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Argentina

The Commune Lives

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Every day Argentina slides further into crisis. Industrial production fell by 20% in December. Tens of thousands of people are falling into poverty every day; official bodies believe that more than 15 million can now be classified as poor, five million of them in extreme poverty. Layoffs multiply across the industrial sector. Economic paralysis is spreading little by little across a country that seems to be disintegrating.

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On February 4-5, 2002 the banks were closed again as a direct consequence of a new phase of the political crisis in the country: on February 1, the Supreme Court of Justice had declared the 'corralito' plan (which imposes a limit on bank withdrawals) unconstitutional. Composed of corrupt judges and politicians linked to the ultra neo-liberal faction of former president Carlos Menem and threatened with dissolution by the government, it sought thus to revive the political crisis. These divisions at the highest level of the state are one of the manifestations of the acute crisis Argentina is experiencing. The institutions have not collapsed, the state is still there and if the army cannot intervene at this stage it remains intact. However, the dominant classes are worried: the gangrene of corruption is such that after the fall of two governments and faced with a probable dissolution of the Supreme Court of Justice, the whole edifice seems rotten through and through.

Their worries are reinforced by the combined crisis of the big two traditional parties (the Peronist Justicialist Party and the Radical Party) and the emergence of a vast movement of mass self-organization throughout society against politicians, government and state.

The emergence of popular assemblies in the capital, Buenos Aires and now the whole country is the major phenomenon of recent weeks. This process is only at its beginning, but since the insurrectional days of December 19-20, 2001 the social mobilization has incessantly broadened. The entire society is on the move, all social and political questions have become questions of everyday life.

Today, there are more than a hundred popular assemblies across the country. In these assemblies people refer to themselves as *vecinos*, 'neighbours'. Some sociologists or informed observers point to the resemblances with the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871.

However, very quickly, urgent questions are posed: how to help the hardest hit, the children, the unemployed the poorest? How to settle the emergency food problems? How to oblige the pharmaceutical firms to provide medicines to the hospitals?

One of the weaknesses of this movement resides in the fact that it is not yet present in the workplaces: the Argentine working class - once one of the most powerful in Latin America - has crumbled under the blows of neo-liberalism (more than 30% unemployment). Still, a number of workers (employed or not) participate in the assemblies as *vecinos* besides middle class sectors and already contacts are being built with the trade unions in the front line against layoffs (notably in the rail sector) and with the *piqueteros*. The coordination of these structures of self-organization will be decisive.

The movement is spreading already to the most popular neighbourhoods of greater Buenos Aires and to the provinces. The assemblies consist of about 100-200 people per neighbourhood; in the best-mobilized areas, they

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break up into smaller groups when they reach several hundred. Beyond the vital questions, they structure themselves in groups or commissions (organization, relations with the media, preparation of the next cacerolazos).

A real social vanguard of tens of thousands of people is coming into being, involving new generations but also the remobilisation of thousands of revolutionary militants or ex-militants. This socio-political vanguard is also beginning more generalized discussions on emergency measures to meet the crisis: nationalization of the banks, reintegration of the privatised enterprises in the public sector, cancellation of the debt, payment of wages and pensions and so on. Finally, these assemblies have often demonstrated their support for the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre.