Labor Union Renewal in Argentina

Democratic Revitalization from the Base

by
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Despite the persecution of labor leaders and activists during the dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s and the co-optation of the union leadership in the 1990s, in the past few years Argentine labor unions have regained some of the leadership role they lost when they became strategic allies of the government, moderating their wage demands and supporting the government in disputes with other strong social actors. The new landscape created by Néstor Kirchner's taking office in 2003 provided a favorable context for a revitalization of unions grounded in principles of union democracy. The experience of the subway workers of Buenos Aires, which is paradigmatic for the depth of the changes in internal practices, their persistence over time, and the strong connection between the form of organization and the results achieved, contributes to an understanding of this revitalization. The involvement of members in formulating and implementing policies produces a program more representative of their demands and allows them to acquire experience, skills, knowledge, self-confidence, and a feeling of solidarity that make their organizations stronger for the struggle with capital. Thus union democracy is not an obstacle to but a prerequisite for increasing union power.

Keywords: *Labor unions, Argentina, Union democracy, Power*

In the 2001 crisis in Argentina, economic, social, and political dimensions intersected. The crisis involved the collapse of the development formula based on financial accumulation, the exhaustion of a social model of exclusion based on a regressive distribution of income, and the delegitimation of political authority.[1] Around 2003 the country managed to address these conditions and move toward an economic model that required, among other things, an expansion of the labor market.

This situation differed considerably from the one that prevailed during the 1990s, in which an enormous number of workers were driven out of the labor market and saw their share of income decline. The neoliberal program sought to lower labor costs and reduce the political influence of workers and the organizations that represented them. The persecution of labor leaders and

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LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 179, Vol. 38 No. 6, November 2011 38-51
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X11413863

activists during the dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s, compounded by the co-optation of the union leadership during the 1990s, significantly weakened labor as a social actor.

Despite the terrible impact of these processes on union practices and strategies, in the past few years labor unions have regained some of the leadership role they lost when they became strategic allies of the government, moderating their wage demands and supporting the government in disputes with other strong social actors (among them the agro-export sector, which led an impressive lockout during the early months of 2008).[2] The new landscape created by Néstor Kirchner's taking office provided a favorable context for a revitalization of unions grounded in principles of union democracy. Although this was not a homogeneous movement, it was an encouraging development. What was involved was the deepening of the representative role of union delegates, and our hypothesis is that this is the key to the reclaiming of grassroots union experiences in Argentina. The purpose of this article is to understand the shape that this revitalization has assumed, emphasizing the strict legal limits and the possibilities opened up by the political action of the workers. To do this, we will examine the experience of the subway workers of Buenos Aires as a case that is paradigmatic for the depth of the changes in internal practices, their persistence over time, and the strong connection between the form of organization and the results achieved. This analysis allows us to understand the key elements of this renewal and the difficulties that workers confront as they seek to modernize union structures.

The article is organized in three sections. The first is an analysis of the factors that affect union power, highlighting the elements that are usually cited as evidence of the revitalization of unions as social actors. In the second we consider revitalization in terms of internal union dynamics, using the concept of union democracy as an analytical tool for assessing breaks and continuities in the relationship between the base and the leadership and in the channels and types of participation. The third section focuses on the case study just mentioned, examining the processes of renewal, the difficulties encountered, and the principal contributions of this case to the issues under consideration. Finally, reflection on this case is linked to the central hypothesis, emphasizing the potential that the deepening of democracy offers for an enduring renewal of unions as social actors.[3]

THE UNION LEGACY OF THE 1990s AND THE NEW SITUATION

As in other Latin American countries (Zapata Schaffeld, 2004), the neoliberal advance in Argentina constituted a reversal of victories won by labor. An increase in unemployment to more than 20 percent was the most visible feature of this process, but it was accompanied by the de-linking of wages from social security, which affected 40 percent of workers at the height of neoliberalism. While the gross domestic product grew (until 1998, when the economy entered a deep recession), wages suffered a decline. This shows that the development model did not conform to the much-touted trickle-down theory; instead, workers remained at an extreme disadvantage when profits were distributed. In addition, in order for the accumulation process to reestablish

the power of capital, one of the stated objectives was dismantling the foundations of labor law that had been forged in the mid-1940s. Thus the reforms promoted by Carlos Menem (who took office in 1989 but did not implement the neoliberal program until 1991, after the failure of the heterodox policies of his first two years) were specifically directed at undermining the principles of employment stability, the impossibility of giving up rights already obtained, severance pay for laid-off workers, employer assumption of risk, and the application of the most favorable norms.[4] This breakdown of governing principles came about because of changes in the norms and institutions that determine the use and reproduction of the labor force aimed at weakening the power of workers by reestablishing the authority of business owners to control and discipline their employees.

The changes in the labor market combined with the deterioration of the norms of protection contributed to the erosion of the legitimacy of unions as guarantors of workers' interests (Marshall and Perelman, 2002). During the 1990s, unions lost much of the power they had enjoyed for much of the twentieth century, suffering a significant decline in their ability to take action with regard to the conditions that owners could impose, their capacity to represent workers, their role as a social point of reference, and the opportunities available to them for influencing state policies (Fernández, 2005).

This situation tended to accelerate the breakdown of union power, reorienting its goals and limiting its social weight. Menem's government opened a new stage in the relationship with Peronism that would be characterized by deep internal division and a redefinition of the political relations between unions and the government. Many unions pursued a strategy that privileged their own survival—maintaining their economic resources or increasing them through transformation into enterprise unions—or directly subordinated them to the government (Murillo, 1997).

In 2001 the model of social exclusion that was taking shape created an opportunity for unions, especially because it required both an expansion of the labor market and the creation of a political actor with sufficient weight to moderate workers' demands and serve as a government ally. This role was personified by Hugo Moyano, secretary general of the Confederación General del Trabajo (General Labor Confederation) and a critic of the model of presidents Menem and De la Rúa. This new era has been described as one of a revitalization of the unions (Etchemendy and Collier, 2007; Senén González and Haidar, 2008)[5] encouraged by the improvement of some labor indicators, among them a significant reduction in unemployment and the development of some industrial activities.[6]

According to Etchemendy and Collier (2007), in the period following the crisis of 2001 there was a resurgence of the mobilizing power of unions in the context of extensive fragmentation of the labor market, giving rise to a new kind of labor relations that could be called "segmented neocorporatism." This can be distinguished from other kinds of relationships (such as those characteristic of the advanced countries) principally in that it encompasses only 40 percent of the working class; the remaining 60 percent consists of informal workers, off-the-books workers, and those self-employed for survival. This negotiating framework benefits only the best-positioned fraction of the working class, in the context of a government that authorizes unions to participate

in the struggle over distribution, producing wage increases[7] and benefits fundamentally linked to pro-union changes in labor law, appointments to the state agency that oversees the operations of social programs controlled by the unions, and appointments to the administrative commissions of renationalized enterprises (water, the post office).

The resurgence of the union movement that is evident in the resumption of strikes and collective bargaining[8] took the form of segmented neocorporatism. Its immediate causes were the increase in employment and the emergence in 2003 of a government that sought union support, but it also benefited from two historical circumstances. First, the deindustrialization of Argentina did not involve a shift of production toward sectors that traditionally had not been unionized or were difficult to unionize.[9] To the contrary, the sectors that had grown in the context of market liberalization, such as foodstuffs, transportation, and privately owned oil, had high rates of unionization, and therefore they could resume an active role once market reforms favored their expansion. Second, the union movement had achieved important institutional concessions during the reforms of the 1990s that contributed to maintaining its power, among them a framework for centralized wage negotiations, maintenance of a plant-level monopoly of representation, and social programs for workers (Marshall and Perelman, 2002). These institutional resources could be used in the more recent context of economic recovery and a more union-friendly government (Etchemendy and Collier, 2007). This background information allows us to situate the trajectories of labor organizations in different historical processes and to view their repositioning in the context of changes in the dynamic of the labor market and their links to the state. The question that arises from these considerations is whether it is possible, given that the external indicators of increased conflict, collective bargaining, and the political presence of labor leaders do not provide a clear measure of the possibilities of union renewal from the base, to identify an analytical tool for the study of union politics that is grounded in the examination of internal union political processes.

UNION DEMOCRACY

As we have said, the new landscape resulting from the socioeconomic and political changes already mentioned suggests the possibility of labor's recovery as a social actor and therefore poses a series of questions that demand answers from an institution whose practices are strongly questioned both from within and by the public. Of all the topics that emerge as pending issues, we are interested in reconsidering union democracy and unions' representative role as analytical axes from which to interrogate the current practices and perspectives of the union actor. This concern requires us to ask what kind of organization, sustained by what political practices, is increasingly regaining its influence in the public arena. In particular, we want to analyze the way in which labor as a social actor deals with workers' demands, and this points us toward trying to understand the implications of the increasing recovery of a number of strategic power resources for the internal management of union institutions in the framework of the new model. Observing the way the principal

unions have operated since 2003 reveals a model grounded in deeply rooted and inflexible practices and dedicated to a mode of operation characterized by rigid verticality, centralism, and bureaucratization. Given the continuity of these structures, it becomes interesting to consider to what extent the new shape of the world of work—with the fragmentation that it entails—jeopardizes in the medium or short term these classic procedures and whether their rigidity ultimately places the institution's survival at risk. The fundamental challenge is revealing the factors conditioning this approach.

Examples from several sectors of activity show that the struggle by leaders at the highest levels to preserve their power closes off any possibility of dealing with the processes of renewal that could emerge from within the union itself. Within this framework, union democracy can be considered a valuable key for reopening the question of how contemporary union organizations are structured and what opportunities are available to reshape the dynamics that concentrate power. Keeping in mind the features that normatively and historically have constituted the structure of Argentine unions, the analytic concern is to consider the realistic political possibilities of generating alternative practices that can force some kind of democratizing opening in the classical union apparatus.

The obstacles to the creation of political-organizational processes that promote participation and autonomy and challenge the politically coercive traditional institutional channels are, on the one hand, a normative structure that severely restricts the ability of workers at the base to organize outside the centralized mechanisms of control and subordination characteristic of the majority of unions and, on the other, the co-optation of the institutional apparatus by power groups that are firmly entrenched in leadership posts and block any indication of the emergence of opposition to the official political line.

In the Latin American sociological literature we find a number of productive analyses that demonstrate the regional features of the renewed interest in this topic.[10] De la Garza (2008) reopens the substantive discussion of union democracy,[11] unions' representative role, and their legitimacy, adopting a historical approach to the problem. Starting with the movement from the welfare state to neoliberalism, he suggests that the dominant model of union structure, based on centralization, delegated, clientelistic representation, and patrimonialism, entered into crisis with the weakening of corporatist relationships with the state and changes in productive processes that produced deep changes in workers' subjectivity. What is interesting about this argument is the questions that arise from it. To what extent does the unions' loss of their representative role and legitimacy following the change in the relationship between them and the state open up the possibility of the emergence of multiple political centers and areas of uncertainty that foster social creativity? And, following from that, to what extent can the mechanisms of representation be made to function differently, producing a change in unions' internal dynamics?

Both Novelo (1999) and Bensusán (2000) highlight a classic element in the analysis of union democracy: the supposed contradiction between efficiency and the democratization of decision making. Both point out that the importance of this question is determined fundamentally by the organization's ideology with regard to union practice, and they distinguish between enterprise

unions and more activist ones with political objectives broader than the immediate demands of their members. Novelo opens the consideration of this issue with a provocative question: What, in the absence of class consciousness, as revolutionary consciousness, is the content of union democracy?

The current dynamic in many large Argentine unions points to the importance of these issues. Contemporary unionism is on the defensive, and any attempt at innovation is perceived as a direct threat. The key organs of participation—the internal committees—are the target of coercion by the official union apparatus, which sometimes forms strategic alliances with management to stifle collective organization that shows signs of not rigorously adhering to the official union line. Its regulations severely limit the autonomy of the sectional units in the various districts in the interest of the central institutions. Moreover, the current dynamic does not promote the recruitment of activist members, prioritizing the preservation of the status quo over the introduction of mechanisms of openness that could jeopardize the structures and leaders' personal privileges. Any questioning is seen as a direct declaration of rivalry, an announcement of a future struggle over positions and perks. Thus, the institution becomes authoritarian, includes less than it excludes, and, when faced with new situations, can respond only with coercion.

The fundamental level of observation for understanding these processes is the internal dynamics of union organization, especially the type of linkage established between workers at the base and the leadership. This point of view, as opposed to an economistic reading, reclaims the study of union tactics understood as a political phenomenon endowed with a specificity derived from its internal organizing procedures (Torre, 2004).

The impact of micro organization and the resulting politicization of workplaces generate a significant enhancement of job security, as James (1981) points out, and set clear limits on management's prerogatives in the productive sphere, thereby constituting an important obstacle to the imposition of a labor discipline that ensures the specific levels of productivity that capital seeks to achieve.

RESISTANCE TO UNION BUREAUCRATIZATION: THE SUBWAY ASSEMBLY OF DELEGATES

The new sociopolitical era that began in 2001 made possible the emergence or consolidation of union renewal from the base. It involved a new base-level union activism in, for example, the food (Terrabusi, Pepsico, and Stani), chemical (Praxai), metallurgical (Enfer and CAT), and transportation (the 60 bus line and the Mitre railroad line) sectors, including the Buenos Aires subway. The last of these is a particularly instructive case for several reasons. On the one hand, it began to take shape in a situation that was highly adverse to organizing, at the height of the neoliberal paradigm in the mid-1990s. The subway union experience emerged, as its protagonists say, "against the current of history" and managed to sustain itself for more than a decade. Moreover, it occurred in an enterprise that was paradigmatic for the recent changes in work relations—privatization, reduction of permanent personnel, outsourcing, and the introduction of a new management culture. On the other hand, it put

traditional strategies for institutionalizing conflict to the test, being led by an assembly of delegates that attempted to break out of the established union model and politically confronted the union leadership. It was innovative in its internal organization, its collective action, and its connections with other unions and with social and political organizations. Finally, it was particularly successful in achieving its demands, including wage increases, the reduction of the workday, pensions, maintenance of the subway's infrastructure, and the incorporation of workers in outsourcing enterprises in the sector's collective-bargaining agreement. All these characteristics make it a model of effective worker resistance and the relegitimation of union practice from the base. Simultaneously, this uniqueness positions it as emblematic of an incipient alternative tendency within contemporary unionism.

Assuming that an understanding of the transformation of the workers' movement requires an analysis of the relationship between the leadership and the base, in this section we return to the proposal of James (1981) that this analysis focus on "fissures"—the coexistence of apathy and bureaucratization with workers' resistance, starting with the composition of their political organizations in the workplace. This approach will show how boundary-violating actions at the base call into question and reveal the limits of the established rules of the game. From this perspective, we shall present testimonies of workers with regard to the challenges they encountered in the process of organizing, explaining the various stages of this process from clandestine organizing to the creation of organizing nuclei to the consolidation of the Cuerpo de Delegados del Subterráneo (Subway Assembly of Delegates)[12] and its achievement of increasing autonomy from the union structure in which it was embedded.

In January 1994 the subway was privatized, and this meant the imposition of a new and significantly different framework for labor relations. This change began during the transitional period leading to the awarding of the subway concession to the Metrovias consortium with the firing of over 1,000 workers, the freezing of vacant positions, and the encouragement of voluntary retirement. When the privatization became effective, a significantly reduced workforce was subjected to lengthening of the workday from six to eight hours and the implementation of a system of functional flexibility.[13] This new context imposed a highly disciplined labor regime characterized by the constant threat of termination in response to any act of disobedience or any error, no matter how small, in carrying out work assignments. Clearly, reducing the number of workers before control of the subway was transferred to private hands was intended to reduce the possibilities for collective organization in the workplace, which was noted for its historical tradition of struggle.

In this context, a handful of activists took the initiative to begin creating meeting spaces for workers. As in many other cases, this organizing had to be clandestine at first to avoid notice both by the company and by the union, the Unión Tranviario Automotor (Automotive Tramcar Trade Union—UTA), which supported management against the workers. Until then the public face of the union had been dominated by delegates organically linked to the official union leadership. Although the union had opposed privatization, once that had taken place it employed a two-track strategy. Externally, in its participation in the Movimiento de los Trabajadores Argentinos (Argentine

Workers' Movement), it was advantageous for it to appear in opposition to the government. Internally, however, it formed a strategic alliance with Metrovías that led it to distance itself from the demands of the base and to discourage worker mobilization, focusing instead on the administration of organizational resources.

In February 1997, organizing in opposition to the union leadership reached its first inflection point. Following the firing of a driver for a problem that had been the responsibility of the company, there was an unauthorized strike against the Metrovías consortium, the first work stoppage to be conducted against a privatized public-service provider. This was a milestone in the workers' struggle and was fundamental in reclaiming union action as an instrument for attaining their demands. In this first stage, delegates allied with the bureaucracy were still dominant. The opposition was highly fragmented, there were no organic links between the different sectors and lines, and conflicts were initiated and sustained mainly by a small nucleus of the most committed activists.

From that point on, political work would be concentrated on creating a list of candidates that could challenge the official leadership of the UTA for control of base-level delegates. The growing political influence of the opposition delegates at the base crystallized in the 2000 elections, when they won 17 of 21 positions, gaining control of the overwhelming majority of sectors and beginning a stage of organizational consolidation of the Assembly of Delegates, which became the point of departure for the most significant union conflicts in the history of the subway.

In 2001, within months of the new delegates' taking office, the first important conflict arose, and the way it was resolved would determine the form of political action that the Assembly would adopt as its own. Confronted with the untimely decision of the company to eliminate the position of ticket taker and assign those workers to other jobs, the Assembly reacted quickly, organizing meetings that decided to take strong measures the following day. The delegates managed the entire conflict autonomously from the official union structure, which had supported the management decision. The broadly representative character of the delegates allowed them to present themselves for the first time as the only interlocutors vis-à-vis both the company and the state (through the Ministry of Labor). Delegates from the base were in charge of the entire negotiation process with only formal involvement of the UTA, which found itself required to endorse the political resolutions of its delegates. These events consolidated the Assembly's political initiative, and this was reinforced by the successful outcome of the conflict.

The delegates and activists of the Assembly claim as the distinctive bases of their legitimacy the dynamic of meetings, constant interaction with those they represent, and independence from both the company and the official leadership of the union. To what they characterize as the vertical functioning of the UTA they counterpose a model of union action grounded in strong base-level activism that guarantees minimum levels of participation of the membership as a whole and makes the delegate the fundamental pillar of the organization. The breadth of this representation was apparent in the framework of the negotiations, in which the alliance between the company and the union sometimes broke down. As one delegate reported,

> Sometimes at moments when the Assembly of Delegates had the most power, the company sat down to negotiate certain matters with the delegates, bypassing the union. And the union got mad and came and made a scene and threatened something in order to get back its role, because for the employer to make an agreement with the union was useless, since we would strike in spite of the agreement. So the company began to see that "I have to sit and talk to these guys and not those because those don't guarantee me anything."

Another element that the workers cited as key was turnover among representatives of each sector. Without the backing of the institutional structure, the organization depended on the active participation of its militants in workplaces, and therefore the main challenge in the context of a growing workforce was increasing the number of workers involved in the organization in order to facilitate the renewal of leadership. In general terms, this renewal did take place. In the elections of 2006, the turnover of the candidate list—which won 90 percent of the votes—was a third of the total delegates elected.

The need to increase the number of delegates and activists was linked to the function of the delegate in this particular organization. The Assembly of Delegates had only formal involvement in any higher-level union structure, operating in fact as a union within a union. This meant that in addition to the activities related to daily work (working conditions, licenses, negotiation of sanctions, etc.) it assumed the responsibilities of the union leadership with regard to the development of medium- and long-term political strategies, negotiations with the state, coordination with other sectors, the design of communication policies directed at public opinion, etc. Given the lack of institutional support, this required the close collaboration of like-minded activists.

In addition to the internal challenges, from the beginning the Assembly had to confront constant attacks by the company and the official union leadership, which had historically worked together with the shared objective of deactivating the organization of workers. Throughout the more than 10 years of the Assembly's existence, both Metrovías and the UTA tried various tactics intended to break up the organization. In the first phase, Metrovías explicitly went on the offensive, focusing on the persecution of activists through both direct coercion and increasingly restrictive working conditions. As the Assembly grew stronger, the company underwent a radical change of attitude based on a medium-term political calculation. The human-resources department of Metrovías adopted a strategy of co-optation, surreptitiously offering delegates a wide array of benefits and opportunities in an effort to neutralize them.

The UTA also tried out different policies against the Assembly that varied with the internal reconfigurations of the union leadership but also corresponded to a significant extent with changes in the national political context. The union's fundamental decision has historically been not to acknowledge the Assembly and to boycott its work. On the one hand, in partnership with the company, the UTA increasingly placed its own militants, paid by the company, in workplaces, where they performed no specific jobs in the subway service but devoted themselves to political work in the different sectors to promote the official UTA list, on whose behalf—with company support—they offered workers increased wages, promotions, jobs for family members, etc., while also serving as shock troops in moments of open conflict. Complementarily, the UTA alternated proposals of subordinate integration (concretely, the offer

of a subsecretary position in a particular sector) with direct aggression in the form of a call for all delegates to be evaluated by the ethics committee to consider their expulsion for failing to respect the union officials. This brutal offensive intensified after a change in the secretary general (from J. Palacios to R. Fernández in 2007) and a change in the political conjuncture to one that was less favorable than it had been during the years of the Assembly's greatest growth and success.

In contrast to other sectors, whose priorities for union activism were focused exclusively on wages, the Assembly prioritized demands such as shortening the workday to six hours (subway work is considered unhealthful), extending the collective agreement to outside suppliers' workers, achieving greater equality for women in terms of promotions, and reducing arbitrariness in the organization of work and workers' assignments. The construction of links between workers and delegates went hand in hand with the increase in victories, moving from a strictly defensive position (for example, preventing the firing of workers) to an offensive one (shortening the workday). This transformation was closely related to a change in the identity of the Assembly. Between the first years of the privatization and the election to the Assembly of workers opposed to the UTA leadership, the Assembly's role as an instrument of political action acquired new meaning. Union policy emerged as a source of tangible improvements. The steady winning of demands strengthened this link between bases and mid-level leaders (delegates and the Assembly).

Among the milestones was one related to the conflict over outsourcing. Although this company policy had been in effect for almost 10 years, conflicts arose over outsourcing at the end of 2004 and the beginning of 2005. The first such conflict involved the workers of the Taym Company, who achieved reinstatement as union members in March 2005, and others followed. On May 9, 2006, an agreement was signed in the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security that included the personnel of Servisub S.R.L. as unskilled workers in the collective-bargaining agreement with the UTA. The same agreement reinstated the personnel who provided services for Controles Orbea S.A. and Bayton S.A. and that of the company that provided security services (Compañía Metropolitana de Seguridad, S.A.)

To a large extent this conflict was an outgrowth of struggles dating back to 1996 of the ticket takers, the traffic and train-operations workers (ticket takers and drivers), and the mechanics in the rolling-stock workshops. It can be explained in terms of (1) the correspondence between collective action and the demand for which it was undertaken (for example, when a work stoppage to obtain a wage increase actually obtained the desired percentage), (2) the articulation of symbols that allowed identification between workers from different sectors and (with regard to outside suppliers) companies and change in the way workers were seen by subway users (the campaigns about defective trains contributed to this),[14] and (3) the legitimacy of the mechanisms of participation in union decisions.

Thus the consolidation of the Assembly, both practical (larger number of delegates, development of communication tools, organizational positions such as secretaryships) and symbolic (creation of solidarity between ticket

sellers and train-operation and workshop workers, between Metrovías workers and those of outside suppliers), bolstered by its success in achieving long-awaited objectives, was marked from its inception by the constant need to reinforce the broad representative character on which its power was based. The fundamental tool was the democratization of internal organizational spaces and decision making.

CONCLUSIONS

Both the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1990s and the practices imposed after the 1976 coup sought to eliminate any kind of resistance in the workplace. The great majority of companies achieved this objective by weakening union organization at the base. Capital attempted to dismantle any opposition that might slow down the changes being put into effect in workplace organization and especially in the work process after the breakdown of the Fordist pact.[15] This leads us to propose the hypothesis that the principal legacy of these two major processes of eroding union power—dictatorship and neoliberalism—is the limited presence of unions in workplaces or, as we have seen in the case of the subway, the weakening of union action in the workplace by sanctioning activists at the base for not following the directives of the union leadership. The question that arises from this hypothesis, in view of the so-called union resurgence, is whether this resurgence opens up the possibility of revitalizing the relationship between the leadership and the base.

In exploring this problematic, we have focused on union democracy as a key tool for challenging the hegemony of capital in the sphere of production and, almost as a precondition for this challenge, the breakdown of vertical control by the top-level leadership and active participation in decision making. In this context, along with writers such as Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, we have grounded our analysis in the view that the involvement of members in formulating and implementing policies produces a program that is more representative of their demands and at the same time allows them to acquire experience, skill, knowledge, self-confidence, and a feeling of solidarity that strengthens their organizations for the struggle with capital. From this point of view, union democracy is not an obstacle to but a prerequisite for increasing union power.

The case we have analyzed is particularly relevant to the questions we have raised, being paradigmatic for the breadth, persistence, and depth of the demands achieved by a base organization with an internal dynamic of active participation through the development of a highly effective strategy of resistance. This strategy of resistance, based on a series of collective actions, developed gradually. The initial moment was characterized by a fragmented activism driven by a few workers with a history of militancy, who worked to create a clandestine nucleus of politicized workers hidden from both the company and the union. With the support of the small networks created by this political work, the first collective actions took shape and became the first open post-privatization conflicts. In this phase, activists from different sectors and independent delegates were widely scattered, and this meant that the struggle took the form of

highly disruptive actions organized principally by the most active militants. When the first actions on behalf of workers' demands achieved their objectives, the Assembly began to gain ground among the workers in the struggle over union legitimacy, and its ability to exercise political leadership came to surpass that of the official union. At that point, its string of successes reinforced the organization's internal cohesion, and this allowed it to move toward visibility and institution building, beginning with the formal recognition of the representative role conferred on the activists by their winning the majority of positions on the Assembly of Delegates. This institutional protection increased its room for maneuver principally in relation to the company but also in relation to UTA officialdom. Once it had achieved institutional status, the Assembly began developing political autonomy as it broke away from the union structure.

From this valuable example it appears that one key for understanding union revitalization is a reform of the operating procedures of the institutions of union representation that have served to limit the reach of the practices of resistance. Along these lines, drawing on the arguments of Turner (2001) we propose an interpretation that emphasizes the relationship between institutional change and participation at the base, on the assumption that one of the privileged channels of union renewal is the active participation of the organization's members through collective disruptive actions that, by transcending the traditional institutional limits, make innovation more achievable.

In the current situation in our country, given an economic-political opening that virtually ensures the broadening of the scope of union influence as a political actor, it is indispensable to revive the historical debate about the possibilities and meanings of unions' representative role and union democracy. This should start with a fundamental rethinking of the mode of integration of delegates and base-level organizations as an element that could enable workers to regain control of union practice and produce a repoliticization that reconfigured the dynamic of union action. If this does not take place, what assurance do we have that most of the union leadership—which for 10 years could do nothing or openly acquiesced in the decline in union membership—will be willing to engage in a struggle that goes beyond strictly wage-related demands?

NOTES

1. President Fernando de la Rúa resigned on December 20, 2001, in a context of diminished presidential authority and intense mobilization involving a wide range of social sectors. After a period of transition that lasted over a year (during which several presidents held office) Néstor Kirchner took office in May 2003.

2. The high prices of commodities in the world market and favorable conditions following the devaluation of the Argentine currency allowed capital linked to the rural sector, the country's main earner of foreign exchange, to acquire great influence. When the government attempted to raise the tax on exports in order to redistribute the extraordinary profits, the opposition political bloc supported the rural sector. It was in this situation that the Central Sindical (Union Federation) reclaimed a leading role as a counterbalance.

3. To carry out the study, we interviewed delegates and workers and analyzed the Assembly's documents, collective-bargaining agreements, and government reports on labor relations.

4. In addition to the legal reforms, there was a de facto establishment of labor flexibility that is confirmed by collective-bargaining agreements. Many of the gains won by the unions in the negotiations of the mid-1970s were eliminated: various kinds of temporary hiring and flexible work categories were authorized, wages were made flexible (consisting of a low base pay supplemented by a variety of incentives and bonuses, which made wages variable and unpredictable from month to month), and the workday was modified, among other reforms.

5. Discussion of union revitalization is not limited to Argentina (see Martínez Lucio, 2008, the special issue of the *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 9 (1) (2003), and *Rélations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* 61 (4) (2006).

6. Some (e.g., Palomino, 2008) even talk about the establishment of a new labor regime based on a shift from contingent labor to regulation. Although it is true that the unemployment rate fell to 8 percent in 2007 from over 20 percent in 2001 and that the improvement of some labor norms and the return to on-the-books status for some employees contributed to improving conditions in the labor market, even in mid-2009 the proportion of contingent and off-the-books labor was as high as 40 percent.

7. The devaluation of 29 percent at the beginning of 2002 meant a decline in real wages. As economic growth increased, labor conflict, one measure of the vitality of labor as a social actor, escalated significantly. While at the end of the 1990s organizations of the unemployed (*piqueteros*) were the main generators of social conflict, once the economic recovery had begun the unions took the initiative in presenting demands.

8. There were more labor conflicts, and the number of collective-bargaining agreements increased significantly: during 2004, 349 agreements were ratified, practically double the average for the previous 10 years.

9. For example, the intensive natural-resource industries in Chile or maquila-type production in Mexico.

10. The topic was taken up by authors writing in English (see Stepan-Norris and Zeitlan, 1995, and Stepan-Norris, 1997).

11. Novelo makes the definition of union democracy more precise by introducing the distinction between formal and substantive democracy and focuses the discussion mainly on the latter, which he describes as *"a form of union organization in which the will of the majority seeks to create spaces that allow for discussing, learning, and intervening in the territory that in capitalist society is totally controlled by capital, such as the control and management of production."*

12. An assembly of delegates is composed of union delegates elected periodically by workers in their workplaces. It was established in Argentina in the mid-1940s and is recognized in the Law of Union Associations. Although it once played an important role in the defense of workers' interests, over the years its presence and influence diminished. Since 2003 it has been recovering this role.

13. In September 1994 a new collective-bargaining agreement with the UTA introduced a series of new definitions of job categories, establishing the norm that workers be able to perform different jobs at one or more skill levels (Vocos, 2007).

14. This second objective is difficult to achieve, particularly when service is interrupted and passengers blame the worker, who is on the front line for complaints. At the end of 2007 there were cases of physical attacks on workers even when the service failures were caused by inadequate or lack of maintenance of trains, signals, or tracks.

15. The need to guarantee effective control of the work process in both the short and the long term places the extraction of surplus value and capital accumulation in constant doubt. Achieving these objectives requires controlling the work process, maintaining internal predictability, and managing the variables that could interrupt it. Consequently delegates, in that they can make the daily dynamic unpredictable, become capital's principal target.

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