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Latin America

Argentina's left at a crossroads

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Since winning last year's presidential election in Argentina, the conservative Mauricio Macri has carried out an onslaught against the working class and social movements. His drive to impose neoliberal austerity measures and to escalate repression against dissent has led to wide discontent and signs of a revived resistance, but the left has crucial questions to answer in order to build an opposition that can turn the tide.

One such question is the role of the Left and Workers Front (FIT by its Spanish initials), a coalition of three far-left parties that identify with the Trotskyist tradition. The FIT won more than 3 percent of the vote in the primary elections for the presidency, a strong showing for the left, although a decline from its totals in 2013. The drop reflected an element of "lesser evil" voting for the governing Justicialist Party (also known as the Peronists) of outgoing President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, which had been considered part of the "Pink Tide" of reformist governments in Latin America.

With Macri winning office in the general election a few months later, debates about the FIT and the direction of the resistance have increased. Inside the FIT, there is an ongoing discussion over whether and how the Front should open itself up to other forces on the left or to remain as a strict electoral pact between revolutionary socialist parties. In this debate, two of the FIT's members, the Workers' Party (PO, by its initials in Spanish) and Socialist Left (IS), have shown greater willingness to broaden the front to other forces on the left than has the Socialist Workers Party (PTS).

Another organization on the Argentinian left, Socialist Democracy (Democracia Socialista, DS), which is not a member of the FIT, has a well-developed analysis of these questions, which [SocialistWorker.org published last June](#). A group of PTS members left that party to form Democracia Socialista in 2005. PTS members who founded DS criticized the PTS (and the rest of the Argentinian far left) for its failure to open itself up to new forces mobilized by the Argentinazo.

DS has raised the question of whether the FIT, in its current form, is best organized to galvanize a fight against Macri's attacks. It argues that the FIT should take the initiative to spearhead a broad fight, transcending party divisions in the far left, and reaching out even to supporters of Peronism. While certainly partisan and critical, DS's views on the FIT and the challenges facing the Argentinian left should be of interest to readers of SocialistWorker.org. Here, we publish a contribution to that discussion from Eduardo Lucita, a DS member. Lucita's article first appeared in Spanish at the [Democracia Socialista](#) website and was translated by Lance Selfa.

At a time when the right is making major gains in Latin America, and particularly in our country, the most important demonstration commemorating the essence of the international workers movement, May Day, was divided.

There's no doubt that the left, in its many distinct currents, has won important space in society. Whether in the social movements or elections, the left has, in one way or another, become a part of the unfolding political process.

This is particularly significant in the case of the FIT, an electoral front that, although limited in its composition, has won more than 20 political offices and has become a national reference point for other groups, including the more radical and class-conscious left, drawn from the so-called New Left or from the populists, as well as many other left

currents. This includes those who don't vote for the FIT, but who feel they have to acknowledge its presence.

For many observers, the current political conjuncture has reopened opportunities for the left. Capitalism has entered into a period of long-term stagnation, geopolitical conflicts are widening the range of crises, and progressive governments in Latin America have run up against their own limits. Meanwhile, a pro-business right has taken charge of the state in Argentina and is making things much clearer.

In the previous period, when state intervention and social spending were on the ascendancy, the left and socio-political and cultural movements found it difficult to correctly assess Kirchnerismo [the latest left-populist version of Peronism named after husband and wife Presidents Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner] and to position themselves in relation to it. In some ways, these difficulties could justify the dispersion of forces and factionalism. Nonetheless, the FIT was launched, and despite its internal conflicts, it has managed to hold together as an electoral alliance.

But today, the sense that "either you're with us or them" and that class polarization is much more apparent has created a yearning to bring together a social force capable of confronting the all-out employers and state offensive and staking out an anti-capitalist alternative. In other words, it's obvious now that more than a merely electoral alliance is needed, and this seems to have given rise to tendencies to dispersion and factionalism.

At this stage, capitalist globalization concentrates, centralizes and homogenizes at the top of society while it divides, fragments and creates heterogeneity below. And in addition to this general tendency, we find sterile arguments and self-promoting politics, all resulting in a sectarianism inherited from a left organized into parties. Even some movements and smaller coalitions haven't escaped this.

Remember, not long ago, an agreement between two leaders—Ruben "Pollo" Sobrero of the Rail Workers Union (UF) and Carlos "Perro" Santillan of the Jujuy Municipal Workers (SEOM)—whose profiles go beyond their trade union base—gave birth to the Class Struggle Union Forum (Encuentro Sindical Combativo, ESC).

The Workers Party (PO) dismissed this initiative while the Socialist Workers Party (PTS) did little to build it. Nevertheless, other smaller forces joined and built the ESC until the end of last year, when the SEOM expelled a delegate belonging to the PTS. When the rest of the left parties and currents belonging to the ESC disagreed because the reasons stated explicitly for the expulsion did not justify the severity of the measures taken, the SEOM pulled out of the ESC and killed it. [1].

In the first case, it all began with the organizers' decision to prevent the Socialist Workers Movement (MST in Spanish, a significant, but smaller force compared to the PO and PTS) from joining the ESC. Once this "problem" was solved (because the other members of the ESC agreed to the MST's exclusion), debate on the composition of the steering committee and speakers for the ESC began.

Behind this discussion lay a debate over whether the steering committee would be permanent or temporary in order to only organize the initial event. When everything was already prepared and the ESC was being promoted, it drew criticisms from all sides. The PO blamed other forces for the ESC's failure. El Nuevo MAS tried to push the PO out with bureaucratic maneuvers; the PTS accused the PO, Socialist Left (IS) and Rompiendo Cadenas ("Breaking the Chains") of bureaucratic exclusions and vetoing delegates. Finally, the IS accused the PO and PTS of wanting to split the ESC. Meanwhile, the MST denounced it from outside the FIT's closed circle.

This wasn't the only example. Following the crackup of the ECS, a formation that had up to that point raised the hopes of many activists in the broad, non-party left, divisions emerged in the left's activities on May Day. These developments show the seriousness of the situation more starkly.

Fortunately part of the FIT (the PO and PTS) and the class-struggle wing of the union movementâ€”marching in their own contingentâ€”participated in the huge May Day demonstration called by all the mainstream union federations. At the same time, a united, anti-bureaucratic and class-struggle slate won the leadership of the tire workers' union, SUTNA, following the overwhelming victory of a united left-wing slate in the Buenos Aires journalists' union, SIPREBA.

These developments show that some working-class common sense survives despite all the division. Without a doubt, these are not insignificant pockets of support.

But the tendency to disunity was unmistakable on May Day. This time, the impeachment crisis in Brazil prompted a split.

The PTS argued that what it calls an "institutional coup" in Brazil will affect the entire Latin American left. And for this reason, it argued, the Brazilian crisis should have been the key rallying point for May Day rallies and demonstrations. Thus, it called for a May Day demonstration outside the Brazilian embassy in Buenos Aires.

The PO generally shared the PTS's assessment of the Brazilian events, but didn't think the Brazilian question should dominate May Day in Argentina. While it wanted to maintain unity among the forces on the left, the PO opposed moving the site of the main demonstration away from the traditional rallying site, the Plaza de Mayo.

The IS, on the other hand, sees the Brazilian impeachment crisis as a fight inside the Brazilian ruling class, reflecting popular discontent rather than a "coup." Nevertheless, it supported a united May Day action.

In the end, the PTS demonstrated in front of the Brazilian embassy on April 30, while the PO and IS along with Rompiendo Cadenas and other smaller groups rallied in the Plaza de Mayo on May 1. For its part, the MST gathered in the Parque Centenario. Clearly, ongoing debates are important and should continue, but they are not the sort of debates that ought to continuously recreate these unproductive splits. Yet again, the narrow interests of the different parties took precedence over the class unity that's needed.

Once again, political disagreements were raised above the interests of the working class and popular sectors. The united May Day action announced in the middle of April came apart over petty arguments. This is clear because nothing required any of the groups to "give up their line," though they could have worked together as they had done in the past.

It's true that at numerous times in the past, the left held multiple and even simultaneous demonstrations, but those were times when a united action didn't have the same national significance and didn't impose the same political responsibility as is required today. In reality, what's at stake is the discussion inside the FIT itselfâ€”a touchy subject for sure, but one that's being brought to the surface following internal FIT elections.

Surely, not all responsibility on the left falls to the FIT, but there is a common thread here: party patriotism pure and simple. Given this situation, and granting that we're facing an increase in internal and sectarian conflict, we have to

pose a new question.

The debate is no longer about whether the FIT should be broadened or not (or how or with whom this should be done), but rather where is the FIT going? We have a quandary. Despite its internal contradictions and sectarian squabbles, the FIT represented a step forward, and its dissolution would clearly be a setback. But at the same time, its current form doesn't serve a broader goal. It's hardly more than an electoral mechanism for collecting votes. Its elected deputies don't act as a coherent bloc, while in the social movements, each group does its own thing.

Thus, we're faced with a certain reality: the FIT was extremely useful in the previous period, but in a new period characterized by an employers' and state offensive and open class struggle, it doesn't fit the bill as it is currently constructed.

We can't predict the future, but perhaps it's a good time to consider whether we've arrived at a point where we should consider different options, including restructuring the FIT or creating something new. Otherwise, the future will be out of our hands.

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Translation by Lance Selfa.

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[1] This article in Spanish provides the background from the PTS point of view <http://www.laizquierdadiario.com/sp...>