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Police Repress Factory Workers

by LADB Staff

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On April 18, police forcibly evicted workers, mainly women, from the Brukman clothing factory in Buenos Aires. A heavy police guard was posted around the building to keep the workers, who were running the factory, from re-entering. The incident, just days before the April 27 first-round presidential election, put the international spotlight on the growing number of factories abandoned by their owners whose workers have taken them over to keep their jobs.

For 16 months, the workers ran the Brukman factory without time-clocks, bosses, or an owner. But on April 18, production was stopped when police arrived to enforce a court order to evict the 57 workers from the factory. The owners had petitioned to have the factory returned to them. The workers, backed by progressive political groups, associations of unemployed workers, human rights groups, and community organizations, tried to re-occupy the factory on April 21.

About 800 riot police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the hundreds of demonstrators outside the factory. At least 30 people were wounded and 100 were detained, including some reporters covering the incident. Police erected barricades, and protesters set fire to police cars and an ambulance. Although police said they only fired rubber bullets, one reporter found casings from regular bullets used by the police. The police said that they had been threatened with Molotov cocktails and other weapons.

"The repression was extremely harsh and could have been avoided, but there was clearly an official decision to intimidate the workers with a huge security operation that exceeded what would be the normal enforcement of a court order," said the Brukman workers' lawyer Miriam Breckman. Although the Labor Ministry called for negotiations on April 22, workers refused to participate as a protest against the police repression and against the refusal of the Policia Federal to withdraw from the factory.

Security secretary Alberto Iribarne justified the police actions as necessary. "It is not an indication of a change in government policy, which always tries not to criminalize social protest, but this was not a social protest and the state had to use force or not fulfill the court order," he said. Workers said they would erect a "tent of resistance" in the intersection near the factory. "We are not going to return home with nothing....We are going to camp here until this government recognizes that the factory is ours," said Celia Martinez, a representative of the workers. At the same time, the court rejected a motion filed by the workers asking that the order to remove the workers from the factory be rescinded.

Number of "recovered factories" grows

The Brukman plant is one of a growing number of businesses seized by workers during Argentina's economic crisis. The factory is run by 57 of its 157 original workers. Factory owner Jacobo Brukman

abandoned the factory in December 2001 without informing workers. He and his brothers simply disappeared. They had failed to pay full wages since 1995, but in the second half of 2001, as the recession deepened, the weekly paychecks, which had already dropped from 100 to 50 pesos (on par with the US dollar at the time), fell to just five pesos.

On Dec. 14, the owners paid their employees two pesos, and laid everyone off. A number of the workers decided to occupy the factory, assuming that the three owners would try to remove the equipment the next day. But no one showed up. The owners also never responded to telephone calls from the Labor Ministry.

In late January 2002, the workers decided to get the company, which manufactures men's clothing, running again. They paid utility bills and other debts, purchased materials, and distributed whatever was left over from the clothing sales among themselves. They had been expelled twice before on court orders but were allowed back in each time through legal action. The first eviction, in 2002, took workers by surprise because the occupation of the factory had been peaceful, and the owners had not made known any demands.

The Brukman workers say they want a peaceful resolution, but they are unwilling to lose the factory and the hope it has brought. Lawyers and human rights groups are claiming that Judge Jorge Rimoldi is unwilling to negotiate. No progress has been made in efforts to get the government, owners, and workers to reach an agreement because the owners refuse to pay back wages and benefits or guarantee that the workers who kept the factory running will still have a job.

Brukman has become a symbol

The Brukman factory has become a symbol of the country's economic crisis and a symbol of emerging social movements that foster self-determination, direct democracy, and cooperation. More than 150 cooperatives have taken over businesses that went under during the economic meltdown and in many cases were abandoned by their owners. The businesses range from food products companies to chemical and auto-parts factories, transport companies, and printing presses.

The Movimiento de Empresas Recuperadas increased significantly after the rioting in late December 2001 brought down the government of former President Fernando de la Rúa (see NotiSur, 2002-01-11). Usually owners of a failing business stopped paying wages several months before declaring bankruptcy or suddenly leaving the country. The employees, with no hope of obtaining their back wages, took over the business and went to court to form a cooperative.

The workers and the former owners generally agreed to an arrangement for the cooperative to rent the building and gradually pay off the machinery and equipment. In some cases, the owners even formed a partnership with their former employees. At times, however, the relationship between the workers and owners is not resolved, and Brukman is an example of the companies that remain embroiled in legal battles.

Workers see connection to election

The Brukman workers blamed President Eduardo Duhalde for the repression, yelling "assassin" and saying "instead of supporting us and giving us work, the government represses us." Buenos Aires Mayor Anibal Ibarra and Labor Minister Graciela Camano said they were surprised that the violence broke out just as efforts were underway to negotiate a solution to the legal dispute between the Brukman workers and owners. But Ibarra had stepped up an eviction campaign in the weeks before the Brukman incident, using police to force families out of occupied houses, workers from recovered factories, and community assemblies from cultural centers.

"The hand of the government hits hard. They ask for an end to social conflict, but they have provoked us, militarizing our factory to take away our work," said Elisa Diaz, a Brukman worker. Workers say they fear the repression will increase after the May 18 runoff election. They say that, with signs of an economic recovery, the government will back owners, ignoring the efforts of workers who kept the factories productive.

Canadian author Naomi Klein, writing in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper about the repression of the Brukman workers, said that many see the recovered factories not just as an economic alternative, but as a political one as well. "In small Trotskyist journals around the world, Argentina's occupied factories, where the workers have seized the means of production, are giddily hailed as the dawn of a socialist utopia.

In large business magazines such as *The Economist*, they are ominously described as a threat to the sacred principle of private property. The truth lies in between," wrote Klein. She pointed out that Brukman workers did not seize the means of production, they simply picked them up after owners abandoned them. "Brukman has come to represent a new kind of labor movement in Argentina, one that is not based on the power to stop working (the traditional union tactic) but on the dogged determination to keep working no matter what. It's a demand that is not driven by dogmatism but by realism: In a country where 58% of the population is living in poverty, workers know they are a paycheck away from having to beg and scavenge to survive. The specter haunting Argentina's occupied factories is not communism, but indigence," she wrote.

Klein said that when the federal judge wrote in Brukman's eviction order, "Life and physical integrity have no supremacy over economic interests," he had, perhaps unintentionally, "summed up the naked logic of deregulated globalization: Capital must be free to seek out the lowest wages and most generous incentives, regardless of the toll that process takes on people." Klein said that workers' lawyers contend that the owners violated basic market principles by failing to pay their employees and their creditors, even while collecting huge subsidies from the state, and she asks, "Why can't the state now insist that the indebted companies' remaining assets continue to serve the public with steady jobs?"

While many cooperatives have been legally awarded to the workers, Brukman is still fighting. The workers have made a proposal that calls for the police to leave the factory, returning it to the

workers to continue producing, and that the government buy what they produce for hospitals, schools, and other institutions.

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