

Interview with an Argentinian socialist

Argentina: "Indigenous communities are leading the struggle in Jujuy"

Sunday 20 August 2023, by [MONTAG Warren](#), [REMY Gastón](#), [SERRANO Joseph](#), [VERGARA Jimena](#) (Date first published: 7 August 2023).

This summer, the province of Jujuy in Argentina exploded in protest against constitutional reforms with the indigenous communities at the forefront. The backdrop to this conflict is an anti-imperialist fight for control of the country's resources. Warren Montag, Jimena Vergara, and Joseph Serrano interviewed Argentinian socialist activist and professor Gastón Remy for *Tempest*.

The protests exploded against constitutional reforms imposed by the government of Governor Gerardo Morales with the help of all the traditional parties, including the center-left Peronist Justicialist Party (PJ). International uproar was caused by images of intense police repression of roadblocks, strikes, and mobilizations. The backdrop to this conflict is an anti-imperialist fight against austerity and for control of the country's resources. Also at stake is the strength of a working-class, indigenous population that is rising up against years of oppression and hyperexploitation. We sat down with Gastón Remy — a professor and councillor for the city of San Salvador in Jujuy, who is a member of the Party of Socialist Workers (PTS) and the Workers Left Front (FIT-U) — to talk about the rebellion and where it goes from here for Left Voice and Tempest.

Interviewers: In June, Jujuy governor Gerardo Morales, of the Radical Civic Union (UCR) party, passed a reform to the state constitution, a reform that has been resoundingly rejected by the people of Jujuy. The reform proposes, among other things, to prohibit street and highway blockades as a method of protest. It also includes several attacks on democratic rights, including voting rights. The reform was approved not only by the representatives of the UCR — the traditional right-wing party in Jujuy — but also by the opposition, represented by Peronism. Since the day the reform was approved, the rebellion of the people of Jujuy has not been quelled. The protests against the constitutional reform — led by indigenous communities — coincided with teachers' protests demanding better wages, as well as the mobilizations of miners calling for better conditions. How was the reform approved? What are its most relevant provisions? And why have the people of Jujuy risen up to overthrow it?

Gastón Remy: The provincial constitutional reform was approved twice, once on June 16 and again on the 20th. Both times it passed with the vote of the governing party, UCR, and its supposed "opposition," the Justicialist Party (PJ) — the center-left party of Peronism, which now holds the

presidency. It was voted on twice because the government retreated in the face of mass protests, particularly the resistance of indigenous communities, which began roadblocks on June 17. These communities resisted repression and the police were unable to subdue them, forcing the government to withdraw changes to articles 50 and 36, which directly affected their land rights. Before the first vote of the reform to the Constitution, mass protests forced the government to withdraw two points from the reform that would have created a near-authoritarian regime in Jujuy, enshrined in its Constitution. It would have eliminated legislative elections every two years (changing it to every four years), as well as adding a “governability” clause, whereby the political party that won the governorship would automatically control the majority of the legislature. The mass rejection of these measures in the streets throughout the province forced the government to remove them.

The government, however, also managed to prohibit roadblocks and street blockades (article 67), as well as to include measures to harshly repress protests and class struggle. They managed to keep these reactionary changes in the new Constitution with the help of the union leaderships, which never called for a general strike because of their relationship to the PJ. They acted to contain the social struggle, balancing between denouncing measures their own party voted for and limiting the ability of the rank-and-file to fight.

The struggle against the reform continues, thanks to the rebellion of workers and communities across the province, which has weakened the position of the government and its partners. This rebellion challenges living and working conditions in the province as well as the reform, which was passed behind the backs and against the rights of the people in just 17 workdays. The movement that rose up to reject the reform is linked to teachers’ demand for higher salaries. Taken alongside the roadblocks by indigenous communities against the reform, these actions express something profound.

This is a challenge — by the vast majority of people in Jujuy — to a regime that has oppressed and exploited the province for eight years, imposing low wages and enabling the plundering of lithium and other minerals by big businesses. The people have said enough to the political regime, which puts forward these policies at the request of the big mining, sugar, and tobacco companies. That is why we say that today, the balance of forces between the social classes has changed, in favor of the working class and the popular sectors — those who have the strength to defeat this regime.

Interviewers: Jujuy is one of the poorest provinces in Argentina, yet at the same time, it has natural resources such as lithium that are coveted by corporations. According to official data, last year, 42 percent of the inhabitants of Gran Jujuy (the suburban area of the capital San Salvador) were living in poverty. Jujuy also has a high concentration of indigenous people and one of the country’s most hyperexploited workforces. What are the living conditions in Jujuy and in its indigenous communities?

GR: Official data shows that Jujuy is ranked fourth for the lowest incomes in the country. The base salary of a teacher before the June uprising was 34,000 pesos (US\$128) a month. With the new bargaining agreement, it went up to 72,000 pesos (US\$272) per month. State workers have a base salary of 45,000 pesos (US\$170) per month. On top of these base salaries, much of workers’ income does not count toward their pensions. In other words, what workers take home is well below a living wage.

These are the conditions in the public sector, but across Jujuy’s workforce, 46.5 percent of salaried workers are informal workers, or off the books. Against a backdrop of high inflation, which is above 100 percent this year, job insecurity and lack of steady employment reinforce a vicious cycle of low salaries. Twenty-seven percent of employed workers in Jujuy seek second jobs, the highest percentage in the country. The national average is 14.8 percent.

Further, many of the workers who face these high levels of exploitation are members of indigenous communities, a historically oppressed sector of the working class in Jujuy. According to an official survey, 11 percent of households in Jujuy self-identify as being of indigenous descent, the highest percentage in the country. Indigenous people make up 38 percent of Jujuy's rural population.

Indigenous communities are leading the struggle in Jujuy, and this is no coincidence. Teachers who are demanding higher salaries in turn participate in the roadblocks as members of the indigenous communities using their own methods against the regime. The same applies to miners and municipal workers. Most of the members of these communities are salaried workers. Other sectors find work as small producers or take up other precarious work, such as driving taxis.

The questions of class and ethnicity at the heart of the current struggle in Jujuy show the true character of a deeply racist political and social regime. It lays bare the limits of the state policy — formed together with the big mining multinationals — of offering some improvements to the broken-down infrastructure of towns while not fixing much bigger systemic issues. The government offers crumbs, which merely divide communities while deepening the enormous inequality between the capitalists, who get millions of dollars from lithium exports and populations whose water is contaminated with arsenic (as is the case in the town of Susques). While the state builds a gas pipeline for a profit, schools are heated with firewood in the winter. These contrasts, even more stark in light of the push for lithium extraction, the new “white gold,” also create the conditions for communities to rise up and fiercely confront the government and the state it represents, as they have done to defeat Morales's reform.

Interviewers: Argentina has been hit hard by an economic crisis, not just in Jujuy but across the entire country. Added to this is increased imperialist pressure in the form of debt and other measures. The IMF has been pressuring the Argentinean government to sign a new economic relief plan that deepens the country's economic subordination to imperialist interests in the United States. Can you tell us about the more general context of the crisis in Argentina and how it has impacted Jujuy in particular?

GR: Undoubtedly, the agreement with the IMF has deepened Argentina's ties of subordination to imperialism, as well as the broader contradictions inherent to its dependent economic structure. In fact, you could say that Argentina's economic plans are drawn up in Washington, DC. None of the traditional political coalitions, neither the current Peronist government (Frente de Todos) nor the Right (Juntxs), differ in their policies on repaying the IMF and following its orders.

That “agreement” is now in jeopardy, owing mainly to the drought, which caused a \$20 billion loss in agricultural exports. The government is trying to sign a new agreement with the IMF, though this is complicated given the IMF's demand to further devalue the peso, which could further exacerbate inflation. Such a move, in an election year, would be suicide for Peronism and its likely candidate, Minister of Economy Sergio Massa. Argentina's austerity policies, which are meant to reduce its deficit, are pushed by the IMF and drive up inflation.

For economies like that of Jujuy, where nearly 90 percent of public spending is financed with national funds, the population acutely feels the effects of these fiscal austerity plans. Adjusted for inflation, workers face cuts to their already-low salaries. This is why the current struggle is taking a political character, not just an economic one. The union leaderships allowed the austerity to pass, and the teachers' rebellion is beginning to challenge both these leaderships and the austerity plans they uphold.

On the other hand, the government's attempt to pay its debt in dollars by exporting raw materials legitimizes the mining multinationals, which need lithium for their “green energy transition.”

Officials like Laura Richardson, the head of the U.S. Southern Command, have been clear about the United States' interest in a region that holds 80 percent of the world's lithium: the Lithium Triangle of Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. Currently, the United States has its own multinational, Livent — which has been operating in the province of Catamarca since 1998 — which is connected to the second-largest lithium mining company in Argentina, Sales de Jujuy. The other project that will begin lithium production this year is Exar, bringing together Chinese and Canadian capital in Argentina.

By applying pressure, the foreign lithium multinationals are heightening tensions in a country that has been forced to export its natural resources in order to pay a debt contracted by governments behind the backs of the working people. Yet austerity policies that gut living conditions are sold as a “necessary evil” to achieve a “stability” that will at some point bring some improvements. These contradictions of a greater subordination to imperialism, as seen in Jujuy, foreshadow greater conflicts between the working class and the ruling class throughout the country.

Interviewers: The approval of the reform in Jujuy aroused an enormous popular response. We have seen the images of intense and massive struggle throughout the state, including teachers marching and shocking videos of indigenous communities facing police brutality. The widespread rejection of the reform has been met with fierce repression. A few weeks ago the police arrested Natalia Morales — a socialist congresswoman from the Party of Socialist Workers (PTS) in Argentina, which is part of the Workers Left Front Unity (FIT-U). Also arrested was Lucho Aguilar — a La Izquierda Diario journalist and member of the PTS — among dozens of other political prisoners. The repression hasn't abated. Can you describe the repression they are facing and how the people of Jujuy are fighting back? What course do you think the struggle will take from here?

The heart of these proposals is advancing the idea that there is a way out of the economic and social crises we face, and it is through the strength of the working class.

GR: The response in the streets to Morales and the PJ's reform reflects an enormous desire to fight back against these attacks. We are seeing a shift in people's thinking, elements of what Gramsci called “a new way of thinking” — not only in the resurgence of a vanguard that resisted repression, such as that on June 17 in Purmamarca, a town where indigenous communities forced the police to retreat in a battle that lasted almost an entire day. But we also see it in the continuous road blockades and the marches of teachers on strike.

The people of Jujuy have lost the fear imposed on them by Governor Morales for almost eight years. They have regained their confidence in their own forces. Now local communities have begun to look for support from the teachers unions, and it is this unity that can defeat the regime.

In this process, broad sectors have had a political experience with the regime, going beyond particular demands. With their actions, they have shone a light on the role of the traditional political parties: to govern against the interests of the people in favor of the powerful. This last part is still the least developed. Many people now see with more clarity that the mining companies loot the

province's resources, but they don't yet see this as something that characterizes the capitalist class as a whole. Taking these conclusions further is a task of the revolutionary Left — to help organize the struggle and point it in an anti-capitalist direction.

The government and its friends in the PJ took a political hit with the widespread rejection of the reform in the streets. Now it is trying to recover its strength, imposing state coercive measures (arrests, fines, persecution) in order to defeat the rebellion. But they are struggling to turn the new relationship of forces between the classes to their favor. The PJ is helping Morales regain control, above all with its role in the unions and the trade union centers (the CGT and CTA). These organizations never called for a general strike to rescind the reform.

In fact, they called strikes off, like the teachers' union (Cedems) strike. In contrast, the teachers' organization April 9 — which is organized and led by teachers who are also members of the PTS, among others — fought those who wanted to lift the strike and called for teachers themselves to decide on a plan of struggle together with the teachers union (Adep) and indigenous communities. The undemocratic decision to lift the strike weakened the mobilizations at a key moment of the conflict. If the strike had gone forward, the struggle could have reached a new phase and ushered other sectors of workers onto the scene and generated better conditions for calling a general strike.

Of course, building toward a general strike is not a closed possibility. The conflict is still open, beyond any individual advances or setbacks of the mobilizations. The change in the relation of forces between the government and the people, and the fact that the reform still stands — all this demands a united plan and democratic coordination to develop a strategy of class struggle to take the fight to the end. This can be done with a general strike, road blockades, and street mobilizations.

In this sense, the PTS is posing the need for a Provincial Assembly to develop such a strategy, one that would unify the unions, activist organizations, indigenous communities and organizations, students, etc. A development that points in this direction is the People's Assembly against the reform, which is made up of teachers, healthcare workers, students, indigenous communities, and unemployed workers. It has been organizing solidarity for local communities and teachers, contributing and raising funds for their struggle, and raising the need for a general strike to defeat the reform.

Interviewers:: During the regional elections last May, the FIT-U performed extraordinarily well in Jujuy. Now the socialist Left is playing an important role in the heat of the struggle. Can you tell us a little about the campaign of Alejandro Vilca, your own experience as a candidate, and why the PTS in particular and the FIT-U in general have gained influence in Jujuy?

GR: The regional elections in May showed a historic result for the Left. My comrade Alejandro Vilca, who is currently a national deputy in Argentina's Congress, won 12.8 percent of the votes for governor. In San Salvador, Jujuy's capital city, we got 18 percent of the votes, coming in second and beating the PJ.

Being part of this process was an amazing experience because we were able to put forward a plan to fight to stop the impoverishment of millions of workers in a rich province that makes so much money for businesses and the wealthy. Specifically, we put forward the need to nationalize the lithium industry under the control of workers and communities. This would allow us to democratically decide for ourselves how the region's resources are used, developing a lithium production plan, as well as deciding what techniques we use to minimize their environmental impact. These proposals received widespread support.

We also proposed nationalizing the province's main energy company (EJESA) under workers' and consumers' control, creating a single energy company that would also direct the operations of the Cauchari solar park, an important source of energy. On top of this, we called for the nationalization of public transportation under workers' control. We put forward an ambitious campaign in the capital city on this issue, showing how we could stop endless fare hikes while providing better service for millions of people who use the system each day.

These were just a few of the most important points of our openly anti-capitalist and socialist program, and they have been well received by broad sectors of the population. But it's not just this. The heart of these proposals is advancing the idea that there is a way out of the economic and social crises we face, and it is through the strength of the working class. And this is beginning to be felt by the people of Jujuy. The current struggle has brought it to the fore.

From another angle, our members played a crucial role in the Constituent Convention as revolutionary socialist politicians. We used our public positions to seize every opportunity to denounce and warn how the government and the PJ intended to take away the rights of the people. We denounced and explained the reactionary nature of the reform. We spoke from the convention, highlighting and speaking in tandem with the teachers' strike and the communities staging road blockades. We denounced every maneuver and deception the traditional parties were planning in the convention, calling for mobilizations and demanding a general strike to throw out the reform.

We put forward a perspective of no confidence in the Parliament, and no confidence that a better reform could be negotiated, as the PJ claimed. So when they moved ahead with the reform, we resigned from the convention before the vote in protest, and we joined the protesters in the streets to amplify their struggle and show that our confidence is in class struggle.

This whole experience reaffirms the role of those of us who have or will have responsibilities in parliament. As members of the PTS, we know that this is alien and hostile terrain and that we will not change the system from within. But we use our platforms to amplify the struggle of the working class as it stands up and finds its own solutions from below, as has always been the case in the history of class struggle.

P.S.

- Tempest. 7 August 2023:
<https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/08/indigenous-communities-are-leading-the-struggle-in-jujuy/>