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Argentina: Government Implements "mandatory Arbitration" Of Public Transport Strike Demands
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On Nov. 8, the first full day of a public transport strike, the Argentine government declared "mandatory arbitration" to end the dispute between workers and employers. (See also Chronicle 11/09/89.) A total of 36,000 bus drivers and other transport workers are members of the UTA (Union Tranviarios Automotor). Employers are grouped together in the Passenger Automotive Transport Federation (FATAP). Under mandatory arbitration, workers face dismissal if they refuse to stay on the job during negotiations. Next, the special decree permits the government to seize vehicles and place members of the security forces at the wheel, and to withdraw a union's legal status. The bus drivers said they wanted an additional $32 over the $86 they were paid for the month of October, and a base salary of $139 for November and December. UTA is a member union of the General Labor Confederation (CGT), Argentina's largest labor organization. At present, the CGT is split into two factions. One is headed by Saul Ubaldini, long-time secretary general. At a CGT congress held in mid-October, Guerino Andreoni was elected to replace Ubaldini. Since then Ubaldini and his supporters have declared the results of the congress fraudulent, and on Oct. 28, the split became "official" with the election of executive council members to replace Andreoni supporters selected at the earlier congress. The government recognizes Andreoni as CGT chief. On Nov. 7, Andreoni criticized the UTA's decision to call a strike, adding that "we must be careful with measures of force...ensuring they are against employers and not workers." On Wednesday night, President Carlos Menem asserted that the UTA strike is infiltrated by political ideologies rejected by the Argentine people. He added that the "ultra- left" was responsible for the strike. In response to statements by unionized railway workers regarding a possible strike, Menem warned that all railway cars involved in a strike will be put out of commission. On Thursday, government officials and police said 40% to 50% of public transport in Greater Buenos Aires was functioning normally. The local media reported isolated incidents of bus drivers pelted with rocks by strikers. Government and private sector sources said that on Friday public transportation was operating at 50% to 70% of normal levels. Long distance transport from Buenos Aires was functioning normally. Police and army troops were stationed at long distance terminals to "guarantee service." Claiming justification under "mandatory arbitration" clauses, bus company owners dismissed 250 drivers. Negotiations between the FATAP and UTA continued. Employers reportedly offered a base monthly salary of 80,000 australs (about $123). UTA leader Juan Palacios said the offer was not formally presented to the union and reiterated the strikers' demand for another $32 applied to their October wage. At least 30 strikers were arrested in Greater Buenos Aires for assaulting colleagues who chose to return to work. About a thousand UTA members demonstrated in downtown Buenos Aires. During a speech, Ubaldini said UTA members were not ultra-leftists nor advocates of violence, as suggested by President Menem. The CGT leader reminded Menem that the UTA was the first union to publicly endorse his candidacy for president. (Basic data from Notimex, 11/09/89, 11/10/89; Noticias Argentinas, 11/07/89, 11/09/89)
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