

# Uniendo lo que el Capital Divide

## *Labor-community unite in an unequal Northern Greater Buenos Aires*

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**Rodolfo Elbert**, originally from Chaco, Argentina, currently lives in Buenos Aires. The paper is based on his Ph.D. dissertation in Sociology at the University of

Wisconsin-Madison. Fieldwork was supported by the NSF-DDRIG, the WAGE initiative, and Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian Studies Program, UW-Madison. A detailed analysis of union activism in the plant described here can be found in "Activismo sindical y territorio en un periodo de reactivación de la protesta gremial en la Argentina", *Revista Quid 16, Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani*, 2012. Elbert is currently a CONICET-funded Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) and teaches Sociology at UBA.

THERE IS AN ONGOING DEBATE among scholars and activists about the possibilities of organized labor as a force of resistance to increasing social inequality: is the labor movement capable of leading the struggles for social justice in a globalized world? In order to understand labor's prospects it is important to study strategies that unions develop to include groups that have been historically marginalized from the labor movement. In Latin America, the question is whether or not unions are developing relations of solidarity with organizations of informal workers, because the typical country in the region employs 70% of the labor force informally.

In Argentina, informality affected an average of 48% of the employed labor force between 2004 and 2010. Given high levels of informality and the low intensity of activism in the recent past, it seemed unlikely that a militant labor movement could emerge. However, labor revitalization did happen after 2003, and unions are again the main organizers of social protests. The combination of labor revitalization and persistent informality provides an ideal setting to ask if there are union strategies beyond the workplace that estab-

lish relations of solidarity between formal and informal workers.

This article presents evidence of a successful alliance between formal workers employed in a meatpacking plant and residents of adjacent neighborhoods in Northern Gran (Greater) Buenos Aires. After describing the solidarity actions, I identify the characteristics of this case that help to explain the alliance, based on a comparison with strategies of unions in nearby factories. Preliminary evidence suggests that the existence of a grassroots democratic union is a necessary condition for inclusive union strategies. The scale of relations varies according to the geographical pattern of workers' housing.

### **The Factory and the Neighborhoods**

This paper uses evidence from interviews and participant observation focusing on relations between formal and informal workers in a city in Northern Gran Buenos Aires. The city is located in the Province of Buenos Aires, around 40 kilometers north to the city of Buenos Aires. The focus of the study is a portion of one city that

includes the meatpacking plant and two adjacent neighborhoods. The majority of neighborhood residents are part of a broadly defined working class, with a high proportion of unemployed and informal workers. Because of the combination of high informality among residents and the new labor activism in the factories, this location provides a good scenario to study changing relations between formal and informal workers during labor revitalization.

The meat packing plant employs 700 workers, being one of the biggest employers in the Argentinean meat industry. The factory regime is a variation of what Burawoy calls “localistic despotism”, characterized by the imposition rather than the negotiation of production policies. It is localistic because most workers are recruited in the adjacent neighborhoods. Recruitment happens through the political networks of the ruling Peronist party and social networks linking workers with lower management.

A corrupt shop floor union has been a key element of despotic localism in the past. The hegemony of the corrupted union ended in 2008, when a grassroots group won the union election. This group is part of a broader movement for union democracy in Argentina, which has been defined as *Sindicalismo de base* (grassroots unionism). In the plant, the grassroots group includes workers with past experience of activism in the union movement and the left as well workers with no activist experience. Since the grassroots group is in office, there has been an increasing activism based

on democratic decision making processes during labor conflicts.

Within the workplace, the grassroots group challenged the company’s nonstandard work arrangements and despotic policies. Beyond the workplace, it challenged the clientelistic networks through actions of solidarity with neighborhood organizations. In the pages below I analyze two of these campaigns.

### **Labor Solidarity to Community Activism**

The union involvement in a land occupation demanding social housing provides a good example of workers’ solidarity with the struggles of neighborhood residents. In 2010, a group of residents occupied a public lot in one of the adjacent neighborhoods. One of the persons that was at the center of the occupation was Martin (a pseudonym), a union activist from the plant who was also a long-time resident.

On multiple occasions the occupiers raised demands during the meetings of the district’s board, and Martin was the leading voice of the group. On one occasion, he confronted the neighborhood’s peronist boss who was vice president of the board. As he recalled in an interview:

“... I knew her from the *barrio* and from the meatpacking plant. At some point in the meeting she said ‘I have helped a lot of people to get a job in the meatpacking plant.’ So I replied ‘... don’t be shameless. How many people have you helped?’ And she said: ‘A lot. More than

100.’ So I told her, ‘Yes, you help them, but for how long can they keep their jobs? You help them in, but after two months they are jobless again. You never helped anyone. I have worked in the meatpacking plant for a long time.’ I don’t mind telling them the truth. When I got to the board I said ‘I’m a union representative at the meatpacking plant.’ And I also told her once, ‘If you want to talk to the company’s manager about me, just do it. I’m not afraid of you or him . . .’”

Thus Martin emphasized his identity as union representative and occupier, confronting the party boss on both fronts.

Other union activists and workers provided sustained support to the occupiers. During the occupation, their actions of solidarity included participating in the weekly distribution of flyers, providing meat for the meals and helping with fundraising efforts. They were present during key events, such as resistance to a police expulsion threat on day 5, a road blockade the day after the expulsion and various public demonstrations.

Union activists explained to me why they got involved in the land occupation. Most workers live in the neighborhoods that surround the plant, but also many of the neighborhood residents currently work (or have worked) in the meatpacking plant. In addition, the meatpackers’ solidarity is the result of the political orientation of the grassroots union, which aims to unite neighbors and workers. They support the occupation be-

cause they think it is a fair demand, but also because in the future this might win them the neighbors' support to their workplace struggles.

### Community Involvement in Workplace Struggles

I could also see relations of solidarity linking the union and the local community during workplace conflicts. One instance of this solidarity was present during a labor conflict in 2011, after the company laid off a group of subcontracted workers.

The struggle started with a week-long strike and blockade of the plant. Workers organized intermittent blockades of adjacent avenues, two blockades of a highway, one demonstration in the city and a music festival. During most of these actions, workers relied on the solidarity of different unions from the area, but also from neighbors and neighborhood organizations. For example, during the music festival, there were two *cumbia* bands formed by young neighbors, and members of the neighborhood's *bachilleratos populares* (adult education centers) helped collecting food and money for the striking workers.

When entering the public arena, workers portrayed themselves as both workers and neighbors.

“They should pay more attention to us. This conflict affects the 600 families of the workers. But it also affects all the *barrios* that surround the meatpacking plant. That's because at least half

of those who live in these *barrios* are currently working for the Frigorifico, or have at some point worked here. And they all know the awful working conditions and the hyper exploitation that has been going on in this plant for more than 40 years. We finally stood up against these conditions, and we won't surrender until we win . . .”

*TV interview of union activist*

Workers also communicated about their conflict through a one-page flyer distributed in the nearby neighborhoods and during large public events. The flyer had an important impact in the district and won the workers a meeting with the mayor. After the meeting, public officials said that “these workers are citizens of our district” and journalists pointed out that “this conflict affects so many families because many workers actually live in our district.” Although the mayor didn't provide any help to the workers, the meeting itself is evidence that the meatpackers succeeded in their strategy of taking the labor conflict outside the workplace and into the community.

In the subsequent weeks, the meatpackers forced the company to re-hire part of the laid-off workers and all workers got a payment that the company owed them. During this conflict, meatpackers combined actions of protest within the workplace with an effort to take the conflict into the community. This effort was based on their self-presentation as both workers and neighbors and in the different strategies to communicate their problems to

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community residents. The geographical focus of their actions was the nearby neighborhoods, where most workers live.

### Conclusion

Many authors suggest that the possibility of a new labor upsurge that confronts capital's offensive depends once again on the alliances that labor movements establish to broaden their constituency. In Argentina, meatpackers' grassroots strategies show how organized labor can successfully join broader popular sectors in the struggle for social change. What are the conditions that explain the success of this inclusive union strategy?

My research compares the meatpackers' strategies with those of workers in two factories located nearby. The comparison has allowed the identification of variables that explain variation in the orientation and outcome of strategies:

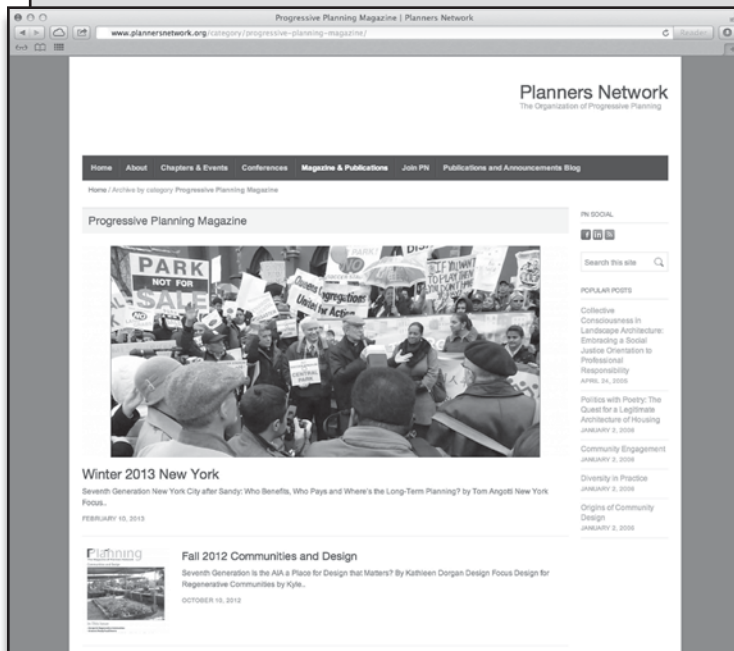
| Case              | Workforce Housing Pattern | Organizational logic of union | Type/scale of strategy |
|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Meatpacking plant | Concentration             | Democratic                    | Inclusive/Local        |
| Food processing   | Dispersion                | Democratic                    | Inclusive/Regional     |
| Car manufacturer  | Dispersion                | Bureaucratic                  | Exclusive/—            |

In this three-way comparison, the emergence of grassroots democratic unions appears as a necessary condition for inclusive strategies. However, the scale of the strategies depends on the geographical distribution of workers' housing. In the meatpacking plant, the activism focused on the nearby neighborhoods because most of the workers live there. The grassroots union of the food processing plant, on the other hand, oriented the alliance-building efforts to broader Northern Gran Buenos Aires because of workers' residential dispersion. These cases indicate that, even in an unfavorable environment of degraded work and corrupt unions, militant *sindicalismo de base* can build power and forge successful alliances with working class communities.

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