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## *Commentary*



# Collective Identity, the State and Politics: Understanding Working-Class Organisations in Today's Argentina

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### Abstract

An analysis of the current state and political horizons of working-class organisations in Argentina can be developed along two intersecting lines. In the first, we have trade unions representing workers in the formal sector, which accounts for about half of the country's working population. In the second, we have social movements, based in both the urban and rural space, representing poor and informal workers. These two lines often run parallel to one another but also intersect and merge at different points following the cycles of capital accumulation and crisis typical of a peripheral country.

### Keywords

working-class organisation – trade unions – social movements – Argentina

## Trade Union and Social Movement Intersections: Identity and Organisation

One site where trade unions and social movements in Argentina intersect is on the issue of identity and organisation. Most contemporary social movements see themselves as representing sectors of the working class who were expelled from the labour market sphere of dignified, protected work at the end of the 1990s, as a result of the adoption of a set of debt-dependent neoliberal policies, including the privatisation of former state companies in key strategic sectors, by the government following IMF advice. Since their first appearance on the political and social scene, social movements have represented workers and given voice to their concerns, including employment, income protection and welfare state measures. The movement of the unemployed gained notoriety at the end of the 1990s through its use of roadblocks as a strategy of collective action – hence its popular name in Argentina, *piqueteros*. This name clearly identifies it with work and workers, and in many cases it has directly represented communities of workers recently wiped out by processes of privatisation (for example in the oil towns of Tartagal and Cutral C6).<sup>1</sup> The movements themselves argue that their existence is justified by the need to represent workers involved in activities within the popular economy, as this informal sphere is defined, and to underline the fundamental contribution that informal, underpaid, unprotected work makes to the economy.<sup>2</sup>

This worker and working-class-at-large identity is reflected in the form of organisation adopted by social movements, who see themselves essentially as trade unions, involved in the everyday economic struggle to improve the conditions of the workers they represent. As the interview with ‘Pocho’, one of the main organisers of the Union de Trabajadores de la Tierra (UTT), published in this issue, demonstrates, the economic struggle is central to the organising strategies of social movements, especially in a country facing high inflation, even though, in the course of the last two decades, their actions have gone beyond the work dimension and have been directed at creating access to primary needs such as land, housing, water and sanitation. Today, workers in the popular economy from a highly diverse group of informal sectors (e.g., recycling, street vending, construction, small rural producers) are represented by a confederated Union, the Union de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular

<sup>1</sup> A. C. Dinerstein, ‘Roadblocks in Argentina’, *Capital and Class* 74 (2001), 1–7.

<sup>2</sup> J. Grabois and E. Persico, *Organización y economía popular* (Buenos Aires: CTEP, 2019).

(UTEPA), that aspires to be formally recognised by the state and to be included in negotiations and decisions on relevant social policies.

This trade union identity is also closely connected to the historical and political institutional role of trade unionism in Argentina. The country has a peculiar system for regulating workers' associations that dates back to the first Perón government in the mid-1940s. The state, through the Ministry of Labour, grants legal permission exclusively to one trade union for each economic and productive sector to represent workers in that particular sector, which is referred to as *personería gremial*. Workers can freely associate and create new trade unions, but, in practice, the system creates a monopoly of representation and a vertical decision-making process that initially guaranteed trade unions' adherence to Juan Perón and Peronism, but which has remained virtually untouched for the past 70 years. The monopoly of representation has been, in fact, strongly defended by trade unions at different historical points, since it was seen as an element of strength for the union movement, favouring at macro level the political unification of unions into a single confederation, the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT), and at micro level empowering local union branches and workplace structures (the so-called *comisiones internas*). Moreover, the monopoly also implied access to vast funds provided by the state to finance health and recreational services offered by trade unions to their members (the so-called *Obras Sociales*). This combination of political and economic factors in a system of industrial relations that grants rights only to legally appointed trade unions, through the process of granting *personería gremial*, pushes any new attempts at organising workers, such as the one led by workers of the popular economy, towards the adoption of the union form, intended both as an organising structure for everyday decision-making ('the union form organises us', says the UTT activist Pocho, in the interview published in this issue) and as a means to gain influence in the political and institutional sphere.

### **Trade Union and Social Movement Intersections: Relations with the State and Peronism**

The second intersection between trade unions and social movements concerns relations with the state and party politics. The history of trade unions in Argentina is closely connected with the rise and consolidation of Peronism as a social and political project. Beginning in 1943, with the arrival of Perón as Labour Secretary, and through Perón's two consecutive presidencies, trade unions were empowered both institutionally and financially and workers

gained access to workplace rights and welfare benefits (paid holidays; pensions; bonuses such as the extra salary known as *Aguinaldo*, paid twice a year; and health coverage). This was accompanied by the co-optation of union leaders into high levels of the state structure and of the Peronist movement in an attempt to put forward a political project oriented towards wealth redistribution and class compromise in which the working and popular classes had a central political role. This special relation between the majority of trade unions and Peronism, though not free of conflicts and contradictions, was consolidated during the years in which Peronism was proscribed or when civil rights were *tout court* abolished (as was the case with the last military dictatorship of 1976–82), with unions often leading the democratic opposition.

With the return to democracy in 1983 and the descent of the country into debt dependency and neoliberalism, a process that reached its peak during the 1990s with the full-scale implementation of labour reforms and that is in many ways continuing today,<sup>3</sup> trade unions gradually lost their political centrality of previous decades, both as a result of the reconfiguration of labour markets, which have become increasingly informalised, and due to the shifting balance of power within the Peronist movement. Despite their partial loss of influence in the political sphere (though union leaders continue to be elected in Parliament as part of the Peronist electoral coalition), trade unions have remained powerful actors at the institutional level, with high rates of membership, financial resources and mobilisation capacity in the formal economy, particularly in strategic sectors such as transport and logistics. While their direct insertion in state structures is much less pervasive than it was under the Perón governments, the state remains a strong interlocutor for trade unions to obtain both more financial resources for their health services (the *obras sociales*) and more room for manoeuvre within the system of industrial relations to press for the adoption of new legislation protecting or defending workers' rights.

Regarding their relations with the state, profound differences exist in trade unions' attitudes and actions depending on the political party actually in government. Peronist-led governments are normally seen as 'friends' of the union movement, either because they share the same political and party identity as union leaders and many workers, or because it is assumed they will not work against but rather will facilitate the interests of unions. However, 'friendship' has not always characterised their relations. This could be seen, for instance, during the Menem's government in the 1990s when the CGT led 13 general

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3 M. Féliz, 'Limits and Barriers of Neodevelopmentalism: Lessons from Argentina's Experience, 2003–2011', *Review of Radical Political Economics* 47 (1) (2015), 70–89.

strikes in just a few years, despite the split into three confederations. This split reflected different political alignments and positions towards the Peronist government anti-labour policies. Beyond this, frictions in the supposedly friendly relations between trade unions and the state under Peronist governments are continuously created by the worsening of the condition of labour exploitation on the ground, as felt by workers through salary reductions, lay-offs, subcontracting, increased rhythms of production and the general labour loss of value in the context of inflation. In such circumstances internal union struggles also arise, with 'bureaucracies' contested by bottom-up movements of workers, this representing a historical dynamic in Argentina. In this sense, unions' actions in the presence of right-wing governments can be considered much more confrontational and less open to mediation, thus paradoxically offering a stronger response.

Social movements' relations with the state and politics follow similar lines. However, social movements' direct dependence on state subsidies and social welfare policies often blurs the line between the state and social movements' actions. Very often, and especially under Peronist governments, social activists from organisations supporting the government occupy central positions in the national and provincial state structures that deal with social and development policies. Their presence is fundamental to drive resources towards the development of projects and the implementation of actions directly affecting the livelihood of many poor, informal-sector workers. As mentioned earlier, social movements' actions have moved from initial claims to income protection for laid-off workers in view of labour market reinsertion, to a full-scale struggle against precariousness and marginalisation affecting not just work but all spheres of life. In the past two decades, social movements have been able to achieve for workers of the popular economy a minimum guaranteed income (called *salario social*, corresponding to about a third of a regular minimum salary); income generation for a different range of cooperative projects in poor neighbourhoods; better housing, sanitation and infrastructure for newly urbanised areas (the so-called *Barrio Populares*);<sup>4</sup> and child income subsidies to mothers. These tangible improvements in poor workers' living conditions, the result of struggles and open confrontation, it must always be remembered, have been accompanied by the strengthening of social organisations, which have been able to include the informal working class in the political conversation. By saying that the workers of the popular economy are those that actually

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4 More than 5,000 of these have been recorded by the national registry Renabap, <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/desarrollosocial/renabap>, accessed 11/02/2022.

make possible the functioning of the formal economy, through subcontracting and informality of different sorts, social movements are clearly holding the state responsible for the over-exploitation of this underclass of workers and thus can legitimately demand state intervention. All the above are tremendous achievements that have improved the daily lives of millions of workers in Argentina.

However, from a more critical perspective, one may wonder about the limits to social movement action built and dependent on the state and its resources. The first challenge for a debt-dependent peripheral country such as Argentina concerns the amount of resources available for social programmes. This clearly involves crucial struggles in the definition of the political-economic stance of the country both internally – for example, which sectors and interests to favour and how to redistribute the wealth produced – and externally. The second is the risk that a policy based on subsidies, guaranteed social income and precarious cooperative work, which has certainly worked to a certain extent up to now, could backfire and contribute to the consolidation of an underclass of precarious workers who are actually exploited by the state through the subsidies that were aimed to ameliorate their conditions.

Despite these existing intersecting lines on identity, organisation and relations with the state, in Argentina and beyond the day-to-day activities of trade unions and social movements tend to occupy two completely different spheres, making the forging of more strategic alliances difficult. Trade unions negotiate the value of labour with capital within a set system of industrial relations: they operate within the sphere of rules, laws and collective agreements that constitute what Gramsci properly called ‘industrial legality’.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, social movements’ claims are broader, involving all spheres of life. They do not formally negotiate the value of labour as such but rather try to set limits and basic conditions to avoid a run to the bottom in terms of workers’ precarity and exploitation. Differences also exist in relation to the subjects towards which they direct their claims. Social movements have the state as exclusive interlocutor and have to exert pressure on it via struggles and mobilisations focused on the state’s different levels and scales (local, provincial, national). Trade unions negotiate and can exercise pressure with both employers and the state in a manner and with results that change depending on their strategic position within the labour market or on the power deriving from their collective association.

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<sup>5</sup> A. Gramsci, ‘Sindacati e consigli’, in his *Scritti Politici* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1973).

## Looking to the Future

Looking at the possible horizons of working-class organisation and mobilisation through the lens of the recent social history of Argentina, we can see how different regimes of growth and accumulation have strengthened the structural differences mentioned above, giving way to a pendulum-like alternation of social movement- and trade union-led struggles.<sup>6</sup> While in the late 1990s and early 2000s social movements literally occupied the streets of Argentina, in the midst of a huge recession that led to state bankruptcy and social upheavals,<sup>7</sup> the recovery of the economy during the first decade of the 2000s pushed trade unions into the lead in classical labour conflict in the formal sphere of the economy. Changes in the political scenario are not irrelevant to this pendulum, such as the movement between Polanyian and Marxian types of labour conflict, as Beverly Silver would have put it.<sup>8</sup> In this sense Mauricio Macri's right-wing, neoliberal, anti-worker policies fostered the formation of strategic coalitions between sectors of traditional trade unions and social movements in various mobilisations. On the contrary, the electoral support given by both trade unions and social movements to the election of Alberto Fernández in 2019, summed up to the government's intervention to help informal workers, who were the most economically affected during the early lockdown phases of the pandemic, has produced a substantial social peace despite the overall deterioration of workers' salary conditions across the formal – informal divide. Though cracks in the alliance with Fernández's government are appearing, especially in relation to the renegotiation of the debt with the IMF contracted by the previous government, Peronist governments, with either direct benefits or alliances, have often been able to contain social conflicts. However, this prevents the establishment of alternative political alliances and strategies that can really go beyond the current fragmentation of work and the working class.

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6 M. Atzeni and J. Grigera, 'The Revival of Labour Movement Studies in Argentina: Old and Lost Agendas', *Work, Employment and Society* 33 (5) (2018), 865–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018800233>.

7 J. Grigera, 'Argentina: On Crisis and a Measure for Class Struggle', *Historical Materialism* 14(1) (2006), 221–48.

8 B. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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