

The Tip of the Iceberg

Media Coverage of “Slave Labor” in Argentina

by
Marina Kabat, Agustina Desalvo, and Julia Egan
Translated by
Richard Stoller

The Argentina media often report “slave labor” conditions in clothing production and seed nurseries. A critical assessment of the types of coercion (economic and noneconomic) that hold workers under these brutal conditions indicates that instances of extraeconomic coercion are merely the extreme manifestation of a general situation in which economic coercion predominates. The determinants of the deterioration of working conditions in these two sectors include relative overpopulation and technological backwardness.

Los medios habitualmente refieren en a las condiciones laborales en los talleres textiles y empresas semilleras argentinas como formas de “trabajo esclavo.” Un balance crítico de los tipos de coacción (económica o extraeconómica) que confina a estos trabajadores a brutales condiciones laborales indica que los casos particulares donde existe alguna forma de coacción extraeconómica pueden considerarse la manifestación extrema de una condición más extendida donde la coacción económica predomina. Las determinaciones del deterioro de las condiciones laborales en estas dos ramas económicas incluyen la expansión de la sobrepoblación relativa y el carácter tecnológicamente atrasado de estas actividades.

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Over the past decade the Argentine media have covered a number of instances of “slave labor,” typically in clandestine clothing workshops in Greater Buenos Aires and in rural seed nurseries (*semilleras*). Some cases have given rise to criminal charges (human trafficking, forced labor, immigration fraud) while others have been classified as infractions of labor laws. The media have characterized these cases as slave labor even in the absence of obvious restrictions on the workers’ freedom of movement. The widespread use of the term seems to be a tactical decision of some worker organizations, one that the media have embraced.

In this article we examine the two activities that have most commonly attracted media attention: corn detasseling (*despajonado* or *desflorada de maíz*) in

Marina Kabat teaches at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and is a researcher at the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas and the Universidad Nacional de La Plata. Agustina Desalvo is a postdoctoral fellow at CONICET and works at the Instituto Gino Germani of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Julia Egan is a doctoral fellow at CONICET and a researcher at the Centro de Estudios e Investigación en Ciencias Sociales. They thank the reviewers for their suggestions and Eduardo Sartelli, director of the CEICS, with whom they have discussed various aspects of the manuscript. Richard Stoller is coordinator of selection and international programs at Schreyer Honors College, Pennsylvania State University.

nurseries for the production of hybridized seed and home work (*trabajo a domicilio*, performed in the workers' own homes or in small workshops) clothing production. We hypothesize that the coercion experienced by workers in these sectors is purely economic and that the situations therefore are not properly characterized as slave labor. We begin with a critical review of the recent bibliography in support of a more expansive definition of "modern slavery." We then look at each sector with the goal of distinguishing between economic coercion and the noneconomic coercion that in our view is a defining characteristic of nonfree labor. Lastly we analyze and historicize the "normal" conditions in these sectors, marked by a strong extraction of absolute surplus value (based upon the length and intensity of the workday), and seek to explain the expansion of home work and the deterioration of working conditions.

OLD WORKERS, MODERN SLAVES?

Human trafficking and varied forms of forced labor have received significant attention in recent years, coalescing into the notion of "modern slavery." Eugene Genovese (2014: 8), the historian of African slavery in the Americas, notes that many would reserve the word for that era, but he recognizes the advantages of using the "modern" qualifier to capture an array of contemporary practices that demand public attention. For those who invoke the term, "modern slavery" does not depend on legal norms (i.e., of human beings as property). One of the most commonly held definitions comes from Kevin Bales (Bales and Robbins, 2001: 5–6; Bales and Soodalter, 2010: 277). In his definition, which we consider ahistorical (and in fact dehistoricizing) and rooted in methodological individualism, slavery is a relationship between individuals. The class identity of these subjects is diluted by the assertion that "modern slavery" is a democratic institution in which anyone can be enslaved; it is an equal-opportunity slavery that includes individuals of all races, colors, and ethnic groups (Bales and Soodalter, 2010: 5–6). Any notion of class cleavage is set aside, replaced by a summary of the characteristics of the most vulnerable groups: the poor, women, migrants, and ethnic minorities.

Insofar as slavery is defined solely as a relationship between individuals, the history of humanity becomes to some extent the history of slavery (Bales and Soodalter, 2010: 252). In the prologue to the 2012 edition of his book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Modern Economy*, Bales (2012: 339) takes note of some of the criticisms directed at his analysis, largely by historians, but he does not accept the need for a conceptual revision. He only notes that he would modify the excessive differentiation between modern and earlier slavery, since he recognizes that slavery's local forms cannot easily be corralled into conceptual categories. He also defends the need to keep the definition of slavery flexible enough to retain its relevance to changing situations. We argue that this flexibility is a weakness, as the concept ends up covering very different situations.

Bales recognizes the existence of multiple gray areas between "modern slavery" as he understands it and other forms of extreme labor exploitation (Bales and Robbins, 2001: 29; Bales and Soodalter, 2010: 215). For this reason, he seeks to refine the definition, for instance (Bales, 2012; Bales and Robbins, 2001: 32;

Bales and Soodalter, 2010: 13) by adding the complete control of one person over another by means of physical and/or psychological violence, hard work for limited compensation, and economic exploitation. In all of these cases a defining element is the existence of threat of violence. However, he does not differentiate between economic and extraeconomic violence. If we are not sure whether someone is a slave, according to Bales and Soodalter (2010: 13), we should ask, "Can this person leave?" At first glance this seems like a precise standard, but it opens new ones: What does it mean to say that someone cannot leave? While there is clarity at the extremes, much of what is in between remains a gray area: language difficulties, geographical isolation, lack of housing of one's own, fear of deportation, intimidation, to name a few (Bales and Soodalter, 2010: 19–26). Forest workers in the Amazon stay in their camps because they have no nearby access to other work or because they are waiting to be paid what they are owed (Bales, 2012: Chap. 4, line 2709). In these cases only economic factors are in play.

Tom Brass (1999: 28–29) presents an alternative view. He understands forced labor as a situation in which the worker ceases to work for multiple employers in favor of permanent affiliation with only one. He depicts this as a modern form of slavery that implies a process of deproletarianization in that it takes labor out of the market. Salary is no longer payment for work but payment of a debt. While this may not eliminate labor protests, it does atomize those protests, thus limiting their impact.

Brass's examples, such as threats to cut off access to land or land rights of various kinds (water, forage, etc.), are clearly economic coercion, but he characterizes them as extraeconomic (Brass, 1999: 15, 17–22, 24). He does not seem to problematize the difference between the abstract rights that capitalism offers to workers and the effective possibility of using those rights. For Brass, the free laborer enters and leaves the labor market at will, while the bonded laborer cannot (10). The question is whether the free laborer can actually enter and leave the labor market as claimed. We argue that this possibility exists only in a context of full employment, and the higher the rate of unemployment, the more constrained and abstract this possibility becomes. Other factors, such as labor market segmentation, work in the same direction. Workers do not freely and unconditionally choose their work settings and conditions, nor do they freely choose to withdraw from the labor market when work is unavailable. Believing that would mean accepting the neoclassical idea that all unemployment is voluntary.

Brass does recognize that certain kinds of salaried work, such as that of movie stars, academics, or professional athletes, do imply the sale of labor power up-front for a long period. He argues that despite the huge difference in working conditions, there is a parallelism that confirms that all contractual relationships are unfree (Brass, 1999: 188–189). In our view this judgment is mistaken: the sale of future labor is indeed a sale, and therefore labor power is not removed from the market relationship. At most the worker loses his or her opportunity cost (i.e., the possibility of getting more in the future), but this is an inherent aspect of any sale and must be set against the risk of not selling in the future and therefore dying of hunger.

Brass shares the neoclassical view that under capitalism the worker is absolutely free to enter (and leave) the labor market and that only the absence of

such freedom can define unfree labor. We believe the root of this confusion lies in inattention to economic coercion. This phenomenon is what transforms apparent liberties into an abstraction or pipe dream (*entelequia*). The worker under capitalism is not and cannot be free; he or she cannot decide whether or not to enter the labor market, because necessity compels the decision to enter it at a certain place and time. Certainly in some countries the relations of power between the classes, at least since World War II, have been relatively favorable to workers, and their degree of effective freedom has increased. But this has not been the norm over the history of capitalism, and many situations that today are presented as examples of “modern slavery” are extremely similar to those described by Marx and Engels among English workers of the mid-1800s (Engels, 1974: 180–181; Marx, 2005: 567–569, 868–872).

In our view, slaves make up a social class whose excess labor is appropriated by the dominant class through a particular form of extraeconomic coercion, property rights over the human being. Many clothing industry and rural workers in Argentina are subjected to extreme forms of exploitation and economic coercion; this coercion operates by generating pressures on the proletariat whose subsistence (reproduction) depends solely upon the sale of their labor power. There are indeed cases in which this economic coercion is accompanied by extraeconomic coercion. But these cases—such as physical confinement—are exceptional in the settings we have studied. They constitute crimes, and workers have recourse to the government. But even in these cases we cannot speak of slaves, since we consider a slave to be not an isolated individual but a member of a social class, one deprived of liberty by official policy of the state.

The literature on “modern slavery” notes that the undocumented/illegal status of many migrants creates the framework for their enslavement, since in many cases migrants who report their employers risk deportation (Anderson, 2014: 102; Bales and Soodalter, 2010: 35). It is worth noting in this regard that Argentina’s migration laws are much more flexible than those of the United States or most of Europe, and the worker who files a complaint does not risk deportation. Likewise, migrants can change without visa or “guest worker” restrictions such as exist in the United States, all of which limits the pressure that employers can exercise against them. The lack of a language difference between the (mostly Bolivian) migrants and their Argentine setting further reduces their vulnerability.

CORN DETASSELING

Corn seed nurseries, which produce hybrid seeds mostly for foreign markets, employ a large number of seasonal workers, mostly from Santiago de Estero in the northeastern part of the country, for detasseling. The seed industry in Argentina took off in the 1980s, and the biocombustibles boom has spurred its development. Around 14,500 temporary workers are employed in the various steps of the process (Asociación de Semilleros Argentinos, 2010: 10). Detasseling consists of manually removing the male flowers of selected plants before they can release their pollen. The process typically employs men between the ages of 18 and 59, and despite the long days and intense heat, workers

typically lack access to fresh water and (at least up to the 2010–2011 season) adequate work clothing. Avoidable work accidents are common, and the extreme conditions have led to deaths from heart attack. The salary, always low, may be determined by the day, by the hectare, or by the weight of the tassels, as decided by the employer; workers are organized into groups (*cuadrillas*) of 12 to 25, supervised by a foreman (*cabecilla*).

Between December 30, 2010, and February 4, 2011, authorities carried out 28 inspections of agricultural enterprises in the region, more than half of them at seed nurseries, and every inspection resulted in charges' being filed.¹ In 68 percent of the cases, the workers came from Santiago del Estero. The companies charged included Nidera, Satus Ager, Pioneer, and Southern Seeds Production, while Monsanto, which was also present in the region, was not charged. While the media presented the 2010–2011 harvest's labor conditions as an exception, the widespread nature of the violations suggests that the conditions were more the norm. The most common charges related to health and safety conditions (37 percent), while others related to forced labor (*reducción a la servidumbre*, 21 percent) and two cases (7 percent) involved human trafficking.² This confirms our earlier claim that economic rather than extraeconomic coercion is the most common situation, given the poverty and unemployment that characterizes the workers' home region. The threat of mechanization of the detasseling process, now in an experimental stage, is especially worrying to them (Interview 2, Buenos Aires, August 7, 2009).³ It is important to note that detasseling workers return year after year, despite the conditions, and they seek out the best employer: "They say, 'I've gone with Manpower and it didn't work out, so I'm going with Monsanto,' so they change, rotating between companies" (Interview 1, Añatuya, Santiago del Estero, October 6, 2009). According to one foreman, "people look for the company that pays the best, because they don't all pay the same" (Interview 2).

Because of the structure of compensation, higher wages generally imply a higher rate of exploitation. The workers are aware of this, but economic necessity pushes them toward these situations: "In my case it was best to go with Monsanto, because you work more hours per day so you're not there for [as many days]. Not Manpower, it's nine hours, and since the days are long [after work], you get bored. It's better to work constantly. If I go with Manpower I make 2,000 pesos in a month, but with Monsanto I make 5,000. But you work more" (Interview 1). Workers' autonomy is circumscribed by the economic conditions of their province of origin, which lacks alternative sources of employment. They must work in several seasonal harvests throughout the country, typically under conditions similar to what they encounter in detasseling. After its forestry industry declined in the 1960s, Santiago del Estero did not develop alternative sources of employment; many workers squatted on former forest lands and supplemented their income with seasonal labor. Even so, they live in extreme poverty and rely upon public assistance in the form of subsidies and public works employment (Desalvo, 2014: 134–141).

At least until the 2010–2011 harvest, the detasseling workers' camps lacked basic amenities; most workers slept 18 to a room in mobile units that trapped the heat of the day and made it hard to sleep at night even apart from the overcrowding. There was neither electricity nor bathrooms. After media reports of "slave labor," the

National Rural Labor Commission issued a resolution (46, 2011) establishing minimum standards for lodgings and sanitation in the detasseling sector, and interviews done after the resolution suggest that there were real improvements in these areas (Interview 3, Villa Salavina, Santiago del Estero, February 27, 2012):

The safety aspect has changed. To some extent they take care of you, so you're not injured. . . . They give you boots so you don't get cut. The food has changed too. . . . Now there's a refrigerator and everything, so as far as food goes, it's all good. As for beds, we used to be crowded into little boxes [mobile units] with six people, three on each side, and you had to enter like a cat. With a worn-out mattress, you were dying of cold if it was cold out, dying of heat if it was hot, because you were up against the metal, but now there's more insulation and we have electricity.

Except for the safety improvements, the basic working conditions have not changed significantly, since the new rules impact only safety and housing. The governing Law 26.727 of 2011, which regulates rural labor generally, permits the employer to set the conditions of work "according to the nature of the activity and common practice [*usos y costumbres*]." The law permits employers to set aside provisions about downtime when "required by the objective conditions of production or maintenance" (Article 40). In the hybrid seed industry detasseling must take place at specific times or the harvest will be lost, so employers extend the workday accordingly; likewise, the preference for piecework leads to a lengthening of the working day. This coincides with the desire of workers to maximize income, as noted above. Two other noteworthy omissions in the law are that employers are not required to hire someone to distribute water to the workers and that there is no overtime maximum: "Since in Syngenta they do piecework you can't put someone on water duty. When we went out to the field we'd carry 20-liter containers, in the morning and afternoon. We would carry them on our shoulders, and who's going to want to do that? But we had to, and when we arrived we would have some water" (Interview 2).

The workers take piecework for granted, and they take ownership of their decisions not to spend time on water breaks or even carrying the water out to the fields. The responsibility of employers to provide adequate water supplies, maintained by workers outside the piecework system, is thus obscured to the point of invisibility. The lack of collective organization by the workers is especially significant here, given that the government's role is highly circumscribed. Likewise, the workers' decision, within the confines of the piecework regime, to work excessively long days is perceived as an exercise of choice: "Well, the reality is that they tell us 8 hours, but we go past that, we do 12 or even 14 hours [a day], because they tell us, 'Look, boys, if you work by the hour we'll pay you this much per hour, but if you work by area it's better, since you can see there's 100 hectares there and that makes that much.' We were crazy for the money, so we did it by area" (Interview 3). Another worker recognized that the extended workday was a choice but only to an extent (Interview 4, Bandera Bajada, Santiago del Estero, October 4, 2012):

It's like 8 working hours and then 2 hours extra. Those 2 hours aren't required, but we can work them to get to 10. If the corn is growing quickly and the pollen

is coming, we definitely have to work 10 hours so it doesn't get contaminated. If we work a half-day on Saturdays we get 25 percent [bonus], and if we work on Sundays we get double.

When there is risk of pollination, which damages the hybrid seed, the extended workday is required by employers and permitted by law. Overall, while the recently mandated reforms have produced positive effects in the safety and well-being of detasseling workers, the basic conditions under which they work remain largely unchanged.

CLANDESTINE TEXTILE FACTORIES

According to the National Institute of Industrial Technology, in 2011 there were 51,000 registered and 120,000 unregistered clothing workers in Argentina (INTI, 2014). Both groups can be found in small household workshops and in larger factories. The smaller units typically employ no more than 10–15 workers and are subcontractors for factories and major brands. There are an estimated 5,000 such establishments in the greater Buenos Aires region (*Tiempo Argentino*, 2010).

According to the national newspapers *Clarín* and *Página 12* and other sources,⁴ between 2010 and 2013 there were 62 official inspections of unregistered clothing workshops, of which 90 percent were in the greater Buenos Aires region and 69 percent were subcontractors for well-known brands. In half the cases, the workday exceeded 12 hours, and in over a third wages were below the official minimum. In two-thirds of the cases, undocumented migrant workers were present. Our interviews revealed that the minimum workday was 12 hours, with a maximum of 16; generally the day started between 6 and 8 a.m. and ended only at 10 or 11 p.m. (Interview 6, Buenos Aires, December 24, 2013; Interview 7, Buenos Aires, November 30, 2011; Interview 8, Buenos Aires, December 20, 2013; Interview 9, Buenos Aires, December 24, 2013; Interviews 10–30, Buenos Aires, April 19, 2013). Workers who lived on-site had the longest workdays. In one workshop investigated by the nongovernmental organization La Alameda (2013), which produced clothing for the Zara brand, workers who lived off-site worked 12-hour days while those who lived on-site worked 14, and both groups worked half-days on Saturday. One interviewee said that her first job in the industry required her to work on her feet from 7 a.m. through 10 p.m. (Interview 6). Another said that the workday was 12 hours even though her sister owned the workshop (Interview 7). In general the workday did not include breaks even where required by law; a worker interviewed by Adrián Hernández said that she ate at her station and that workers who lived on-site went directly from their beds to and from their stations (Hernández, 2013).

Workers in these settings typically lack any protective equipment, even dust masks. While the work itself produces hazardous dust, other workers also represent a hazard: a 2009 study by Hospital Piñeiro found that the tuberculosis rate in the southern Buenos Aires region was the highest in the country and comparable to that in some parts of Africa; 60 percent of the cases were migrants working in clothing factories (Mundo Hospitalario, 2009). To make matters

worse, in some cases single mothers or married couples live on-site with their children, and they are unable to take breaks during the day to care for their children.

Like corn detasseling, clothing production is based upon piecework, which promotes an increase in work intensity as well as the length of the workday. "If you're fast you can produce more, and your pay is based on what you produce" (Interviews 7–9). Another characteristic of the industry is the predominance of Bolivian migrants both as workers and as proprietors. Some workers had previous experience in similar settings before migrating to Argentina, while others did not (Interviews 6–9). Some workers came from Bolivia to Argentina with employment already arranged through family members (among them Olga, who came in 1998 after her siblings reported that they were doing well [Hernández, 2013]) or after hearing radio advertisements in Bolivia. Sometimes the travel expenses of the worker were covered by the workshop owner in exchange for the first month or two of wages (Interview 6; La Alameda, 2013). This raises the specter of debt bondage, but the relatively short amount of time required to pay off the debt calls that characterization into question (Bales and Robbins, 2001: 35).

All of the interview subjects invoked the precarious economic situation in Bolivia as their motive for emigrating. While some employers did not honor the commitments they made, either in Bolivia or upon arrival in Argentina, none of our interview subjects had problems finding work elsewhere in the sector. "I worked a month as an assistant . . . and after that I looked for someplace else" (Interview 6). There were, however, cases where freedom of movement was restricted. According to the legal complaint against a workshop producing for Zara, workers "could not enter or leave without the permission of the foreman, and the personal effects of the workers were held to guarantee their return. There was strict control over coming and going" (La Alameda, 2013). Apart from these physical constraints, there were frequent cases in which recent arrivals were threatened with deportation if they sought employment elsewhere.

While we found 151 inspections described in the media, more detailed information was available for only 62 cases. Only 7 of these involved clearly extraeconomic coercion: some combination of physical constraints, threats, and retention of identity documents. Nevertheless, the media referred to all of these cases as "slave labor," a term used reflexively in all coverage of protests or legal complaints in this sector. Even a worker protest against the closure of a textile factory was presented in the media as an example of "slave labor" (Info Blanco sobre Negro, 2013). Other writers have noted the xenophobic aspect of this discourse insofar as it presents the Bolivian migrant as an infantilized subject who is easily enslaved (Gago, 2011; Kesselheim, 2007; Rivas and Cartechini, 2008). The danger of this critique is that it relativizes harsh exploitation and the violation of labor rights in its desire to honor the autonomy and cultural self-sufficiency of migrant workers. It presents an idealized vision of kinship (in this case, between proprietors and workers) that minimizes its role as a mechanism of oppression.

In our opinion, the real distortion in the media version is about capitalist exploitation generally: by failing to recognize that clothing workers are salaried rather than enslaved, the media version obstructs the development of a sustained agenda in favor of worker rights. While legal actions are called for in

cases of coerced labor, the real need is for improvement in the overall situation of textile workers, as Pacecca (2011) notes. She has also shown that these legal actions stereotype a wide variety of kinship and other assistance networks as criminal organizations. But as with the critiques cited above, Pacecca tends to minimize the degree to which these networks can hide exploitation, including extreme forms of abuse and coercion.

The same observation may be made of the work of Benencia (2009), who sees the industry as an "ethnic enclave" that offers migrants the possibility of social mobility through self-employment; the author's own interviews disprove the claim in that none of the subjects escaped their situation as workers. A survey of 66 Bolivian migrants by the Taller de Estudios Sociales (TES, 2010) showed that only 15 percent had their own businesses while the remaining 85 percent were salaried workers, although nearly half (47 percent) had been in the country for at least six years. This suggests that, at least for now, social mobility is not accessible for migrant workers despite their hopes and the claims of the industry itself.

INCREASE IN THE RELATIVE SURPLUS POPULATION AND WORKING CONDITIONS

The two groups of workers considered in this article belong to the fraction of the working class that Marx (2005: 782–785) called the "relative surplus population," the fraction that capital is unable to employ at median levels of productivity. The migrant "swallows" of Santiago del Estero are a latent surplus population, since they are still rooted in the countryside. Their parcels do not provide enough to survive, so they get by on seasonal labor and public assistance. Clothing industry workers, in contrast, are a principal component of the stagnant visible surplus population. The two sectors share a low organic composition of capital: detasseling is a manual activity, while clothing manufacturing, while mechanized, has a high manual component. These sectors lose part of their appropriated surplus value to higher-technology sectors, a loss that they seek to compensate for by intensifying the extraction of absolute surplus value through lower salaries and a longer and more intensive workday. This is a defining feature; even legally registered (as opposed to clandestine) clothing workshops and those organized as workers' cooperatives operate under the same conditions of low wages and bad conditions (Egan, 2015: 4, 7; Kabat, 2011a: 373, 380).

At historical moments when the relative surplus population is minimal and the economy is moving toward full employment, the conditions exist to regulate and even abolish the most extreme forms of exploitation. This was the case in Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s (Kabat, 2008: 258–265; Pascucci and Kabat, 2011: 128–133). Since the mid-1960s, however, the process has been reversed because of technological change, relocation of companies at the global level, and the entry into the labor force of new populations. Countries whose labor costs were previously low in global terms have been undercut by Asian countries. Small workshops based on piecework become, in this context, an attractive business decision, especially when they employ migrant labor (Kabat, 2014: 375–376).

In Argentina this expansion of smaller workshops has occurred clandestinely (i.e., in unregistered fashion), facilitated by the progressive dismantling of the agencies that previously policed such workplaces. This tendency toward expansion in unregistered workplaces has increased since the economic crisis of 2001 as the Argentine textile industry has expanded even as the number of registered home workers declined (Pascucci and Kabat, 2011: 135–136); in 2014 there were only 54 registered home workers in the capital district (Testa, 2014). Likewise, we can observe the unfavorable tendencies in collectively negotiated contracts for these workers (Kabat, 2011b: 132–134).

In the agricultural sector we can observe something similar. The workers of Santiago del Estero were impacted by the crisis of the forestry sector in their home province and then by the restructuring of the sugar and cotton industries, where they had previously worked seasonally, in the 1960s and 1990s respectively. But these structural factors do not wholly explain the situation. It is worth asking, for instance, why the economic expansion of the post-2001 period did not produce at least a relative improvement in working conditions. The answer must be sought to some extent in subjective factors starting with identity.

THE SUBJECTIVE ELEMENT

One of the problems facing rural workers is their exclusion from the Law of Labor Contracts (Law 20774), which covers most urban activities and offers more protections than the miscellany of laws covering the countryside. For the workers of small urban workshops, who are covered by the law, the problem is that the legal norms are consistently violated. Both groups have encountered obstacles to the development of their class consciousness. For one thing, they are typically appealed to not in their identity as proletarians but in others. The workers of Santiago del Estero are largely identified with the struggle for land rights in their communities of origin, through the *Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero* (Santiago del Estero Peasant Movement—MOCASE). This defense is based on an appeal to the supposedly campesino rather than worker character of the participants, and people thus identified are not in a position to formulate demands as workers. Neither of the rival MOCASE organizations (MOCASE-Histórico and MOCASE-Vía Campesina) has shown any interest in organizing workers in their identity as migrant proletarians. Meanwhile, as suggested above, the media's discourse of "slave labor" precludes any genuinely pro-worker agenda or unionization.

The rural union that should be organizing these workers, the *Unión Argentina de Trabajadores Rurales y Estibadores* has participated in the media-led campaign that gave rise to government inspections in 2011, but it has not sought to enroll migrant workers, nor has it presented demands on their behalf. The traditional union of the clothing sector, the *Sindicato Obrero de la Industria del Vestido y Afines*, has not promoted the organization of workers in small-scale units and has even opposed such efforts. *La Alameda*, which does work with these workers, sees them more as migrants than as workers and has sought to reform immigration laws. It is under the umbrella of the December 20 Neighborhood Association, representing an area with many unregistered

textile factories, and for that reason it took a leading role in filing legal complaints. While it did promote the Unión de Trabajadores Costureros, it is a workers' cooperative rather than a representative of the collective demands of salaried workers (Pascucci and Kabat, 2011: 44).

While La Alameda's willingness to denounce "slave labor" has assured it of media prominence, its impact has sometimes been counterproductive. Workers have protested against the campaign to close unregistered workshops and against their own stigmatization as slaves. On March 30, 2006, after a workshop fire in which two workers and their four children died, the government began a campaign to close clandestine workshops. This provoked a response by owners and workers against the authorities and against Gustavo Vera, the head of La Alameda. On April 5, 3,000 protesters marched under a banner declaring, "Here there are no slaves, only workers," and demanding the safeguarding of their source of employment (Sánchez, 2006; *La Nación*, April 6, 2006). While the demonstration was organized by workshop owners, who are typically the leaders of Bolivian migrant associations in Buenos Aires, the worker element was significant. We argue that in this case posing the issue as one of slave labor was counterproductive in that it pushed workers who did not see themselves as enslaved to fall back on ethnic identities that empowered the bourgeois leadership of migrant associations. Whereas La Alameda called for the closure of unregistered workshops and their replacement by cooperatives, the owner-dominated Bolivian migrants' associations demanded the loosening of regulations to legitimize the existing conditions and better prices in the market for finished products. Neither side defended the interests of the workers as such, even to the point of demanding the fulfillment of existing laws. That agenda can take hold only when workers are recognized and recognize themselves as proletarians first and foremost.

The definitive resolution of these problems can only be achieved with the abolition of the capitalist social system that constantly recreates and expands the conditions of relative surplus population, but there is important political and union work to be done in the shorter term to achieve better working conditions. If, as we have seen in both sectors, the form of coercion that pushes thousands of workers to accept harsh terms and conditions is essentially economic, in order to change the situation we must protect workers from that coercion. The extension of public assistance to the unemployed would accomplish this, but the urgent task is to promote the collective organization of these workers so that they can fight for better labor laws and better enforcement. In both sectors the elimination of piecework and effective restrictions on overtime are central and interrelated demands. In the case of the textile workers the experience of the 1930s and 1940s could be built upon, including the revival of demands for the strict enforcement of labor laws and the concentration of the industry into larger factories. This would permit the creation of a unified struggle by workers who are now fragmented among multiple identities.

NOTES

1. The inspections were conducted after press reports in local and regional daily newspapers and leftist weekly magazines (*Página 12*, *La Noticia*, *La Voz de Tandil*, *Mendoza Económica*, *Tiempo Argentino*, and *Ámbito Financiero*) and online news portals such as terra, Telam, and Argentina.ar.

2. See, for example, *La Noticia*1 (2011), *Página 12* (2011), *Ámbito Financiero* (2011), and *Prensa Obrera* (2011).

3. To preserve their anonymity we refer to our interview subjects only by number and offer the following generic information about them: 1, male, peon, 20 years old; 2, male, cuadrilla head, 52 years old; 3, male, peon, 30 years old; 4, male, cuadrilla head; 5, male, cuadrilla head; 6, female, employee in Zañartu workshop; 7, female, 27 years old, employee in clandestine workshop; 8, male, employee in Zañartu workshop; 9, male, 30 years old; 10–30, employees of the Impetu Company. Interviews 1–5 were conducted by Agustina Desalvo and 6–30 by Julia Egan.

4. On the basis of a search for “trabajo esclavo taller,” we retrieved material for this section from Telam (a news agency), *Prensa Argentina* (the official government information portal), *Ámbito Financiero* (a business newspaper), InfoJus (a legal information portal), and the newspaper sites *Crónica*, *Pueblo Regional*, *La Razón*, *El Sindical*, and *La Política Online*.

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