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Workers' power not bureaucrats' power

Lessons from Argentina

Jonathan Payn

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Around the world the ruling class (capitalists, politicians and state managers) is trying to restore its profits by making the working class pay for the economic crisis. One way capitalists do this is by retrenching workers and making the remaining workers work harder to meet production targets, as well as by attacking wages, working conditions and benefits. States help capitalists do this, among other things, by increasing interest rates while giving corporations tax cuts, commercialising and privatising state owned enterprises and outsourcing the provision of basic services. States also help capitalists by undermining workers' rights, such as the right to strike, in order to make it more difficult for workers to resist these attacks.

Unions have failed to defend workers from the immediate threat of these attacks (by preventing dismissals and defending jobs, wages and conditions), as well as to mount an effective resistance that can prevent further attacks and begin to roll back the devastating effects of neoliberalism. Moreover, union bureaucrats are often complicit in these attacks through deals

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they make with governments and bosses. A recent example in South Africa is the National Minimum Wage and amendments to the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and Labour Relations Amendment Bill – all of which represent an attack on workers yet were agreed to at Nedlac (the National Economic Development and Labour Council) by the leaders of the three main federations: Nactu, Fedusa and Cosatu.

Faced with this ruling class threat and with union bureaucracies that are either complicit or unwilling to fight, workers in Argentina have begun a process to build unity in struggle and a democratic worker-controlled alternative.

In July 2017, workers at a PepsiCo factory in Buenos Aires arrived at work to find a sign posted on the factory entrance announcing its closure and the dismissal of over 600 workers. Production would be moved to another plant – where workers would be expected to work harder and longer to make up for production lost by the closure of the Buenos Aires factory.

Left to their fate by union leaders that could or tried to do little to help, workers had no hope but to try defend their jobs through direct action. They collectively decided to occupy the factory to prevent its closure and keep their jobs. The occupation was violently evicted by a massive police operation after a few weeks; but the dismissed workers continued to fight for their jobs. They organised working class cultural ‘festivals of resistance’ to build solidarity, had mass marches and demonstrations, blockaded roads and even camped in tents in front of Argentina’s legislature to keep their struggle visible.

At this camp the PepsiCo workers made an open call to all organisations that wanted to join them in building an independent pole of worker organisation and resistance. In contrast to the union bureaucrats, this initiative would be based on democratic decision-making by workers themselves in open assemblies, and combative class struggle in opposition to years of conciliation by union bureaucrats that try to make workers believe they have something in common with the bosses and

government. Instead of being bought off, they chose to rely on their own collective strength; and they took it beyond their won struggles to fight for other demands. Thus they turned their struggle into an example for the entire Argentine working class.

One group that heard the call, at a meeting in February, was that of 122 workers dismissed at the beginning of 2018 from the Posadas Hospital. As a dismissed nurse put it, “We are dismissed workers from different companies and establishments. The leaders of the big unions and federations have left us to fight alone. We have had strikes, blockades and mobilisations. Now we are uniting to fight, no matter what province or union we are from. We all struggle together and demand a national plan of action so that we can get our jobs back.”

Another step was on 11 April when mineworkers from Río Turbio, dismissed PepsiCo and Posadas Hospital workers, workers from ‘recovered’ (de-bureaucratized) sections of the education workers’ union, outsourced aeronautical and rail workers, drivers, call-centre operators, dock-workers and others shut down a main avenue in the centre of Buenos Aires – demonstrating the possibility of coordinating struggles and building unity from below. They demanded an end to the stillness of the union leadership and raised the need for a national general strike and a real plan of action.

This action was followed two days later by a general meeting where workers agreed that the central problem confronting them is the role of the bureaucratic union leaders that are either complicit in attacking workers, turn a blind eye or do everything they can to encourage conciliation and compromise. In opposition to this the meeting decided to continue the call for a national general strike and a plan of action; but also to develop a plan of action now specific to the various sectors in struggle, from below, through general assemblies of affected workers.

The PepsiCo workers' call responded to an urgent need – in South Africa as much as in Argentina – for workers to exchange experiences, discuss strategies, tactics and ideas and decide collectively how to build genuine unity and coordination of struggles from below. To take immediate steps to strengthen each local conflict, but also to take steps towards formulating a joint plan of action and compelling the leaders of all the union federations both to adopt the joint plan of action and call a national general strike.