

The fight for public education and universities in Argentina



Photo: Conadu/Facebook

Public education in Argentina is under threat from a political agenda that has made its way into the national government and aims to – in the words of President Javier Milei himself – “destroy the state from within”.

Arguing that the state is a “criminal organisation” that attacks freedom (of the market) and that social justice is an assault on the principle of individual merit and free competition, Milei intends to pursue a project that is no less delirious than his speeches in ultraconservative international forums and as ruthless as his posts on social media.

The powerful economic groups supporting him, and now occupying key positions in government, hope to implement a formula for irreversible domination, which will allow them to permanently secure the conditions needed to amass profits through the unbridled exploitation of Argentina’s resources and people.

This is why the current government has set to work on what Milei sees as a “refoundation”, wiping clean the pre-existing institutional framework.

It is no coincidence that the Argentina longed for by economic libertarians is exactly the same as pre-democratic Argentina, free of political, social and cultural rights, in which an exclusively primary, agro-exporting economy nourished the lavish revelry of an oligarchy made outrageously rich off the misery of the majority.

This agenda, imposed with blood and fire at the beginning of the neoliberal cycle in Argentina, during the last civil-military dictatorship (1976-1983) is not new.

Not long after the 40th anniversary of the return to democracy, the economic elite is back, with Milei, to take its revenge – deregulating the economy, opening to foreign capital, reducing public spending, depreciating workers’ incomes and implementing a neoliberal reform of the state, regressive labour reform and a policy of criminalising social organisation and social protest.

In the context of the external debt previously incurred by the government of Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) and the consequent

subordination to the dictates of the International Monetary Fund, within barely six months of “libertarian” rule this policy has already led to an unprecedented increase in poverty, destitution and unemployment.

These devastating social impacts are not an accident or “collateral damage” but are designed to achieve a social reordering under the discipline of inequality.

And just as such a goal requires the elimination of the middle class in a country like Argentina, it also requires suppressing the ability to mobilise opposition, be it through trade unionism, social movements, Peronism, feminism or human rights organisations.

Hence, within days of taking office, Milei’s government introduced a “protocol” instructing the security forces to intervene in street demonstrations, limiting freedom of expression and association and criminalising peaceful protest, in violation of all international human rights conventions and recommendations.

The application of this protocol has already resulted not only in the unjustified and violent repression of social mobilisation, but also in arbitrary arrests, fines on organisations, extortion of the beneficiaries of social assistance programs and, more recently, the arbitrary charging of people taking part in protests with very serious offences.

The attack on public universities and public education is part of a multifaceted policy of neoliberal adjustment and reform of the state, the commodification of all spheres of life and social disciplining.

The current government – which eliminated the Ministry of Education, reducing it to a secretariat of the new Ministry of “Human Capital” – has already made brutal cuts to the education and university budget, suspending the funding of countless programs needed to ensure adequate conditions for education and academic activity.

It has stopped paying the National Fund for Teacher Incentives (FONID), a historic gain won by the teachers and that represented a significant percentage of their pay at compulsory levels of education and has effectively blocked collective negotiations in national education and universities, resulting in more than a one third fall in the purchasing power of teachers’ salaries.

In so doing, the national government is disregarding its obligation to guarantee the right to education at all levels, and – at the same time as pushing for education to be declared an essential service in order to suppress the right to strike – has caused thousands of working teachers to fall below the poverty line.

With particular regard to universities, the government is not only subjecting them to its general plan to reduce public spending and shrink the state but is deliberately throwing their operation into crisis so as to open the doors to the market, threatening to destroy a public system that is unique for its democratic and popular standing.

In our experience, in the past, budgetary asphyxiation has been used as an extortive condition aimed at subjecting academic activity to the objectives of the business sector or international financial organisations.

The president’s intention to refocus education financing on demand – through vouchers, credits or similar formulas – is a key component in the global strategy of privatising and commercialising education, which has already made significant progress in other countries around the world, especially in Latin America.

With this in mind, we must warn against attempts to trigger the fragmentation of the university system, leading to a scenario – as in other countries – in which some niches of excellence and “world ranking” coexist alongside institutions or areas where activity, limited to the teaching function, would be subjugated to market logic, based on more precarious work for teachers and reducing university education to the provision of credentials to raise people’s “employability”.

But the precariousness and the breakdown of equal conditions is already visible in various aspects of academic life.

For example, the deepening of the crisis is leading to the search for emergency solutions, which are a matter of particular concern, such as the incorporation of virtual spaces to replace on-site education in universities, as was the case during the pandemic.

Argentina’s public universities are not only deemed unnecessary by a neocolonial project such as that represented by Milei, but an obstacle to its aspirations.

For this reason, another invective has now been added to the usual accusations of inefficiency and corruption that the right wing tends to wield against them: public universities are dangerous centres of political and ideological “indoctrination”.

The public responsibility of an institution in which the plurality of ideas and the comprehensiveness of education promotes the development of a critical citizenry and supportive sociability that does not bow to the dogmatic imposition of inevitable suffering and injustice, that debates the problems affecting the majority and engages in the collective search for solutions to

resolve them,
is an obstacle to those who want a people enslaved.

Faced with this onslaught, our unions are in a permanent state of mobilisation to defend public education and universities and the decimated scientific-technological system.

And, together with all grassroots organisations, we are actively involved in building resistance to this policy, which is authoritarian and devastating in every way.

On 23 April this year, more than one and a half million people filled the streets of Buenos Aires and numerous cities throughout the country, under the banner of defending public universities.

The transversal and mass nature of this call to action reflects the deep rootedness of certain shared values among the population and attests to the importance of an institution that is central to the construction of democracy, social justice and sovereignty.

In this demand and the clear determination to fight for it lies our confidence in a people that during every period of resistance, throughout our history, have managed to rebuild the implacable hope of being able to achieve a more just society in these lands.

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