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Argentina

# Chronicle of a green day in Buenos Aires

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**What happened on August 8th? Still our bodies feel the onslaught of so many arduous days, the swirling sensations and emotions that we experienced during these final hours of waiting, anxiety and organization. Our historic demand crossed borders, entered every house, in every work place, overflowed the streets, permeated all the spaces but could not overcome the stultifying conservatism of the Senate.**

The proposal that had been approved by the Chamber of Deputies on June 13th, 2018 was rejected on one of the coldest and most humid nights of the year by 38 votes against 31. Although in the main newspapers it is no longer news, we know that we are a living revolution and that we are writing the story. We continue to try to name what we lived during the day of 8A. We vindicate our incessant and always open pursuit; it is not yet written where the strength of feminism moves (and pushes us).

## The background

The unprecedented level of mass activity in the streets invites an impression which perhaps misses the depth of the accumulated Argentine and Latin American feminist experience.

Since 1986, National Women's Meetings (ENMs) have been held once a year in different parts of the country. These are instances where thousands of comrades divide in workshops with specific axes of debate, from which articulations, agendas and political intensity emerges which everyone takes back to their own province. In workshops like these, comrades met who would then build pink relief networks, pre-and post-abortion counselling that provides quality information to interrupt unwanted pregnancies safely.

Also, from an ENM in 2003 there arose the initiative of constituting the national campaign for the right to legal, safe and free abortion. The campaign from its beginnings was a federal articulation composed of a broad spectrum of political parties, independent activists and feminist professionals involved with the struggle for abortion rights. It worked in a focused way to install the theme and to gain presence and support at the parliamentary level.

This year was the seventh time that the campaign presented a draft law in its 13-year history. This perseverance was accompanied with an international feminist effervescence, with the dissemination of an agenda of demands of the women's movement and the LGBT collective and the agitating focus of Ni Una Menos (Not One Less). Ni Una Menos was to become the slogan of a movement of activists and organizations. In a matter of months, we went from repudiating macho violence to also incorporating the demands of formal and informal workers, paid and unpaid, in this struggle; we discussed cis-heteronormativity and of course we took up the historic fight for abortion rights.

## Dinosaurs

An image that is repeated everywhere on the networks came to the halls of the Senate during the night of the vote: a gathering which in its ancient composition resembles a sort of Jurassic Park. Despite the effectiveness of the metaphor, it is worth pointing out some essential differences with prehistoric times: the result of the vote teaches us that it is not an open and green space but an armoured stronghold on whose walls crucifixes hang and where those

wearing blue scarves managed to move like fish in the water.

In this interior, so impervious to the outside, we found that the level of debate was not even a shadow of what had taken place in the Chamber of Deputies. The presentations of specialists in the commissions that were to deal with the draft left scenes impossible to forget, like that of the doctor who said that condoms do not prevent the contagion of HIV or that of the priest who had been the receiver of testimonies of violated minors and had not reported the rapists.

The level did not rise when the senators themselves debated in a session that lasted more than fifteen hours. We feel anger at not being able to answer live and direct to a legislator like Urtubey, who claimed that “there are rapes that do not involve violence for women.” He did not even make efforts to hide his misogyny, his hypocritical morality, his dangerously reactionary values. Or the senator De Angeli who justified his veto thus: “When a woman is pregnant we go with joy to congratulate her. You are given a plant so that the plant grows and see the image of your child. Those are the things we can't lose. That's why I'm voting against.”

The names of those who expressed their negative vote are repeated in a thousand formats on the networks and we all promise to remember them, especially when the time comes for them to submit to the ballot box. However, the slogan “Let's never vote for them again”, clear, powerful and capable of frightening any career politician, was also used. It is clear that for many senators the powerful local ecclesiastical institution was more persuasive, its huge economic resources allowing them to have a “basic unity”, than the arguments of the massive feminist movement faced with this new Inquisition. On our side we are doubling down and we already carry orange handkerchiefs, a new symbol that pleads for the separation of the church and the state.

Almost all the speeches in favour of the law underscored a temporality that we share: sooner or later, we will have legal abortion. On the other side they also seemed to know it: “they call us archaic, retrograde, say that we do not listen to young people... But I know how society is going to evolve, I know absolutely,” said a senator, who, like many others, tied his vote to a personal electoral calculation despite being personally in favour. In other words, “guarantee me that this does not complicate my candidacy as governor and you will have my vote”, laying bare the logic with which Congress approves or rejects laws.

To the astonishment of many, when the draft bill entered the Senate, the positive vote maintained some advantage over the No. That made me think that the photo of the June 13th demonstration that showed the full green streets on one side and just a handful of Argentine flags and rosaries on the other had influenced the upper chamber. We quickly understood that it was necessary to hold the streets. We filled them over and over again, we mobilized in plazas from all over the country and we had space in the mass media: we had the support of actresses, artists and journalists with a great capacity to impact on the mass public.

For every piece of bad news about some undecided senatorial vote coming down against us we responded with more activities, public debates, dissemination of materials and arguments in favour. But on the other side we had a stealthy and powerful enemy who copied our insignia (celestial handkerchiefs instead of our green ones) and marched with crucifixes in all the provinces of the country.

However, winning the streets did not bring us victory. The visibility of our debates, the public transparency of our interventions, the tireless search for democracy in our organizations was opposed by the opacity of parliamentarians, electoral calculus and obscurantism.

In spite of despair with each new *poroteo* - the colloquial term to refer to the counting of votes - and having lost finally by seven votes, we have a certainty: now they see us. The feminist movement has burst into the political system with

insolence. We proposed a debate of almost unprecedented magnitudes for Argentina's democracy. That's to our credit. Also, for the first time in the history of the Chamber of Senators such slogans as "the maternal is political" and "the right to enjoyment" as well as the words feminism, machismo and patriarchy.

We were protagonists without having any seat in the Senate. Ours is a lively, booming movement in the midst of a creative process. Before our threat to make the earth tremble, on the other side they showed their teeth and brought out their ancestral practices, misogynistic and scornful of civil rights. But yes, no doubt: they see us. And despite the fact that the traditional parties continue to minimize our power, the political system as a whole had to take note of everything that happened. No one escapes the winds of political instability and, in this open process, the feminist tide may be able to articulate several discontents: from repudiation to misogyny and the ideology of domesticity prevailing in parliament to highlighting the fact that the patriarchal discourses and practices of the right that govern us are not merely an accessory, but structure a neoliberal program of the hollowing out of the state and precarization of the conditions of existence of working people. And in that precarious existence, we women, cis, lesbians and trans continue to bear the heaviest burden.

## Weathering the storm

On June 13th we were witnesses to and protagonists of an unprecedented scenario of mobilization of the movement of women, feminists, LGBT, political parties, unions and social organizations in the campaign for the right to abortion. On August 8th the efforts were redoubled: minibuses brought comrades from all over the country and from the night of August 7 tents and gazebos, scenarios and screens were mounted throughout the main avenues of the political centre of the capital city, with similar mobilizations and deployments in the other main cities of Argentina.

After midday, the rain gave no respite and while we followed the debate minute by minute, coordinating the various activities of the day (panels, lectures, workshops, recitals), we invented creative ways to protect ourselves from the cold downpour. Beyond the fenced Congress square, the state seemed to have withdrawn to its parliamentary precinct, and the general care of the massive mobilization had to be built between us, in coordination with the campaign. A joint deployment between organizations also ensured coordination throughout the night even with a tidal wave of people making a simple two-block walk in an impossible odyssey that took an hour. Thousands of teenagers, in groups, behind the wet flags of their student centres, were present and also showed how the fight for the right to legal abortion is intertwined with the fight for the application of the law for comprehensive sexual education.

Organized comrades from the poor neighbourhoods of the city and the Buenos Aires suburbs arrived early to deny with their presence the misogynistic and patriarchal arguments that talking about sexuality, desired maternity and safe ways to interrupt pregnancies were points on an agenda of middle class women alone. Colleagues from the front of transmasculinities, partners of trans comrades, queers, non-binaries and lesbians supporting abortion rights shouted in the midst of the downpour that abortion is not only a matter for cis women. On the one hand, because we prefer to think in terms of building capacity to take into account the diversity of possible sex-gender experiences in the interruptions of pregnancies, but also because we understand, as a trans partner once said, that there is a powerful emotional alliance between those who struggle for the autonomy of our bodies, to decide on our own terms how to inhabit them. Together with our demands we defy the cis-hetero-patriarchate, its violence and its ordinances.

The street condensed a powerful accumulation of organization and articulation. It was not just a handful of those discontented with the illegality and clandestinity of abortion that came. In addition to social and political organizations, feminists, trade unions, student centres, the articulation with those who daily challenged the clandestinity of abortion was also visible. The Network of Professionals for the Right to Decide, who intervene to guarantee interruptions of pregnancy for causal reasons (health of the pregnant person, rape and foetal unviability), coordinated a talk in which they reaffirmed their will to continue working from the health system itself to reach more comrades. Pre-and

post-abortion counselling, safe information lines, collectives of pink relief feminists were also involved.

## What about the other side?

On the other side of the square, very close to the entrance through which the Senators enter the Congress, there were huge Argentinian flags and rosaries. Also, the famous giant papier mache baby which was paraded in each of the marches of the anti-rights sector. In recent weeks, public figures such as actress Amalia Granata cordially invited us to “close our legs” while Cecilia Pando, a well-known advocate for genocide in the last military dictatorship, urged the fight “for both lives.” And the presence of Bandera Vecina, an openly xenophobic neo-Nazi political party, was the element that we needed to bring together in the same framework the ecclesiastical, fascist, conservative and misogynist alliance on the opposite side of the sidewalk to the feminist movement.

And beyond the symbolic violence of their words, in recent weeks we encountered multiple cases of comrades physically assaulted in the streets for the mere fact of having tied the handkerchief to their backpacks. For the same reason, teachers were harassed in private schools where they teach and even “invited” to leave the institutions. In this context, the post-voting panorama indicates that within the ruling party torn between a liberal right and a conservative and reactionary right inside the Cambiemos alliance, the balance has shifted in favour of the latter.

## The compass is ours

We do not wish to deny or overlook the anger, frustration, sadness of the moment the vote was known. The distress and the moment of fatigue is also political. The balance sheets, the review of strategies and the new challenges to come are made. But feminism as praxis and daily reflection supports us. Also, in urgent and concrete senses: we continue to build networks of accompaniment so that the interruptions of pregnancy for causal reasons are respected, so that secure information circulates, so that the rights conquered so far are fulfilled.

In the course of the last week, we witnessed attempts to run the axis of the nodal discussion around our draft bill. Through isolated, petty, senatorial initiatives that ended up abstaining in the vote, we encountered projects of decriminalization of abortion and others that repeated what had already been won over the causal issue. Rumours circulated that they were to be dealt with after our law was rejected in the August 8th session.

The confusion thus created responded to the position of the ruling party, the main force against the law within the Congress, which began to fear the political cost if the law was rejected without any alternative project. Again calculation, opacity, manipulation. On August 9th, very early, the newspapers confirmed this hypothesis: some of the civil servants who had strongly opposed our draft now appeared as the creators of a possible reform of the Penal Code that would contemplate depenalization. Hours later, the draft of this reform confirms to us that it does not even envisage the elimination of the penalties but only proposes to leave it free to the discretion of each judge.

We insist: without legalization there can be no decriminalization. That is because preventing free access through the public health system penalizes those who do not have the means to safely interrupt a pregnancy. Decriminalizing without legalizing is to clean up the consciences of those who can resort to a private clinic. It is the panorama dreamed of by the liberalism that governs us: each takes care of their body with the purchasing power they enjoy. We want decriminalisation and legislation that makes it possible in a real and concrete way, that guarantees rights, that does not take public resources from the state. And we want the application of the Comprehensive Sex Education Act that enables places of study throughout the country to be spaces for reflection on sexuality, desire, gender roles and

depatriarchalization.

Our feminist networks cannot do everything, they do not have the resources and the infrastructure of a state and its public health system, even in a neoliberal period when they are being hollowed out. But they can do a lot. We get here and go for more. The compass is ours. As are these new feminist ways of thinking, feeling and existing in politics.

PS:

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[1] On August 8, 2018, the Argentine Senate voted down a proposal for the decriminalisation of abortion.