

INTERVIEW

A political balance sheet in Argentina after the 2015 elections

Friday 20 May 2016, by [SANMARTINO Jorge](#), [SELFA Lance](#) (Date first published: 10 June 2016).

Presentation

This year, Argentina faces a series of elections, including the election of a new president. Most commentators on the left see the likely successor to President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (known colloquially as “CFK”) to be one of three candidates, all poised to move the country to the right. If that happens, Argentina’s status as one of the governments of the left-of-center “pink tide” in Latin America will come to an end.

CFK took office in 2007, winning election as president following the term of her husband, former President Nestor Kirchner. Coming to power in the wake of the Argentinazo, the 2001 mass uprising, the Kirchners, members of the longtime ruling Peronist Justicialista Party, had promoted a kind of reformist politics that Argentines call “Kirchnerismo.” Kirchnerismo increased aid to the poor and unemployed, stopped the privatization of the country’s retirement system, repudiated a portion of the country’s foreign debt, and ended “impunity” that had protected the country’s military from answering for its crimes during the dictatorship of the 1970s. With these popular policies, Kirchnerismo managed to restabilize the political system after the Argentinazo.

But with CFK deciding not to run for re-election, and with the country’s business sector pushing for more pro-business policies, all three leading contenders—Daniel Scioli, of Kirchner’s Front for Victory (Frente para la Victoria, or FpV), Buenos Aires Mayor Mauricio Macri of the conservative Republican Proposal party (Propuesta Republicana, or PRO), and the Sergio Massa, a one-time supporter of CFK running on the Justicialista Renewal ticket—are committed to moving the country rightwards.

While that trend holds at the level of mainstream politics, the rise to national stature of the Left and Workers Front (Frente de la Izquierda y los Trabajadores, or FIT), an electoral alliance of three Trotskyist socialist parties—the Socialist Workers Party (Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas, or PTS), the Workers Party (Partido Obrero, or PO) and the smaller Socialist Left (Izquierda Socialista, or IS)—offers an alternative. The FIT won over 1.3 million votes nationally in 2013, electing three deputies to the national congress, and a number of members of local and state legislatures. The FIT is currently engaged in a debate about whether to open the coalition to broader left-wing forces—and if so, how.

In this interview, Jorge Sanmartino, a University of Buenos Aires sociologist and leading member of the Democracia Socialista (Socialist Democracy) group, analyzes the FIT and the current debate in the Argentinian left. Democracia Socialista was founded in 2005 by a group of PTS members who criticized their party (and the rest of the Argentinian far left) for its failure to open itself up to new forces mobilized by the Argentinazo. While certainly partisan and critical, Sanmartino’s views on the FIT and the challenges facing the Argentinian left should be of interest to readers of SocialistWorker.org. We reprint a translation of the interview, abridged for reasons of space—the

full interview can be read at Democracy Socialista [1].

Lance Selfa

Lance Selfa - THE RECENT elections in Buenos Aires pointed to increased strength of forces on the right. In this context, how do you see electoral support for the left?

Jorge Sanmartino - OVERALL, I think that different sections of the right gained ground. Naturally, in first place is PRO, a part of the pragmatic right that's based on broader social forces who vote for specific policies. In the majority of provincial governments, the official Front for Victory (FpV) won. Nevertheless, we shouldn't exaggerate the turn to the right. I believe that an important part of the vote for FpV in Buenos Aires is from progressives sectors with a democratic and egalitarian outlook. But thinking that the FpV supports that sort of an agenda, or that it's the best positioned to defeat the PRO and Massa, is another thing.

The problem is that in October, this vote will go for Scioli. It's harder to say how this affects the ECO front, which appears to be closer to anti-Peronist radicalism and to Elisa Carrió. [2] The most important takeaway from the elections in Buenos Aires is the near-disappearance of a pole of attraction to the left of Peronism, such as Proyecto Sur in 2011 [3]

Those on the left who celebrate this vacuum are mistaken. The political space that Proyecto Sur occupied—defending nationalization of natural resources, opposing the law on mining and turning the countryside over to the soy industry, and supporting a strong welfare state—wasn't filled by the left, either from the FIT or from any other current. And this means leaving a political vacuum that will be felt in the legislature and city councils.

Activists who marched to support striking teachers, health workers or cultural centers, or who gravitated to a politics independent of the FpV, will find only radicalism and the Civic Coalition on offer. The person most responsible for this is, of course, Pino Solanas, who, after winning 27 percent of the vote in 2013 and a senate seat in the Federal Capital, abandoned his platform of "five causes" [Proyecto Sur's five-point program, emphasizing social and environmental justice] to sign up with the watered-down program of the Civic Coalition and the UCR. His "two souls"—the nationalist/populist one seen in his films and his activism, and his "above it all" opposition to politics as usual—took him down the road to this false liberal-tinted republicanism.

Given this situation, the left should try to occupy this political space, projecting itself as what I call an "active minority," with enough strength to influence the city's political agenda, and, if possible, the national agenda, as well. That will be an enormous task for the left in the future. Not to aspire to govern nationally, taking power and winning the support of large national majorities, but to position itself as a very strong active minority.

WHY DO you think the left didn't do better?

FIRST, THIS isn't something that happens overnight. You need to create real leaderships, based on a program that brings together progressive sectors. I think the left's disunity worked against creating that pole of attraction, as the elections in Buenos Aires clearly showed.

With seven competing electoral slates on the left, it was difficult to attract support and to have a real debate. There was no strong left-wing voice in the political arena to counter the ideology of "no

ideologies” or the mealy-mouthed postmodern rhetoric of “management,” the “leadership team,” “consensus” or the neoliberal view of the citizen as “customer.” Or showing that a better, stronger alternative to the FpV could win in the city. The price the left paid was a meager result that will be hard to resolve in time for the June 5 elections.

The Left and Workers Front (FIT) was the leading force on the left. In 2013, it made a splash, electing three deputies to the national congress and winning a number of provincial seats. It had a responsibility that no other formation on the left had: leading up a broad social and political front to fill that political vacuum.

In the most recent elections, all left-wing forces lost support compared to 2013, with the FIT losing almost half its vote, Camino Popular losing about as much, and with the MST, el Nuevo MAS, and the electoral lists of left-wing politicians Pablo Ferreyra and Gustavo Vera all having lackluster showings. Of course, one can't compare an election to an executive position to a legislative election, but the left had a worse showing than in 2011, when the FIT had just been formed and when part of the left created Proyecto Sur.

Beyond the debate about the numbers, what's important is the political balance sheet. Some of this decline in political support is unavoidable. The question is how you read it and what conclusions you draw from it. In this case, the FIT is lost in a sort of labyrinth. And this is beginning to express itself in an indirect way, through internal disputes over candidate selection, and a fight between PO-IS and the PTS.

ARE YOU referring to the fact that the FIT has been unable to construct a broader front or to open up new political forces?

IN PART, sure. But it's not only a question of how to build a political front. The FIT emerged in 2013 as a visible electoral front, with candidates for national and provincial offices. They interpreted their success as an expression of the “global crisis” or of a “working-class advance.” To me, they partially occupied the political space to the left of Kirchnerismo. It wasn't a “class” vote or the harbinger of a revolutionary situation.

This shows the major contradiction for parties that base their strategy on what Gramsci called the “war of maneuver,” meaning a rapid shift to a situation of dual power and the taking of power, where the state is seen as an apparatus hostile to popular interests. The FIT's strategy was based on and is based on a sharp working-class break with the center-left Kirchner government. They think the same applies to all the progressive and left governments in Latin America.

It's a profound error, and a mistaken strategy, based on the assumption of a rapid shift to a break with the system. In my opinion, this gets in way of a more rounded view of the relationship between the left and Peronism, or, not to focus solely on Peronism, of the relationship between the left and the masses. It rules out a long-term perspective based on a “war of position,” meaning the creation over a longer period of a social and political bloc of the popular classes.

What does this mean in the short term, practically speaking? To me, it means that in a situation where there isn't much popular struggle, and where the Peronists have partially adopted certain points of the popular agenda, the creation of an active minority with national influence, a bloc of 10-15 percent of the vote. Such a force wouldn't be looking for the speedy resolution of a crisis or to taking power immediately. But it would be capable of bringing together broad popular forces, including those who vote for and support Kirchner and other non-Peronist progressive sectors.

I don't see, and I've never seen, the possibility of overthrowing a progressive government, even if

many of its policies are aimed at defending the national capitalist class and continuing the policies of previous governments on energy and soy. The problem of relating to reformist governments has always been the Achilles heel of Trotskyist parties, which are very strong in our country. For example, they don't seem to get through their heads the idea that governments can offer up reforms. They think that since 1914, reforms have been impossible! In general, they read their good performance in 2013 as showing the futility of relating to the center-left and instead insist that it shows the correctness of a "hard class line." But what won in 2013 wasn't a "hard class line" program—which voters don't pay attention to—but the fact that the FIT filled the political space to the left of Kirchnerismo and in opposition to the traditional political apparatus.

It's not accidental that the FIT's best performances have been in Mendoza, where there wasn't a strong social movement, and in Salta, a very conservative area where the PO has, without question, won a solid footing of active support in the social movements. It stands in for La Cámpora [a social/political movement on the left of Kirchnerismo] and the center-left when those forces are weak or where the FpV is represented by the traditional conservative bureaucrats. And in the great urban centers, it attracts support from those on the left who don't want to vote for Peronism, but who also don't want to join up with the "republican" camp of the conservative opposition [i.e. the UCR and similar forces].

In sum, the FIT has had an important political victory as a movement of the left, perhaps in historic terms, showing a broader reach than the MAS in the 1980s and early 1990s, or of the United Left and Luis Zamora, which were phenomena limited to the capital and greater Buenos Aires. But the FIT doesn't really know what to do with its success. There are many battles to lead in a wide range of social, political and cultural areas that build on democratic struggles, and fight for an agenda around issues of gender, the environment, urban and labor rights, etc. There isn't a rigid boundary between the far left and Kirchnerismo, nor between the far left and supporters the non-Peronist center-left. But to the most "orthodox" sectors of the old left, like the PTS, one shouldn't speak of "the people," a term associated with a watering-down of the socialist program.

That's to say that, so far, the FIT hasn't been able to project itself as a leadership able to champion demands and aspirations of broad sectors that aren't easily translated into the language of "class," or must be reformulated as class demands before they are taken up.

DO YOU believe that the electoral terrain could have been different?

IN THE Capital, I think there could have been some type of broad coalition, whether through electoral agreements or through runoffs, with all the left participating. In 2013, the left took 12-13 percent of the vote in the city of Buenos Aires. I'm not proposing some naïve coming together of the left. Many times, it's not possible to reach agreements and decide who will run for what office. Politics includes political disputes. What I'm saying is that I believe that the FIT didn't have that perspective.

A broad left-wing coalition that is able today to get 12-13 percent of the national vote needs a hegemonic perspective that takes on important tasks: leading movements, raising demands and organizing people. In a recent article in *El Diplo* [4] (the Latin American edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*), Tarcus and Stefanoni mention that the left has become much more adept at speaking to a wider audience through the mass media. This raises the possibility that the left's whole approach to politics might change.

I'm not convinced by that argument, but I agree with Tarcus and Stefanoni that there is a gap between the new ways the left is presenting itself and the politics it's presenting. If this gap intersects with other social and political phenomena that have their own dynamics, it can start a

serious debate about anti-capitalist strategies in established democracies and action strategies to challenge reformist governments. The debate that's happening inside the FIT, whatever its origins, can make the left more dynamic. It can lead to a major opening to other forces.

YOU'RE REFERRING to the debate over the inclusion of Pueblo en Marcha y La Dignidad on the FIT's electoral lists.

RIGHT. THE debate on opening up the FIT—that is, making it a broad left front promoting candidates beyond the ranks of the three founding parties—overlaps with the internal fights over the slating of candidates. The opening was a positive, but insufficient, gesture by PO and IS. The PTS openly opposed opening up the Front.

From the time Pueblo en Marcha proposed joining, in recognition of the visibility the FIT had gained, it offered the opportunity to extend the front so it wouldn't just be an electoral front, but a broader and more open movement. [5] In the end, the PO and IS agreed to allow the movements to have a few minor positions. That's a positive step, but it still shows [the FIT's] limitations.

I recall successful Trotskyist electoral experiences, like that of the FOCEP (Worker Peasant Student and Popular Front, formed in 1977) in Perú, which collapsed when internal disputes and splits began. Or the election in France in 2002, where Lutte Ouvrière (LO) got 5.72 percent of the vote, and the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire) got 4.25 percent. In general, these are ephemeral. For LO, it was a swan song. They didn't know what to do with those votes. Like the FIT today, the votes they got had given them a "theoretical security," a validation that, at last, their workerism, their semi-underground way of operating in 21st century France, and their disdain for the rest of the left were the keys to their success. Their success reinforced their worst instincts.

Today, in the FIT, it looks like there is a movement in the opposite direction, toward greater openness. That can fall apart, as it could only be a change of rhetoric for the primaries. But it seems to me that, whatever peoples' intentions, when there's a political opportunity, you have to go for it. El Perro Santillán [6] backed Partido Obrero leader Jorge Altamira's candidacy and is talking with the FIT. It would be an extraordinary contribution for the FIT, to put forward a very well-known workers' leader, who is very popular in Jujuy and who has interesting electoral perspectives.

Also, there's a debate about where the FIT should go. It's not only about whether or not the FIT should open itself up, or what kind of electoral agreements to make, but something more fundamental. It's about what kind of political strategy to adopt in this period: in this democracy, in this continent, for this post-1989 consciousness after the collapse of "real existing socialism." This debate still hasn't really begun. But it's clearly a positive step when Altamira says that we [the left] must work together.

The PTS has been the most resistant to opening up the FIT. They view it as a Trotskyist electoral front. They want a purist front. They think that they have to mount a fight against the PO and the IS to against broader coalitions. They call broader coalitions "centrist". This view of party struggle leaves the FIT as little more than an electoral marriage of convenience, born only out of the need to win more than 1.5 percent of the vote (to guarantee representation in the congress) under the new election law. That is a dead end. It's based on the constant suspicion that the one closest to you is actually your worst enemy.

I've been saying this since 2005, when we left the PTS, a group of 500 or 1,000 members that considers itself the only revolutionary group in the world. It has a major problem in communicating with the rest of the world, and, above all, with those who fight for socialism. On the other hand, we'll have to see if the opening that the PO and the IS are attempting can push them to new insights.

I think that there doesn't exist, and can't exist, a single revolutionary party, not even a single revolutionary system of thought. There exist many revolutionary traditions that are interwoven into and sustain the struggle. Revolutionary nationalism in Latin America, without which the Cuban Revolution wouldn't exist, is one example. Socialism, revolutionary nationalism, ecology, feminism, the Marxist tradition, indigenismo and liberation theology, are all revolutionary traditions that have crossed paths and influenced each other, and at the same time, have been key components in the processes we've lived through in Latin American history. I don't think that you can understand the richness of the Venezuelan experience by placing it in the simplistic category of "bourgeois nationalism." It's a very narrow way of looking at things.

If we keep believing that there's only one truth, and that "the other" might threaten our purity, the game is up. Perhaps I'm too optimistic, but now I see that a debate with an important part of the FIT, that wants to open up and try to work in common, even though until recently it had held to a somewhat metaphysical view of "proletarian truth."

WHAT DO you think of the experience of the independent left?

TO ME, it seems very interesting. There's an obvious maturation, from the somewhat unsophisticated refusal to engage the state and political power, to today, where it approaches politics in very different way. Of course, under the label "independent left" there are a lot of political groups and social movements. But in general, they've tried to think about and grapple with political and strategic problems with a fresher eye than the traditional left has.

This doesn't mean the independent left has an advantage. To me, the independent left made a lot of bad mistakes, like spending more than 10 years denying the importance of the electoral arena, or denying the existence of a new political cycle that came with the consolidation of Kirchnerismo, for example. At the same time, I believe that it has advantages in engaging with the social movements more constructively, without wanting to dominate them, while allowing them to find their own way. And I think it's much more attuned to the long-term cultural battle, grounded in the concept of popular power, which, while debatable, opens up interesting horizons.

The independent left split over the question of electoral participation. In some senses, this split was to be expected, because there were many political ideas in play. I don't think differences over electoral strategy are the problem. I think the problem is that, as in the case of Patria Grande, to achieve a greater coherence and prominence, they have launched their own, very centralist, organization—losing the richness that a pluralism of tendencies and groups brings. [7] They look more to the experience of the 1970s left than what's going on in the rest of the world today. At some point the 1970s experience will become indispensable, but I don't think that a period of political fragmentation lacking the requisite political leadership will permit this somewhat artificial centralism.

In contrast, I think that the experience of Pueblo en Marcha provides an example of flexibility, combined with leadership, that will allow it to grow and develop. It is still a work in progress. For the medium term, there must be a process of coming together to share insights. I say this because I think there is a lot of agreement in many of our political assessments. There are diverse local and neighborhood groups, unions and student organizations. There are differences between them, but I think it's most important to look at the Latin American left's experience with a critical eye, or else you're not helping it to develop.

There are many other movements on the independent left in cities and provinces that reflect political and cultural phenomena rooted in the Argentine left's political traditions, like the piquetero movement in the 1990s. I think that in some way the independent left is a continuation of that

experience, as in the case of the piquetero or unemployed workers' movement. But for some reason, perhaps because of the strength of Peronism, we've never managed to break out of our separate "tribes." We are diverse tribes that keep coming together and breaking up. The traditional left parties have the advantage of being the most consolidated tribes, but it doesn't have to be that way. Experiences like that of Syriza are interesting to me, but frankly, I think we're still far that here. To many, factional politics is a badge of identity.

To repeat, I think it's a byproduct of the weight of Peronism and the inability to find a way to express mass politics. The growth of movements of the independent left is here to stay and I have no doubt we'll see new examples. The fundamental point is whether they can project and sustain themselves. The anti-politics and anti-statism of 10 years ago prevented that. Kirchnerismo, as a type of reformism, made things difficult. But now we're entering a new stage, not only for the independent movements, but for the entire left.

P.S.

* Socialist Worker (USA). June 10, 2015:

<https://socialistworker.org/2015/06/10/a-political-balance-sheet-in-argentina>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.democraciasocialista.org/?p=4607>

[2] Note: "Radicalism" in this context means the politics of the Radical Civic Union (UCR), a liberal, somewhat social democratic party that is the traditional second force to the Peronists. Carrió is long-time politician with roots in the UCR that is now allied with the right-wing PRO party.

[3] <http://www.proyectosurbsas.com.ar>:

Proyecto Sur is a "national popular" left-wing electoral alliance launched in 2007. Its leading figure is Fernando "Pino" Solanas, a noted film director.

[4] <http://www.eldiplo.org/index.php?CID=2002276>

[5] Note: Pueblo en Marcha is another electoral front composed of other forces on the Argentinian left, including Democracia Socialista, of which Sanmartin is a founding member.

[6] Carlos "Perro" Santillán], a well-known trade union leader in the province of Jujuy

[7] Patria Grande is another broad left political and social front launched in 2014, formed by a number of organizations with roots in the Argentinazo.