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Argentina's New Government Resolves Conflict with Teachers Union

by LADB Staff
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Argentine teachers ended the year with a significant victory, winning wage gains and other concessions after protesting for more than 1,000 days. It was the longest-lasting labor dispute during former president Carlos Saul Menem's ten years in office. The white tent, called the "tent of dignity," which had become a symbol of underfunded public education, was taken down (see NotiSur, 1997-09-26, 1998-05-08).

A plaque, the only remnant of the nearly three-year struggle, read, "The White Tent stood here, a symbol of commitment to public education. April 2, 1997-Dec. 30, 1999." "It's been decided now," said Marta Maffei, president of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de la Educacion de la Republica Argentina (CTERA). "The budget and tax bills have been passed and the government's delivered on its promise to us. It's a victory for us and for the people. For the first time, we're meeting with government officials who keep their campaign promises."

The tax-hike bill approved Dec. 29 as part of the 2000 budget will raise an additional US$600 million for education, enough to increase teachers' salaries by between US$60 and US$120 a month. The average teacher currently earns US$300 a month. The budget also includes a 4% increase in education spending, Maffei said. "It's a small thing but a step in the right direction," she said.

While the tent was up, teachers from around the country took turns camping out in the tent, with many rotating on a liquids-only fast for periods of a week or two at a time.

New administration supports solution
The teachers union is solidly aligned with the government of President Fernando de la Rua and the Alianza, formed by the Union Civica Radical (UCR) and the Frente del Pais Solidario (FREPASO), which took office Dec. 10.

The teachers' hopes of having their demands met soared with the Alianza victory. But many felt betrayed when de la Rua named liberal economist Juan Jose Llach education minister. They feared Llach, who served as deputy to former economy minister Domingo Cavallo in the early 1990s, would be more concerned with cutting costs than raising salaries.

Teachers had also become skeptical of government promises after former President Carlos Menem of the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) promised them salary increases several times but then failed to follow through.
Public education in Argentina is decreasingly a means of social betterment. A study by the National University of the northwestern province of Salta, "The Effects of Neoliberal Policies on Education," shows a growing socioeconomic gap in access to education and school drop-out rates.

At the beginning of the century, Argentina was the world's tenth-largest trading country and the sixth in per capita income. But today, more than a third of the population have fallen below the poverty line, and 45% of children are born into poverty. And while 27% of poor children repeat at least one year of grade school, that proportion is just 4.4% among the wealthiest sectors of society.

The study, coordinated by Juan Gottifredi, deputy minister of education and rector of the university at Salta, found that 7.5% of poor children started school late, compared to 4% of those not living in poverty. And only 25% of teenagers from poor families graduate from high school, compared with 76% of middle- or upper-class teens.

The school dropout rate is particularly high in poor areas of Buenos Aires, and most minors who drop out of school do so to find a job. UNICEF figures show that 252,000 youngsters under the age of 14 work in Argentina, the highest number this decade.

Gottifredi said the economic growth registered in the 1990s not only was accompanied by high unemployment 15% today, down from a peak of near 20% earlier this decade but also widened the gap between rich and poor. And instead of helping overcome that inequality, education has become a contributing factor.

In areas like the province of Buenos Aires, public schools are attended almost exclusively by children from low-income families. Professor of education Mirta Goldberg said public school curricula no longer provide the tools to overcome differences in background and environment. "The abyss is enormous," she said. In addition, the tendency of the middle class to send their children to public schools has rapidly diminished in the past decade. With the neoliberal reforms implemented by Menem, education suffered a severe crisis because of funding cuts.

Even as higher skills and greater specialization have become necessary to find a job, public schools are less able to equip students for the new job market. "Just getting their kids to stay in school is a very big sacrifice for poor families," said Goldberg, and many families doubt "whether school will really guarantee their children access to the labor market." She says merely improving the educational system is not enough. What is needed is a profound change in public policies aimed at promoting a more integrationist model of development. [Sources: Inter Press Service, Reuters, 12/29/99; Spanish news service EFE, 12/30/99; Clarin (Argentina), 12/31/99]

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