

# Argentina's nuclear program under fire

by Cynthia Rush

With two days of advance publicity, ABC-TV featured on its May 28 nightly news program the claim that it had just learned of "one of the most alarming developments in the nuclear age": Within five years, Argentina would have the capability of building an atomic bomb. Five nations possess the bomb now, ABC warned, and ten will by the end of this century.

The Argentine story is a "chilling" one, ABC reported in conspiratorial tones. Showing film clips of Gen. Juán Perón, the figure who inspired the development of the nuclear program in the early 1950s, the commentator explained that Argentina's government and scientific community had been "driven by national pride," for the last three decades, to produce the most advanced nuclear program on the Ibero-American continent. ABC's racist message is that only greed, and evil political fanaticism, could drive a nation to develop its scientific and technological capabilities in the way that Argentina has.

Worse, ABC shrieked, American and European companies have been "spreading their knowledge" of nuclear technology, by selling reprocessing equipment and microswitches to Argentina! The previous military government had "secretly constructed" the uranium enrichment plant at Pilcaniyeu in southern Argentina, thus giving the country the full nuclear fuel cycle. And the Ezeiza plant in Buenos Aires is producing plutonium which could be used to build "the bomb."

ABC named the Honeywell Corp. in the United States, which has sold microswitches to the Ezeiza plant, and the Italian firm, Techint, as two corporations involved in sales of technology for Argentina's nuclear industry. The moral: Since Argentina is allegedly violating "international controls" which prohibit export of enrichment technology to other countries, these high-technology firms should at once cut off their sales to Argentina. But, ABC complained, no one seems to care about enforcing these controls. Lest anyone miss the point, ABC planned to air a longer documentary on June 6, with further details on the Argentina story, and on the erstwhile "dangers" of allowing Third World nations to develop nuclear industries.

The ABC program did not contain one iota of "news." Argentina's uranium enrichment and reprocessing capabilities are no secret. As a source close to Argentina's National Atomic Energy Commission (CNEA) told *EIR*: "We haven't

built the bomb, because we have made a political decision not to. This [ABC program] is obviously related to our economic difficulties, and to the foreign debt."

Argentina is in the final round of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and New York banks on the "adjustment" program it must adopt in order to receive new loans. One of the IMF's conditions for granting new money, is the destruction of every vestige of "costly" industrial and technological capability, such as the nuclear industry. The government of President Raul Alfonsín must sign an agreement with the International Monetary Fund by June 10, to avoid having its debts classified as "substandard" by the creditor community. ABC's broadcast is an effort to blackmail Argentina with a cutoff of technology sales from the advanced sector, unless it buckles under to the "adjustment program" demanded by creditors.

Of course, Argentina, and other Ibero-American nations, are to receive no more credit from the international financial institutions for which ABC devises its "news" programs, in any case (see *Banking*, p. 21). The financial oligarchy running the IMF intends a new colonial era—and all modern economic methods and technologies are to be denied to Third World countries, and destroyed where they exist.

Government acceptance of the austerity conditionalities of the IMF and the creditor banks thus far has already dismantled significant sections of the country's nuclear program. According to Raul Boix Amat, who has been president of the Argentine Association of Nuclear Technology since 1981, the budget for the National Atomic Energy Commission has been reduced from \$1.2 billion to \$200 million. As the Buenos Aires correspondent for New York's *Journal of Commerce* gloated in the May 28 edition, "the once prestigious nuclear program" faces serious reverses, "as President Raul Alfonsín presses for ever more spending cuts."

Due to budget cuts made at the behest of the international banks, completion of Argentina's third nuclear power plant, the 698-megawatt Atucha II, will be delayed for at least six months. And the Alfonsín government is reportedly considering scrapping altogether the second half of the nuclear program, which originally envisioned the completion of six nuclear power stations by the end of the century. Since heavy water needs at the functioning plants, and at Atucha II, are already provided for, the government may also convert the heavy water plant under construction at Arroyito, in the south, to partly support fertilizer production.

The current situation in the nuclear sector is "a dramatic one," Boix Amat reports. Within the framework of the current budget, "we will not be able to maintain a reasonable work pace. There are already three paralyzed projects: the heavy water experimental plant, the uranium enrichment plant, and the radio-chemistry laboratories, recycling nuclear fuel. Also, only some of the work at the Atucha II plant is being carried out." Boix Amat called on President Alfonsín to understand that "the nuclear field is about to yield important economic results, and this possibility must not be thwarted."