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Argentine workers stage massive general strike against Macri's austerity policies

Following months of inaction against the sackings as well as attacks on wages and living conditions, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), allied with the three wings of the Peronist Party, organized a 24-hour work stoppage. By all accounts, there was a broad level of participation in this one-day protest, virtually paralyzing the country.

At issue are the economic policies of the right-wing government of President Mauricio Macri. This is the third CGT-organized protest strike since April 2017 and by far the one with the most popular support. Monday's strike paralyzed schools, transportation, banking and other services.

The strike, called two weeks ago by the CGT bureaucracy, was supposedly meant to “send a message” of working class opposition to austerity policies by the Macri administration, in the context of accelerating consumer price inflation that is driving many Argentine workers into poverty. Instead, it revealed workers' underlying anger, resistance and willingness to fight.

The “message” for the Argentine unions is that the working class is getting out of control. The unions are offering a new round of negotiations with Macri over wages and labor reforms. Denying the government accusation that their demands are “politically motivated” by the Peronist parties, union leaders declared themselves non-political and warned of an impending social catastrophe.

Joining the CGT were smaller union federations: the CTA (Argentine Workers Central) and the Autonomous CTA, bank workers, health workers, education workers and court

employees. With more than 3,000 unions, and 3.1 million members (40 percent of the labor force), Argentina is the most highly unionized country in the Americas. Its unions, split into competing federations, are also very likely among the most conservative. During more than a year, between December 2015 and April 2017, the CGT and other unions observed a truce with the Macri government. Having ended the truce with the first protest general strike, they limited and isolated workers' struggles as much as they could. None of the CGT's conciliatory tactics appear to have changed.

The role of its aging bureaucracy—most of the CGT and CTA leaders have been in power for more than 25 years—notorious for its corruption and horse-trading strategy, is to dissipate working class opposition to the policies of the ruling oligarchy.

In line with the class-collaborationist policies of the union bureaucracies, no mobilizations, marches or rallies were scheduled on Monday.

Workers were asked to stay home. Those marches, rallies and mass pickets that did take place in Buenos Aires and several other cities were called by left groups and dissident factions within the unions.

Prominent among the organizers were pseudo-socialist groups, such as the Morenist Socialist Workers Party (PTS) and Izquierda Socialista (IS), and the Partido Obrero (PO). Their demand was a 12-hour extension of the one-day strike in order to organize a mass rally at Buenos Aires' government house in Plaza de Mayo. They were joined by thousands of workers who were already on strike. Among the most numerous participants were teachers and public-sector workers.

Protests took place in every major city in Argentina.

At these demonstrations, there was a heavy and intimidating police presence, with dogs and water cannon at the ready to repress the protesters.

On June 8, President Macri reached an agreement the International Monetary Fund's (IMF's) Christine Lagarde granting Argentina a \$15 billion installment on a \$50 billion rescue package. Lagarde praised Macri for moving swiftly, in the context of international financial volatility, to counter the capital flight that had weakened the Argentine peso and exacerbated the nation's ongoing debt crisis. The agreement with the IMF received a strong endorsement from US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.

As part of the IMF agreement, Macri pledged to abandon his go-slow austerity measures, including budget cuts, attacks on pensions and wages, and large increases in public utility charges to consumers, in favor of a more aggressive assault on wages and living standards. The big fear of the Argentine establishment is a repeat of the revolutionary upsurge that

brought down the government in 2001 and 2002, in the midst of financial collapse and economic depression.

For this, Macri and the Argentine bourgeoisie are counting on the CGT and the other unions. Last week, in negotiations with the union bureaucracies, Macri agreed to a 5 percent wage supplement over the 15 percent agreed to by many of the unions. These increases are insufficient when the most optimistic observers expect inflation rates of 25 percent or more.

The financial collapse now threatens the bureaucracy. The very high level of participation in this strike, compared to previous ones, is itself a sign of the increasing resistance of the Argentine working class.

At noon on the day of the strike, the CGT leadership gave a press conference in Buenos Aires. CGT leader Juan Carlos Schmid called on the government to engage in a round of discussions with the unions, including union participation in new labor reform legislation. The government has “another opportunity” to sit at the table, declared Schmid.

Sergio Palazzo, leader of the bank workers’ union (*Asociación Bancaria*), after declaring his astonishment at the scope of the strike, voiced his hope that the government would respond and meet with the bureaucracy: “ *Ojalá* (God willing) the government will understand the anger that its policies generate,” declared Palazzo. “If it does not take note of this strike, social conflict will increase,” he warned.

Pretending to be blind to the scale of the strike, Economics Minister Rogelio Frigerio blamed the broad participation on a “lack of public transit.”

Government officials denounced the strike; Macri declared that it “did not help at all.” Elisa Carrío, a leader of Macri’s Cambiemos bloc, denounced Argentine workers for not being ambitious and productive enough, likening them to “corrupt chickens content with eating worms on the ground.”