



## Employee Voice in Emerging Economies

The Constant and Continuous Voice of Workers in Argentina

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# THE CONSTANT AND CONTINUOUS VOICE OF WORKERS IN ARGENTINA

Maurizio Atzeni

## ABSTRACT

*It could be argued that in Argentina, workers' voice has never been silenced. In a legislative system protecting workers and politically and legally empowering trade unions, these organisations have historically represented workers. Voice however has never been limited to institutionalised and organisational forms. It has often exploded in informal ways out of workers' experiences of the precariousness of their labour processes and of the contradictions generated between this and formal voice and representation. But it has also emerged in novel forms, through the occupation of factories, roads and public places, in moments of deep economic crisis or among groups of informally employed workers.*

*The case of Argentina certainly calls for a broader understanding of voice tied to the idea of voice as a socially and politically mediated process, through which formal and informal channels of voice can be alternatively created, destroyed and recreated.*

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*The paper attempts to trace these multiple forms of voice in the recent social history of Argentina using ethnographic research conducted by the author.*

**Keywords:** Argentina; formal and informal voice; precarious workers; class and voice; voice and economic crisis

## INTRODUCTION

Apart from hyper managerialist and rhetorical HRM approaches advocating employee involvement, voice in Argentina is an unknown concept in the field of labour relations, at both the academic and practitioner level. This neglect should not be surprising given the historical and political roots of the concept in the Anglo-American tradition.<sup>1</sup> However, in contrast with other non-English-speaking countries in the Global South, at particular times in history, voice has found expression in Argentina in similar ways to the experiences of many countries in post-war Europe.

This similarity has been particularly evident in regard to the central role given to trade unions as the *par excellence* voice of workers in the workplace and at societal level. For decades, trade unions have embodied in Argentina the means through which workers could balance management power in the factory and obtain social citizenship through recognition of individual and collective labour rights. While changes and transformations in the world of work, in the production structure and adverse market cycles have altered the effectiveness and reach of trade unions' collective voice in Argentina, they still remain powerful actors in industrial relations and at the political level. In this sense, the pluralist 'representative participation approach' to voice that used to be common in many European countries before the 1980s has been and continues to represent, to a certain extent, a model in Argentina, although implemented in a context with local, socio-historical peculiarities. This model has been demonstrated in the last 10 years after the 2001 crisis, which has seen a renewed role for trade unions as workers' representative voice in collective bargaining, tripartite concertations and government's interlocutors in elaborating new labour policy and legislation.

Voice is a broad umbrella concept that has included often conflicting visions and meanings (Wilkinson, Donaghey, Dundon, & Freeman, 2014) and that involves different political stances, with pluralist and radical views,

and is thus certainly open to broader issues of power and contestation (Ackers & Johnstone, 2015). However, voice remains, across its wide ideological spectrum, attached to organisational and institutionalised perspectives. This notion is particularly evident in the pluralist ‘representative participation’ approach, both in its pre-eighties collective bargaining version and in its more contemporary variations, such as partnership (Johnstone, 2010). But voice is not alien to critical, left perspectives focusing on militancy and resistance as the ‘real’ voices of workers. Similar critiques of partnership also exist (Danford, Durbin, & Richardson, 2014; Kelly, 2004; Upchurch, Danford, Tailby, & Richardson, 2008) or calls for broader union renewal (Fairbrother & Yates, 2013; Simms, Holgate, & Heery, 2013). Representative and more adversarial perspectives on voice have all remained attached to a very old conceptual framework that reduces workers’ collectivism to trade unionism and negotiated bargaining. This historical reduction, which has given rise to the field of industrial relations and the sociology of work (Atzeni, 2014), has had a direct effect on how voice has been intended. On the one hand, framing voice within structure, systems and institutions with ‘standard employees’ has hidden from view the informal social processes through which voice is constituted and expressed in today’s workplaces, characterised by an increasing diversity of contractual relations and workers’ identities (Greene, 2015). On the other hand, this framing has led to a virtual denial of the agency and class dimension of workers’ voice. Across the social sciences, there is now a growing body of literature, particularly in developing countries, that focuses on the micro contexts of collective interests and voice formation (Agarwala, 2013; Chun, 2009; De la Garza, 2011; Gunawardana, 2014; Jenkins, 2013; Lazar, 2012; Ngai, 2005; Pangsapa, 2007; Taylor, D’Cruz, Noronha, & Scholarios, 2009). However, the importance of these micro social processes and of the material conditions that have generated them have rarely been seriously considered by the institutionalised voice perspective. As Gunawardana (2014, p. 4) notes, despite labour process and historical and ethnographic accounts of resistance and the many forms in which workers can and have exercised voice, ‘when voice is conceptualised only as a means of acting within management/state structures of voice, workers agency recedes in importance, giving an inaccurate picture of voice in the employment relationship’.

In general, within the context of a retreat of trade unions and their diminished role as an effective and general voice channel (Bieler & Lindberg, 2011), the debate on voice has increasingly moved from addressing broader policy issues related to social justice and inclusion, to narrower debates ‘in favour or against partnership’ (Ackers, 2010). A less

Eurocentric perspective, as per the one presented in this paper, can help to recover, together with an opening up of informal and non-standard forms of voice, some of these broader social issues. Understanding voice in these broader terms would also probably make more evident the positive link existing between strong working people politics and more effective workers' voice in workplaces and societies.

For the reasons outlined above, despite the importance of the role of trade unions in Argentina as a general voice for workers, it would be a conceptual and historical reduction to limit workers' voice to trade unions/unionism and to institutional regulations of union voice. The recent history of the country, with its economic ups and downs and consequent social instability, provides enough evidence of multiple forms through which workers have made their voice heard at different times. Together with a tradition of workplace, grassroots voice in the formal sector, articulated through legally established shop-floor structures of representation (so called *comisiones internas*), processes of organisation to give voice to groups of workers in the informal/precarious sector are constantly emerging. And, there have been cases, particularly in moments of severe economic crises, in which, in the absence of traditional voice channels, workers have reacted by occupying spaces (factories, roads, public spaces), thus creating new channels of voice.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on these multiple forms and dynamics of workers' collective voice in different socio-economic contexts can help give insights into the constant, continuous, albeit informal and atomised voice, that workers as a collective group within society and the producers' class within capitalism have been able to provide.

Having this broader picture of voice in mind, the paper starts with a brief characterisation of the institutional and legislative system that regulates employment and workers' representation in Argentina. This helps to identify in the section 'Institutional Workers' Representation and Voice', the role of trade unions within the formal channels of collective voice and how this can create limits or opportunities for other forms of workers' voice within the formal sector of the economy. In the section 'Voice and Organisation Building among Unorganised and Precarious Workers', I will explore the dynamics of organisation and voice among informally employed and unorganised workers with a focus on three specific organisations in the city of Buenos Aires, drawing from recent fieldwork. In the section 'Voice in the Context of the Economic Crisis: The Movement of the Unemployed and Workers' Self-Managed Factories', I will explore other experiences of voice and organisation that have developed in the context of economic crisis: the cases of the movement of the unemployed and of the

workers' self-managed factories. Together, these sections outline how socio-economic, historical and structural factors have shaped the creation and recreation of voice in Argentina and help to support two arguments. The first is that the voice debate needs to go beyond organisations and institutions, and engage with collective processes of interest; voice and class formation in societies. The second is that to avoid pessimism as to the extent of the effectiveness of voice, research should be less Anglo-American centred and more concerned with voice formation in the informal and precarious sectors of the economies. Precarious workers were those that trade unions starting organising at the end of the 19th century with the beginning of the industrial era, and precariousness is what characterises workers' daily lives in both the Global North and South.

## INSTITUTIONAL WORKERS' REPRESENTATION AND VOICE

Under Argentinean legislation, trade unions have formal monopoly of workers' representation. This monopoly power is a consequence of the fact that the law recognises just one trade union in each sector of the formal economy as the legal subject with representative power in collective bargaining, conflict and negotiations (what's called *personeria gremial*). This monopoly is further strengthened by unions' management of funds for health and social services (the so called *Obras Sociales*), constituted through a system of compulsory contribution from government, workers and employers. In addition to this legal monopoly, legislation provides formal local channels of voice in shop-floors and establishments (*comisiones internas*) and gives protection to shop-floor delegates and union representatives against discriminatory employer practices (*foro gremial*). This legislative framework and an advanced system of individual labour rights protection dates back to Peron's political role and presidencies during the period 1943–1952. This framework has remained firmly in place until today and has for decades, represented the strength of the Argentinean labour movement offering effective channels of voice to workers at both the political and national level, through the identification of many trade unions and workers with a pro-labour stance within the Peronist movement, as well as at the workplace level, through the *comisiones internas*. The vertical, bureaucratised and prone to compromise union structure, results from its legal monopoly of representation and from its political/institutional

linkages with Peronists' governments and state apparatuses, and contrasts with the bread and butter conditions and realities of work in an unstable labour market, which have often produced grassroots mobilisation and protests, even in times of dictatorship and political repression (Iñigo Carrera, 2007; Pozzi, 1988). In this sense, workers' voice has never been silenced in Argentina.

Within a context in which trade union action has historically been linked to politics, given the role of trade unions in the Peronist movement and the strong Peronism/Anti-Peronism polarisation of Argentine's politics, the introduction of neo-liberalism, starting with the liberalisation policies implemented by the military regime in the years 1976–1983 and expanded further by the massive privatisations and labour flexibility of the 1990s, posed new challenges to workers and conflicting relations between different forms of voice. Mixing pragmatism, ideology and politics, trade unions have been able to survive three decades of neo-liberal policies, defending their organisational strength and thus their institutional voice role for formally employed workers. The devastating effects of neo-liberalism on the Argentinean working class, including increased precariousness and informality, have left the majority of workers powerless from an institutional viewpoint. However, new channels of voice in the informal sector are continuously created and are starting to consolidate in organisational representative forms, as we will see in the next section.

The post 2001 crisis has demonstrated the role of trade unions as 'official' workers' voice, but at the same time the re-emergence of 'from below' forms of voice, has contested unions' leaderships. The economic recovery that started in 2003, and that has been present with some ups and downs during the whole period until 2015, has reduced unemployment and has promoted employment growth in many sectors of the formal economy, particularly those related to consumption goods (food production, retail and distribution, white goods), transport, automotive and specialised mechanical industry and in construction (Kosacoff, 2010). This growth and the government's emphasis on national collective bargaining and concertation as the main instruments to produce 'growth with inclusion', have revitalised the role of trade unions and their central federations in the management of the industrial relations system. While changes to flexibility rules and arrangements, introduced largely in the 1990s have rarely been the centre of attention (Marticorena, 2014), workers' real salaries have improved, reaching, on average, the 2001 pre-devaluation<sup>3</sup> levels despite inflation, but with some groups of workers strategically located to be able to achieve better gains (for instance, in the transport sector). In recent years, a split

within each of the two trade union confederations (CGT and CTA), between pro and anti-government political factions has led to several general strikes which while political in nature, have raised complaints common to many categories of workers and unified political forces within the labour movement (e.g. casualisation and precariousness of contracts, elimination of the income taxes for wages below a certain threshold, wage increases at inflation level). In addition to this, coinciding with new rounds of collective bargaining, workers in sectors such as public education or transport have led extended strikes and confrontations, thus adding, in line with the labour movement tradition in Argentina, a mobilisation dimension to institutional voice.

Has this renewed role and importance of trade unions in the formal sector of the economy been able to effectively channel workers' voice? Evidence shows it did this, but partly. Reducing the view of voice to formal channels of representation masks the reality of the continuous, albeit informal struggle that has been going on in many workplaces in the recent decades in Argentina as well as the fact that the achievements of trade unions have been based on the pressure of these struggles in addition to formalised mechanisms of representation. The legal role given to internal commissions as structures representing workers' voice in the establishments, has often offered a more effective channel of voice for workers. The re-emergence of the internal commissions, a historical trend in Argentina's labour movement history (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2009), has indeed probably been the most distinctive element in the revitalisation of the Argentine labour movement in the last decade (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2013), often associated with processes of trade unions democratisation, as with the famous case of the Buenos Aires underground (Atzeni, forthcoming; Bouvet, 2008). The reframing of voice at the level of internal commissions offered a more democratic, direct and unfiltered mechanism through which workers' complaints, such as working conditions, rhythms of production, salary levels or disciplinary issues could be resolved. Internal commissions represent, numerically speaking, just a fraction of organised workplaces, being present in about one tenth of, mostly big, productive establishments in the private sector. Moreover, their effective role as direct expressions of workers' voice remains subordinated, and there is room to manoeuvre via the official union representative in the sector. But partly, the need to cope with the widespread flexibility and precariousness of work, a characteristic of both the private and public sector, and partly the need to cope with growing levels of inflation (currently at about 30% yearly), impose wage negotiation and renegotiation almost the whole year around and stimulate the



formation of often informal, 'from below' groups of workers demanding change (Abal Medina & Diana Menéndez, 2011), a characteristic typical of unorganised and precarious sector workers, as we will see in the next section.

In summary, many facts can be mentioned to demonstrate how voice has been created among workers represented by trade unions. A first set of facts have concerned the strengthening and use of existing legislation regulating the exercise of voice. Collective bargaining, tripartite agreements and trade union participation in the elaboration of labour and social policies have been reactivated and have become pivotal to the government's industrial relations strategy. This pro-labour government stance has gone hand-in-hand with the political support offered by the main trade union confederations to the Peronist governments in power. This support has given unions the possibility to exercise, up to a certain extent, political influence at State level and thus making their voice more effective. These positive improvements in the institutional, regulated sphere of voice have been reinforced by the renewal of processes of voice formation from the 'bottom-up'. Workplace struggles against precariousness and flexibility, and for health and security at work and wage increases, characterise the everyday experience of the work for many groups of workers, and have repeatedly taken place in sectors with formal workers' representation but outside the institutional sphere, signifying and enlarging the scope and effectiveness of existing channels of voice.

## **VOICE AND ORGANISATION BUILDING AMONG UNORGANISED AND PRECARIOUS WORKERS**

The focus on voice and organisation building among workers in the unorganised and precarious sector of the economy helps to see the social process nature of voice and the continuous line existing between informal and formal channels of voice. The combination of specific material conditions (organisation of labour processes, the geography of production, the skill requirements) affecting workers' everyday experience, and the institutional framework and socio-political context existing at a certain point in time, are all factors influencing the process of voice formation.

In this section, I thus want to highlight the importance of focusing on these processes by drawing from findings of an ethnographic study of two cases of precarious informal workers collective voice formation in the

context of the service economy of Buenos Aires. The first case, that of motorbike mail and parcel delivery workers, known in Argentina as *moto-queros*, concerns a group of workers in extremely precarious work including: questionable health and security conditions; and, the fact that they are employed by a myriad of small agencies performing their work across the geography of the city in a very individualised way based on the very nature of the service provided. One could argue that they are without basic material conditions for building collective voice. However, a closer analysis would reveal that despite the absence of a physically identifiable workplace and individualised employment relations, voice has found spaces of collective expression. At traffic lights, in public squares, at common bars, at a friend's mechanical workshop, the collective suffering caused by poor working conditions became a collective voice, leading to collective decision making and demands. Organising in 2001 in a moment of deep economic crisis and social mobilisation, for these workers, voice was not a conceptual model or a framework but rather a real and noisy expression of anger of working people rebelling through direct actions and on the streets, and by occupying government buildings. It was not channelled through trade unions or other institutional channels; it was non-existent in the sector and in general disarray at that time of economic crisis. Through a clear call to the State's authorities' responsibilities, voice was framed as a social struggle.

Compared to this case, in which an effective form of voice was created not just out of informality but also informally channelled, the second case analysed that of specialised sound and video technicians working in big shows and music events, and stands out as an attempt to formalise informal voice through the creation of a new trade union. From a labour process point of view, the key role is performed by technicians in the production of the event; the cooperation they have to establish for the success of the event, their proximity to the work and the sharing of precarious working and salary conditions give them considerable strategic power, thus offering material conditions for making their collective voice effective. However, the relative autonomy and creativity that each of them enjoy in performing their work, the extended subcontracting and segmentation of the sector, the increasing labour competition, a by-product of the development of new easy to handle audio and video production software, their assignment/event tied to a common work experience, and the individualised ethic that pervades within the sector, have made it difficult for these workers to find spaces and channels for collective voice. Organising in current times in a context of relative economic growth and stability, with the government's discourse supporting the creation of genuine jobs in the formal

sector and its support for a renewed ‘representative participation’ approach to voice, technicians had to go for a more mediated and negotiated way of obtaining voice. They have thus adopted a two stage strategy to achieve effective voice centred on focusing and defending their profession and professionalism through the creation of a trade union (for a discussion Ackers historical argument, in Ackers & Johnstone, 2015). The first stage aimed to create spaces for informal collective voice by providing free training and development on new audio and video techniques and use of consoles, workshops on health and security at work and labour legislation, but also specific advice to groups of technicians organising at local level (this is an ongoing process considering the levels of inflation). The second stage aimed at encapsulating these informal expressions of collective voice into the trade union form. This is, in the view of many of them, and considering the specific Argentinean legislation favouring workers’ organisation in trade unions, the best way to make voice effective in the long term. However, differences remain within this group of workers as to the effectiveness of a step-by-step strategy in obtaining recognition, with some arguing for a more conflictual approach.

The recent experience of the *Confederacion de Trabajadores de la Economia Popular* (CTEP, Confederation of Workers of the Popular Economy) somehow mediates and fuses these two different approaches to obtaining effective voice for informal workers together. The Confederation aims to offer trade union type recognition to associations of independent workers organising within the so called popular economy; that part of the economy made up ‘of workers dispossessed of their labour and social rights by the neo-liberal wave’, as stated by the Confederation (<http://ctepargentina.org/nosotros>). The Confederation includes recyclers, agricultural workers, small artisans, street and market vendors, workers employed in social programmes, delivery workers, producer cooperatives, workers of recovered factories, domestic workers and all other kind of ‘invisible’ work. The Confederation helps to raise the visibility of the struggles faced by these group of workers, who because of their peripheral position in the chain of value production, do not often have a direct employer to blame and need to exert pressure on the State at local and central level for improving their conditions. To represent workers that operate within the invisibility of a parallel economy, the Confederation thus needs to frame worker voice both in terms of demanding the extension of traditional employees’ rights to fair wages and conditions (asking for the opening of collective bargaining rounds as with other sectors of the economy and for *personeria gremial*), and, in terms of involving the State in the support of

alternative production and economic circuits (creation of popular markets to control inflation, creation of a Ministry of Popular Economy, land concessions to direct producers).

The three examples of informal workers' organisation clearly demonstrate the social process and nature of voice. Voice in this context appears as the negotiated, intermediated and temporarily variable but always lively outcome of the clash of social and productive forces, of workers' agency with specific, structural, socio-economic conditions. Economic instability and capitalist crises, representing a direct attack to employment conditions, always alter established patterns and put in evidence the dynamic, multi-layered and variable expression of voice. In peripheral countries like Argentina, with its marked social contrast and inequality, and with its rich history of workers' organisation and politicisation, workers' voice has continuously emerged.

### **VOICE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: THE MOVEMENT OF THE UNEMPLOYED AND WORKERS' SELF-MANAGED FACTORIES**

In the context of the IMF led privatisation and neo-liberal policies adopted by Argentina in the 1990s and in the recession and economic crisis starting in 1996, which led to the sovereign debt default and social unrests of December 2001, alongside traditional union voice,<sup>4</sup> two peculiar expressions of workers' voice have occupied the social and political scenario of Argentina: the movement of the unemployed and that of workers' self-managed factories.

Both experiences have attracted the attention of social movement and labour researchers internationally for their prefigurative and potentially revolutionary nature and for the innovative strategies used (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007; Atzeni & Vieta, 2013; Dinerstein, 2007, 2001; Ozarow & Croucher, 2014; Ranis, 2010; Sitrin, 2012; Vieta, forthcoming). From the broader voice perspective adopted in this paper, the most interesting insights deriving from these experiences lie in showing how the changing socio-economic conditions, the closing down of factories and the changing landscape of production, destroy existing channels of voice just to almost contemporaneously recreate, within the same contexts, new forms and expressions of voice.

The movement of the unemployed has certainly represented one of the most important social movement protests led by workers across Argentina during the 1990s and early 2000s. It was characterised by the use of road-blocks as its main form of action and it emerged initially among public sector workers in response to the redundancies and unemployment produced by the process of privatisation of public enterprises. In particular localities, as in the cases of the oil producing town of Cutral-có and Plaza Huincul in the province of Neuquén, the closure of factories and producing facilities that followed the privatisation of the national oil company YPF, represented a collapse for the local economy and led to massive protest and popular uprisings by unemployed workers and local community alliances. These alliances were to dominate the social scenario of Argentina at the end of the 1990s when the deepening of recession, the worsening of the monetary crisis and new measures of austerity were adopted by the government. In the midst of this crisis, with massive unemployment, informalisation and marginalisation, dispossessed urban workers' communities forged new organisations using the roadblocks as a tool of resistance. Empowered by the struggles, these new organisations achieved a substantial negotiating role vis-a-vis local and national state authorities, granting the implementation of employment plans and programmes and access and provision to essential services (Dinerstein, 2001). Whereas the crisis had destroyed production facilities and jobs, making workers invisible and not easily representable through traditional trade unions, representative power and voice shifted from the workplace to the territory and from more formalised and institutionally regulated forms to the physical reality of social struggle. The improved economic conditions and dynamism of the labour market after 2003, created new jobs and waged employment across the formal/informal divide, and greatly reduced the voice and representative role of the unemployed workers' movement putting trade unions back at the centre. However, the co-optation of many of the movement leaders into the Peronist governments of Kirchner/Fernandez that have dominated in Argentina over the last 10 years, and the resilience of some territorial organisations, has certainly shaped certain policies and practices of inclusion and redistribution adopted by the government (Dinerstein, 2008).

Forged within the same context of crisis, the movement of workers' self-managed factories represents a different, potentially radical way of making workers' voice effective and at the same time, a social reality that condenses and makes real many of the theoretical and historical debates associated with workers' voice and participation in organisational scholarship (Ackers, 2010; Cheney, 2002), in Marxist theory (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007;

Lebowitz, 2003) and in the sociology of work (Ozarow & Croucher, 2014). Facing the threat of factory closures that the collapse of the economy in December 2001 accelerated, and in the absence of opportunities in the labour market, hundreds of factories have been occupied and run under self-management by workers. Seen initially as emergency measures to keep their jobs and the possibilities of satisfying basic needs, self-managed factories have represented, for the workers involved, a constantly stimulating, even if sometimes frustrating, learning process in the implementation of the principles of equality and democratic participation (Vieta, 2010). Since their beginning, with their emphasis on the collective assembly as the centre of decision making and the accountability of worker delegates to this, self-managed factories have been expressions of direct democracy, proposing an alternative, direct way of representing and organising workers voices that go beyond trade unionism. At the same time, workers' direct involvement as organisers of the whole production and administrative process have given room to democratic decision making mechanisms to guarantee workers' participation at all levels. Finally, the collective experience of struggle in the recovery of factories, the initially limited income produced and workers' roles as collective owners/producers, has led many self-managed groups of workers to adopt the equality of salaries/equality of functions in production as the basis of the group's economic interrelations. Once we consider other historical experiences of workers' control and self-management, participatory and democratic mechanisms to empower workers repeatedly appear (Azzellini & Ness, 2011). However, what is probably most striking behind these democratic 'eruptions' is that these reappear time and time again as grassroots workers' responses to the inability of the capitalist's governance structure to provide basic satisfaction of needs. In this sense workers' democracy and participation seem to be the most natural response to rebalance the structure of capitalist relations, a real governance alternative from a workers' point of view (Atzeni, 2012).

As the history of the cooperatives movement worldwide has shown, the competitive market dynamics in which producers' cooperatives are enmeshed, influence the extent to which democratic participatory processes are effectively implemented in workers' run production. The fact that workers need to compete with traditional business organisations, that by nature are not really democratic, inevitably shapes internal decision making processes reducing participation. The acceptance of market competitive mechanisms is certainly a real limit that the system imposes to workers' own independent decisions and this, in the case of Argentina has been analysed in detail elsewhere (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007). But this limitation

notwithstanding, all historical experiences with workers' self-management, with their emphasis on workers' direct democracy, certainly represented a real empowerment and advancement for workers. These radical experiences thus pose crucial questions that should be at the centre of the voice debate.

## CONCLUSIONS

The paper started by arguing that workers' voice has never been silenced in Argentina. By starting in this somewhat provocative manner, the intention was to highlight, from the beginning, the importance of the material dimension of voice formation. Alongside this, voice was framed as a concept for understanding management-workers relations' within the employment relationship, whereby voice in its concrete form, is the outcome of specific social relations. These social relations are structured around material conditions (type, nature and intensity of work, working environment, skills required for the job) and power relations; the latter set by the dynamics of capitalist profitability. Through contemporary and historical references, it has been possible to link forms of voice to different socio-economic and institutional contexts, different labour processes, and different geographical spaces (the workplace, the community, public spaces) and to see how all these factors have shaped voice in its practical reality. In this sense, through the different sections of the paper, we have been able to see how voice has been institutionalised through trade unions, the 'representative participation' approach, but also how voice has been expressed by these very same institutions in different ways depending on workers' pressure from below in the workplace. Similarly, ethnographic research has shown the existence of continuous processes of workers' self-organisation among unorganised and precarious workers leading to various forms of voice at the workplace and broader level of organisation, thus demonstrating evidence of the role of workers' agency in voice formation. Finally, a focus on voice in moments of economic crisis has provided evidence of innovative, direct and more democratic forms of exercising and channelling voice whose empirical manifestations address broader societal issues, coming close to the radical approaches of voice and participation.

The experiences of voice sketched in this paper seem then to converge on the idea that voice has never been silenced in Argentina, despite adverse conditions, and thus let us see the possibilities of workers' collective voice with more optimism. This is certainly not just because Argentina in its

history has gone through sometimes dramatic socio-economic changes or for its political institutional specificity. This has certainly played a role and international comparisons show consistent differences among countries in terms of employment relations. For the study of voice however, the most important point that the examples in the paper highlight, is the need to look at this through a class/agency lens, going thus beyond the traditional, institutional and organisational conceptualisation of voice. A class lens would allow focusing on the real factors contributing to the formation of voice and portray this as a contested terrain of struggle in which broader socio-economic and political issues come into play, alternatively, creating, destroying and recreating voice. Similarly, re-framing voice in class terms would help return to a serious engagement with the original social justice dimension of voice and thus frame a typical industrial relations issue within the broader social sciences.

Today, the precariousness of work across the North/South and the formal/informal divide and the absence of formal channels of representation and voice at the workplace, and more generally at the societal level are putting new pressures on workers, making the constructions of voice, in institutionalised or contested form, an urgent necessity.

## NOTES

1. In the United Kingdom, for instance, voice has featured in the academic and policy debate since the early experiments with profit sharing and employees consultation put forward by enlightened employers in the Victorian times and has continued to be central to government policies through the twentieth century (see [Ackers, 2010](#); [Ackers & Johnstone, 2015](#)).

2. In the paper I emphasise the idea of voice as a process constantly mediated by social and political processes result of class confrontation at workplace and society level. Focusing on these shifting contours of voice makes, in my view, the distinction between formal and informal channels of voice and between voice formation within the formal or informal sector of the economy, unnecessary in the context of this paper.

3. During the 1990s Argentina's neo-liberal government, as a measure to control inflation, attached the local currency to the dollar supporting a parity exchange rate. However, this was made possible just by further expanding the country's sovereign debt. The worsening of the economic and social crisis in the second half of the 1990s led the country to declare default on its debts and to devalue the local peso.

4. Despite a general union retreat, the period has witnessed widespread trade unions led resistance in particular sectors where privatisations were implemented and at general level with national strikes called by newly formed trade unions



confederations (CTA, *Congreso de los Trabajadores Argentinos* and MTA, *Movimiento de los trabajadores Argentinos*) in opposition to government's neo-liberal policies.

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