The Double Confrontation of Grassroots Unionism in Argentina

Union Democratization and Defense of Working Conditions

by
Cora Cecilia Arias, Nicolás Diana Menéndez, and Paula Dinorah Salgado,
Translated by Mariana Ortega Breña

Social conflicts in Argentina over the past decade have retrieved the essence of the capitalist dispute: the struggle between capital and labor as situated in the workplace and no longer across urban space as it was in the 1990s. In this context, both institutionalized and alternative union expressions regained their centrality for analyzing social reality. The revitalization of collective bargaining and the consequent repositioning of unions on the labor and political scene activated grassroots dynamics that sometimes challenged existing union structures. Few experiences of resistance were able to alter the balance of power as much as the workers' organization of the Buenos Aires subway. This organization was able to achieve such gains because of a combination of the strategic importance of the subway to the city's production and reproduction, the fact that the privatization of the firm was a time-limited concession rather than a direct sale, the union tradition and workers' awareness of lost rights, and the incorporation of new workers with a history of political militancy.

Los conflictos sociales en Argentina durante la última década han recuperado la esencia de la disputa capitalista: la lucha entre el capital y los trabajadores como situado en el lugar de trabajo y ya no a través del espacio urbano, como lo fue en la década de 1990. En este contexto, las dos expresiones sindicales institucionalizadas y alternativas recuperaron su centralidad para el análisis de la realidad social. La revitalización de la negociación colectiva y la consecuente reposición de los sindicatos sobre el escenario laboral y político activan dinámicas de base que a veces desafiaban las estructuras sindicales existentes. Pocas experiencias de resistencia fueron capaces de cambiar al equilibrio de poder tanto como la organización de trabajadores del metro de Buenos Aires. Esta organización fue capaz de lograr tales ganancias debido a una combinación de la importancia estratégica del metro para la producción y reproducción en la ciudad, el hecho de que la privatización de la empresa fue una concesión de tiempo limitado más bien que una venta directa, la tradición

Cora Cecilia Arias is a professor at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and a member of the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani. Nicolás Diana Menéndez is a researcher at the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Tecnológicas and a professor at the Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales of the Universidad de San Martín. Paula Dinorah Salgado is a Ph.D. candidate in social sciences at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and a member of the Centro de Estudios en Políticas Sociales Urbanas of the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires. Mariana Ortega Breña is a freelance translator based in Canberra, Australia. A preliminary version of this article appeared as "La disputa estratégica: El caso Metrovías," pp. 75–126 in Paula Abal Medina and Nicolás Diana Menéndez (eds.), *Colectivos resistentes: Procesos de politización de trabajadores en la Argentina reciente* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2011).

LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue XXX, Vol. XX No. XXX, Month 201X, 1–18
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X14550283

sindical y la conciencia de los trabajadores de los derechos perdidos, y la incorporación de nuevos trabajadores con antecedentes de militancia política.

Keywords: *Grassroots organizations, Unionism, Subway workers, Union democratization, Working conditions*

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Argentina witnessed the return of labor conflict to the workplace. The capital-labor dispute that in the previous decade had taken to the streets and neighborhoods returned to its own space: the firm and the factory. In this context, unions regained a central role in the political arena. However, the events of the past few years have led to a number of questions regarding the prevailing union model. Many grassroots organizations and shop steward structures (*comisiones internas*) have gained public visibility from the double struggle they are engaged in: with the companies, on the one hand, and with unions that do not represent them, on the other.

This article deals with a paradigmatic case: the Buenos Aires subway workers' organization. However, this is not an archetypal experience of the Argentine world of labor in the late 1990s and the beginning of the next decade. Quite the opposite: in a context of worker weakness and fragmentation, the subway began to develop an organization that would reverse the balance of power in its favor through the political restructuring of the workers' organization to achieve victories one would have thought impossible in the neoliberal capitalist era. While our text does not seek to provide unequivocal answers, it addresses a number of concerns: Why have the subway workers, organized as a collective, triumphed in so many of their struggles? What political meanings have been constructed to bring the collective together? Why have its power relations with both the company and the union been reversed?

We propose to address these concerns in three stages. First we will look at the fragmentation of the workers' collective that took place during the privatization of the subway service, placing special emphasis on the privatization's objectives: to install labor flexibilization, on the one hand, and to obstruct any possibility of organization, on the other. Then we will present the resistance that arose, reviewing the relationship with the company and the union (the Unión Tranviarios Automotor—UTA) and the ways in which politics was reintroduced to the workplace. Finally, we will characterize the restructuring of the organization and the tensions and debates this has generated. We will employ a qualitative methodology mainly based on in-depth interviews of workers of the Metrovías company[1] in 2007–2010. The data have been controlled through the triangulation of sources. We have drawn upon a number of academic studies of this case as well as on the electronic and printed publications of the organization itself.

The PrivaTizaTion of The Service: Labor PrecariouSneSS and The fragmenTaTion of TheCoLLecTive

We understand the relationship between capital and labor as a particular power relationship. According to Foucault, social relations are relations of

power between individual or collective subjects. He goes on to say (1985 [1977]) that power relations imply an unequal and relatively stable relationship that involves a potential difference and a "top-bottom" structure. This can be understood as a "domestication of behavior," since "the distinctive feature of power consists in certain people's having more or less complete power of decision over the conduct of others, but never in a comprehensive or coercive manner" (Foucault, 1996: 203). The exercise of power thus consists of a series of actions that modify the actions or possible actions of other subjects.

This approach leads us to think in terms of the "strategies" used by capital to impose its logic of domination. Making labor precarious is the preponderant form[2] of exploitation in neoliberal capitalism, and there are two positions with regard to it: that all forms of paid work are precarious, whatever the stage of capitalism, and that the organization of labor in the neoliberal and globalized context is itself precarious (Arias and Crivelli, 2010).The first stance retrieves orthodox Marxist tradition. For Marx (1993), work in the capitalist mode of production is not free but based on a relationship of estrangement and alienation. The consequence of this assumption is that all forms of capitalist production entail precarious labor. Thus, precariousness is at the heart of the wage relationship (Bihr, 2007), and that relationship is a constituent, structural dimension of capitalism that cannot be treated as external. Precariousness may have the appearance of novelty, but in reality it is inherent in wage labor, which means that social relations are expropriated and therefore precarious.

There is, however, a substantial body of literature that uses the concept of precariousness to describe the changes in labor under post-Fordism. For these writers precariousness is a mode of existence, a global movement that acquires, following Paugam (2000), different features in different national settings. From this second perspective, there are two ways of conceiving the creation of precariousness: in relation to employment (in which case the term could be replaced by "flexibilization") or, more broadly, in connection with social relations in general. In line with this notion and with the idea that the capital-labor relationship takes on different characteristics in each stage of capitalism, the creation of precariousness can be considered the mode of existence (Holloway, 2005) of productive organization in our times. Although it takes on different shades and has unique features in each situation, it serves as a comprehensive concept for a particular age.[3] Our case study shares in this zeitgeist. Its first significant aspect is the privatization of the subway service. The transfer of public transport services to private hands is framed by the context of neoliberal hegemony, which was subject to the Washington consensus and, via structural reforms, established a new relationship between the Argentine state and society and between the state and the market.[4] The move from the productive-industrial model to that of financial speculation required the dismantling of the functions of the state and their transfer to the market (Basualdo, 2001; Campione and Gambina, 2002).

Subterráneos de Buenos Aires Sociedad del Estado (the state's subway company—SBASE) was one of the companies that underwent privatization. The sector was diagnosed as in crisis because of the overabundance and inefficiency of public employees and the state's financial inability to modernize it and make it more efficient, and in 1991 the government decided to privatize its railway service, which included the subway. After a nontransparent process with lax regulation, Metrovías S.A., part of the Grupo Roggio, took possession of the

Premetro and subway service on January 1, 1994.[5] The privatization was characterized by a neoliberal rationale that sought, among its main objectives, to maximize the use of the labor force and construct an unarmed collective that unquestioningly followed the orders of the new company. The restructuring process undertaken by Metrovías was as follows:

The reduction of the workforce. Under the widespread discourse of delegitimization of public services, once the political decision to privatize had been made a process of "healing" that claimed to be streamlining the company and making it more "effective" was undertaken. In this context, turning a hypertrophic state into a rachitic one (Oszlak, 1994) meant a drastic reduction in the number of workers.In SBASE, the downsizing was conducted via dismissals and voluntary retirements. Until mid-1992, the Buenos Aires subway had employed about 4,500 workers. Thereafter and until the concession went into effect, there were approximately 1,000 dismissals, and some 1,700 workers accepted the voluntary retirement "offer" (Cresto, 2010). It should be noted that Metrovías hired only 30 percent of those workers, along with some 1,000 new ones. The fear of losing their jobs generated constant insecurity among workers:

> You arrived one day in the morning, already at the end of '94, and learned that seven or eight workers were going to be transferred to another workshop. And they issued a number of dismissals, drop by drop—three or four dismissals a day, and a week later just as many in some other place; they kept up this situation of terror.

Not all sectors suffered staff replacement in the same way. The ticketing sector was one of the most vulnerable, undergoing a change of approximately 90 percent of its staff. Some key posts in the workshops were not affected in the same way during the early years because they required specific technical knowledge. We agree with Ventrici (2009) that this traumatic staff reduction was also meant to reduce the possibility of collective resistance in the workplace, which was characterized by a remarkable historical tradition of labor struggles. The layoffs targeted activists, militants, or former shop stewards (*delegado*s) of the state-owned company with the sole aim of erasing the memory of that disruptive tradition.

The lengthening of the workday. Using a strategy of extraction of absolute surplus value (which had been practically erased through decades of working-class struggle and then brought back by Menem's flexibilizing and deregulatory legislation), Metrovías increased the workday by two hours. In 1946, under Perón, subway work was decreed insalubrious (Presidential Decree 10.667/46), and therefore the workday was set at six hours with a maximum of six workdays a week. This assessment of unhealthfulness was cancelled and then restored in subsequent years. Finally, after the return to democracy, and again under the assumption that this activity was carried out in an unhealthful environment, a resolution signed by the board of directors of the SBASE (14/84, February 7, 1984) reduced the number of working hours established by the military government in 1980. From then until December 31, 1993, when state management ended, the work time was six hours six days a week (Salud, 2007). This dismantling of one of the official rights of subway workers took place through negotiations between the UTA and Metrovías that resulted in Collective

Bargaining Agreement of Company Work No. 384/99 "E," stipulating a seven-hour workday plus another compulsory hour. The UTA can be said to have given in (Arias and Haidar, 2008) by merely agreeing to the eight-hour workday that Metrovías was seeking to implement.

Service outsourcing. The new company quickly proceeded to outsource many activities that had previously been part of the structure of the company, such as security, the cleaning of docks, cars, and bathrooms, and the opening of stations. Outsourcing is any form of labor relations in which there is no relationship of dependence or subordination between the contractor and the hired party or this responsibility is transferred to an intermediary (which is why it is also called "tertiarization" or "externalization" (Iranzo and de Paula Leite, 2006). Again, this strategy had two goals: labor cost reduction, on the one hand, and barring potential worker articulation through fragmentation, on the other. Outsourcing may involve the fragmentation of the workplace in that different sectors correspond to different employers, are represented by different unions, and therefore have different collective bargaining agreements, which generates a huge difference in wages and working conditions across sectors. As a result, this scenario bars homogenization and identification among workers, establishing a powerfully individualized system.

Job rotation. Another strategy employed by Metrovías for "rationalizing" work in the sector was functional flexibility (Vocos, 2007)—the availability of workers to perform tasks or occupy posts other than ones that matched their qualifications. Once again, this situation was legalized through an agreement between Metrovías and the UTA in 1999. Installing a multipurpose labor organization that enabled job rotation allowed a reduction in labor costs, and the movement of workers impeded identification and solidarity among them and caused difficulties for organization to resist capital's power. It was, in short, a new stumbling block for collective resistance.

The recovery of The ShoP STeward STrucTure (*Cuerpo De DelegaDos*): reSiSTance and reSTrucTuring of The coLLecTive

Foucault warns that where there is power there is resistance and distinguishes this relation from the "state of domination," in which a force becomes a mere object to the other (Abal Medina, 2006). Resistance speaks of power, since it is inherent in it (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Abal Medina (2007), along with Mumby (2005), returns to Adorno's negative dialectic to develop a relationship between power and strength capable of transcending a mere dichotomy. The proposed approach is to "sustain tensions and contradictions in constant motion," creating an escape valve for the esentialization of power relations housed in grand syntheses. Thus, as we have proposed elsewhere (Abal Medina et al., 2009), we approach resistance through its link with power and with the broader social context from which it derives its character.

With the privatization of the subway, the stage began to change in line with what was happening on a national level. The transfer from the state to the Grupo Roggio was, as we have pointed out, a violent attack on working

conditions, and some of the changes would be imprinted in the collective memory as part of a pending account: the lengthening of the workday, wage reduction, and outsourcing. An activist put it this way:

> When we got together we were young and we began to listen to those left from the underground [referring to the state company], or they began to come. There we learned that the workday used to be about six hours, and about safety, for example; fee collectors on the subways were paid approximately 870 pesos and we got 405 pesos, and we didn't know that. For example, when we started to speak candidly, the idea that until December 31, 1993, one worked six hours and January 1 it had changed to eight hours came to me as a trauma! This defeated us emotionally. If there was any hope in '94, '95, '96 . . . It was very painful for them, and then some started leaving because the company offered it. I don't know if there are any left; I don't think there is anyone in any line. . . . It was a massive defeat, and they told us about it, which is why, when we started to organize ourselves, we sought to recover the six hours. That was our motto; in this period of struggle what we wanted to do is be effective, stop the layoffs. Then the company began to issue very specific layoffs, to candidates, delegates (*delegados*), or activists, and we presented ourselves in '96.

However, more than five years went by before these demands could be taken up collectively. This leads to two complementary and contradictory questions that refer us to the dialectical relation that articulates this organizational experience with the course of the labor movement: On the one hand, why was all this time needed to build an organization capable of reversing the correlation of forces? And, on the other, what factors made this form of resistance possible during a time that blocked class organization?

To begin to answer the first question, we need only consider the context in which the concession took place. Both the outsourcing of tasks and the "healing" process targeting staff (which laid off activists and replaced them with youth lacking union experience) were key in undermining organized resistance to the flexibilization policies being implemented. Not only did these measures modify the balance of power but also they stopped (at least temporarily) the process of historical accumulation, which required new components to connect with past political activism. Regarding the second question, the militancy and activism of workers on the political left (the Partido Obrero [Workers' Party], the Partido Comunista [Communist Party], the Movimiento Acción al Socialismo [Action toward Socialism Movement], and the Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas [Socialist Workers' Party], among others) were of overriding importance, primarily during the early days of the organization.

It is here that the strategic position of the subway in the production structure provided new elements. In this regard, Womack (2007) takes up Dunlop when speaking of the centrality for labor organization of certain positions in the framework of production relations. The "strategic" nature is understood as the "bargaining power in regard to location and positioning within the production process" (Dunlop, cited in Womack, 2007: 68). Womack argues that "strategic position" is most important where the protection of workers is greatly reduced or labor rights are violated with impunity, since in these cases it may be the only resource with which they can defend themselves from a corporate or governmental attack. The effect of using this position radiates to the whole of the

productive system, and thus the workers "organize themselves in direct conflict with capital" (69). The subway workers' latent capacity for interfering with other processes through a strike is a factor we must not lose sight of as we analyze the construction of this grassroots organization.

The firST formS of reSiSTance

The first stage began with the concession and extended to the first strike in 1997. During this period, some workers started organizing in clandestinity and forming groups called Los Topos (The Moles), Trabajadores de Metrovías (Metrovías Workers), and El Túnel (The Tunnel). The fear of dismissal meant that workers had to be extremely careful in addressing union or political issues in general. Members of these organizations did not know about the members of the others; communication was handled through flyers to avoid exposure. Events unrelated to work were employed to get workers together and give them the chance to discuss work issues. Birthday celebrations, barbecues, and soccer games strengthened trust among colleagues in areas where they did not need to worry about persecution. In the words of a worker,

> Yes, there was a lot of persecution. There were some colleagues who were dismissed on suspicion of being members or going to these meetings. This is why this was very, very difficult in the early days, very complicated. Without talking about politics, one would get invited to a dinner, a barbecue: it was done from a social point of view, to build friendships with colleagues, and, after that, well, we'd talk politics, but only once there was a closer bond of friendship.

Various union seedlings emerged during this period, until the siege of silence was finally overcome. Thus, in September 1994—barely nine months after the beginning of the concession—a discussion regarding the election of shop stewards was held. Just two years later, again close to election time, an event that spoke of the momentum regarding the subway workers' process of articulation took place: two ticket sellers who were going to stand for election were dismissed, and this led to a mobilization targeting company headquarters to demand their reinstatement. Around 100 people were present, but this was not enough to make the company give in. Results aside, this measure was important because it meant a step toward the exteriorization of resistance. Thus, in the 1996 elections, two of the elected delegates took more radical positions than those of the representatives who, until then, had made up the shop steward structure (Cresto, 2010). That same year, Metrovías tried to introduce a series of flexibilization clauses into the collective bargaining agreement. It demanded that the workers accept them before it would enter into wage discussions. After several days of deliberation, the workers decided not to accept, and no progress was made in any direction.

Another episode took place toward the end of 1996, when the company unilaterally began transferring ticket clerks to other stations. In this case, more than 100 workers participated in an assembly that resolved to work to rule and to undertake a campaign to inform passengers of the situation. As a result of this measure the transfers were reduced. Contrary to what was intended by the company and what the workers themselves had expected, the transfers served

as a opportunity for the organization to contact peers across lines and exchange experiences. Thus a business measure intended to make working conditions more flexible became one more tool for resistance.

This first stage ended in February 1997 with the first strike, which was due to a driver's dismissal. The spontaneity of this measure was not its only novelty. The strike was carried out without the union's consent, and the result was the reinstatement of the dismissed driver along with 20 workers being processed for blocking the routes. This conflict set a precedent in a number of ways: workers saw the latent possibility of curbing layoffs, felt the power of a strike in this specific and unique context, and opened up a line of action that showed the incompatibility between the workers' agenda and the UTA's.

STrengThening The organizaTion

At this stage, the organization began to be consolidated as some workers gained greater visibility. In a book put together by the protagonists of this story, Bouvet (2008) notes that the capacity for organization and coordination among workers was due more to the management abilities of some activists than to the existence of an organizational structure. With their advances and setbacks, the three strikes conducted during this period were clearly defensive in nature. Two of them were undertaken to demand the reinstatement of workers who had been dismissed without justification. The first was in May 1997, just three months after the first strike carried out since the concession. In contrast to the first case, in this one assemblies were called and, days later and after intense discussion, the service ground to a halt. Three hours after the strike started, the company pledged to reinstate the employee.

The dismissal of a driver in April 1999 led to the second strike of this period. The company responded to this measure with 200 more dismissals. The Ministry of Labor intervened, demanding binding arbitration, and Metrovías proposed reinstating the 200 workers in exchange for not reinstating the driver. Because of a lack of consensus, the decision was reached through a secret ballot (Bouvet, 2008). Metrovías's proposal was finally accepted, and a sense of defeat reigned until it could be capitalized on by the organization.

The third strike was organized as a response to a Metrovías attempt to eliminate a post, that of the B line guard. In February 2001 a shop steward tied to the UTA decided to notify the rest of her colleagues days before the implementation of the measure. After trying to get explanations from the union, workers resolved, through an assembly, to go on strike across all lines and workshops. The company used the strategy implemented during the previous strike and dismissed 218 workers. The ministry demanded binding arbitration, and negotiations lasted for three months. The measure was finally removed, and all of the workers dismissed were reinstated.

During this stage the workers also began to make demands that, without resorting to strikes, questioned existing conditions. Shortly after the strike of May 1997, a ticket collector began to gather signatures on a petition demanding drinking fountains in ticket offices. One month and 80 signatures later, these were installed across all lines and sectors. Days later, some women requested to be promoted to guards, a post that only men had occupied so far. When the

company refused, they prepared a petition and gathered 800 signatures. While neither the company nor the union was willing to receive it at the time, by the end of the year women were being hired as guards (Cresto, 2010).

Another factor that made the organization more cohesive was obtaining a majority on the shop steward structure in the September 2000 elections: 12 of the 21 shop stewards elected were non-UTA. Stances partial to labor democracy began to generate new discussions among workers and give rise to demands previously dismissed by the union. In the words of an activist,

> In the year 2000 we gained a majority; we were 16 or 17 [the numerical difference here is the result of oral narrative imprecision; the data have been checked against other sources] worker delegates, and there we began to fight for the six hours; since we were the majority, we could start talking openly to society about the recovery of the six hours.

After the months of negotiations held in response to the intended elimination of the guard post, the shop stewards had decided to start meeting regularly. The grassroots organization had already proved itself repeatedly with successful actions, gained a numerical majority in the shop steward structure, and demanded, with increasing vehemence, a return to the working conditions that had prevailed before privatization.

Taking The iniTiaTive

The next stage brought together the largest number of conflicts and victories. There were campaigns to restore the six-hour day and achieve a wage increase, and in the process relationships with the UTA became strained and involved several violent attacks by the union.[6] Several measures of substantial magnitude, requiring a greater capacity for organization and coordination, were carried out. The post-2001 political context undoubtedly contributed to a climate that gave the demands a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of subway users. In this period, claims were characterized by an offensive strategy as workers sought to construct alternatives. Even some actions that were apparently defensive (such as the fight to prevent the installation of ticket-selling machines) were later capitalized on within a larger sequence that led to a change in the correlation of forces. The nature of the disputes reflects this character.

The reduction of the workday to six hours. In 2001 the struggle for the six-hour day was driven by the shop steward structure without the support of the union despite workers' explicit requests. The legislative route began that year with the presentation of Bill 871, which asserted that subway work was insalubrious and reduced the workday to six hours. The social climate brought about by the 2001 explosion acted as an catalyst: demonstrations increased to weekly frequency. A year after it was presented, the project was approved by the legislature of the city of Buenos Aires. Later, at the company's request, the mayor vetoed the project. The law could be passed only with the vote of two-thirds of the legislature, but the disappointing forecast did not stop more than 100 workers from showing up at the venue on the day of the vote. After a bloody police crackdown, the law was rejected, and mobilization slowed down. Almost a

year later, taking advantage of a loophole opened up by the political situation, the bill was approved with only the threat of a strike.[7] The victory was partial in that it involved only traffic workers. Months later, the workers of Premetro joined in, and in April 2004, after a landmark four-day strike, the six-hour day was reinstated across all sectors.

Foucault's (2004) idea of "the event" describes the appearance of a new configuration of the correlation of forces. This concept could well apply to the struggle for the six-hour day, since from that moment on there was a restructuring of the organization, which had been destroyed by the privatization. At the same time, the organization achieved an unprecedented series of victories compared with other worker collectives, generating a "response movement" to the neoliberal system.

Increase in wages. In late 2004, measures to gain a wage increase greater than that established by the government were intensified. Workers carried out four strikes and achieved an initial agreement in December of that year, which was formalized in February 2005 with a 44 percent increase as opposed to the 19 percent proposed by the state (*Página 12*, February 11, 2005).

Incorporation of outsourced workers into the UTA bargaining agreement (and, subsequently, into Metrovías). After the six-hour day was extended to all sectors, workers from companies to which Metrovías outsourced services began to organize to demand their inclusion. At the end of 2004, the cleaning company Taym dismissed five activists, and the workers began a strike demanding their reinstatement. They were finally taken back, and the framework within which they worked was changed. From then on, workers of all these companies began to organize, and the shop steward organization began to actively intervene in these measures. A year later the workers of Servisub and Pertenecer and the nonmanagement personnel of Orbea and Bayton entered into the UTA bargaining agreement. In December 2006 Metrovías virtually incorporated all outsourced staff.

Gender equality. Since 1981 the company had been hiring women as part of its full-time staff, following the Ministry of Labor's declaration that subway work fulfilled the required health conditions.[8] Although female workers were always a minority,[9] they were able to organize and show solidarity when necessary—a sign not only of shared class interests but also of gender interests in a differentiated labor context. An example of this was their struggle for access to jobs considered the province of males such as driver or guard and the number of obstacles they had to overcome to succeed.

In 2002, the Buenos Aires legislature declared subway work insalubrious, and the company threatened to fire 100 women. The need to provide joint responses to specific issues resulted in the formation of the Comisión de Mujeres del Subte (Subway Women's Committee). From then on, with the support of the newly elected shop steward structure, they began their long path toward the achievement of the six-hour day. Organization solidarity was an important pillar during the conflict as well as during the struggle for the wage increase and the provision of a decent changing room, among other things.

Support for the struggles of other workers. In April 2005 a half-hour strike was called in solidarity with the workers of the Líneas Aéreas Federales (Federal Airlines—LAFSA), who were seeking job continuity. In November of that year

another strike was carried out to protest the presence of George W. Bush in Argentina, and in April 2007 another strike and the opening of the turnstiles were prompted by the murder of a teacher in the province of Neuquén (Cresto, 2010).

Seen in historical terms, most of the demands listed here were focused on recovering the working conditions that had prevailed before the concession and in that sense can be considered offensive in nature. In fact, when we take a closer look we see a poorly articulated labor movement that had begun to envision new grassroots expressions in 2003 and whose ability to reinstate the rights held by subway workers before the 1990s was still uncertain.

Theroad ToindePendence

A four-hour strike was carried out in May 2008 because the UTA called elections for delegates of outsourced companies on short notice. As a result, the minister of labor promised to guarantee a suitable process for the election of those shop stewards. In September of that year the UTA called elections by sector (rather than by line, as had been done historically) in order to be able to bias results in its favor. The elections were held despite the refusal to participate of opposition shop stewards, and only 10 percent of eligible voters turned out (*Página 12*, February 2, 2009).

As a corollary of the long process of deterioration and a lack of common denominators, the shop steward organization launched a plebiscite whereby workers could express their willingness to form an independent union. With more than 60 percent of the vote and despite attempts by the UTA to slow down the process, the new guild of subway and Premetro workers was formed.

The workerS' own union: The aSociación gremiaL de LoS TrabajadoreS de SubTe y PremeTro

Final Many of the discussions that occurred and still occur in the shop steward organization readdress and refer to traditional discussions involving left-wing politics and unionism. One of the issues updated through this kind of experience is that of the legitimate goals and means that can arise from labor claims. Questions such as What is the role of unionism? What are its limits and its scope? What demands are legitimate? What ways of struggle are legitimate? and What is the relationship between efficacy and democracy? returned to the main stage of historical and heterodox, combative union experience. For example, the final years of the 1960s and the early 1970s were marked by intraunion fights between bureaucratized organizations and strongly opposing shop steward structures (Jelin, 1978).One of the most interesting aspects of the subway workers' experience was their addressing of elements that were not commonly discussed or questioned in union practice. Experience pushes the socially valid limits regarding what one can and cannot do within and from a union organization.

Bourdieu (2008) has a classification of the levels of the labor struggle that is useful for this process: the unthought (issues that do not come to mind or are not "reasonable"), the unthinkable or illegitimate, and the legitimate. The

experience that we have been discussing in many cases challenged the limits of the "reasonable." The struggle for the six-hour day in a context in which flexible employment and, consequently, extremely long working hours prevailed is an example, as is the incorporation of outsourced workers into the collective bargaining agreement of Metrovías. These claims appeared unthinkable in the historical context.

We can similarly analyze the practice of an original form of protest that caused tension with dominant social structures regarding legitimate and illegitimate means: the opening of the turnstiles to let the passengers ride free. In contrast to the traditional strike, in which users' opposition often resulted in an absence of solidarity with the workers' demands, the turnstiles strategy had the virtue of pleasing users. However, such measures had adverse consequences, and those who carried them out often ended up in court. Something similar happened to workers who threw themselves onto the tracks during strikes to prevent supervising staff from operating the trains.

Here we must introduce a new player: the mass media, which, when it comes to "fixing" ideas of what is or should be, what is legitimate or illegitimate, play a transcendental role in globalized societies. The dynamics of the construction of the social meanings granted to protest strategies is based on the antinomy that Barthes (1980) defines in terms of user/worker. This is a feature of media narratives and emphasizes the opposition between the striking worker and the atomized individual presented as one of the major victims of the strike.

The Asociación Gremial de los Trabajarores de Subte y Premetro (Metro and Premetro Workers' Union—AGTSyP) employed a series of practices and discussions that, while they differed from those of the UTA (which it viewed as a bureaucratized union), were intended to create a representative union founded on the direct participation of the workers and consisting of an "ideal type" of delegate and organization that was not exempt from a multiplicity of political/ideological viewpoints. The organization's heterogeneity gave rise to a number of debates.

An initial, crucial discussion dealt with whether to fight for space within the UTA or create a new union.[10]The cornerstone of this process was the profound difference between the practices and concepts espoused by the UTA and those of the shop steward structure. However, it is possible to infer that the eventual formation of an alternative union had more to do with the obstacles posed by the UTA than with convictions derived from a purely abstract debate. Indeed, the oppositional resources and devices used by the UTA against the shop steward organization and the virtual impossibility of "freely" contesting the union leadership limited options and virtually forced the creation of a distinct union, with all the costs, practical and aspirational, resulting from this choice. Thus, the possibility of contesting the leadership of an established and legally valid union paved the way for the formation of a new organization that started from an almost negative point, requiring as it did internal debate regarding the best possible strategy, including the decision to differ from the prevailing union schema. At the same time, the internal dispute in the preexisting organization constituted a sort of "natural" direction for a group of people with aspirations alternative to the dominant ones.

Another set of discussions revolved around the internal dynamics of the proposed organization. On the one hand, there were elements that were settled

enough to be discussed, such as the assembly-based method for decision making, which was part of the functional heritage of the organization.[11] This methodology, in a way inherent in the union system desired, was a hallmark of the dissident shop stewards' experience and was strongly associated with the left-wing ideology of its protagonists. At the same time, it functioned as a tool for legitimation both within the organization and in its public discourse. The assembly-based model signified, in a way, a rupture of representation to the extent that it appeared as its opposite: participation. In addition, the assembly established and amplified stances collectively and, in that sense, amalgamated the organization by providing it, in this single instance, with bonds of belonging while reinforcing each participant's sense of relative autonomy in decision making.

The heterogeneity of points of view and aspects of this organization was expressed in a variety of aspects that made up the union's daily life and the desire to build an organization that was radically different from traditional populist unionism (Jelin, 1978), personified in this case by the UTA. Among the issues discussed were the economic contributions of members, the payment of delegates, delegate rotation, certain privileges for delegates, and the requirement that representatives continue to hold their original jobs.

A fundamental element for any organization trying to survive is financing. Argentine law makes union membership fees voluntary basis and allows the occasional negotiation of so-called solidarity contributions (*cuotas de solidaridad*) that fall on the whole set of workers included in the collective bargaining agreement. In the case of the AGTSyP, which lacked legal union status (*personería gremial)* and therefore was unable to negotiate collective bargaining agreements, the only possible remedy was voluntary contributions. That said, having to persuade coworkers about the need to impose a membership fee is often an uncomfortable ideological situation for activists, perhaps because of its association with a more utilitarian logic of affiliation from which they seek to distance themselves. Although this is an issue that is usually quickly resolved, its problematization remains striking.[12] In fact, in order to create a new union, the group had to disaffiliate from the UTA and reaffiliate with the AGTSyP, charging 1 percent, given that, as required by current law, it needed to demonstrate they it had the most affiliated contributors in the sector.

There was also discussion about the payment of delegates and heads of secretariats for the hours they invested in union activities. This issue was both economic and moral. First, the possibilities for fundraising were limited, and, second, given the discourse—and, probably, the key value—of dedication and self-denial in the struggle, the payment of wages to delegates could be seen as a blemish on their good intentions. The idea of the shop steward as a model to follow and ultimately imbued with "ideal" and heroic characteristics made the elimination of any privileges for delegates, however minimal, a moral mandate.

Another problematic aspect was the need for rotation of shop stewards. It was argued that rotation both fueled the potential of "new generations" of rank-and-file delegates and allowed for a distribution of commitments in such a way that more members were actively incorporated, opening real and meaningful opportunities for participation to all those who were willing to take

them. It was further argued that rotation would obstruct any possible "bureaucratization" that might arise from the professionalization of the role of shop steward. Indeed, one of the causes of bureaucratization is the development of specific interests distanced from grassroots ones, a product of the desire to reproduce conditions that allow individuals to remain in their posts regardless of the interests of their constituents (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1992). But remaining in their posts does not necessarily mean the development of such interests to the point that they unbalance representation. In that sense, all processes of representation demand a threshold for the development of particular interests beyond which delegation and representation are endangered but within which the accumulation process can be more effective.

Finally, another issue was the need for delegates to continue performing their duties in the workplace. Again, this had positive and negative elements. It entailed both ethics (representing from the same base as those being represented) and the conviction that this was the only way of understanding the conditions and experiences of constituents without any mediation, thus barring the gradual, potential alienation of representatives from the "base." The obligation to remain on duty burdened shop stewards with a wealth of activities and demands—especially considering the limited structure of the AGTSyP, which forced them to undertake all the necessary tasks themselves. Ultimately, the post of representative became a significant additional burden that threatened to fall on those most committed to the union and, therefore, most willing to assume the required sacrifice. The eagerness to create an "ideal delegate type" limited access to the small and select group of people who were willing to "give everything," thus creating a sort of elite.

finaL commenTS

Since 2003, Argentina has undergone great economic growth, a sharp decline in unemployment, a revitalization of collective bargaining, and the consequent repositioning of unions on the labor and political scene. This process has shaken the labor world and activated collective grassroots dynamics that call attention to and sometimes challenge existing union structures (see Abal Medina and Diana Menéndez, 2011). However, having started in a highly regressive context during the 1990s, few experiences of resistance have been able to alter the correlation of forces within a relatively brief period. In this regard, the subway shop steward structure, now the AGTSyP, is paradigmatic rather than archetypal within a larger process. The different stages of the process constitute a shift from what we could call a "defensive" to an "offensive" position in that it includes the retrieval of labor rights and the creation of and progress toward new goals. Inscribed in the dialectic logic inherent in the power relationship between capital and labor is a dynamic, contradictory and dialectical process that has transformed a completely unfavorable field of forces into another in which the strategic positions of capital and labor are somewhat more balanced. What we have described is a network formed by the insistent deployment of the power of capital against labor and a resistance that is not limited to reacting

but seeks the cracks in the power system that lead to the confrontation. Thus, power and resistance, capital and labor, set up a dynamic force field that is redefined by each movement in the relationship.

In the face of a reality that can be interpreted as "successful" in terms of a dispute with capital, the question that arises is what enabled this organization to achieve such gains in such an adverse context. In order to give some sort of response, we will point to the elements of this experience that emerge as possible interpretative landmarks.

In structural terms, we must take into account the nature of the company and its activity: a public service of fundamental importance in the daily life of Buenos Aires, where the subway moves more than 1.5 million people each day. Womack's notion of strategic power applies to the subway's strategic importance in daily city production and reproduction. At the same time, the process of the subway's privatization has some explanatory particulars: first, it was a time-limited concession, not a direct sale to private capital, with a deadline and terms of contract termination that tended to limit entrepreneurial initiatives. In addition, the firm was subsidized by the state, and therefore the latter was explicitly and directly involved to some extent in the sector's labor relations.

From a historical point of view, we can say that the union tradition and collective memory played an important role, though it was substantially broken via targeted layoffs of activists and shop stewards prior to the concession. This affected the subway workers' organizing in at least two ways: on the one hand, as living memory of previous experiences of organization and struggle (which inscribed this struggle in a much larger process that went back decades) and as an embryo of resistance after an attempt to destroy the whole organization and, on the other hand, as an awareness of lost rights, a historical pressure toward a future that was somewhat known.

Another central component was the incorporation of new workers after the concession process, which introduced a set of "activists"—workers with a history of political/union militancy and ideological and organizational concerns who lit the initial spark that subsequently became the shop steward organization and eventual union. The sophistication of capital's mechanisms for preventing labor resistance and organization had advanced considerably, but the ineffable of the social reappeared here in the form of an "activism" that escaped the fallible logic of such mechanisms. Resistance and militancy inevitably reappeared. In this case, there was also a particularly canny approach to reality and the opportunities presented by circumstances: knowing how and when to carry out actions and industrial strikes; using and enhancing the strength of the 2001 social upheavals; the political context of openness begun in 2003; and the possibilities found in the structure and actions of the UTA, which, within the Confederación General del Trabajo (General Labor Confederation), strongly fought collaborationist sectors in the 1990s.

These individual gifts were also articulated with a great collective capacity that was boosted by adopting the unionized format as an organizational modus vivendi. The grassroots way, in its comprehensive logic, allowed for decisions and references that crystallized in a collective and expanded wisdom and strength that have shown indisputable efficacy and power.

noTeS

1. The sample consisted of 29 cases selected according to the criteria established for theoretical sampling, seeking a heterogeneity capable of guaranteeing theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of the categories gender, seniority, history of militancy, political activity in the context of the company, position, and participation in the actions promoted by the shop steward structure, among others.

2. It is not, however, the only one; it coexists with various other forms of exploitation (e.g., that used in textile sweatshops, which resembles slavery) (see Salgado, 2011).

3. In the framework of a broader debate on the changes in capitalism over the past three decades, Antunes (2005) designates three interpretative lines regarding the restructuring of capital in what has been called flexible accumulation. A first approach is based on the work of Piore and Sabel, who argue that flexible accumulation leads to productive flexibility, with an enrichment of the dailyness of labor and the gradual implementation of more democratic labor relations. A second, critical approach by the likes of Pollert, Gordon, Hyman and Streek, and others argues that we are witnessing not the emergence of a new accumulation regime at the global level but a deepening of certain preexisting tendencies that imply a new advance of capital in the reduction of the power of workers and their organizations, leading to a new configuration of power relations. Finally, a third interpretation that includes Antunes and other critical writers (Harvey, Castillo, and others), argues that flexible accumulation implies a new regime of world accumulation that has continuities and discontinuities with the Fordist model and entails a deepening of the capitalist system that requires some reconfigurations to sustain the valorization of capital.

4. After the mid-1970s crisis and the policies implemented by the liberal-conservative governments of Reagan and Thatcher in United States and Britain, respectively, the conditions of the Washington consensus were established at the end of that decade; they considered state intervention in the economy the root of all imbalances and crises. These ideas were implemented in Argentina through the neoliberal reforms of the Carlos Menem administration (1989–1999), the cornerstones of which were privatization, a change in the role of the state, unrestricted financial opening, deregulation or re-regulation of social relationships (including labor), state reform, and currency convertibility.

5. The company Metrovías S.A. has an exclusive concession until December 31, 2017, to operate the SBASE and its complementary surface lines Premetro and Ferrocarril Gral. Urquiza. The grant is a "public service concession" and includes the right to commercially exploit locations and advertise in stations, cars, and buildings. A particularly important provision is that the financial balance (*balance contable*) of the company can be adjusted by modifying the basic fare, subsidy, and/or levy. Complaints of higher operating costs led to a subsidy from 2003 on and to subway and railway fare changes in January 2008 and January 2009. This allowed Metrovías S.A. to transfer the cost of the workers' victories to the state in that the increase in labor costs led to a subsidy adjustment that ensured the company's profitability (Dávila, 2011).

6. The first clash was in August 2001, when a group of workers approached the union to demand that it back its demands for a six-hour day and a wage increase. The response was gang violence, and it was decided to push for these measures without the union's leadership (Bouvet, 2008).

7. Head of government(Jefe de Gobierno) Ibarra was standing for reelection in the second round. The strike date was set for some days before the poll regarding his administrative abilities.

8. Law 20.744 of the Working Contract (Ley de Contrato de Trabajo) forbids hiring women for jobs considered insalubrious.

9. In 1981, 100 female workers were incorporated. According to a survey conducted by the Programa de Investigaciones sobre Cambio Social (Researach Program on Social Change—PICaSo), by 2006 women accounted for around 20 percent of Metrovías staff.

10. The law on trade union associations (23.551, Ley de Asociaciones Sindicales) allows the coexistence of unions in the same business environment, but only one can have legal status. In this case, the specificity of the subway in relation to transport in general enabled the creation of a new sector in the environment. Two judgments by the Supreme Court, in 2008 and 2009, opened the door to grassroots organizations with prerogatives similar to those of legally recognized trade unions.

11. Ventrici (2009) points out internal differences in the union's management of assemblies, identifying "certain excessive levels" of assembly-based behavior that could become an obstacle to union action.

12. In other experiences we can also find this sort of objection to certain practices strongly associated with organizations characterized as opposite in practices and stance (see, for example, the case of the Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado in relation to the Unión del Personal Civil de la Nación [Diana Menéndez, 2005]).

referenceS

Abal Medina, Paula

2006 *Dispositivos de poder en empresas: Un estudio de la relación capital-trabajo en grandes empresas en grandes cadenas de supermercados*. Buenos Aires: CEIL-PIETTE CONICET.

2007 "Notas sobre la noción de resistencia en Michel de Certeau." *Kairos, Revista de Temas Sociales, Universidad Nacional de San Luis* 11 (20): 1–11.

Abal Medina, Paula, Cora Cecilia Arias, Karina Crivelli, and Nicolás Diana Menéndez

2009 "Resistencias en los lugares de trabajo," pp. 113–141 in Paula Abal Medina et al. (eds.), *Senderos bifurcados*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros.

Abal Medina, Paula and Nicolás Diana Menéndez

2011 *Colectivos resistentes: Procesos de politización de trabajadores en la Argentina reciente*. Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi.

Abu-Lughod, Lila

1990 "The romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women." *American Ethnologist* 17 (1): 41–55.

Antunes, Ricardo

2005 *Los sentidos del trabajo*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Herramienta.

Arias, Cora Cecilia and Karina Crivelli

2010 "Ensayando prácticas de articulación colectiva: la Coordinadora de Trabajadores Precarizados de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires." *Revista Ciências Sociais Unisinos, Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos* 46 (1): 92–103.

Arias, Cora Cecilia and Victoria Haidar

2008 "Resistir en nombre de la salud: un análisis de la experiencia del Cuerpo de Delegados de los subterráneos de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires." *Revista Trabajo y Sociedad*, no. 11.

Barthes, Roland

1980 *Mitologías*. Mexico City: Siglo XXI.

Basualdo, Eduardo

2001 *Sistema político y modelo de acumulación en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmas.

Bihr, Alain

2007 "La précarité gît au coeur du rapport salarial: une perspective marxiste." *¿Interrogations? Revista Pluridisciplinaria en Ciencias del Hombre y de la Sociedad* 4 (June): 4–21.

Bourdieu, Pierre

2008 *Cuestiones de sociología*. Madrid: Akal.

Bouvet, Virginia

2008 *Un fantasma recorre el subte: Crónica de la lucha de los trabajadores de Metrovías*. Buenos Aires: Desde el Subte.

Campione, Daniel and Julio Gambina

2002 *Los años de Menem, cirugía mayor*. Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural de la Cooperación.

Cresto, Jorge

2010 "Revirtiendo los efectos de la privatización sobre la fuerza de trabajo: estrategias sindicales y transformaciones de las condiciones laborales en los subterráneos de Buenos Aires (1994–2008)." Ph.D. diss., Universidad de Buenos Aires.

Dávila, Facundo

2011 "Análisis de los balances de la empresa Metrovías S. A.," pp. 127–139 in Paula Abal Medina and Nicolás Diana Menéndez (eds.), *Colectivos resistentes: Procesos de politización de trabajadores en la Argentina reciente*. Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi.

Diana Menéndez, Nicolás
2005 "ATE y UPCN: dos concepciones en pugna sobre la representación sindical de los trabajadores estatales," pp. 169–191 in Arturo Fernández (ed.), *Estado y relaciones laborales: Transformaciones y perspectivas*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo.
Foucault, Michel
1985 (1977) "El juego de Michel Foucault" (interview), pp. 127–162 in *Saber y verdad*. Madrid: Ediciones de la Piqueta.
1996 *La vida de los hombres infames*. Buenos Aires: Altamira.
2004 *Nietzsche, la genealogía, la historia*. Barcelona: Pre-Textos.
Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss
1967 *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. New York: Aldine.
Holloway, John
2005 "Del grito de rechazo al grito de poder: la centralidad del trabajo," pp. 7–40 in Alberto Bonnet, John Holloway, and Sergio Tischler (eds.), *Marxismo abierto*, vol. 1. Mexico City: Ediciones Herramientas/Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.
Iranzo, Consuelo and Marcia de Paula Leite
2006 "La subcontratación laboral en América Latina," pp. 268–288 in Enrique de la Garza Toledo (ed.), *Teorías sociales y estudios del trabajo: Nuevos enfoques*. Mexico City: Antropos.
Jelin, Elizabeth
1978 "Conflictos laborales en la Argentina 1973–1976." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 40: 421–463.
Marx, Karl
1993 *Manuscritos*. Barcelona: Altaya.
Mumby, Dennis
2005 "Theorizing resistance in organization studies: a dialectical approach." *Management Communication Quarterly* 19 (1): 19–44.
Offe, Claus and Helmut Wiesenthal
1992 "Dos lógicas de la acción colectiva," pp. 47–112 in Claus Offe (ed.), *La gestión política*. Madrid: Ministerio del Trabajo y de la Seguridad Social.
Oszlak, Oscar
1994 "Estado y sociedad: las nuevas fronteras," in Bernardo Kliksberg (ed.), *El rediseño del perfil del Estado*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
Paugam, Serge
2000 *Le salarié de la précarité*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
Salgado, Paula Dinorah
2011 "El trabajo en la industria de la indumentaria: una aproximación a partir del caso argentino." *Trabajo y Sociedad* 15 (18): 59–68.
Salud, Claudia
2007 *Las trabajadoras del subte, protagonistas de cambios: Una aproximación sobre la situación laboral de las mujeres en el subterráneo de Buenos Aires (1981–2004)*. Buenos Aires: Desde el Subte.
Ventrici, Patricia
2009 "Organización sindical, práctica gremial y activismo de base en el subterráneo de Buenos Aires." Master's thesis, CEIL-PIETTE/CONICET/Universidad de Buenos Aires.
Vocos, Federico
2007 "Enfrentando la ofensiva empresaria: la construcción del anteproyecto de convenio colectivo por los trabajadores del subte." Paper presented at the Eighth Congress of the Asociación Argentina de Especialistas en Estudios del Trabajo, Buenos Aires.
Womack, John, Jr.
2007 *Posición estratégica y fuerza obrera: Hacia una nueva historia de los movimientos obreros*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.