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Argentina

Argentina at the rendezvous with its history

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Since the coming to power of the ultra-neoliberal and reactionary government of President Javier Milei, the eyes of the global left have turned to Argentina to try to understand the phenomenon of the rise of the extreme right in Latin America and around the world. Much has already been written about its neoliberal, authoritarian, anti-popular and misogynistic nature, as well as about possible developments in the context of the struggle of the Argentine popular and progressive masses. This article attempts to take stock of the situation and identify ways to understand the balance of forces engaged in the class struggle in Argentina.

The 2001 crisis in the country ended with the affirmation, for about fifteen years of a so-called progressive project: the center-left national-popular sector of Peronism consolidated itself as the dominant force. More than a party, it is a conglomerate of groups, organizations and movements, all united under the umbrella of their adherence to the figure of Perón and his strategies of political construction. In one way or another, this is still the preferred form (or refuge?) of organization by the popular masses (including the proletariat) in Argentina.

This does not mean that the bourgeoisie, inextricably linked to imperialist interests, has agreed to move towards a development model based on investment and the strengthening of the internal market, as proposed by Presidents Kirchner (Nestor and Cristina). From 2012 onwards, faced with economic stagnation, these conservative sectors began to regain ground, until the victory in 2015 of Mauricio Macri's neoliberal right, which led to a social regression without managing to impose itself in the long term. Macri was not re-elected in 2019, and was once again replaced by a Peronist government, that of Alberto Fernández, which failed to reverse the trend or emerge from economic crisis.

A situation of deadlock

This situation is representative of the impasse in which Argentina has found itself for 75 years: neither of the two conflicting political projects has been able to fully impose itself against the other, whether it is the agro-export model defended by the right or that, more focused on the development of the domestic market, supported by centre-left Peronism. As Antonio Gramsci had noted, this polarisation and immobility of political forces has led to the exhaustion of both sectors and opened the way to a third actor, the ultra-neoliberal and authoritarian right of Javier Milei and the libertarians. Based on the elimination of state intervention in all areas except its repressive component, the libertarian project is not new.

It advocates:

- A strong deregulation of the economy, through the elimination of all state controls. This includes the liberalisation of prices, including those of basic necessities.
- A compulsory fiscal balance, accompanied by a significant reduction in the state's participation in the fields of social security (pensions, health, education, scientific research), and a reduction in the number of workers within its structures.
- The dollarization of the economy, with the elimination of the peso and the privatization of the Central Bank.
- The removal of all export restrictions.
- The privatization and fiscal austerity measures specific to the neoliberal state.

This project was first and foremost driven by Decree 70 (“Decree of Necessity and Urgency”). It corresponds to a

radical version of the austerity program already championed by previous neoliberal governments, which has led some to refer to the Milei phenomenon as the “fourth neoliberal wave” in Argentina. This underlines its continuity with the dictatorship of 1976-1983 and the democratic governments of Menem and De la Rúa (Justicialist Party – PJ – and Radical Civic Union – UCR, from 1989 to 2001) as well as that of Macri (Republican Proposal – PRO – from 2015 to 2019) that preceded it. The originality of this government, however, lies in its authoritarian dimension, i.e. its contempt for the fundamental norms of liberal democracy, established in Argentina after the dictatorship, and its decision to radically abandon any social welfare role attributed to the state. First of all, this has had an impact on the living conditions of the popular masses, through the dismantling of all support and development programs, but also on the endowments of the various provinces (autonomous regions), through the cessation of all economic transfers and collaboration with them, in order to guarantee the payment of the foreign debt and the profits of the multinationals.

The government's first measures were introduced by Decree 70 and the “omnibus law”. [1] They have already caused enormous damage to the people: a 120% devaluation, inflation at 70% in three months, the elimination of social assistance programs, the opening of export markets, the halt of public investment in infrastructure as well as the closure of many public bodies. These measures have led to thousands of redundancies (150,000 in the construction sector alone, 15,000 in the civil service) and the closure of many companies, causing a snowball effect on economic activity. At the moment, the lack of management of the dengue epidemic that is wreaking havoc in the country accentuates the inability of the state to guarantee the protection of the population in terms of public health.

A neoliberal and authoritarian ethos

We are clearly facing a government that is trying to definitively resolve Argentina's historical impasse, breaking any capacity of the popular masses to resist. It is understandable, despite its poor results, that it still enjoys the favor of big business (national and international), the IMF and the United States, which are multiplying declarations of support. What is more difficult to understand is the support it still enjoys among the popular layers (about 53%, according to surveys). This could be explained by multiple factors:

- The first is, without a doubt, the persistent economic crisis, which has continued to grow since 2012. The stagnation of the economy has increased precarious work; inflation has hit the popular classes hard, and the pandemic has only exacerbated shortages.
- Another factor is the fact that the outgoing Peronist regime had shown an inability to solve the most pressing problems of the population. It had also shown a willingness to manage the system “as it is” (i.e. in its capitalist and neoliberal form), while integrating progressive elements, such as the fight against SGBV, which have however proved insufficient to improve the living conditions of a large majority of the population.
- Finally, another factor is the inability of the left (governmental and “extra-parliamentary”) to adapt to the new realities and its failure to propose credible and desirable alternatives.

In this context, a small part of the popular sectors has lost its historical bearings, moving away from Peronism without approaching the left, and has therefore shifted to the libertarian project.

Resistance

The inability of President Alberto Fernández and Sergio Massa, his Minister of Economy and candidate to succeed him, to manage economic and social problems, to control persistent inflation and to restore the purchasing power of the popular masses foreshadowed Massa's defeat in the elections.

The popular reaction to the reactionary government of Javier Milei, on the other hand, was unpredictable (and in a way remains so). It is difficult to know what capacity the popular masses can develop to mobilize to thwart the government, especially since the government has resorted to repressive and intimidating measures to discourage resistance.

However, there are several positive signs that show a state of mobilization, if not general, at least of readiness for significant change. From the government's first actions, protests emerged, thanks to the mobilizations of people affected by the reforms but also to the emergence of organizations such as neighborhood popular assemblies, a means of self-organization for the inhabitants of large cities, especially in Buenos Aires, as well as social movements in the suburbs or factory committees. In this perspective, the scale of popular mobilization has prevailed, surprising even its organizers, which could foreshadow a cycle of intense struggles in the months to come.

First general strike on 24 January

After two mobilizations of unexpected magnitude on 20 and 27 December 2023, the unions broke their inertia and organised a first day of general strike on 24 January 2024. The aim was to pressure the National Assembly to reject the first “omnibus bill”, a package of measures aimed at granting broad powers to the executive to deregulate the economy and impose reforms by decree, without debate in parliament – where Milei's government is clearly in the minority.

Although the strike was poorly supported, the mobilization was a remarkable success, bringing together more than a million demonstrators in the country and about 300,000 in the capital. Its intensity has created the necessary conditions to constrain the room for manoeuvre of the dialogue wing of the opposition and thus push the government to back down and withdraw its project.

8 March, day of strikes and feminist revolt

In the face of a reactionary government that has not hesitated to make misogynistic and anti-feminist remarks and has even considered repealing the law on voluntary termination of pregnancy, the call for a global feminist strike on 8 March has taken on particular importance in Argentina. Feminist collectives denounced the attacks on organizations fighting against discrimination and racism and the elimination of programs to support female victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

The call, aimed at defending the gains made and fighting against the oppression of women workers, met with a massive echo. The mobilization was commensurate with the situation, with hundreds of thousands of women occupying the National Congress Square and surrounding streets, as well as numerous demonstrations throughout the country.

Social movements in action

From its first measures, the government cut off all aid to the poorest social sectors. This concerns the inhabitants of “villas miseria” (slums) and working-class suburban neighbourhoods, where the organisation of soup kitchens is

crucial as a social support mechanism. In Argentina, the state guarantees access to food, while voluntary work is normally carried out by “social movements”: political, social and unemployed organizations, often very divided between those that claim to be Peronist, leftist or Christian.

The current situation has begun to force unity in the struggle. It had its baptism of fire on 18 March, a day marked by more than 500 street blockades and mobilizations to denounce the abandonment of the state in a context where more and more people are seeking help.

The movement was repressed by the police, who applied an unconstitutional “anti-blocking protocol”, denounced by the United Nations. Despite the repression, this day marked the significant entry of popular organizations into the protest against Milei's government.

24 March, memory without unity

March 24 is an important historical day for Argentine society, marking each year a mobilization against the dictatorship, for democracy, justice and human rights. This year's event was particularly significant because, for the first time in Argentina's 40 years of democracy, a government that claims the legacy of the dictatorship is in power and seeks to destroy the social consensus built by the historic struggle of human rights organizations and social organizations against state terrorism. It is also a day on which a democratic and inclusive model of society is defended, albeit vaguely.

As predicted, the protest was massive, mobilizing millions of people across the country. This year, Peronist unions, including the powerful CGT, which do not usually participate in the 24 March organization, also took part in the event.

This new configuration unfortunately prevented the construction of a unitary demonstration; As in previous years, it split in two with, on the one hand, some organisations of the extreme left such as the PTS having decided to march separately and, on the other side, the other political, social and trade union components.

Government defeats conceal partial victory

Although the mobilization is beginning to be felt, pushing the Assembly to reject many anti-social measures, the government nevertheless retains the initiative thanks to various institutional tools: Decree 70, the most important, remains largely in force until its examination by the National Assembly. For the time being, the government, which had to deal with the Senate's rejection of the order-in-council, has managed to delay its consideration. It has also bought time (and initiative) by presenting the opposition with a new draft agreement called the May Pact, which is beginning to be discussed (and approved in principle) by the provinces governed by Mauricio Macri's PRO.

As long as Decree 70 continues to be implemented, even partially, Milei's government retains the necessary tool to continue its project of dismantling the state and destroying the social gains won over a century of struggles. It is therefore continuing its offensive, without showing signs of weakening: 15,000 redundancies have already been announced among state employees with the promise of reaching 70,000, while new cuts in public spending and new anti-popular measures are looming.

The crisis of Peronism

Alberto Fernández's disastrous management and the accumulation of his political failures have led some observers to note the loss of support for Peronism among a part of the Argentine popular classes. If for the moment they remain orphans, they are already the object of a new hegemonic conflict. This situation of political vacuum is currently benefiting the far right, although this change is not yet definitive.

What is certain is the current state of great weakness of Peronism, which is expressed by its great difficulty in reacting, in a context of frontal attacks against the popular masses it claims to represent. Disoriented, "Pan-Peronism", conceived as the aggregation of different Peronist currents, is now living in a state of crisis with no apparent way out, at least in the short term. As a result, it struggles to influence conflicts and is often overwhelmed by the autonomous action of social bases.

A necessarily partial conclusion

In this context of the crisis of Peronism, certain sectors of the far left are delighted to see the left take the lead in certain struggles, sometimes even as a driving force in them. This may be an overly optimistic but encouraging conclusion. If we also consider that the social movements are beginning to mobilize and gain courage, that within the unions (including the bureaucratic structures) the date of the next general strike is being discussed, and that this month students are starting to go back to school, these conditions still allow us to nourish a little optimism.

However, the left will have to travel a long way in building a favourable balance of forces: unifying the class against Milei will be its fundamental mission.

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*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Revue l'Anticapitaliste](#).*

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[1] The name given to the 660 provisions aimed at reforming the economy, commerce, culture and criminal law, proposed by Milei after his inauguration, reduced to 300 articles after reading by parliament.