

## BETWEEN THE STRIKE AND THE BALLOT BOX: THE EARLY YEARS OF THE ARGENTINE SOCIALIST PARTY, 1890–1910

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*The Socialist Party is one of Argentina's oldest political formations and played a key role in the national political scene since its foundation in the late nineteenth century. Under the leadership of the physician Juan Bautista Justo, it developed a political stance that called the workers to organize themselves in an independent organization along clear class lines. At the same time, the activity of the party was definitely reformist and strongly oriented toward the "political struggle"—that is, the participation in elections in order to get parliamentary representation. Due to the fraudulent political regime of the time, the Socialist Party faced serious difficulties to develop this strategy. Not surprisingly, strong anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist currents developed inside the labor movement, and posed a serious challenge to the socialists' influence among the working class. This article assesses both the organizational and political characteristics of the Argentine Socialist Party in the period before the First World War. The goal is to contribute to our knowledge of one of the first socialist political organizations established in Latin America, its political stances and its relationship with the local labor movement.*

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### Introduction

On the evening of June 29, 1896, the nineteen delegates assembled in the main hall of a German socialist club in downtown Buenos Aires stood up, along with the public, to sing Filippo Turati's *Canto dei lavoratori*, and put an end to the two-day congress that had just officially founded the Socialist Party of Argentina. The outcome of two years of intense coordinated activity among a handful of socialist groups in the capital and some newly founded centers in the interior provinces, the congress was also the result of the influence of *La Vanguardia*, a weekly newspaper founded on April 7, 1894, which contributed to the coalescence of the different groups, many of them structured among national lines, into a single organization.

The history of the first socialist groups in Argentina goes back to the 1870s, with the activity of French *communards*, and the early 1880s, when exiled members of the German *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* created the first permanent organization, called *Verein Vorwärts*. At first, they represented small and isolated groups. Through their agitation and propaganda, however, they

insisted on highlighting the class antagonism that arose as a result of capitalist development and struggled to spread their ideas among the young working class. In the last years of the 1880s, these small groups found a bigger audience and recruited new followers. In the following decade, under the impact of a serious political and economic crisis that shook the country, they started a process of unification and growth.<sup>1</sup>

“This country is being transformed” (“Este país se transforma”): that was the classic start of the heading article in the first number of *La Vanguardia*. The physician Juan Bautista Justo, the journal’s director and main leader of Argentine socialism until his death in 1928, argued that this transformation process was the consequence of the country’s integration in the global development of capitalism. Indeed, Argentina had experienced major changes, in social and economic terms, in the last third of the nineteenth century. A massive population growth, spurred mostly by European immigration, combined with the arrival of foreign investments and the expansion of agricultural exports, shaped a highly unstable but definitely capitalist labor market that posed a new working class as a central actor in the country’s scene.<sup>2</sup> According to Justo, the main reason for a working-class party to be created in this context was the unstoppable and tumultuous expansion of the capitalist economic system from the center to the peripheries. The world was rapidly changing, and so was the country. In the new interconnected world, capital and labor were the two main opponents, and Argentina was no exception.<sup>3</sup>

The progressive character of the country’s entrance into capitalist modernity, however, was delayed by the “ineptitude and rapacity” of the Argentine ruling class. In Justo’s characteristic view, the typical *criollo* ruler was “ignorant,” a “mixture of merchant and *cacique*,” and his “lack of intellectual discipline” made him completely incapable of acquiring “clear and positive ideas about the social question.” Things would, therefore, only change with the intervention of the working class, which would have a progressive effect on the country’s society as a whole. In what was also a clear demarcation with their Anarchist rivals, increasingly rooted in the more exploited layers of the working class, the Socialists called the Argentine proletariat to organize itself in a political party, in order to “make the first important step in the path of its emancipation, [and to] give a great impulse to the historical evolution of the population.”<sup>4</sup>

Justo told the delegates that the party could take advantage of the fact that socialist development in Argentina was starting late, compared to Europe, by following the example of the socialist parties of other countries. Although the organization was still very weak, with no more than a couple hundred members, most of them concentrated in Buenos Aires, the founding congress approved an ambitious set of resolutions, including a party program, a declaration of principles, and detailed statutes, that would shape the development of Argentine Socialism for several decades.<sup>5</sup>

Revisiting the early stages of the Socialist Party is important for current scholars and activists as it provides a chance to reconstruct the local working class’ first attempt to build an independent political party in a very early period

of its history. The aim of this article is to assess the main features of socialist development in Argentina in this early period, as well as the reasons for some of its problems and pitfalls. To do so, it explores the Socialist Party's social and organizational composition, as well as its political development, taking into account the dynamics of class struggle, the internal debates inside the labor movement, especially regarding the position toward strikes, and the evolution of the political regime of the time.<sup>6</sup>

### **Structure, Internal Organization, and Social Composition of the Leadership**

Formally, the party was to be built as a federation of socialist groups and a variety of labor and union centers. The founding congress established that the organization was "constituted of every political group, trade union, circle of social studies and propaganda, mutual benefit society and cooperative, with more than ten members, that formally declare its adherence to the program and method of action of the party."<sup>7</sup> In the first congress, more than a dozen trade unions had indeed participated in the debates over the "economic program." In the following years, however, this very broad list of potential members was in practice much more limited. Trade unions, mutual benefit societies, and cooperatives, even when created or influenced by members of the party, were not formally part of it.

As a result, the party turned out to be a federation of openly *socialist* centers, to which members were individually affiliated. Even though its development and growth during the last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth is the story of increasing consolidation and relative centralization, it would always remain a federative organization. As Madeleine Reberieux has pointed out for the case of the French *Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière*, the elimination of any kind of collective membership contributed to create a party that saw itself as a *party of citizens* rather than a proletarian's party.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the case of other European parties, however, and due to the decisive importance of Buenos Aires in political, social, and economic terms, provincial and regional federations did not exist in this early period. Roughly, half of the sections that constituted the party belonged to the capital. According to the statutes, the "general vote," an instance where all party members were summoned to participate in an internal election, in order to decide upon different matters, was the most important source of authority. In second place came the national congress, the formal occasion for the groups and sections that constituted the party to gather together and discuss the political course to be taken.<sup>9</sup> The congress would, in turn, elect the members of the executive committee, who actually controlled the everyday activity of the party, and also the editors of the party organ.

Before 1910, the party had a humble financial and organizational structure. The main sources of income were monthly fees that party members paid to their local organizations, a percentage of which were transferred to the party's central treasury. These regular contributions were supplemented by a myriad of

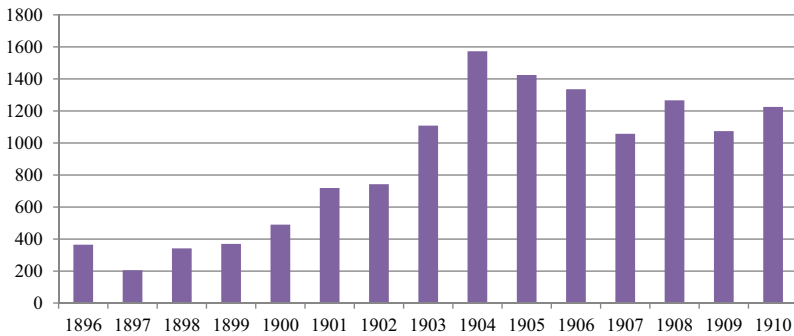


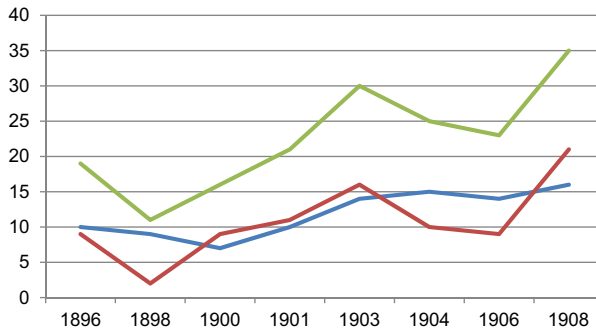
Figure 1. Party Membership (Monthly Average of Contributing Members).

Source: *La Vanguardia*.

extraordinary donations, in the form of special subscriptions for electoral campaigns, revenues from the sales of brochures and books, and so on. The situation changed between 1904 and 1908, when the election of a socialist national deputy created an abrupt distortion in party revenues, as long as the statutes established that a percentage of his salary was to be given to the party. This distortion became the rule in the following decade, after the 1912 electoral reform, when the growing number of socialist deputies and senators completely reshaped the financial structure of the party: in 1913, 83 percent of the party revenues came from parliamentarian's contributions and only 6 percent from member's fees.<sup>10</sup> In the previous period, however, the party still had low incomes and, therefore, lacked a strong apparatus of paid officials equivalent to that of other social-democratic parties of the period.

It is not easy to measure the party size during these years. Sources do not provide detailed information: it was common to come across complaints by the party leadership, regarding the lack of accurate information sent by local centers, the instability of member-fee payment and the absence of any reports whatsoever. Some conclusions can be drawn, however, by taking a look at the financial information of the party's treasury, published monthly in *La Vanguardia*, as well as reports presented at party congresses. The monthly average of contributors (Figure 1) can underestimate the total number of active members, although it provides a useful overall glimpse of the party size. Taken together with the evolution of local centers represented in party congresses (Figure 2), the information shows that between its foundation and 1910, the Socialist Party experienced a process of growth dotted with years of crisis and stagnation, some of them very serious.

The starting point were the 300–400 members that paid their fees in 1896, a year that crowned a cycle of growth of socialist groups in Buenos Aires and the interior provinces. After that initial impulse, however, a period of difficulties emerged in 1897 and 1898, in line with a cycle of decay of labor unrest, and the average number of contributing members came down to about 200 in 1897. This first crisis was particularly important in the interior provinces—almost all



**Figure 2. Amount of Local Centers Represented in Party Congresses.** Green: Total / Red: Interior provinces / Blue: City of Buenos Aires.

Source: *La Vanguardia*.

centers outside Buenos Aires that were represented in the 1896 congress disappeared in the following months. The third congress, held in 1900, showed an upturn in the number of groups from the interior provinces, but a drop in those from Buenos Aires, which is related to the schism of several local centers, known as “collectivists,” who temporarily left the party in 1899. It was only in the fourth congress, after the return of these dissidents, that the number of represented sections exceeded that of the founding congress.<sup>11</sup>

A slow recovery in membership took place with the turn of the century, and it gained strength in 1901, 1902, and 1903. This sustained growth reached a peak in 1904, when the average monthly contributors numbered almost 1,600. But in the years that followed, a new and important downturn took place, directly related to the political crisis that led the “revolutionary syndicalist” faction to break with the party. This faction, strongly influenced by French and Italian syndicalist leaders, such as Georges Sorel and Walter Mocchi, had managed to control the socialist-oriented labor federation—the *Unión General de Trabajadores*—and to gain important positions in the executive committee of the party itself, and was finally expelled in the seventh congress, in 1906.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the period under study, the party had an average of 1,200 monthly contributors.

During this early period, in sum, the Socialist Party of Argentina increased its size and experienced a process of growth, although it remained a relatively small organization when compared to other socialist parties of the time. Its oscillating membership was a consequence of the ups and downs of labor unrest in the country and also an outcome of internal tensions that often led to organizational crises and splits. Moreover, it was related to the local labor market’s characteristics, constituted as it was by an extremely volatile migrant workforce. As party leader Nicolás Repetto explained to the fifth party congress in the name of the executive committee: “it should be noted that while progress is indicated by the steady increase in the number of members, this increase, however, is not proportional to the spread of our ideas. This is due to the floating condition of a large part of our working population. For this reason, during the last six months 278 members resigned because they had to leave [the country]. If we added those

who are reluctant to join because they would have to leave soon, we would have even bigger figures.”<sup>13</sup>

Who were these members? What was their social background? Although it is almost impossible to retrieve detailed information about rank and file members due to the lack of sources, some conclusions can be drawn about the social background of the leadership in this early period, by constructing short lists of those militants that most attended party congresses, were chosen as candidates in more occasions, and served as members of the executive committee for longest periods.

On the occasion of each congress, *La Vanguardia* published a detailed list of the delegates' names. In the first eight congresses, between 1896 and 1908, the total sum of 256 delegations was fulfilled by 157 members, all of them men except for Fenia Cherkoff Repetto, who represented the *Centro Socialista Femenino* (Socialist Women's Center) in 1903 and 1908, and Juana Beggino, who did so in 1906. More than a third, that is, 54 militants, participated as delegates in more than one occasion. A shorter list of 27 party leaders (17 percent of the total sum) who acted as delegates in more than two congresses shows a significant parity between workers and professionals. Twelve of them were manual workers: four wood workers (Schulze, Arienti, Boffi, and Rosáenz), four typographers (De Armas, Baldovino, Mantecón, and Zaccagnini), a mechanic (Cúneo), a shoemaker (Schäfer), a painter (Patroni), and a tinsmith (Pizza), while twelve came from an “intellectual” or professional background: five physicians (Justo, Dickmann, Giménez, Repetto, and Ingenieros), two students (Lorenzo and C. Torcelli) a lawyer (Palacios), a book keeper (Sesma), two journalists (Piñero and A. Torcelli), and a teacher (Meyer González).<sup>14</sup>

Consistent results come up when assessing the information of electoral candidates. Between 1896 and 1908, the Socialist Party went to the polls seven times in the city of Buenos Aires, presenting a total of 70 nominations, covered by 44 militants: almost all the leaders included in the previous short list were party candidates at least once. Again, one-third, in this case 15 out of those 44, represented the party in more than one occasion. In this case, a larger proportion of this shorter list came from an intellectual background—it is however, barely more than half of the list. Indeed, there are three physicians (Dickmann, Justo, and Repetto), three lawyers (Arraga, Palacios, and Del Valle Iberlucea), a teacher (Meyer González) and a journalist (A. Torcelli), whereas candidates of working-class origins are the remaining seven: Cúneo, Patroni, Arienti, Mantecón, Pinto, Prat, and Zaccagnini.

A last sample—members of the executive committee—provides similar results. Between 1895 (the date of its creation) and 1908, a total of 56 militants served as members of these body. A short list of fifteen of them, those who served for more than 24 months, usually not continuously but in different periods, shows consistent results with the previous information. Apart from José Lebrón, the party treasurer, all of them had regularly attended party congresses and most of them had been party candidates in the elections, at least once. Regarding the social background, there is again parity between manual workers and



intellectuals. Seven of these long-lasting members of the executive were workers (De Armas, Cúneo, Schäfer, Pizza, Patroni, Arienti, and Baldovino) and seven came from professional or intellectual backgrounds (Dickmann, Repetto, Giménez, Piñero, Lorenzo, Torcelli, and Lebrón).

Taken together, these three short lists provide a set of around thirty leaders of the Socialist Party in this early period. While it remains clear that Juan B. Justo exerted a strong influence and contributed to shape the party with his ideas, it is not true that it was guided only by intellectuals, as it has usually been noted. Rather, the different structures of party leadership showed a consistent mixture of militants from middle-class and working-class origins, all of them male, and the rank-and-file showed an overwhelmingly working-class composition.

In sum, between its foundation and the beginnings of the second decade of the twentieth century, the Socialist Party found its way to develop as an important actor inside the labor movement, becoming a relatively small but well-structured party of workers, which considered itself as such, even though its leadership included an important number of intellectuals and despite the fact that it also saw itself as a party of citizens committed to gradual, nonviolent reforms. To understand why this was not seen as a contradiction we need to move from an analysis of the social and organizational structure to an assessment of its stances regarding economic and political struggles.

### **From Strikes to Elections**

In a letter sent to the International Socialist Bureau in 1905, in which he asked for solidarity measures to be taken by European longshoremen against ships carrying Argentinian products, the national secretary of the Argentine Socialist Party made a brief and succinct description of labor unrest in the country, closely related to the characteristic traits of its export-oriented economy:

In the summer, when the crops are harvested and shipped to Europe, the economic and commercial activity reaches its climax. In the winter, when the work of agriculture is ended, this activity is at its lowest ebb. (...) For the majority of labourers of Argentina, the only reason in which they can demand any improvement is that their hands are demanded for the harvest, that is to say, in the summer time. Ever since a small labour organization has existed in our country we have great strikes every year, beginning in the month of November and ending in the month of March. In the first years in which the working class followed this strike tactics during harvest time, the capitalist class of Argentina was taken by surprise and had to acquiesce to the demand of the laborers. But when these strikes continued and reached their climax in November, 1902, especially in the capital, the capitalist class quickly brought pressure to bear on the government and at the end of the year had a law passed exiling all foreigners who had taken a conspicuous part in those strikes. And when this did not suffice to break the strike of 1902, the government declared martial law and crushed the movement.”<sup>15</sup>

Since its earliest origins, Argentine socialists were closely involved in these labor struggles. The important cycle of strikes that shook Buenos Aires in 1888 and 1889 showed a significant involvement of the *Verein Vorwärts*, the group founded by German Social Democrats *émigrés* in 1882. Moreover, the socialists faced a fierce press campaign against them, when several commercial newspapers attributed the strikes to the action of “foreign leaders,” and specifically the members of the Verein. On this occasion, socialists developed for the first time a position toward strikes, as a way to confront these accusations. In their newspaper, also called *Vorwärts*, they argued that the causes of turmoil should not be sought in their intervention but in the severe inflation and economic crisis, and characterized the strikes as “a necessary evil, a result of the current social circumstances.” They were inevitable under capitalism, as they often represented “the only way for workers to defend themselves from excessive oppression by capital.” The strikes were beyond the will of socialists, whose task was not to provoke them—indeed, sometimes they even “discouraged” them.<sup>16</sup>

In the spring of 1892, during a shoemaker’s walkout, the *Vorwärts* against addressed the problem of strikes, with the same ambivalent position. German socialists made clear that they were “fully sympathetic with the strikers,” but they did not conceal that the strike was “hasty and thoughtless.” The newspaper characterized that even if it concluded in a failure—as indeed occurred—the measure “would still be useful,” as it would be a “warning to employers” and to workers themselves, who in the future should be “wiser, thanks to this experience.”<sup>17</sup>

After 1894, when *La Vanguardia* appeared and socialist activity grew in numbers and organization, the position on strikes was directly linked to the interpretation of the country’s economic development, and its consequence—the need for working-class economic and political organizations. *La Vanguardia* repeatedly argued that the progress of capitalism in Argentina had blocked the chances of upward social mobility for workers. This, in turn, explained the spread of strikes, which were fair and inevitable, and the expansion of unions.

On the one hand, therefore, strikes were an inevitable product of capitalist development, and should not only be defended from bosses’ attacks but also vindicated as a symptom of class consciousness. On the other, they were at the same time a “backward” method of class struggle. Industrial action could temporarily improve the situation of certain groups of workers, provided that it was put forward “in the right moment and with intelligence,” but political action was, in any case, the best way to “gradually reach more radical and permanent reforms, that would put workers closer to their beloved goal of economic emancipation.”<sup>18</sup> The superiority of “political action” was reinforced by the fact that it consolidated the unity of the whole working class, while any improvements of a particular strike would only benefit the trades involved. Reforms gained in the political terrain favored “the working class in general.”<sup>19</sup>

The same ambivalent position toward strikes was developed by Juan B. Justo. According to him, strikes were a first step in the proletarian struggle. Even if they ended up in defeats, they were “good for the working class,



in principle,” as far as they would draw workers from passivity and contribute to strengthen “the feelings and habits of solidarity” and to experience to what extent the government just “slavishly served the bosses.” According to Justo, however, strikes were only “a rudimentary form of struggle.” He went on to argue that a strike constituted a “negative and passive action” as far as workers gathered “in order not to do.” Instead, political and cooperative actions were “active efforts” through which workers were able to acquire “the knowledge and discipline they need in order to reach their emancipation.”<sup>20</sup>

In sum, on the question of strikes the Argentine Socialist Party had already developed, by the end of the 1890s, a perspective that was coherent with the orthodoxy of international Social Democracy. Socialists would only promote partial strikes, put forward by solidly structured unions, capable to facing the resistance of employers. They were supposed to be nonviolent strikes, based upon the worker’s unity and consciousness, and directed toward the goal of obtaining reforms, either by defeating the employers or through negotiation. These economic and limited strikes would strengthen existing trade unions and stimulate class consciousness, always bearing in mind that the ultimate expression of that consciousness was the incorporation of workers in the party ranks, in order to make a decisive intervention in political life.

Indeed, for turn-of-the-century Argentine socialists, “political action” was the keyword, the main task of their organization, and the quintessential difference with the anarchists. Political action was understood as a set of interconnected tasks: building a party to spread socialist ideas, organizing and educating the workers, and participating in the polls, in order to get parliamentary representation. Indeed, Justo made clear that the conditions were ripe for the structuring of a working-class party in Argentina, but by no means did this reasoning lead him to the conclusion that this new organization should face a frontal struggle for power and overcoming the capitalist regime in a near future. Political action, thus, was understood in the sense of the struggle for gradual reforms, mainly to be obtained in parliament. In a programmatic article in the first issue of *La Vanguardia*, Justo avoided any reference to the ultimate aspirations of overcoming capitalist society and merely said that the objective was “to represent the intelligent and wise proletariat in the press” and to “promote all reforms aimed at improving the situation of the working class,” such as the eight-hour day, the abolition of indirect taxes, the protection of women and children, “and other parts of the minimum program of the international labour party.” At the same time, he made clear that the goal of the party was “to promote the political action of Argentine and foreign workers as the only means to obtain those reforms.”<sup>21</sup>

In short, political and parliamentary action played an educating role for workers: in this sense the struggle for reforms and the organization of socialist forces within the framework of capitalist society were seen as a necessary step and as the only concrete tasks that could be undertaken in the immediate horizon. Socialists had to participate in electoral struggles in order to educate workers, “to prepare the revolution, and to create the force that has to carry it out.”<sup>22</sup>

This was, of course, a common characteristic of socialist parties at the time, and in this respect the history of the Argentine Socialist Party needs to be assessed as part of the much broader development of the international socialist movement. In order to understand some important peculiarities—and problems—that socialists had to face in Argentina, however, a brief look at the political regime of the country needs to be taken.

Unlike their comrades in other countries, during this period Argentine Socialists did not have to face a system of restricted suffrage or property-based franchise. “Universal” suffrage—excluding women—had been established as early as 1820 in the province of Buenos Aires and included in the national Constitution sanctioned in 1853. Nor they had to face military interruptions of constitutional order, as their heirs in the twentieth century would be used to. Indeed, between the 1860s and the 1920s, elections were promptly conducted to choose provincial and national deputies, electors for president, and members of municipal governments. According to 1909 figures, however, only 15 percent of the country’s total population had the right to vote. The reason was that not only were women and children under 18 were disenfranchised, but also foreigners. In a country that had relied on a huge migrant labor force since the second third of the nineteenth century, this restriction meant that a big portion of the working class did not have the right to vote.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the Socialist Party’s bid for political action faced a complicated conundrum. On the one hand, it acted in a formally liberal and republican political regime, with universal suffrage for native men over 18 years old and the legal right to obtain the Argentinian citizenship for those migrants who had resided more than two years in the country. On the other, the party had to face an openly fraudulent electoral system, dominated by political machines of the ruling classes and with no minority representation, a regime that seemed to provide no attractive for foreign workers to engage in political participation.<sup>24</sup>

It comes as no surprise, in this context, the prominent place that socialists gave to the appeal for naturalization of foreigners. Given the characteristics of the political regime, the call for workers to become Argentinian citizens so to gain the right to vote was a key part of the broader campaign to promote political action as the most desirable tactic for the working class. Moreover, since those who actually participated in the polls were mostly workers and people of humble condition, who responded to patronage networks of the ruling classes, calling for workers to obtain the right to vote went hand in hand with inviting them to cast their ballot for the socialist ticket—that is, to *independently* intervene in the political arena, breaking up with bourgeois parties.<sup>25</sup>

According to *La Vanguardia*, a conscious worker was the one who not only recognized himself as such but who also understood the need to assemble in a class-based party and, above all, was aware of the importance of carrying out political action. Obtaining electoral rights by becoming an Argentinian citizen was therefore a duty for any class-conscious worker.<sup>26</sup> The party leadership even established that only Argentinian citizens would be able to participate in the internal assemblies who would choose socialist candidates in the elections.

Moreover, it was the task of every member to help “awake” the mass of workers, to let them realize that “becoming citizens” was “the best way to have an influence on the country’s progress and in the awakening of the whole working class.”<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the socialist press would put forward a rather polemical ethnical concept, and go on to argue that migrants were actually bound to play a decisive role in the struggle against the fraudulent electoral system (*la política criolla*), dominated by corrupted native politicians. In 1894, *La Vanguardia* pointed out that the proletariat of the cities, “mostly of European origin,” represented “the most intelligent and learned element of the Argentinian working class.” These migrants were precisely those “workers without ties to the existent [bourgeois] parties, because they still did not take part in politics.”<sup>28</sup>

In this early period, the socialist campaign for the naturalization of foreigners did not have any relationship with some kind of patriotic vindication of the Argentinian state. On the contrary, it was a campaign against any traces of nationalistic feelings that workers might still have had toward their European homelands. According to *La Vanguardia*, those who opted to become Argentine citizens showed that they were “free of patriotic worries, and at the same time willing to struggle for the betterment of the society they are now living in.”<sup>29</sup>

And, indeed, socialists were facing problems in their campaign for naturalization and political action among the mostly foreign milieu of the Argentine labor movement. In a country characterized by the extreme volatility of migration flows, where it was not uncommon for migrants to return to their countries of origin, or at least to be uncertain about their future, many newly arrived workers saw no reason to lose links with their homelands. Whereas they did not need to become Argentine citizens in order to live and work in the country, there seemed to be no real incentives to obtain political rights, in a context of fraudulent electoral practices.

Against all these setbacks, however, the Socialist Party insisted in the necessity of political action and struggled to improve its performance in the polls. Since 1896 and with no exception, the party intervened every two years in all the elections held in Buenos Aires to choose deputies to the National Congress. In the course of the following decade, the party began to participate in other cities of the interior provinces, as well as localities surrounding the capital city.

As show in Chart 1, the performance of the Socialist Party in the parliamentary elections over this period can be divided in two phases. Between 1896 and 1902, its results were completely negligible. Moreover, the figures were not taken seriously even by the party itself, as it repeatedly denounced, in the days following every election, the scandalous fraud put forward by the political machines of the ruling parties. The socialist newspaper would report—and socialist leaders would restlessly denounce in the public tribune—that many party members did not even have the chance to cast their own ballot, as the polling places were fiercely controlled by the ruling political groups.<sup>30</sup>

After 1904, however, things slowly started to change. The result of the 1904 election shows a meagre 6 percent of the vote, but on that occasion the Socialist

**Chart 1.** Votes of the Socialist Party in the City of Buenos Aires

Año	Percentage	Votes
1896	n/a	134
1898	n/a	105
1900	n/a	135
1902	1.1	204
1904	6.3	1,254
1906	5.3	2,136
1908	29.2	7,575
1910	25	7,945

Source: Richard Walter: *The Socialist Party of Argentina*.

Party managed to win one seat in Parliament. After an electoral reform in the previous years, the capital city—and the whole country—had been divided into electoral sections, each of which would choose one deputy. Thanks to this electoral change, to its progress in the working class neighborhoods and, last but not least, to internal struggles among candidates of bourgeois parties that led some factions to vote for the socialist candidate, Alfredo L. Palacios, a lawyer, was elected as “the first socialist deputy of the Americas,” in representation of the neighborhood of La Boca, in southern Buenos Aires.

In the years that followed, even though the Socialist Party was not able to elect more deputies—the uninominal system was suspended soon after the 1904 election—it is possible to see how the number of votes increased. Unlike the previous period, socialists were now able to seriously compete with the political machines of the ruling parties, especially in the southern neighborhoods of La Boca and Barracas, which concentrated strong working class constituencies. In election days, the party would put in action the strength of hundreds of activists and militants, confronting the ruling classes *caudillos* and their armed groups even in the physical terrain. Although they did not have the right to vote, socialist women played an important role in the party’s electoral campaign, a fact that was brought to the attention of commercial newspapers, usually hostile to the labor movement. In 1906, *La Nación* emphasized that in La Boca “the female element has taken an active part under the socialist banner, carrying out propaganda works in favour of its cause.” In Barracas, according to the same newspaper, the socialists had introduced “a Yankee way of recruiting followers: by means of beautiful working-class girls who, dressed in red, occupied cars that travelled the most frequented points, fighting for the triumph of their candidates.”<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The Argentine Socialist Party was established in an early period—the last decade of the nineteenth century—contemporaneously with the formation of the first social, economic, and political organizations of the local labor movement. Unlike other countries, especially European, the making of Argentina’s

modern labor movement was not preceded by a long tradition of artisan and craft organizations but rather developed rapidly in the last years of the century. It was a period of hasty economic growth, fuelled by massive European migration and a big amount of foreign investments that contributed to shaping the subordinate and long-lasting relationship between the local and mostly agrarian bourgeoisie and British imperialism. In this context, the first socialist groups, first, and the unified Socialist Party, soon thereafter, contributed to—and were at the same time shaped by—this process of working class formation.

As part of a political dispute with anarchists, and also with syndicalist tendencies that appeared at a very early stage, Argentine Socialism under the leadership of Justo defined a political line whose main elements were: (1) a vindication of the necessity and possibility of organizing a working class party, independent from all the existing bourgeois factions; (2) an assertion of “political action,” mainly understood as parliamentary participation, as the main tool to develop workers’ interests and to struggle for their emancipation; (3) a characterization of “economic struggle” (i.e., industrial action) as an archaic and inefficient method of struggle, therefore, destined to play only an ancillary role; (4) a strongly evolutionist interpretation of capitalist development, which emphasized gradualism and, therefore, questioned the use of violent means. This perspective, in turn, reinforced the appeal for parliamentary political action and the critique of economic struggles, and especially the tactic of the general strike. The preference for political action *vis-à-vis* economic struggle (i.e., strikes) was understood as a logical conclusion of the historical development of capitalist society, and as an ideological choice that set them apart from anarchist currents.

Fourteen years after the founding congress, in 1910, when Justo himself represented Argentine socialists in the Copenhagen congress of the International, the party was able to show an important development to their comrades in other countries. The average of monthly fees paid by members had increased from 742 in 1902 to 1,200 in 1910, whereas the 19 local centers represented in the founding congress had turned into 35 in 1908. A couple of months before the first congress, in March 1896, the party had made its first electoral presentation in Buenos Aires, with a very disappointing result. Fourteen years later, the party reached almost 8,000 votes in the capital city.

Despite these promising signs, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century Argentine socialists could not hide that their political development was also facing important difficulties. Membership had increased, but the party was still small compared to others of the time. Electoral figures showed some improvement, but progress was concentrated only in Buenos Aires and was very far from the striking successes that many European parties could show in the polls and in Parliament. More important, they had to contend with the increasing forces of its rivals inside the labor movement, namely a strong anarchist current and a newly formed “revolutionary syndicalist” tendency. Although the socialists did have influence among the working class, even controlling some trade unions, anarchists, and syndicalists unquestionably dominated the country’s main labor federations.

After these formative years, marked by strong internal tensions, sometimes explicit and sometimes larval, the Argentine Socialist Party had emerged with a defined political profile and organizational structure. Unlike the German case, its reformist practice did not include a consistent theorization but was rather concentrated in practical and everyday matters. In a report sent to *Die Neue Zeit* in 1903, the old German Socialist German Ave-Lallemant—who had been deeply involved in the first years of the movement but was now less active, in the remote province of San Luis—strongly criticized the party orientation. “The congress,” he said, “adopted after great discussion a long new party program with a so-called minimal program to which every half way liberal and radical party can subscribe with good grace (. . .) Of actual socialist demands and principles the program contains absolutely nothing, and they were also wholly lacking in the proceeding, and the party organ shows very little socialist tendency.”

Lallemant also lamented that “the great majority of the Argentine laboring class have permitted themselves to be driven to anarchism through their hatred of the despotically governed state and have rejected the political tactics advocated by the socialists, which, to be sure, can only be of a purely platonic character since a government according to popular election is absolutely non-existent. The union movement is wholly under anarchistic influence.” His conclusions were certainly an exaggeration, but he was right in pointing out that, as this article intended to show, spreading their word among the militant working class was not an easy task for local socialists. As in France, Spain, or Italy, and due to a strong presence of anarchism and—later—revolutionary syndicalism, the Socialist Party was not the hegemonic force inside the working class.<sup>32</sup>

This article has argued that—apart from the common trends that defined the social democratic parties of the period—the peculiarities of the Argentine society and political regime also contributed to shape the politics and pitfalls of this first local socialist experience. Following the example of its European counterparts, the Argentine Socialist Party made completely clear that insurrectional action was out of the question, as it was considered an anarchist method, completely alien to socialist tactics. But, at the same time, the bid for political action was not providing encouraging results. Fifteen years after its foundation, the socialists did not have any representatives in Parliament, let alone any chance of participating in government. By 1910, the goal of creating a party to politically represent the working class of the increasingly modern Argentine society, dreamed by the delegates of the mid-1890s founding congress, was now a reality. But the task of convincing the workers that the party was theirs had proven to be more difficult.

A major electoral reform, put into practice since 1912—with secret and mandatory vote for all adult Argentinian males at its core—, would change the rules of the political regime and help the Socialist Party make very significant gains in the electoral terrain in later years. However, the First World War and, shortly thereafter, the Russian Revolution, would also introduce major shifts in working class politics. Many of the characteristics that the Socialist Party developed in its first two decades would reveal themselves highly problematic in the new context of the post-war years.



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## Notes

1. José Ratzel: *Los marxistas argentinos del 90*, Córdoba 1970; Jan Klima, “La asociación bonaerense *Vorwärts* en los años ochenta del siglo pasado,” in *Iberoamericana Pragensia* VIII (1974); Horacio Tarcus: *Marx en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires 2007; Ricardo Falcón, “Orígenes del movimiento socialista en Argentina. Prólogo. Capítulo I y II”, *Cuadernos del Ciesal* 8:10 (2011): 11–45; Lucas Poy and Daniel Gaido, “Under German Eyes: German Ave-Lallemant and the Origins of Marxism in Argentina,” *Science & Society* 75:4 (2011): 480–505; Lucas Poy, *Los orígenes de la clase obrera argentina* (Buenos Aires, 2014).
2. Lucas Poy, “Hard Times: The Formation of the Working Class in Late-Nineteenth-Century Buenos Aires,” *Working USA. The Journal of Labor and Society*, 17:4 (2014): 553–64.
3. Nuestro programa, in *La Vanguardia* (April 7, 1894). All quotes from sources in Spanish were translated by the author.
4. Plutocracia criolla, in *La Vanguardia* (September 1, 1894). On the development of Anarchism during these years, see, among others, Isaac Oved, *El anarquismo y el movimiento obrero en Argentina*, Buenos Aires 1978; Gonzalo Zaragoza, *Anarquismo argentino 1876–1902*, Madrid 1996; Juan Suriano, *Paradoxes of Utopia: Anarchist Culture and Politics in Buenos Aires, 1890–1910* Edinburgh, 2010. On the relationship between Socialists and Anarchists, see Lucas Poy, “Socialismo y anarquismo en la formación de la clase obrera en Argentina: problemas historiográficos y apuntes metodológicos”, *Archivos de historia del movimiento obrero y la izquierda*, 1:1 (2012): 13–34.
5. El primer congreso socialista obrero argentino, in *La Vanguardia* (July 4, 1896). See also Jacinto Oddone, *Historia del Socialismo Argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1934).
6. For a long period, the history of Argentine Socialism attracted little attention from academic scholars and the first studies were published and promoted by the party itself. Highly partisan, this “militant historiography” was mainly a history of the leadership: less attention was paid to the history of the rank-and-file, let alone the social experiences of party members (the best example is Oddone, *Historia del socialismo argentino*). The first contributions by professional historians came from foreign scholars (Richard Walter: *The Socialist Party of Argentina, 1890–1930*, Austin 1977; later Jeremy Adelman, “Socialism and Democracy in Argentina in the Age of the Second International,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 72:2 (1992): 211–38). A renewal in Argentine historiography took place after the demise of the last military dictatorship, in 1983, when labour history of the pre-Peronist period flourished. This new literature represented a renovation in terms of perspective, as it contributed to enrich the knowledge of social and cultural aspects of workers’ lives. However, at the same it moved away from histories of labor parties and trade unions—as a consequence, a new and global study on the origins of the Socialist Party was not undertaken as a research project. Rather, the most important contributions came from scholars interested in intellectual history, and were therefore mainly focused on Juan B. Justo’s thought [see

- especialmente, José Aricó, *La hipótesis de Justo* (Buenos Aires, 1999) and Horacio Tarcus, *Marx en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 2007)]. In the last ten years, studies on the history of the Socialist Party are experiencing a new impulse, especially after the publication of a collective work edited by Hernán Camarero and Carlos Herrera (*El Partido Socialista en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 2005). For an overall assessment of labour historiography in Argentina, see Lucas Poy, "Remaking the Making: E.P. Thompson's Reception in Argentina and the Shaping of Labor Historiography," *International Review of Social History*, 61:1 (2016): 75–93.
7. Jacinto Oddone: *Historia del socialismo argentino*, p. 67.
  8. S. Williams (ed.), *Socialism in France: From Jaurès to Mitterrand*, London, 1983.
  9. Between 1896 and 1910, the party held nine congresses. While the first three were held in Buenos Aires, due to the undisputed importance of the capital city both for the capitalist development of the country and for its labor movement, after the fourth congress the Socialist Party tried to summon the event in other cities, as was traditional in many European social democratic parties of the period. Thus, the fourth congress was held in La Plata, the sixth in Rosario and the seventh in Junín. In 1910, an extraordinary congress was summoned in Montevideo, Uruguay, as it was impossible to do it in Buenos Aires because of the state of siege imposed by the government.
  10. Gonzalo Cabezas, "La propaganda socialista en el interior. Liderazgos y redes en la construcción partidaria a principios del siglo XX," in *Jornadas Interescuelas/Departamentos de Historia* (Argentina: Comodoro Rivadavia, 2015).
  11. Lucas Poy and Sabrina Asquini, "La experiencia colectivista. Orígenes, desarrollo y alcances de la primera ruptura obrera en el Partido Socialista argentino, 1896–1900," in: *PIMSA. Documentos y Comunicaciones*, 15 (2015).
  12. By a vote of 822–222, the congress approved the following resolution: "The seventh congress would be pleased to see the group of affiliates titled Syndicalists constitute themselves into an autonomous party, with the object of realizing the experimental proof of their doctrine and tactics." On the history of Revolutionary Syndicalism in Argentina, see Hugo del Campo, *El sindicalismo revolucionario, 1905–1945* (Buenos Aires, 1986); Maricel Bertolo, *Una propuesta gremial alternativa, el sindicalismo revolucionario (1904–1916)* (Buenos Aires, 1993); Alejandro Belkin, *Sobre los orígenes del sindicalismo revolucionario en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 2007). For a global overview of this current, see Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923* (Boston, 1989).
  13. Quinto congreso del Partido Socialista argentino, in *La Vanguardia*, 11 July, 1903.
  14. There is a lack of information about three others: Rossi, Cevasco, and Fernández.
  15. Socialism Abroad: Argentine, in *International Socialist Review* 6 (1905/1906): 123–4.
  16. Die Streiks und die Sozialisten, in *Vorwärts* (November 17, 1888).
  17. Zum Streik der Schumacher, in *Vorwärts* (November 19, 1892).
  18. Huelgas y acción política, in *La Vanguardia* (January 12, 1895).
  19. Las huelgas son una forma atrasada de la lucha de clases. El voto es la gran arma del trabajador, in *La Vanguardia*, 21 December, 1895.
  20. La acción obrera, in *La Vanguardia* (October 3, 1896).
  21. Nuestro programa, in *La Vanguardia* (April 7, 1894).
  22. La política, "Cómo la entiende el Partido Socialista," *La Vanguardia* (24 November, 1894).
  23. R. Recagno, *Naturalización de los extranjeros. Legislación y jurisprudencia argentina y extranjera* (Buenos Aires, 1912).
  24. Natalio Botana, *El orden conservador: la política argentina entre 1880 y 1916* (Buenos Aires, 1977); Richard Walter, *The Socialist Party of Argentina, 1890–1930*, 30–31 (Austin, 1977).
  25. Hilda Sabato and Elías Palti, "¿Quién votaba en Buenos Aires? Práctica y teoría del sufragio, 1850–1880," *Desarrollo Económico* 30:119 (1990): 395–424; Lucas Poy, "Ciudadanía, derechos políticos y conciencia de clase. La cuestión de la naturalización de los extranjeros en los orígenes del socialismo argentino," *Diálogos. Revista electrónica de Historia* 16:2 (2015): 3–29.
  26. The socialists insisted in the fact that legislation on electoral suffrage and citizenship was much milder in Argentina than in other countries. Whereas the socialists of countries like Belgium had gone as far as a general strike in order to obtain universal suffrage, in Argentina it was granted by the constitution. See, for instance, Nacionalización de extranjeros, in *La Vanguardia* (April 21, 1894).

27. Nacionalización de extranjeros, in *La Vanguardia* (April 21, 1894).
28. Naturalización de los socialistas extranjeros, in *La Vanguardia* (June 9, 1894).
29. Nacionalización de extranjeros, in *La Vanguardia* (April 21, 1894).
30. See, for instance, Nuestro meeting de protesta, in *La Vanguardia* (April 23, 1898).
31. *La Nación* (March 12, 1906).
32. Socialism Abroad, "Argentine Republic," *International Socialist Review* 4 (1903–1904): 309.