

Brewing Crisis in the South Atlantic: Oil Exploration in the Malvinas Islands Ignites an Old Dispute

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For Argentines the long simmering territorial dispute between Britain and Argentina is coming to a head, as a [British oil rig travels](#) to what analysts say is a 60 billion barrel reserve of high-grade oil located in a 200 square mile zone surrounding the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands. This would make it one of the largest oil reserves in the world. Argentina had instituted a naval [embargo](#) of the islands but has recently permitted the oil rig to land in Port Stanley, capital of the island.

The delivery and installation of the oil rig will substantially alter the fundamental economic character of the disputed islands from fishing and sheep-raising to the exploitation of one of the world's most sought after commodities: petroleum. The exploitative economic character Britain is unilaterally imposing exacerbates the national tensions between Argentina and Britain. This conflict has brought the relationship between the two countries to their sharpest point since the 1982 war over the Islands.

The Argentine government of President Christina Kirchner is set to bring the matter before the [United Nations](#) Security Council and is mustering its diplomatic resources to bring this matter to a negotiated end. In addition, President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, [Hugo Chavez](#), has correctly demanded that Britain cede the Malvinas: "The British are desperate for oil since their own fields in the North Sea are now being depleted," Chavez said in a televised speech. "When will England stop breaking international law? Return the Malvinas to Argentina!" Argentina and Venezuela are both members of Mercosur, the common market covering much of South America.

The Anti-Imperialist Character of the Conflict

This conflict is not, however, a simple land dispute or even an oil resource dispute. The question of the return of the Malvinas Islands is an explosive national issue for most Argentines, who see the haughty imperial occupation and colonization of their islands as symbolic of their nation's relationship to western imperialism. Argentina is a country whose national wealth is sapped by the wealthiest financiers of London, Madrid, and New York City. The vast majority of the Argentine people view the continued occupation of the Malvinas Islands by Britain as a fundamental injustice. Argentina attempted to seize the islands in 1982 but was defeated by the British after a short-lived, but bloody re-occupation of the colonial outpost. The conflict resulted in nearly 1,000 deaths with two-thirds of the dead from the Argentine military. The invasion was a military disaster for Argentina and a stunning loss in the fight against imperialism which bolstered the fanatical anticommunism of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Then, too, the conflict was bathed in the waters of the Nicaraguan Revolution, the Grenadian revolution, and the civil war in El Salvador, not to

mention the U.S.' sponsored swath of counter-revolutions in Chile and Argentina.

Despite the failure of the Argentine military in 1982, the question still must be answered: What right does Britain have to a colony in the South Atlantic 7,800 miles from London? Britain claims it has the right to defend "self determination" when this seems as a convenient cover for British interests in the expansion of its capital. In keeping with this, the Legislative Assembly of the Falkland Islands, the local governing body for the 3,000 plus residents of the Falklands, announced on February 5, that it would oppose any Argentine firm exploring for oil in the territory.

21st Century Colonialism or 21st Century Socialism

The British, French, Dutch, or U.S. governments have no business maintaining colonies in South America, or anywhere else on the globe. The Malvinas are properly Argentine territory, and workers in Britain have no interest in maintaining the old Empire territorial claims that Labor and Tory governments, including those of Thatcher, Blair and [Brown](#), have vigorously defended.

In this sense the Falkland Islands are no different than returning Hong Kong to the Peoples Republic of China, India to the Indians, or Ireland to the Irish. What seemingly complicates the matter is that there are virtually no Argentine nationals on the Falklands. The local residents vigorously support continued British control, much like the reactionary Unionists of Northern Ireland.

Central America, South America, and the Caribbean are dotted with direct colonial possessions of the United States (Puerto Rico, American Virgin Islands), Britain (British Virgin Islands, etc.), the Netherlands (Curacao, Dutch West Indies), and France (Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana). With the century-long occupation of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands as examples, it is clear that the United States has no genuine inclination toward the establishment of democracy or independence for the remaining subjugated nations of this region.

Administration after administration prattles on about democracy in countries with which it is interested in interfering. Yet the actions of the U.S. government, whether those run by Democrats or Republicans, while courting figures like the Dalai Lama, are intractable in their overlord status in Puerto Rico. The disgusting example of Vieques, an island off the coast of Puerto Rico, comes to mind. The U.S. has shelled the island for decades as a military training ground. The U.S. refuses to clean up the dangerous waste, which includes carcinogenic pollutants and unexploded ordinance. This has led to absurdly high levels of cancer on Vieques.

Meanwhile, against this backdrop of unresolved colonialism, a new social power is emerging, the resurgent continental resistance to imperialism by Central and South American working people in recent years. A prime example of this is the movement that has thrust the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela to move sharply to the left in the direction of socialism. The specter of social revolution is haunting the oligarchies of South America and the imperialists of the northern hemisphere. The crisis in the South Atlantic cannot be seen outside the context of one imperialist provocation against this process: the military buildup in Colombia against Venezuela, the U.S.-backed separatist movements in Bolivia, the U.S.-sponsored removal of President Zelaya in Honduras, and the influx of U.S. and other

imperialist troops in Haiti.

The Anti-Imperialist Potential of the Crisis

The overwhelming anti-imperialist sentiments of the Argentine working class could be ignited into mass action by the British provocation. Given the historic militancy of the working class in Argentina, which propelled hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets to demand economic relief from the government in response to the economic crisis of 2000-2001, one president after another was forced to leave office. Consequently, the Kirschner government will have to act boldly if it is to stay in power.

However, the capitalist government of Argentina is tied hand and foot to the imperialists it is attempting to challenge. President Cristina Kirchner, whose political support includes the businesses and bankers who are in large part dominated by British financial interests, may find it difficult to be successful with her government's diplomatic efforts or with an attempt at a semi-military blockade of the islands.

Argentina has long been dominated by British capitalism. The direct occupation of the Malvinas Islands by the British only serves to underscore the position of Argentina as a neo-colonial subject nation. A working class upsurge opposed to further British machinations would in all likelihood expose the country's subjugation at the hands of British imperialism and lay the blame squarely in the Argentine government's inability and or unwillingness to seize the islands.

Working Class Unity is Critical to Defeat Imperialism

Imperialism can be defeated and will be defeated only when workers politically unite and act independently of their own capitalist-controlled governments so as to lead their respective nations in taking successful actions in defense of the right of all countries to self-determination. One possible action that could be promoted would be to attempt to unite American, British, and Argentine dockworkers with other South American port workers in refusing to load or unload shipments of oil equipment or military related cargo to or from the Falklands. If the British and U.S. workers do not take a stand in support of their Argentine brothers and sisters, there is no reason Argentines should wait. South American workers could demand a halt to all these type of shipments.

It is unlikely that once pushed into independent political action the working class will resume their subservient political role in Argentine politics. The question of working class power was raised in recent Argentine history when workers in 2000 to 2002 took over many workplaces, the streets, the national plaza, highways and even towns.

What about the Falklanders?

As for the Falkland residents themselves, they, too, are unfortunate victims of British Imperialism. Although many families have lived for generations on the islands, the illegitimacy of Britain's claim has been well known for over a century. Falkland laws against Argentine interests must be voided by the Falklanders themselves if they wish to be on the right side of history.

The Falklander's parochial interests are secondary to the basic question of national self-determination and sovereignty of Argentina. The Falklanders are not a separate nation from Britain. They are its colonists. Their fear of domination by Argentina is a foil for British

economic interests. Britain's capitalist elite has little regard for its subjects when its economic interests are at stake. It did not grant the millions of residents of Hong Kong the right to elect its own leaders when it was in its interests to secede the Territory to the Peoples Republic of China. Nor ultimately will it consider the interests of the residents of the Falklands equal to their own economic interests.

A victory in the Malvinas for the Argentine working people would be like a beacon for South and Central America's long and incomplete fight for territorial and political independence from imperialism.

About the Malvinas Islands (Falklands)

The Malvinas Islands lie approximately 300 miles from the coast of Argentina.

Its land mass is comparable to Connecticut.

Argentina has always claimed these islands and challenged British claims to colonial possession.

The non-military resident population is just over 3,100, 70% of whom are British descendents. The British Empire seized the islands from the Argentine government in 1833.

The Malvinas were captured by the British Empire in 1833, as South American was beginning to oust the Spanish and Portuguese Empires claims to South America. Britain eventually colonized the Malvinas with British subjects, and renamed them the "Falklands."

The rugged islands were mainly devoted to raising sheep until oil exploration pointed to petroleum reserves in 1998.

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