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Uruguay: 36-hour General Strike To Protest Government Austerity Policies

by Barbara Khol

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On May 10, the PIT-CIT (Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores-Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo) announced plans to launch a general strike on May 12 to protest unemployment, low wages, privatizations of state-run enterprises, and to demand reforms of the social security system. The strike was set at 36 hours for Montevideo, and 24 hours for the rest of the country. Montevideo accounts for two-thirds of the nation's GDP. Labor unions claim that workers are carrying the lion's share of government austerity policies. On May 1, the government set a wage hike ceiling of 35% applied over the next year for public sector workers, and recommended the same proportion for the private sector. Consumer price inflation in 1992 alone is projected at 65%, and for the next 12 months, 79%. Accumulated inflation over the first four months of the year was 19.53%. According to a recent independent study cited by Spanish news service EFE, workers' purchasing power over the past nine years dropped 31.61%. The last general strike in Uruguay took place on Dec. 18. The strike commenced at noon on Tuesday, affecting airlines, public transport, banks, government offices, and some retail stores. Thousands of workers and students participated in a demonstration outside the national congress. On Wednesday, public schools, clinics, factories, the print media, port facilities, movie houses, and theaters, among other activities were scheduled to close down. The Agence France-Presse reported that about half the city's shops closed their doors. The leftist Broad Front (Frente Amplio) party coalition is currently collecting voters' signatures in order to oblige the government to organize a public referendum on privatizations. (Basic data from Agence France-Presse, 05/10/92, 05/12/92, 05/13/92; Spanish news service EFE, 05/11/92, 05/12/92; Chinese news service, 05/13/92)

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