

Transportation unions call for strike in Argentina

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Seven key transit and transportation unions in Argentina meeting at a National Transportation Conference (Mesa Nacional de Transporte) decided on a 24-hour protest strike against the policies of the Javier Milei administration which, in less than a year, have sunk millions of Argentines into joblessness, hunger and extreme poverty.

At the conference last week were leaders of the truckers, pilots, flight crews, as well as rail, dock, maritime and transit workers.

The protest strike will take place on October 17, an important anniversary in the history of Argentine Peronism. On October 17, 1945, over 100,000 workers rallied in Buenos Aires, demanding that Labor Secretary Juan Peron and his wife Eva be released from military arrest. Nine days earlier the military Junta, that Peron himself had been part of—alarmed over his pro-union and corporatist demagogic policies—placed him under arrest.

Though the conference delegates declared that the choice of date had nothing to do with the October 17 anniversary, they did so with large photographs of Juan and Eva Peron behind them, symbolizing the unions' subordination to a bourgeois party that provides the fascistic Milei indispensable support.

The protest-strike call was triggered by the proposed privatization of state-owned Aerolíneas Argentinas.

Aerolíneas, a successful airline established as a government airline under Peron in 1949, was privatized in 1990 under the Menem administration (also a Peronist) as part of a neo-liberal wave of privatizations, which turned the debt-free airline into a private corporation managed by Iberia Airlines (Spain). Two years later as a result of mismanagement and corruption, the airline had accumulated debts of \$530 million and had to be rescued by the Argentine government through the purchase of shares of stock. In 2008 heavily in debt and on the edge of bankruptcy, the airline was re-nationalized under the

(Peronist) administration of Cristina Kirchner, to be run as a public utility and in large part, based on the sacrifices of its workers.

The privatization of Aerolíneas Argentinas was part of the government's policy of privatizing every possible public enterprise. This was seconded by Transportation Secretary Franco Mogetta, who called on Congress to approve a decree to be formalized this week, in order to "force Aerolíneas Argentinas to submit to the dictates of the market, and function like all the other airlines."

On September 27, the Milei administration declared its intentions to privatize the airline once again by transforming it into a privately owned corporation. The privatization of the airline had been originally included in, and then removed from, the Law of Bases legislation (also known as the "Omnibus Bill") approved by Congress earlier this year.

In its message motivating the decree Milei indicated that in a nation with a poverty rate of 52.9 percent, "it is irresponsible and inadmissible for the State to keep financing the deficit [of the airline] and the privileges of a few by taxing those that cannot make it to the end of the month."

Specifically, the Milei administration identifies the "privileged few" as the supposedly overpaid pilots of the airline.

The president's message contrasted the hunger wages and pensions of the working class of the country with the wages and benefits of pilots. "Monthly pilots' wages range from US\$2400 to US\$8000 ... family members and friends enjoy free tickets."

In this way, the government, which has broken off negotiations with the pilots' union, is attempting to pit the more oppressed sections of the working class against the pilots.

Manuel Adorni, Milei's press secretary, denounced the fact that the airline employs 15 pilots per airplane, which

he considers “absolutely unnecessary.”

Currently the airline flies 11 million passengers a year on 95,000 flights. It is the only airline serving 22 cities in the country’s interior.

Nothing in the Decree message acknowledges that the conditions of poverty that affect millions of workers and retirees in Argentina today are the direct consequence of Milei’s brutal austerity policies. These policies have included the removal of food entitlements and the cancellation of wage and pension increases to keep up with the increase in the cost of living, including food, fuel, medical care, child care and housing (the Total Basics Basket, Canasta Basica Total, CBT).

Recent statistics indicate that Argentina’s poverty rate among households living below the CBT in the first semester of 2024 reached 52.9 percent, the highest in 20 years, a 13 percent increase since Milei took power. The level of indigence, those households unable to afford the Basic Food Basket (Canasta Basica Alimentaria, CBA), stands at 18.1 percent, up from 6.2 percent in the first semester of 2023. For children under the age of 14, the figures are even more alarming—with 66 percent, or 6.9 million, now living in poverty and 27 percent indigent, or over 3 million children, unable to afford the most basic necessities of life, condemned to a life of hunger, with little or no education.

This month, municipal surveyors in the industrial and port city of Rosario (population 1.4 million) reported a 40 percent increase in the number of people scavenging garbage [*cartoneros*] in Rosario’s city center. Nationally over 150,000 workers live off the collection of cardboard and other materials, an occupation that did not exist prior to 2001, a mark of poverty which increases every year. *Cartonero* workers, many of whom are homeless, report that the recycling firms that buy their recyclable trash have cut down on the amount that they pay. Currently, each collector earns less than half of the minimum average daily wage.



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