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Shooting of Teacher in Argentina's Patagonia Province Sparks Wide Protests

by LADB Staff
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A strike by Argentine teachers saw bloodshed when police killed a chemistry teacher on April 5. The killing led to a call for a national strike and demands that the governor of Neuquen province resign and probably destroyed his effort to run for president in elections set for later this year. President Nestor Kirchner publicly repudiated the killing and the police handling of the strike.

Exploding tear gas canister kills science teacher
Carlos Fuentealba, a 41-year-old science teacher, died after being hit in the head by an exploding tear gas canister during a rally as police dispersed crowds blocking a highway. The teachers were demanding higher wages, arguing that inflation reduced the spending power of their salaries.

The violence happened when police fired tear gas to disperse the several-hundred-strong group of demonstrators, some of whom responded by throwing stones. Fuentealba was hit by a tear gas canister and taken to hospital but later died of his injuries. New photos showed him bleeding profusely as emergency workers loaded him into an ambulance.

Fuentealba's death further fueled what was already a volatile protest over pay and working conditions. Other teachers' protests were reported around the country. Police fired rubber bullets at teachers in the northern province of Salta after they tried to prevent lawmakers from leaving the local legislature after a vote on salaries, the Associated Press news agency said. Back in Neuquen, 1,160 km southwest of Buenos Aires, police used tear gas for a second day against the protesting teachers after Fuentealba's death.

The clashes came as people gathered at a local government building to protest against police action the day before. Prosecutor Sandra Gonzalez Taboada said on April 11 that Fuentealba was shot from a distance of between 3 meters and 7 meters. Buenos Aires daily paper Clarin said that the tear gas canisters should not be used closer than 60 meters from their target and should fired upward.

Nationwide strike
Schoolteachers went on a one-day nationwide strike on Monday, April 9, after Fuentealba was killed. In the capital, Buenos Aires, workers at banks, hospitals, government offices, and in public transportation joined the strike for one hour on the day following the Easter holiday. Many protesters blamed the teacher's death on Neuquen Gov. Jorge Sobisch, who ordered police to break up the blockades and marches. '

Professor Carlos Fuentealba's assassin has a name. His name is Sobisch, and he must pay. He must go, he must answer for his crimes,' Hugo Yasky, president of the national teachers union (Confederacion de Trabajadores de la Educacion de la Republica Argentina, CTERA), said at a rally
in Buenos Aires. In Neuquen on April 9, teachers painted the doors and windows of the provincial government building black. Signs posted throughout the city of Neuquen lambasted Sobisch, calling him a murderer and the enemy of workers.

The Patagonian province's teachers union threatened to camp out in front of the government building until Sobisch replaced his education and justice ministers. 'They shot Carlos, but they not only shot him, they shot my entire family, and they also shot all those things he stood for,' his widow, Sandra Rodriguez, told reporters.

**Kirchner attacks governor**

President Kirchner criticized the killing of Fuentealba, reiterating his stance that the police should not crack down on street protests. 'We strongly reject violence and, of course, those of us in the state must exercise with great responsibility the monopoly we have on security, particularly in these kinds of protests,' Kirchner said. "'I will always act in favor of co-existence, even if it means they call me permissive. It is preferable to appear to be permissive. Life must be protected before all else."

The teacher's death has complicated Sobisch's presidential bid to unseat the popular Kirchner in October. Recent polls showed Sobisch with support in the single digits. A group of provincial legislators called for impeachment proceedings, or a political trial, for Sobisch after Fuentealba's death.

Sobisch made changes to his cabinet after the incident, changing top officials in the police and governing ministries. Sobisch said on April 10, 'I maintain my presidential candidacy. If it was necessary to return order by repression, it would have been done out of respect for the Constitution.' The protest in Neuquen came after many provinces said they did not have enough money to give teachers raises decreed by the central government.

A February government decree raised base salaries for Argentine teachers by 24%. Inflation last year was close to 10%, and the base wage for teachers was raised to about US$334 from US$270 a month, which was below the poverty level for a four-person family. Neuquen residents live mostly off of public employment, tourism, and agriculture, although the district is one of the country's richest petroleum and gas producers.

On April 16, Salta teachers came to an agreement with the government after a month-long strike, and Neuquen unions considered an offer from the Sobisch government the next day. Sobisch decreed a raise in pay, although spokespersons for the unions said they would reject it and continue to seek Sobisch's resignation. As Argentina's economy has grown at a relatively fast pace following the crash of 2001-2002, inflation has become a significant difficulty for Argentines.

The struggle to keep inflation down and keep government salaries equivalent to inflation rates has been a central predicament for the Kirchner administration (see NotiSur, 2007-03-02). It is one of the main political problems that he will face if he chooses to run for re-election this October, along with concerns about crime. Kirchner may face challenges from his former economy minister, Roberto Lavagna, and other figures from the right and center-right who oppose him. Sobisch was...
an ally of business magnate and top opposition leader Mauricio Macri, but Macri also pursuing the presidency broke relations with the Neuquen governor after the incident.

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