

Que Se Vayan Todos (out with all politicians)

The following is a condensed version of eye-witness reports sent to Schnews from Buenos Aires in January.

Fri, 18 Jan 2002

The streets are emptier in Buenos Aires at night, than I have ever seen them. In the centre of the city in the daytime it's as crowded as ever. Queues for exchange bureaux stretch around blocks. There's a feeling in the air of anxiety and barely-surpressed anger. Walking down the main pedestrian avenue, Florida, I heard a woman laugh too loud, and everyone jumped and shot her alarmed stares. 'Ladrones usureros' - usurers, thieves is scratched onto the marble plaque outside the Bank of Boston. The Lloyds and HSBC banks have put up enormous metal panels over their windows; in the provinces, banks are being ransacked every day. The TV news shows protest after protest; today in Santiago del Estero, in the North, there are barricades in the streets and brutal police repression of the mostly middle-aged working men who are demanding 'Dignidad para el obrero' - dignity for the workers. In La Quiaca, people are crucifying themselves every day, 5 hours each in the hot sun, while the children hold signs saying 'pan y trabajo' (bread and work) and 'luchamos contra el hambre' (our struggle is against hunger). Yesterday, after a cacerolazo outside the Supreme Court to demand the resignation of its 9 judges, the people went to the home of one of the judges and continued there. Politicians and judges can't walk the streets in case they are recognized - a friend was queuing at a bank the other day when a judge drew up in a car and tried to go in. Everyone started abusing him - 'ratta!' (rat), 'corrupto', 'hijo de mil putas' (son of a thousand whores), until he took refuge in his car and left.

Peoples' fury at their inability to access their savings, due to banking restrictions, is worsened by news of 386 trucks stuffed with cash, which ferried an estimated 26 billion dollars to the airport after banking restrictions had been imposed, for transfer to Uruguay and beyond. Given the numerous stories of massive 'capital flight' over the early days of this crisis, and of businesses and banks which mysteriously took out fortunes before and during the strict new measures, people think most of their money will never be seen again. There are many for whom the corralito means nothing - they have nothing in the bank. Unemployment is over 20%, and there is hunger in many areas. Pensioners are badly affected. They have had no pensions since November - millions of workers are going unpaid. The state medical system, PAMI, has collapsed due to lack of funds. There is an extreme shortage of insulin and other common drugs, because they are imported and because many drugs were withdrawn from the shelves by pharmaceutical companies, to protect prices. In the outlying, poorest barrios people have arms and use them, but actual robberies are outstripped by paranoia and vigilanteism, born of government disinformation about supposed widespread looting of homes. Many people are trying to leave the country, reluctantly but seeing no future in Argentina - when it was reported this week that Poland was to join the EU, a queue formed immediately at the Polish embassy. Thousands of the large Chilean population of Mendoza have gone home, as have many of the Bolivian, Peruvian and Paraguayan migrant workers. People talk bitterly of institutional corruption from top to bottom. Now, as well as blaming the IMF, the free market economy forced on them by Menem (the whole-sale selling off and privatisation), and the constant flight of capital abroad, people are beginning to blame themselves. It's bitter and humiliating.

Mon, 21 Jan 2002

Yesterday we went to the general assembly, the 'Interbarrial', of the almost 100 neighbourhood ('barrio') assemblies of Bs. As. in Parque Centenario, and attended by about 2,000 people. There were speeches from each barrio, telling of their experiences, listing actions they planned and putting forward proposals. There was a lot of talk about the Supreme Court and continuing the protests against it until all the judges resigned - or to go in and boot them out themselves. The media was denounced by many speakers for its lies and distortion; meanwhile, the news that there were TV crews from Japan, Spain, UK and Finland present at the assembly was greeted with cheers, while the mention of a US TV crew met with angry whistles and boos. There were no Argentinian TV crews present at all. Speakers suggested that anyone who had held a political post in the last 30 years should be disqualified from ever doing so again. They denounced the new budget and banking reforms due to be announced this week as measures that were bound to suit the 'yanquis' (USA) - the new economy minister is a veteran of 20 years' service to the IMF. It was agreed that the visitors from the IMF due here on Tuesday should be greeted with a 'cacerolazo'. A speaker proposed that 'we stay in the streets till they have all gone' and commented on the importance of showing that it's not just the corralito they are against; that they want to change it all. There was a minute's applause for those who died during the repression which followed the first cacerolazos of the 19th and 20th of December and chants of 'Policía Federal, la verguenza nacional' - the Federal Police, a national disgrace. Barrio after barrio made its proposals, and when the voting through of the main proposals went ahead they were:

- * Que se vayan todos (that all politicians should go)
- * No to payment of the external debt
- * Justice and punishment for the murderers and repressors
- * Nationalisation of the bank and the privatised companies
- * The Supreme Court - out!
- * Return the money to depositors.

Tue, 29 Jan 2002

On Friday night, the 25th January, a national 'cacerolazo', agreed at the assembly, began at 8pm with the sound of pans clanging from balconies and in the streets and parks of the capital. By 10pm, the enormous Plaza de Mayo was starting to fill and the noise was already deafening. Along the Av. de Mayo a steady stream of people was pouring into the square: 'asambleas barriales' (neighbourhood assemblies) arriving from the barrios, hundreds of families and thousands of old people. The rain was coming on and off in the heat, but everyone acted like they hadn't noticed as the square filled with banging, chanting people. Over the rhythm of beaten pans, chants were constantly breaking out; the favourite chant, sung by nearly 20,000, football-style: 'Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo' (that they all go, that not a single one remains). And, jumping and pointing at the President's Casa Rosada, cut off from the square by fencing and lines of stony-faced cops, 'A minute's silence for Duhalde, who is dead'. I look at the faces of the police behind the fence and I think I see fear and shame; later, I reconsider.

By 11:30pm the rain is pouring down in buckets, but the crowd only bangs the pots harder and jumps faster, chanting louder, 'Que llueve, que llueve, que el pueblo no se mueve' (let it rain, let it rain, the people are staying here). And suddenly, unexpectedly, almost on the stroke of midnight, the 'represión' begins. Motorcycle police appear and begin to fire teargas and rubber bullets, causing panicked running here and there; as people on their way home along the Avenida de Mayo approach the wide Avenida 9 de Julio, a

line of cops appears and fires teargas and rubber bullets from the front and from side-streets. In the Plaza, people taking shelter from the rain in front of the cathedral are fired upon with gas and rubber bullets. The demonstration had been noisy but entirely peaceful - on TV reports, there is just a single image of a youth throwing a molotov cocktail at lines of police who have already emptied the square. It is an incomprehensible response in already volatile times. I hear a report on the radio of a woman of 70, on the ground badly wounded, her legs full of rubber bullets, and a young man with two in his head. Back home, we watch on TV as 20 people, under arrest, are forced to lie face down in the rain with their hands above their heads - 'It's just like during the dictatorship', someone says. There are still 300 demonstrators at Congress, completely surrounded by police. They are chanting and jumping - 'El que no salta es policía' (whoever's not jumping is police). We see three young men with their arms over their heads being thrust towards a police bus. Their t-shirts are pulled over their heads from the back by police and at least one is bleeding heavily from the head. A policeman in soaked t-shirt and shorts is directing uniformed officers as they hustle the lads onto the bus. In the bar someone says - 'These sons-of-bitches haven't even been paid' (thousands of people have gone unpaid, some for months). 'No importa', says someone else - 'lo hacen de onda'. (They don't mind - they do it for fun).

PS. This morning, tho' some of the press made the point that the demo had been entirely peaceful and the police action unprovoked, most of the TV news, as always, reverted to type and lied. As graffiti here in the barrio where we are staying says, 'Nos mean y la prensa dice q' llueve' (they piss on us and the press says it's raining).

Payback Time

Last year, as the country slipped into total crisis and it looked likely it was going to default on its eternal (sic) debt, IMF conditions dictated that the government should make massive cuts in public spending. State workers' salaries were cut by 13%, as were state pensions, in yet another round of austerity measures which helped to push people's patience right to its limit. Argentina has paid and paid for its addiction to IMF 'assistance', and it looks as if it will be paying for years, in ways it never thought possible. The deployment of Argentinean troops to the Gulf War and to Bosnia are examples of favours called in by the USA, as is the training of Colombian airforce pilots in Argentina. US and Latin American troops, commanded and financed in Washington, have carried out exercises in Argentina without Congress's approval, and despite this being in violation of Argentina's constitution.

Argentina is about to vote, for the third time, against Cuba's human rights record at the UN, this time as a proposer of the motion. It has promised Washington to 'work for the liberty of the Cuban people,' to the disgust of the Argentinean people and Fidel Castro, who has yet again called the government 'yankee boot-lickers'. Another member of the Cuban government expressed sympathy for Argentina, locked in to 'carnal relations' with the USA, for the way the USA is 'humiliating and pressurizing' Argentina while denying it the funds to resolve the situation imposed by 'the dogmatic imposition of the neo-liberal model'. And there's more to come for Argentina. On January 12th, the New York Times reported US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, as saying the US might be willing to financially assist the Argentinean government, if they were permitted to install military bases in Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of the Americas. The governor of the province has secretly authorised bases, where the US will be allowed to detonate underground atomic bombs - but only for 'peaceful ends'. So that's alright then.

Silver Tongued

Buenos Aires - once known as 'the Paris of Latin America' has now sunk - along with the rest of Argentina, into what has been called Latin Americanisation. "It used to be the jewel in the crown, but now has all the same problems of poverty as the rest of the continent." So who's made us cry for Argentina? International Monetary Fund, come on down.

Argentina has for the past two and a half decades been the IMF's star pupil. It sold off everything, down to its "grandma's jewels," with foreign firms taking over key sectors of the economy and the utilities. Companies like French multinational Vivendi Universal, which in 1995 bought most of the water system before sacking staff and raising prices, up 400 % in some areas. Or the Spanish oil company Repsol, which snapped up the state-owned YPF, sacked thousands of workers and turned the only oil company in the world not making a profit, into a money-spinner estimated to have taken \$60 billion out of the country. Or the Spanish Telefónica, which bought up most of the privatised telephone system for a bargain basement price, then whacked up the prices to way above those paid anywhere else in the world and made a tidy profit of \$2 billion in its first year.

Argentina obediently deregulated its markets and tried to make its workforce more 'flexible' (meaning you work longer for less pay.) It has jumped through all the IMF hoops, with promises of prosperity at the end of them, yet now finds itself with a \$150 billion dollar foreign debt, with 30% of its GDP going every year to pay off interest payments alone before December, and is still paying part of it despite having defaulted.

Loan Sharks

The first IMF loans were to the military junta in 1976 and since then, this 'debt' has been paid off by the Argentinean people many times over - and not just in pesos. Argentineans used

to call their country the bread-basket of the world, and say that in a country bursting with natural resources and a huge agricultural sector, nobody ever went hungry. But now 40% of the people live below the poverty line and up to a hundred die every day from poverty-related illness, with food parcels and medicines now arriving from Spain and neighbouring Brazil.

In a ruling two years ago a federal judge summed it up. "Since 1976 our country has been put under the rule of foreign creditors and under the supervision of the IMF by means of a vulgar and offensive economic policy that forced Argentina down on its knees in order to benefit national and foreign private firms."

Despite the economy being in free-fall, two documents leaked to investigative journalist Greg Palast show that, for the deluded economists at the IMF, what the country really needed to get it back on its feet was even more structural adjustment! So it's more cuts for state pensions, salaries, unemployment benefits, education and health, all of this ensuring that the burden of this so called 'adjustment' falls, as ever, on those who can least afford it.

Anoop Singh, leader of the IMF delegation currently in the country, admitted it was "the worst economic crisis any country has had." Then promptly listed a new set of demands Argentina must implement immediately before they even get to see how much 'aid' they'll receive. In a veiled threat he commented, "without an IMF agreement, it will be very difficult for Argentina to recover." Since 1983 there have been nine IMF stabilisation plans in Argentina, 'helping' the country out.

But it's not just the IMF that wants more adjustment. Other financial institutions are still licking their loan shark lips, saying Argentina's crisis should not be seen as an obstacle but as an opportunity because, the reasoning goes, the country is so desperate for cash it will do whatever the IMF wants. "During a crisis is when . . . Congress is most receptive," explained

Winston Fritsch, chairman of Dresdner Bank AG's Brazil. Meanwhile, a couple of Massachusetts Institute of Technology economists writing in the Financial Times, go even further. "It's time to get radical. . . (Argentina) must temporarily surrender its sovereignty on all financial issues . . . and give up much of its monetary, fiscal, regulatory and asset-management sovereignty for an extended period, say five years."

When Greg Palast interviewed the former chief economist, Joe Stiglitz - fired by the World Bank for questioning its economic wisdom - Stiglitz told him about 'IMF riots' "Everywhere we go, every country we end up meddling in, we destroy their economy and they end up in flames." He went on to tell Palast that the IMF even plan for riots, because as the people revolt, capital drains out of the country (helped by IMF inspired abolition of currency controls) and whoever's left in charge has to go begging back to the IMF for more money. They don't mind handing some out, as long as the country agrees to even more demands, and they turn a blind eye as politicians fill their pockets in return for their compliance.

On Tuesday the IMF did just that, agreeing to give Argentina \$5 billion of its promised, frozen \$22 billion loan programme. And where will that money go? To where it's really needed - paying the interest on the debt. The debt gets bigger, the cuts get harsher - and the money doesn't even have to leave Washington. The people of Argentina know the IMF aren't there to help them. The only people the IMF dish out their dollars to are those who in their view really need it; the banks and big business, the rich and the powerful. For them, the Argentina experiment has been a stunning success - Shame about the people though, eh?

* Greg Palast's *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* (Pluto Press, 2002) www.gregpalast.com

* www.corpwatch.org

* www.50years.org

Money For Sale

The banking restrictions, known as the corralito (meaning the corraling or ring-fencing of bank deposits), was imposed at the beginning of December, when nervous savers, feeling disaster approach, started to withdraw their money from the banks. Since then, its rules have changed almost daily, allowing a certain amount to be withdrawn each month, but also forcibly converting most savings, 80% of which had been deposited in dollars for security (!) into pesos at extremely unfavourable rates. Those who insisted on keeping their deposits - which exist on paper only now as the money is no longer in the country - in dollars, have been forced to accept bonds which may or may not be repaid in the next year or so, and almost certainly not in dollars. And those with pesos can only watch as the peso falls from one-to-one with the dollar, where it had been artificially pegged for eleven years, to a low of 4 a few weeks ago. The hated Supreme Court, in a manoeuvre calculated to save its own skin from moves in Congress to impeach them and from the angry threats of the people to go in and kick them out, decreed the corralito unconstitutional on the 1st of February. Some savers laid down their pots and pans to queue at the court for individual court orders to their banks to return their deposits, but banks have generally ignored these. Those with a lot of money or influence routinely skip out of the corralito with their money, either on the nod from their banks or through clever dealings with shares in Argentinean companies on the New York stock exchange.

It's a different story for businesses, which have been generously compensated by the (bankrupt) state for the peso-fication of their debts in dollars. Plans for the peso-fication, at one-

to-one despite the plummeting peso, of debts contracted in dollars was intended to help individuals with debts like mortgages, who could never dream of repaying them in the devalued peso, and was going to apply only to debts of less than \$100,000. But an investigation by reporters on the TV news show 'Telenoche Investiga', who were all sacked and their programme never broadcast, uncovered the truth about how the debts of big business came to be included in the rescue plan. On the 12th January, heads of large Argentinean corporations held a secret meeting with President Duhalde and three other members of the cabinet. They were told by the president that it might be possible for their massive debts to also benefit from conversion at one to one, if they were willing to make a 'contribution'. Even the millionaire CEOs were taken aback at the size of the bribe he was soliciting - it was to be \$500 million dollars, in dollars and in cash. The reporter was told that the money was to be divided between members of Congress and the Senate (\$200 million) who would have to approve it, \$175 million for Mendiguren, Lenicov and Capitanich, the cabinet members present that day, and a tidy \$125 million for Duhalde. One empresario refused and is now under investigation by the DGI (General Tax Directorate). The overall saving to businesses is estimated to be in the region of \$20-30 billion dollars (YPF-Repsol oil, for example, has been able to halve its \$310 million debt); the money will have to come from more cuts in public spending.



The former middle class are 'avin' it on the street - pissed off with the banks cos they've lost their money.

Bourgeois Block

An email to Schnevs describes bizarre scenes as the 'bourgeois block', gangs of enraged savers denied access to their money, strikes again:

"Tearing off the metal cladding, they invaded the bank lobbies and in full sight of the police, without a mask or black hood to be seen, proceeded to destroy the cash machines. Women with perms, golden bracelets and high heels kicked at the windows, lipstick grins spreading as they watched the glass shatter. Every armoured security van the mob of 300 people came across was surrounded. Men in business suits proceeded to unscrew the wheel-nuts, while others prised open the bonnets, tearing out wires from the engines. Soccer mums jumped up and down on top of vans, smashing anything that could be broken, wing-mirrors, lights, number plates. . ."

They Piss On Us And The Press Says It's Raining

- Graffiti in Buenos Aires

PIQUETE Y CACEROLA, LA LUCHA ES UNA SOLA

The two biggest types of organised resistance in Argentina are the popular assemblies and the piqueteros, the unemployed workers' movement which takes its name (picketers) from their trademark tactic of blocking roads.



Highway blocked by the 'piqueteros' on outskirts of Buenos Aires

Repression

Despite the unprecedented changes happening at street level, there's little new in mainstream politics and government. President Duhalde is an old political hand, and well known for corruption during his previous years in office. In his nine years as governor of Buenos Aires, he amassed support, contacts and experience that now stand him in good stead, including the use of violent thugs ('patoteros'), both paid and party political. At his swearing-in as president, hundreds of his supporters, said to have been paid to come, battled outside and inside Congress with protestors, and there are even rumours that some of the looters who precipitated the downfall of President De la Rúa were paid by the Peronist party. Duhalde has ordered the repression of at least one cacerolazo, on the 25th January, since taking power, and is now making use of the thugs of his party apparatus (officially called the Justicialist Party, aka Peronism) to intimidate a population which still clearly remembers the fearsome repression, torture and murder of the military dictatorship (1976-1983), when 30,000 people 'disappeared'. In the Buenos Aires barrio of Merlo a few weeks ago, the assembly was attacked one assembly has even been shot at. In the barrio of Avellaneda last Sunday the assembly, gathered to protest at corruption in the local administration, was prevented from reaching their destination by a gang of 300 thugs sent by the local municipal leader. Last Tuesday during one of the regular savers' protests at the Bank of Boston, a woman was beaten to the ground, kicked and handcuffed and had teargas sprayed in her eyes by police, and many of the other protestors were beaten and arrested.

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www.argentinaarde.org.ar (should be online soon)
www.buenosairesherald.com/ (English language daily newspaper)
<http://argentina.linefeed.org/> (indymedia Argentina, almost all in Spanish)
www.rebelion.org/ (in Spanish)
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The Piqueteros

Rising unemployment in Argentina over the last few years has created the world's largest concentration of unemployed industrial workers. Many piqueteros are experienced workplace and union activists. They use the tactic of blocking roads as a way of disrupting production, setting up camp right on the asphalt, putting up tents and cooking food. Women and children are a fundamental part of the movement, and always present. The piqueteros have stepped up their activities in the last few months, paralysing the capital a number of times, most recently when the latest IMF delegation arrived to 'negotiate'. In February they blockaded oil refineries and depots throughout the country, demanding 50,000 jobs; new, shorter shifts to employ more workers; no petrol price rises and the re-nationalisation of the oil industry and all the privatised companies. They also usually demand food packages, the release of political prisoners, unemployment benefits and 'work plans' – a type of workfare scheme worth a meagre 120 pesos a month. An email which arrived at Schnews last week from a British activist in Buenos Aires:

"There's loads of different piquetero organisations, and a lot of divisions, partly caused by old left parties. The CCC is the largest, and the most reformist [despite the name – Classist and Combative Current] – they are the ones who concentrate on demands for proper social security payments. Far more militant are independent organisations such as CTA Anibal Verón, and Movimiento Teresa Rodrigues (both named after piqueteros murdered by cops during blockades), and the MTD (Unemployed Workers Movement). They see their struggle as a Latin American one, and identify with the anti-capitalist movement. They are active, highly politicised people, and probably number 10,000."

Popular Assemblies

Popular assemblies, also known as neighbourhood (barrio) assemblies, have mushroomed in Argentina since December. A recent survey by the newspaper Página 12 found that 33% of those questioned in the capital had participated in them. Assemblies are held on street corners or public spaces, and operate in the most transparent way, with what they call a 'horizontal' structure and no leaders or representatives. Born of the first cacerolazos, and the fertile coming together of neighbours on the streets in protest, the assemblies discuss and vote on issues ranging from non-payment of the external debt to the defence of local families in danger of eviction for non-payment of rent. They have organised collective food-buying, soup kitchens, support for local hospitals and schools and even alternative forms of healthcare. Every Sunday, all the Buenos Aires assemblies meet in Parque Centenario for the Interbarrial – the inter-neighbourhood mass assembly. Certain sections of mainstream politics are attempting to participate in or co-opt the assemblies – like one proposal made in Congress that the assemblies be given their own space and resources at the Congress building – but these proposals were vehemently rejected. Pressure from left-wing parties such as the Partido Obrero (workers' party), has been harder to resist. At an Interbarrial in Centenario, a motion was put that "the party militants stop coming along to assemblies to lay down party lines – that they take the assembly's position back to their parties instead." The sovereignty of each local assembly has been reiterated again and again at the Interbarrial and motions voted there, based on proposals from each assembly, are taken back to local assemblies to be ratified. Despite this, a controversial proposal for a Constituent Assembly – an assembly of delegates – which many felt was an unacceptable move back towards representative politics, was voted through at the Interbarrial of March 17th.

Despite their differences, an important similarity is that both organise outside the sphere of work. The assemblies' refusal to negotiate with the government, under the slogan 'Que se vayan todos' – out with all politicians – clashed with some sections of the piqueteros. Since the economy collapsed at the end of last year, the total of Argentineans living in poverty has risen to some 14 million (pop. 36 million), and the middle class has been destroyed. The piqueteros' struggle has been going on for years with little support from the wider public; those who participate in the cacerolazos and at bank protests are accused of having acted only when their own pockets were

finally rifled. Despite these contradictions everyone sees the need to link their struggles together; and many of the piqueteros' demands, which seemed radical just a few months ago (non-payment of the national debt, for example) have become the battle cries of the newly-impooverished middle class too. On the 27th February, a march of some 5,000 piqueteros from the poor Buenos Aires suburb of La Matanza was met by a number of local assemblies, who provided breakfasts and then joined the march to the Plaza de Mayo. The piqueteros were also cheered along the route by the people of Buenos Aires, who gave out food and drink with some even banging their pots and pans. A new slogan was born – 'Piquete y cacerola, la lucha es una sola' (pickets and pot-bangers, the struggle is one). Piquetero demands include things like the return of savers' deposits, while motions at popular assemblies almost always include support for the piqueteros, and for occupied factories under workers' control.

And Finally

From the first night of the uprising, the Argentinian people have shown utter contempt for politicians, summed up in the slogan 'Que se vayan todos' – out with all politicians. Not that this disillusionment with representative politics is new. In last October's general elections, more than 40% of the (compulsory) votes were blank or spoiled – the majority going to a cartoon character, Clemente the cat politician, who has no hands so he cannot steal! So while politicians in the West denounce their own demonstrators as either foolish, indulgent or violent for having the cheek to fight for a better world, the mass media focuses on protests in Seattle and Genoa, while burying news of general strikes and mass protests in countries like Argentina. But we know that it will only be people around the world working together and linking up with international struggles, that can defeat capitalism. As one of the speakers at last year's National Assembly of piqueteros, put it, "Argentina is part of a world-wide crisis – all over the world piqueteros are arising. And last week, 300,000 piqueteros invaded the city of Genoa to say 'no' to world-wide imperialism." Others have taken up the slogan 'Todos Somos Argentinos' – 'We Are All Argentineans' – because people know that what is happening now in Argentina will be happening in a country near you soon if the IMF and their big business mates carry on destroying the planet in their never ending search for profit. Unless of course, we stop 'em.

Disclaimer

SchNEWS warns all readers we're 'avin' a week off then back again with more beefy stories – unless we break our little toe. Honest.