



## Election fiasco for the Argentine left

Wed, 30/04/2003 - 22:00

The outcome of the first round of the Argentine presidential elections last month is a calamity for the left and a boost for the previously discredited parties that bear responsibility for plunging the country into economic depression and political convulsions since December 2001.

Ex-president and pro-IMF Peronist Carlos Menem topped the poll with 23 per cent, while the outgoing president's preferred candidate, Peronist Néstor Kirchner, came second with 21 per cent. All together 63 per cent of those voting, on a high turn out, did so for the three main right-wing candidates.

The Stalinist and centrist left did poorly. The United Left-Izquierda Unida (IU) a bloc between the MST and the PC, and Jorge Altamira's Política Obrera (PO) only polled 500,000 votes or about 2.5 per cent. In the 2001 legislative elections, the left (IU, PO-MAS, PTS and AyL) gained about 800,000 votes (8 per cent).

PO lost about 35 per cent of the vote it gained in the legislative elections of 2001 and fell back to the level it got in the presidential elections in 1999, with around 0.7 per cent of the vote.

IU, while getting less votes than in 2001, did double the percentage of votes it got in the 1999 Presidential elections to 1.8 per cent.

Some of the left parties that stood in 2001 and 1999 refused to put up a candidate this time and argued for an active boycott of the poll. The PTS, PCR, Patria Libre (Barrios de Pie), AyL (led by the popular Congress member Luis Zamorra) and MIJD as well as some popular assemblies, assorted intellectuals and student groups called for 'abstention, vote blank or void your ballot.'

The PTS were among those to issue fake ballot papers, calling on voters to stuff them in the ballot box. On the day less than 15,000 of these fake ballots were used.

The tactic of active boycott was premised on the fact that as a result of the revolutionary crisis of 2001 the old 'regime parties' (Peronists and Radicals) were utterly discredited. This was expressed sharply in the widespread slogan 'Get rid of them all!' that unified the popular assemblies, unemployed piqueteros and the workers' vanguard.

Since the elections 'called by President Duhalde last June' were an attempt to restore some legitimacy to a regime that had lost the confidence of the mass of the population, it was argued by the PTS and others that the 'Get rid of them all' sentiment would best be focused by refusing to play the game of electoral politics. Instead, the PTS hoped to use an active boycott campaign to build up the popular assemblies, occupied factories and various local co-ordinadoras as an alternative pole of political authority to the regime.

The results show what a gross miscalculation they made. The proportion of blank/voided votes was about 2.5 per cent, around the average for all Argentina's elections. Even then most spoiled ballots are a result of mistakes by voters, and do not necessarily reflect disgust with the system.

As to abstentions, only 20 per cent of the electorate did not vote for one of the 18 Presidential candidates. It is normal in Argentina 'where it is mandatory to vote' for between 17 to 22 per cent not to cast their ballots. The abstention rate in 2001 was 28 per cent.

The tactic of 'active boycott' was misconceived. The main political defect of the Argentine working class is the absence of any mass independent workers' party. For 60 years the gangster Peronist trade union bureaucracy has tied the mass of organised workers to the Peronist party (PJ). In these elections the various trade union barons have backed one or other of the rival Peronist candidates.

Since the revolutionary days of December 2001, the main defect of the political situation has been the inability of the vanguard, some tens of thousands strong, to draw in the several million-strong organised working class (mainly in the two CGTs and the CTA trade union federations) into a battle to unseat the Duhalde government through general strike action. The trade union leaders of the rival CGT federations absolutely refused to do this.

In overcoming this gap in class consciousness between the vanguard and the mass of the working class it was crucial for the former to find every opportunity to present the case for breaking politically with Peronism and forming a workers' party.

The presidential elections were such an opportunity. Last October we said: 'Duhalde was at his weakest in first half of the year; but has been helped by: continued support from the CGT trade union bureaucracies that have refused to organise general strike against his government; the fact that from spring onwards the mass movements came up against limits of their spontaneous development and a certain bureaucratisation of them has taken place; thirdly, whereas in the first half of the year Duhalde could not lean on foreign support, today the IMF has become reconciled to his regime.

'[Duhalde's] job is to stabilise the crisis not overcome it; that is entrench the losses the masses have suffered so far while preventing a generalisation of the resistance. This involves repression of the left-wing of the movement against him and an attempt to preserve the 1994 constitution from those who demand that 'all of them must go'.

'Alongside repression goes the quest for regime renewal. This involves seeking to re-legitimise the 'regime parties' by organising new presidential elections that can draw the masses into participating in them.'

Faced with this the task of the left was to build the biggest possible united campaign around a workers' party presidential candidate. Such a candidate could have been drawn from one of the nationally known representatives of the occupied factories, for example.

They should have stood on a platform that represented the key thrust of the revolutionary days: for a living wage, nationalisation of the banks, nationalise the occupied factories under workers' control, root the popular assemblies in the working class and through them build a national delegate-based alternative the Congress; freedom for all political prisoners.

Unfortunately, the sectarianism of some on the left, like PO, would have been an obstacle, but massive pressure from the piqueteros and occupied factories could have overcome this. Similar pressure may have forced unaccountable leaders like Luis Zamorra and his AyL to join such a project.

A candidate, on a revolutionary action programme, could have at least unified the existing vanguard around a common political campaign and drawn hundreds of thousands of CGT members away from Kirchner in Gran Buenos Aires, where he received half of his support.

Such a campaign could hardly have gained much less than the pathetic results achieved by Jorge Altamira for PO or the meaningless outcome of the 'active boycott' campaign.

In the next half year there are elections for governor in many states throughout the country. The left must absorb the lessons of the presidential elections, and build a unified campaign around workers' party candidates.

The results represent something of a victory for President Duhalde. His candidate is the overwhelming favourite to win the second round on 18 May. Menem is hated by most people for his role in bringing about the present disaster when he slavishly followed the neo-liberal policies during his two terms in office in the 1990s. He has mined his available

support in the first round when he attracted the backing of the bosses, upper middle class and the poorest, least class conscious, layers in the north of the country.

Kirchner will experience a 'Chirac effect' with people voting for him to keep Menem out.

The regime has not recovered its position of November 2001, before the eruption of the 'revolutionary days'. The Radical party has collapsed, its members and leaders turning into a variety of bourgeois 'independents'. The elections also showed how bitterly divided the Peronist party is in the face of the social upheaval.

But the mass of the organised working class has been lined up again behind one or other of its candidates. This is the tragedy of the elections of 2003. How to destroy Peronism's political hold over the working class remains the great unsolved problem facing the Argentine far left. Without addressing it even an incredibly deep revolutionary crisis, such as Argentina has seen in the years 2001-3, will not turn into a revolution. Indeed, if the working class fails to solve the deep social crisis by taking power, it will inevitably be solved by a counter-revolution.

---

**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/election-fiasco-argentine-left>