

# New Internationalist

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## Mothers who die

The way in which the danger was growing quite the way could be any time. A midwife in a hospital who can't get better. She refused to go to the hospital. The women in the area didn't want to go. The baby was born after two days. She couldn't get better. At birth she could not clean. Her body was very heavy and she stopped eating. She was getting very tired and getting heavy and she closed, so we could not go to the hospital. She got weaker and weaker all the time and on the fourth day she stopped eating and talking altogether. She looked yellow and weak. On the fourth day we buried her and came home. Everything had changed. The baby is born very big. My mother was looking after

NI 420  
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• UK £3.95 • IRELAND €5.00  
• AUSTRALIA \$9.50 (inc GST)  
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**Guantánamo**  
Both sides

**Tibet**  
50 years



# Currents

## CORPORATIONS

# Going Public

### Unions' fight brings flagship airline back to Argentina

**T**oday we are all Aerolíneas Argentinas,' exclaimed Hugo Moyano, Secretary General of Argentina's labour federation, from the steps of the National Congress. The crowd responded with a cacophony of triumphant cheers and drum-pounding. Moyano's proclamation, delivered on 21 August last year, gave a sense of finality to the countless stickers and leaflets decorating Buenos Aires signposts and sidewalks with the assertion: 'We are all Aerolíneas'. The House of Deputies authorized the Government to purchase the struggling airline several hours later.

Argentina's four airworkers' unions, with the support of the National Confederation of Labour, began their campaign to expropriate the nation's flagship airline in June, after the Spanish travel company Grupo Marsans announced that it could no longer meet the company's payroll. The unions have traditionally maintained a hostile posture to foreign ownership, striking repeatedly since 2005 and calling on the State to take back its leading role.

The Cristina Fernández de Kirchner Government listened. The President herself, whose Justicialist Party maintains close ties to Argentina's powerful unions, spearheaded the drive to nationalize the company, claiming in a speech on 21 July that the company's poor performance had obliged 'the State to take the decision to guarantee service'.

Grupo Marsans' directors initially responded warmly, but soon found themselves embroiled in a dispute over the airline's value. Grupo Marsans insisted it was worth between U\$330 and \$546 million, while an Argentine Senate Investigative committee declared that the airline's debts had pushed it \$832 million into the red. Charting a middle

course, the Argentine Congress valued the airline as worthless, declared it a 'public utility' and authorized the expropriation of its foreign-owned shares on 17 December. Grupo Marsans have since responded by filing an arbitration claim with the World Bank.

The Nationalist Government of Juan Perón first formed Aerolíneas Argentinas as a state enterprise in 1950. It was privatized by his successor Carlos Menem 40 years later as part of a structural adjustment plan that de-nationalized the Argentine economy, transferring everything from public utilities to the postal service into private (and generally foreign) hands.

The downward spiral of the company's finances over the next 18 years made a mockery of the proposition that private ownership leads to greater efficiency. The company changed hands three times before Grupo Marsans purchased it for one symbolic euro in 2001. By that time, all of its 33 routes were operating at a loss.

Whether it will fare better in its nationalized form remains to be seen – especially in the light of concerns about climate change, which the Argentine Government has so far failed to acknowledge. Critics are already faulting the Government for maintaining the airline at the taxpayers' expense. The company currently eats up a million dollars a day of Argentina's national budget, according to a report by *La Nación*. Supporters counter that the investment serves the public interest by integrating the national territory – Aerolíneas Argentinas currently serves 80 per cent of the domestic market of South America's second largest country – and by providing much-needed employment.

Roque Planas

## ASIA-PACIFIC Not such a natural disaster

Described as 'the first great natural disaster of the year', the wave of flooding that hit the Asia-Pacific region in January 2009 led to the displacement of at least 100,000 people, reports United Press International. Although tropical storms are a frequent occurrence in the area, this year's flooding was unusual because so many countries – Fiji, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia among them – were affected simultaneously. In the Mindanao region of the Philippines, the damage reached 'humanitarian crisis proportions', according to local officials, and in Fiji a state of emergency was declared.

While the non-stop rains caused rivers to burst their banks, critics claim that the series of floods cannot simply be blamed on the weather. Garbage pollution, poor infrastructure, urban development, deforestation and ineffective flood control programmes all played their part. In addition, the governments' failure to realize that neighbouring countries were being hit at the same time meant that no regionwide programme of control or assistance was put in place.

The flooding occurred mainly in provincial areas and with the main economic and political centres unaffected, neither the media nor the governments felt the need to sound the alarm. But the internet was alive to the unfolding events, and many bloggers expressed their anger at their governments' failure to act. As one Malaysian contributor explained: 'Many of us who have gone through so much hardship hate ourselves for electing, term after term, ministers who have done nothing for the people. Politicians argue that flooding is a natural disaster, but [it isn't] all the time.'

CRACK PALINGGI / REUTERS



Dodging the waves: the 'first great natural disaster of the year'