march, police motorcycle squads went on a rampage, attacking fleeing demonstrators and innocent bystanders alike.

The “gradual” austerity measures that have characterized the administration of President Mauricio Macri since his coalition took control in December 2015—the imposition of draconian increases in rates for public utilities and gas, as well as attacks on pensions, wages and working conditions—are giving way to much more drastic measures. This is a foretaste of what will be demanded by the International Monetary Fund as the condition

for a loan of \$30 billion to rescue the Argentine economy. The struggles of workers are sure to be met with increasing repression.

On Wednesday, thousands of striking education workers marched in Buenos Aires and rallied in Plaza de Mayo, across from the nation's government house. The protest was linked to a national teachers' strike in defense of education, for decent wages and against the IMF's austerity measures for Argentina. Also at the rally were striking metro workers. In addition to the one-day national strike, teachers are in the second month of a strike over wages and in defense of education in the Patagonian province of Neuquén. Teachers' strikes have also taken place in Chubut and other provinces.

So far the Macri government has been able to impose its austerity measures—the so-called normalization policy—with the collaboration of the Peronists and Kirchneristas in the national legislature, and with the consent of the trade unions, a pact made possible by imposing 15 percent wage increases on Argentine workers and so far restricting their response to isolated protest strikes.

While Argentina's unemployment rate remains relatively low, at 8 percent (it reached 21 percent at the height of the country's depression in 2002), the current financial crisis and capital flight, plus the as yet unknown IMF demands, are expected to usher in a period of "stagflation," economic stagnation combined with rising prices. This is bound to usher in an escalation of the class struggle.