En nombre del hogar proletario: Engendering the 1917 Great Railroad Strike in Argentina

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Commenting on the enthusiasm that swept over Junín, a small town in the province of Buenos Aires, during the 1917 "great railroad strike," the socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* reported:

> Today's fervor has been even greater than in previous days. Over five thousand men and women assembled to hear the latest news. Later more than one thousand women rallied on the city streets, headed by a group of elderly railroaders. The huge crowd stationed on the sidewalks never stopped cheering these emancipated working-class women who demanded more bread for their homes.[1]

Throughout the country, the printed press informed the public about scenes such as this, underscoring the active involvement of working families and, in particular, the participation of women in Argentina's first general strike of rail-

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1. *La Vanguardia* (Buenos Aires), 1 Oct. 1917, p. 1. (Hereafter this newspaper will be cited as *LV*.)

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waymen, which brought the nation's rail traffic to a virtual standstill for over three weeks. The first official histories of railroad trade unions, however, almost completely overlooked female militancy.[2] To some extent, historical scholarship has proceeded in the same way.[3] Understandably, historiography has focused on railroad unions and the state, since the former called the strike and led negotiations with the companies and the national government. On September 24, 1917, La Fraternidad (LF, the association representing engineers and firemen), the Federación Obrera Ferrocarrilera (FOF, the Railway Workers' Federation, which united shopmen, traffic personnel, and track laborers), and the Asociación Argentina de Telegrafistas y Empleados Postales (AATEP, the Argentine Association of Telegraphers and Postal Workers) jointly called a general strike that engaged around 70,000 railwaymen from every trade.[4] This was indeed an unprecedented labor protest in Argentine history, and it is thus key for analyzing the ideology and organizational skills of the trade unions.

Far from being an isolated conflict, the great railroad strike was part of a cycle of labor mobilization that unfolded during the first presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916–1922). The leader of the Radical Party came into power as a result of his victory in the first national elections under mandatory universal male suffrage in Argentina. Even though the political opening made possible by the 1912 electoral reform law renewed popular expectations of social change, working-class families endured high rates of unemployment and falling standards of living due to the disruptive economic effects of the Great War. These were times of persistent labor unrest, as exemplified by the general strike in the city of Buenos Aires in January 1919 (known as the Tragic Week) and the rural agitation in Patagonia between 1920 and 1922. Thus the Yrigoyen administra-

2. Juan B. Chiti and Francisco Agnelli, *Cincuentenario de "La Fraternidad": Fundación, desarrollo, obra, 1887-20 de junio-1937* (Buenos Aires: Sociedad de Personal Ferroviario de Locomotoras "La Fraternidad," 1937); Manuel Fernández, *La Unión Ferroviaria a través del tiempo: Veinticinco años al servicio de un ideal, 1922–1947* (Buenos Aires, 1947); Jorge Larroca and Armando Vidal, *Rieles de lucha: Centenario de La Fraternidad, 1887-20 de junio-1987: Aporte para la historia del sindicalismo argentino* (Buenos Aires: Sociedad de Personal Ferroviario de Locomotoras "La Fraternidad," 1987), 64–65.

3. Ruth Thompson, "Organized Labour in Argentina: The Railway Unions to 1922" (DPhil diss., Oxford University, 1978); Heidi Goldberg, "Railroad Unionization in Argentina, 1912–1929: The Limitations of Working Class Alliance" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1979); Mónica Gordillo, *El movimiento obrero ferroviario desde el interior del país (1916–1922)* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1988). Of these authors, only Ruth Thompson mentions female solidarity with the 1917 local strikes.

4. *La Fraternidad* (Buenos Aires), Dec. 1918–Jan. 1919. (Hereafter this publication will be cited as *LF*.)

tion confronted an intricate dilemma. Despite its substantial middle-class support, it had to pursue moderate policies to reassure traditional elites. Yet at the same time it could not jeopardize the political favor of the working class, which eventually could incline to the Socialist Party, the Radicals' main electoral competitor in the largest Argentine cities.[5]

The great railroad strike signaled a turning point in the history of government intervention in labor affairs in Argentina. The Radical administration faced the challenge of mediating in a conflict between big companies (the majority of which were foreign-owned) and social sectors such as workers and agricultural and cattle producers, whose support the administration could not dismiss.[6] On September 24, 1917, the House of Representatives approved a uniform regulation of working conditions at railroad companies that was, however, repealed by the Senate. After harsh negotiations, on October 11, 1917, President Yrigoyen enacted this regulation by decree, advancing state control over labor affairs. In addition, the government ordered a 10 percent increase in wages of up to 300 pesos as well as a raise in railroad fares, meant to compensate the railroad firms for the ensuing higher labor costs. In exchange, both companies and workers were compelled to resume their activities on the government's terms. By the end of October, railways were once again working in an orderly fashion in all of Argentina.

Whereas the role of the trade unions and the government's strategy during the great railroad strike have been researched in detail, this article takes a fresh approach to this labor conflict by focusing instead on the collective action of working-class families. In dialogue with studies on Latin American labor history that deal with issues of everyday life, culture, and identity, I set out to unveil the leading role of families at the local level in this strike and the mani-

5. David Rock, *El radicalismo argentino, 1890–1930*, trans. Leandro Wolfson (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1977); Joel Horowitz, *Argentina's Radical Party and Popular Mobilization, 1916–1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2008); Ana Virginia Persello, *El Partido Radical: Gobierno y oposición, 1916–1943* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2004).

6. Rock, *El radicalismo argentino*; Paul B. Goodwin, *Los ferrocarriles británicos y la U. C. R., 1916–1930*, trans. Celso Rodríguez (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Bastilla, 1974); Ricardo Falcón and Alejandra Monserrat, "Estado, empresas, trabajadores y sindicatos," in *Nueva Historia Argentina*, vol. 6, *Democracia, conflicto social y renovación de ideas (1916–1930)*, ed. Ricardo Falcón (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2000), 151–94; Matthew B. Karush, *Workers or Citizens: Democracy and Identity in Rosario, Argentina (1912–1930)* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2002). Also on railroad unions and politics, see Joan L. Bak, "Labor, Community, and the Making of a Cross-Class Alliance in Brazil: The 1917 Railroad Strikes in Rio Grande do Sul," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (1998): 179–227.

fold forms of their political participation. In addition, I will take gender as a category of analysis for examining the cultural meanings of sexual difference that shaped both the political sociability of working-class families and the specific language of their claims.[7] For this purpose, I have looked at a broad sample of documentary sources. Aside from the labor publications *La Fraternidad*, the journal published by LF, *El Obrero Ferroviario*, issued by the FOF, and *La Organización Obrera*, edited by the Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA, Argentine Regional Workers' Federation), I have also reviewed the left-wing press, in particular the anarchist daily *La Protesta* and the socialist daily *La Vanguardia*. In addition, I have examined three major national newspapers of the time published in the city of Buenos Aires: *La Prensa* and *La Nación*—both critical of the government's stance—as well as the pro-government *La Época*. Various company sources, official records, and memoirs of labor militants have been taken into consideration as well.

To illustrate the leading role of women as strike organizers, this article begins by reconstructing working-class families' modes of collective action. Paradoxically, a general strike in an industry with virtually all male workers intensified the vibrant presence of women in the public realm. As I will demonstrate, female politics, combined of course with railroaders' rank-and-file activism, proved vital for keeping the strike alive during almost three weeks. Family mobilization indeed goes a long way in explaining the success of the railroad workers at drawing the attention of the authorities and winning the solidarity of local communities.

The second section of this study explores the demands that railway communities formulated on behalf of their families' well-being. In reviewing the state of labor history, Daniel James and John French have pointed out that "perhaps the greatest gap stems from our inability to adequately historicize and particularize our understanding of the gender ideologies and practices of the popular classes in Latin America."[8] In tune with this concern, I will examine how working-class families conceived the duties and rights assigned to men and women in both the public and domestic spheres. I contend that the first general railroad strike in Argentine history was a landmark in the making of the

7. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988); Heidi Tinsman, "A Paradigm of Our Own: Joan Scott in Latin American History," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008): 1357–74.

8. John D. French and Daniel James, "Squaring the Circle: Women's Factory Labor, Gender Ideology, and Necessity," in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 15.

railwayman as the male breadwinner capable of providing economic security to his family. And yet, since fighting for this ideal became associated—due to the very dynamics of the social protest—with female activism, this model of manhood did not necessarily reaffirm the cult of domesticity, the notion that women should seclude themselves in the private realm to fulfill their supposedly natural mission as mothers and guardians of their homes. On the contrary, the protest prompted an acknowledgment of working-class women's rights to self-expression and to the exercise of their civic liberties at a time when female suffrage in Argentina was still not granted.[9]

The last section of this article analyzes the representations of family activism in the printed press, examining in particular the gendered politics of socialists and anarchists. The press accounts of the 1917 strike turned into cultural battlegrounds for defining working-class respectability and gender roles. Even if a certain consensus was reached on the legitimacy of a work stoppage aimed at protecting the welfare of the workers' homes, a profound controversy arose regarding whether it was socially acceptable for families in general and women in particular to mobilize on behalf of their perceived rights. Thus the active participation of women in the protest opened a debate on gender roles that was almost as unprecedented as the strike itself.

By exploring these three interrelated issues, this study aims at demonstrating that the visibility and effectiveness of the railroad strike was largely due to family mobilization. The strength of the transport workers in collective action has been generally attributed to their involvement in an activity strategic for the Argentine export economy. As typical representatives of the labor aristocracy, their relatively powerful trade unions also contributed to their bargaining power vis-à-vis both the companies and the state. In addition, as Joel Horowitz has persuasively shown, railroaders developed a common identity out of their experience of belonging to a quite distinctive occupational community, which in turn made their unions particularly strong.[10]

Without underestimating these interpretations, I will argue that to fully comprehend labor politics in this conflict, it is crucial to recover female participation in the public realm as well as the gendered dimension of working-class communities. Labor historians have revised the assumption that modern

9. In Argentina, the law granting women suffrage in national elections was approved in September 1947.

10. Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), 101–17; Joel Horowitz, "Los trabajadores ferroviarios en la Argentina (1920–1943): La formación de una elite obrera," trans. Leandro Wolfson, *Desarrollo Económico* 25, no. 99 (1985): 421–46.

industrial protests were primarily a male domain. Numerous investigations into women's work in Latin America have convincingly documented women's dynamic involvement in factory strikes and their militancy in trade unions.[11] Moreover, several scholars have highlighted the relevance of female activism and the contributions of a gender perspective even in male-dominated sectors of the economy, as has Thomas Klubock in his study on the mining communities in twentieth-century Chile.[12] In tune with these recent findings, this article will contend that the fact that railroad companies in Argentina — as elsewhere — employed mostly male workers did not transform the 1917 strike into an exclusively male protest.

Women on Strike

A requisite for the development of agricultural exports and domestic markets, the national railroad system enjoyed a steady expansion in Argentina from 1880 to 1910 that was only halted during the crisis of 1890. By 1916, the country boasted a network of almost 34,000 km of tracks, and railways had transformed into complex companies led by professional managers, engaging over 110,000 workers. The largest British firms — Ferrocarril Sud and Ferrocarril Central Argentino — employed about 18,400 and 25,100 workers, respectively, while the state-owned Ferrocarriles del Estado had up to 16,800 laborers. Smaller firms, such as the Ferrocarril Francés in Santa Fe, had between 3,000 and 5,000 workers on its payroll.[13] Although most companies did not explicitly set gender

11. Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men, and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905–1960* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000); Elizabeth Quay Hutchison, *Labors Appropriate to Their Sex: Gender, Labor, and Politics in Urban Chile, 1900–1930* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001); Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000); Deborah Levenson-Estrada, "The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the 'Male World' of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s," in French and James, *Gendered Worlds*, 208–31; Mirta Zaida Lobato, *La vida en las fábricas: Trabajo, protesta y política en una comunidad obrera, Berisso (1904–1970)* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2001).

12. Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904–1951* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1998); Débora D'Antonio, "Representaciones de género en la huelga de la construcción: Buenos Aires, 1935–1936," in *Historia de las mujeres en la Argentina*, vol 2, *Siglo XX*, ed. Fernanda Gil Lozano et al. (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2000), 245–65; Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870–1960* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002).

13. República Argentina, Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Dirección General de Ferrocarriles, *Estadística de los ferrocarriles en explotación*, vol. 25, *Año 1916* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos del Ministerio de Obras Públicas, 1924).

qualifications, they recruited mostly men.[14] Whether an adult or a youth, any man had a reasonable chance of getting a job at these companies, and—no less important—the possibility of a lifetime career. Getting hired by a railway firm raised the hope for education on the job, occupational mobility, a steady wage, and access to fringe benefits.[15] By the time of the great railroad strike, most companies had a long history in the country, allowing employees and workers to accumulate an extended service record. A 1916 census of railroad personnel indicates that 40 percent of employees had worked for the same company for over ten years, while 29 percent had six to ten years of service.[16] In modern Argentina, working for the railroads was thus a life experience shared by many men of different ages and skills.

Railroad companies profoundly shaped workers' daily lives and usually determined their place of residence as well. The companies' rapid expansion left an indelible mark on the social geography of the country, transforming small villages into railroad towns. In the early twentieth century, to meet the increasing demand for freight and passenger services, railroad companies built workshops for the maintenance of steam engines, wagons, and passenger cars. These were capital-intensive plants with facilities for assembling locomotives and rolling stock, foundries, electricity-generating power stations, and warehouses for supplies. Typically located in suburban areas, these workshops were still close to the main traffic junctions and to large cities. In 1902, the Ferrocarril Sud opened its workshops in Remedios de Escalada, 11 km from the city of Buenos Aires. Four years later, the British company Ferrocarril Buenos Aires al Pacífico remodeled and expanded its own repair complex in Junín. In 1910, the executives of the Ferrocarriles del Estado inaugurated the shops in Tafí Viejo, 15 km from the city of Tucumán, capital of the province of the same name; in 1912, the Ferrocarril Central Argentino followed suit, opening its workshops in Pérez, a town located 16 km outside Rosario, Santa Fe.[17]

14. According to the 1916 official census of railroad personnel, some women occupied clerical positions in the largest companies. Also, in rural areas women could be employed as crossing keepers.

15. Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 125–63.

16. Alejandro Bunge, *Ferrocarriles argentinos: Contribución al estudio del patrimonio nacional* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Mercatali, 1918), 311–25.

17. Colin M. Lewis, "Railways and Industrialization: Argentina and Brazil, 1870–1929," in *Latin America, Economic Imperialism, and the State: The Political Economy of the External Connection from Independence to the Present*, ed. Christopher Abel and Colin M. Lewis (London: Athlone Press, 1985), 199–230. See also William Rögind, *Historia del Ferrocarril Sud* (Buenos Aires: Establecimiento Gráfico Argentino, 1937), 73, 91, 230–33; "Descripción de los Talleres 'Gorton'-Pérez," *Revista del Ferrocarril Central Argentino*

A large number of working-class families settled down in these suburban areas, boosting residential developments with schools, health-care centers, and recreational facilities. Very soon these villages turned into genuine working-class towns, which prompted heated public debates between railroad executives and state officials regarding the social question.[18] For instance, the reformist physician Juan Bialet Massé, famous for his 1904 report on working-class conditions in the Argentine provinces, opposed the companies' plans to build working-class neighborhoods near the workshops. He firmly believed that life in the suburbs would severely impoverish workers' civic sociability and cultural horizons by limiting their possibilities to fraternize with other social classes. Regarding the construction of the Tafí Viejo shops, Bialet Massé argued that "it will inevitably result in a boring center, which will become a hotbed for anarchist ideas, or any other ideas that will distract workers and extol their imagination dulled by loneliness, drunkenness, and gambling."[19] And he added that "a small town is already a huge hell; but an exclusively working-class town is hell three times over."[20] Ultimately, neither his advocacy nor that of other officials could dissuade railroad executives from their original plans. As a matter of fact, Tafí Viejo came to be baptized the "cradle of artisans."[21] Bialet Massé did not live long enough to see his worst fears come true. Home to pioneers of labor unrest, railroad towns became a breeding ground for community mobilization during the 1917 strike.

Let us summarize the main events. On June 22, 1917, a seemingly minor incident altered the labor routine at the Tafí Viejo shops. Boilermakers walked off their jobs in protest against the dismissal of a fellow worker, fired by a foreman ill reputed for his arbitrariness. Early the following week, shopmen—around 1,300 workers in all—stopped work. While railroad executives took

(Buenos Aires), July 1918, pp. 41–44; "Descripción de los Talleres 'Gorton'-Pérez," *Revista del Ferrocarril Central Argentino* (Buenos Aires), Aug. 1918, pp. 40–43; República Argentina, Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria presentada al Honorable Congreso, marzo de 1908 a marzo de 1910* (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1910), 22, 53.

18. On the relevance of comparing industrialists' and state officials' reform projects, see Barbara Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920–1964* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996), 53–54.

19. Juan Bialet Massé, *Informe sobre el estado de la clase obrera en el interior de la República* (Madrid: Hyspamérica, 1986), 1:422.

20. Ibid., 2:988–89.

21. Francisco Roldán, *Tafí Viejo y su taller* (Tucumán, Argentina: Biblos, 1984); David Dip, *Guía informativa y comercial de la ciudad de Tafí Viejo* (Tucumán, Argentina, 1961).

their time pondering a response, the strike committee and union representatives acted promptly. They demanded solidarity from all the company's other workshops and informed the Socialist congressmen, who immediately contacted the minister of public works, Pablo Torello. They also garnered the staunch support of the local community.[22]

In the meantime, another walkout occurred at the Ferrocarril Central Argentino. At the Pérez workshops, sawmill workers stayed off the job to protest the reduction of their work schedule. Unlike the authorities at the Tafí Viejo workshop, managers from the Ferrocarril Central Argentino took an uncompromising stance. As a consequence, all shopmen from both Pérez and Rosario went on strike on July 3. A few days later, once the company reinstated the strikers and guaranteed the sawmill workers four days of work per week, the labor routine returned to normal. Even so, when on July 20 shopmen at Pérez learned that the head engineer had fired two workers for leading the walkout, they quit work, threw stones at the workshop's administrative offices, and burned three passenger cars that had arrived from Rosario allegedly transporting security guards as reinforcement. In retaliation, the company declared a lockout. Concerned with the escalation of the conflict, Minister Torello asked Dr. Alejandro Ruzo, head of the Legislative Division of the National Labor Department (DNT), to look into the roots of this work stoppage. Union representatives from LF and the FOF led the negotiations, while strike committees sought backing from workers and local society. On August 4, union leaders announced a companywide strike. Two weeks later, based on Dr. Ruzo's recommendations, Minister Torello demanded that the company reinstate the strikers, or otherwise the government would declare the disruption of railroad traffic unwarranted and levy economic penalties. The company had no choice but to agree to the settlement. Yet, as the Ferrocarril Central Argentino rail traffic resumed, labor protests engulfed the rest of the railroad companies throughout the country. In short, by the time the general strike was called on September 24, labor unrest was already widespread.[23]

The success of the protests and their possibility of enduring heavily rested on the solidarity of local communities. Regarding the work stoppage at Tafí

22. *El Obrero Ferroviario* (Buenos Aires) (hereafter cited as *EOF*), July 1917; issues of *LF* from June and July 1917; and the news published in late June and July in *LV*, *La Protesta* (Buenos Aires) (hereafter cited as *LPro*), *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires) (hereafter cited as *LP*), *La Época* (Buenos Aires) (hereafter cited as *LE*), and *La Nación* (Buenos Aires) (hereafter cited as *LN*).

23. See *EOF*, July 1917; issues of *LF* from July to September 1917; and reports published between July and August in *LV*, *LPro*, *LP*, *LE*, and *LN*.

Viejo, *La Vanguardia* informed readers that "at the strikers' request, local merchants closed their stores today. Everybody feels enthusiastic, and there is active propaganda in which women have an active role."[24] Praising female militancy during the shopmen's protest at the Ferrocarril Central Argentino, the journal *La Organización Obrera* emphasized that "for the first time in our country, the female element—wives, sisters, and daughters of strikers—has taken on a spirited and daring participation in the struggles of working men on behalf of their homes."[25]

Indeed, from the very beginning of the local unrest, just as throughout the three weeks of the general strike, community support allowed railwaymen to organize the mobilization and to achieve an almost full work stoppage. And the role of women proved essential to that effect. Railroad workers' female relatives attended every rally and public demonstration as an expression of their sympathy for and contribution to the cause. From Rosario, *La Nación*'s correspondent reported on a female parade near the workshops that ended with women singing the workers' anthem outside the gates. Not only did women march in solidarity with their male relatives, but some of them even acted as speakers at strike meetings. From the same city, *La Vanguardia* reported that on August 11 "four thousand male workers and a thousand female workers cheered and applauded the declaration of the general strike" and that several women addressed the assembly.[26] The following day, approximately 1,000 women gathered at the Ariossi Hall to listen to Felisa Romani and Emma Rola, who "stressed the need to escalate strike propaganda."[27]

It is hard to assess to what extent female participants were encouraged by their male relatives to mobilize or whether they joined the protest mainly on their own account. Union representatives sometimes explicitly invited them to public events and gatherings. The committee of the FOF in Santos Lugares, Buenos Aires, issued a call to "railroad workers and their female comrades" to attend a conference on a Sunday afternoon at their union hall.[28] On occasion, entire families went to the strike committee reunions, as in the case of a meeting in Avellaneda, Buenos Aires, where several women and children figured among the 120 attendants.[29] Sometimes women actually took the lead in orga-

24. *LV*, 26 June 1917, p. 1.

25. *La Organización Obrera* (Buenos Aires), 1 Aug. 1917. (Hereafter this publication will be cited as *LOO*.)

26. *LV*, 12 Aug. 1917, p. 1.

27. *LV*, 13 Aug. 1917, p. 3.

28. *LPro*, 16 Sept. 1917.

29. *LE*, 28 Sept. 1917, p. 2.

nizing public demonstrations. From San Martín, Buenos Aires, *La Vanguardia* reported that "yesterday women also set an amicable and distinguished example when fifty of them arrived spontaneously at La Fraternidad headquarters demanding that a rally be organized in order to publicly express women's support of the strike movement."[30] According to *La Protesta*, the rally stirred "great enthusiasm." Two thousand people attended the demonstration, one of the largest the town could remember.[31]

Family involvement in this labor mobilization went beyond symbolic expressions of solidarity. It contributed considerably to making effective the disruption of all railroad service. This was not an easy task: the spatial fragmentation of the world of railroad labor, with activities undertaken in different locations—locomotive depots, workshops, stations, and offices—a considerable distance from one another, hindered the strikers' efforts to achieve complete adherence to the strike. For this diligent mission, railwaymen relied on their families' assistance. The wives of the strikers organized committees to convince the female relatives of those who were still working to endorse the work stoppage. In Rosario, as the conflict progressed, around 120 workers' wives joined the committees that paid house visits to the nonstriking personnel.[32] Women's collective actions were therefore by no means restricted to their residential area; they also extended to the environs of workshops, offices, stations, and railroad crossings. Frequently, strikers' families also became involved in acts of intimidation against strikebreakers. Seeking to harass personnel still loyal to the companies, women protested in groups, sometimes even armed with clubs, or simply circulated threatening rumors. It was reported that when three employees from the Ferrocarril Central Córdoba working at a warehouse refused to walk out, "a female rally was called to bolster their demand amid shouts against the Company."[33] The ensuing crowd prompted a police intervention that broke up the demonstration and left four people injured. On other occasions, family support allowed strikers to implement original, nonviolent methods of protest such as station sit-ins and other means of disrupting railroad traffic. In Santa Rosa, in what is today the province of La Pampa, women and children lay down on the tracks to prevent Governor Ruiz Moreno from arriving by train at the General Pico station, forcing him to enter the town on foot.[34] Families of the strikers

30. *LV*, 17 Aug. 1917, p. 1.
31. *LPro*, 16 Aug. 1917.
32. *LOO*, 1 Aug. 1917; *LV*, 11 Aug. 1917, p. 1; *LP*, 11 Aug. 1917, p. 7.
33. *LP*, 25 Sept. 1917, p. 10.
34. *LP*, 1 Oct. 1917, p. 8.

from the Ferrocarriles del Estado took over the North Central station in Santa Fe and the Ledesma station in Jujuy and remained there peacefully until the authorities finally managed to evict them.[35]

This massive presence of working-class families in the protest ultimately affected the methods of state repression. Soon it became evident that the local police was ineffective in maintaining public order. In small towns, members of the security forces were lenient with railroad workers due to ties of kinship or comradeship. For instance, the chief of police and some agents from Las Cejas, Tucumán, had to be suspended for complicity with the strikers, among whom they had several relatives.[36] At the same time, threatened by this massive mobilization, railroad executives had to enlist outside reinforcements to protect their facilities, and local authorities requested the assistance of special squadrons and battalions of prison guards. As the conflict dragged on, the national government deployed the army. As was to be expected, this had dreadful consequences. In late September, clashes with the armed forces in Rosario, San Francisco (Province of Córdoba), and Villa Mercedes (Province of San Luis) resulted in the first fatalities. In October, several workers were killed in Tafí Viejo and Remedios de Escalada as a consequence of confrontations with the military.[37]

In related events in the city of Mendoza, two women died due to the army's repression. On September 25, LF organized a rally in the city's outskirts "headed by several women, with red flags, followed by a group of four hundred workers" who marched to the local railway station yelling and destroying signals to impede the departure of a train. *La Prensa* and *La Época* reported that the protesters attacked the infantry captain with a stone and then fired shots.[38] The labor press, on the contrary, argued that officers fired against a crowd of defenseless workers.[39] In any case, all news reports agreed on the fact that two women were dead after the shooting: Josefina Brandano de Gómez, a 23-year-old Argentine, and Adela Montaña. Among the 16 wounded protesters were 2 Spanish women, Eudosia Rojas and Rosalía Pérez, and 2 Argentine women, Mercedes de Lezcano and the 19-year-old Esther Lidia Jiménez. All we know from the press reports about these women is that they were young and that at least two of them were married. On September 27, the city of Mendoza was paralyzed by mourning. The FOF demanded that their union headquarters,

35. *LP*, 8 Oct. 1917, p. 7; *LP*, 12 Oct. 1917, p. 9.

36. *LP*, 12 Oct. 1917, p. 9.

37. *LP*, 22 Sept. 1917, p. 8; *LPro*, 22 Sept. 1917; *LE*, 22 Sept. 1917, p. 1; *LP*, 26 Sept. 1917, p. 9; *LP*, 8 Oct. 1917, p. 7; *LP*, 12 Oct. 1917, p. 9; *LP*, 13 Oct. 1917, p. 9; *LP*, 14 Oct. 1917.

38. *LP*, 26 Sept. 1917, p. 9; *LE*, 27 Sept. 1917, p. 2.

39. *LOO*, 4 Oct. 1917; *LPro*, 27 Sept. 1917; *LV*, 27 Sept. 1917, p. 1.

which had been shut down after the events, be reopened for the funeral. When the governor finally gave in, a huge crowd joined the procession and listened to the eulogies, some of them uttered by female peers of the deceased.

Undoubtedly, while the general strike left many working-class families with painful memories, it offered some moments of collective joy as well. Once the local work stoppages were over, festivities turned into community celebrations. On July 2, after learning that a definitive agreement had been reached, railroaders from the city of Tucumán walked to Tafí Viejo, where several families met them on the road to celebrate.[40] *La Fraternidad* attributed the workers' success to their virile attitude, pointing out that "the strike was sustained manfully." Yet it also acknowledged that "workers at Tafí Viejo, their wives, children, local merchants, and all who suffered the arbitrariness of the conniving foreman have managed to get that weight off their shoulders. Solidarity has triumphed in this emergency, because it was just."[41] Moreover, the settlement of the national strike did not put an end to female public actions. Either collectively or individually, women continued to petition for the release of relatives who had been arrested. In Santa Fe, wives of railwaymen organized the "Luisa Michel" committee, which, among other tasks, was responsible for demanding the liberation of political prisoners.[42] Libertad Ferrini, from General Pico, sent a letter to the anarchist journal *La Obra* denouncing the fact that "her father, comrade Juan Ferrini, together with a number of underage workers and other comrades, has been arrested and taken to the Santa Rosa de Toay prison, accused of writing a manifesto during the last railroad strike."[43]

To summarize, the great railroad strike offered workers' female relatives an opportunity to partake in public life, a crucial dimension of political participation in a republican nation. It is not surprising, then, that many newspaper correspondents referred to them as "women strikers" and not as strikers' relatives. By recovering their agency, one can not only unveil some of the social actors usually silenced in traditional historical narratives but also revise current interpretations of working-class politics during the period of the democratic republic (1916–1930). Studies on the labor protests during the first presidency of Yrigoyen have pointed to trade unions as the agencies mainly responsible for leading and organizing the strikes, whereas they have regarded the behavior of the masses as spontaneous and emotionally based. Moreover, family participa-

40. *LV*, 3 July 1917, p. 3.
41. *LF*, 15 July 1917.
42. *LPro*, 20 Sept. 1917.
43. *La Obra* (Buenos Aires), Nov. 1917.

tion in labor unrest has been typically taken as a sign of the low levels of popular organization. Its main role, as in the case of anarchist agitation, has been thought to be simply confined to exacerbating strike violence.[44]

However, a quite different picture emerges from the evidence presented here. Far from being a symptom of disorganization or of sudden outbreaks of social unrest, these repertoires of collective action attest to workers' reliance on their daily social networks to maintain a cohesive organization over the course of the strike. The participation of women, youths, and even children and elderly people in demonstrations followed a concerted strategy of family mobilization whose purpose was to draw the attention of state officials and the public to the labor cause. By analyzing these forms of political action we gain a greater appreciation of how these working-class communities succeeded in communicating the motives of the protest more effectively, keeping up the strike's momentum, and ensuring the work stoppage. Neither press reporters nor union leaders associated family mobilization with chaos or disorganization. Actually, in some cases the complete opposite was true. *La Época*, for instance, described the involvement of women and children in the disruption of railroad services as a "tactic employed by the strikers."[45] Accordingly, union delegates explained that in the Mendoza rally "they decided that the wives of the strikers should head the march in order to encourage the rest of the families to make common cause with the strikers."[46] Rather than being two antithetical forms of political action carried out in parallel or in isolation from one another, family activism and trade-union militancy represented two ways of protesting that, although qualitatively different, reinforced each other.

In sum, the action of working-class women and families contributed to both legitimizing and sustaining the complete nationwide stoppage of railroad services. As the following section shows, it also placed the needs and aspirations of the working-class household at the center of public debate.

Male Breadwinners, Female Militants

The railroaders' list of grievances during the great railroad strike (wage increases, pay scales, predictable work schedules, and extrawage incentives) was

44. Rock, *El radicalismo argentino*, 152; David Rock, "Lucha civil en la Argentina: La Semana Trágica de enero de 1919," trans. Mario R. dos Santos, *Desarrollo Económico* 11, no. 42/44 (1971–1972): 165–215; Falcón and Monserrat, "Estado, empresas, trabajadores y sindicatos."

45. *LE*, 10 Oct. 1917, p. 2.

46. *LP*, 26 Sept. 1917, p. 9.

associated with the recession resulting from the Great War. Between 1913 and 1917, railroad companies froze investments, cut over 15 percent of their personnel, and reduced the wages of those they kept employed.[47] To be sure, analyzing the uncertainties that railwaymen confronted at work sheds light on the hardships that working-class families experienced in this recession economy. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the severe situation of the working-class households requires considering whether the wages of the adult male could be supplemented by the earnings of other family members.[48]

This was precisely the perspective from which Dr. Ruzo, the official from the DNT, examined the causes of the conflict at the Ferrocarril Central Argentino. In his report, Ruzo explained that workers sympathized with the fired men because they were artisans with undisputable labor credentials. In the shopmen's eyes, their dismissal threatened the basic principle of respecting qualification and seniority, which, in their firm opinion, had to be upheld even in an unfavorable economic context. Additionally, Ruzo recognized that the wages the company paid were insufficient. He described the case of one of the fired workers, a diligent laborer who had to "support his wife and seven children" while earning just "a wage of 35 cents per hour," which added up to a monthly income of less than 100 pesos.[49] The situation was particularly alarming given that workers' wages were destined for maintaining a family. The 1916 census of railroad personnel provides statistics regarding the relative weight of adult males with families within this population: 47 percent of employees earning less than 100 pesos per month (the lowest income category defined) were married, and 40 percent of those married employees had children.[50]

To further explain the hardships that many working-class families experienced, Ruzo pointed out that male workers' responsibilities as breadwinners were even more burdensome, since the other members of their families likely

47. Rock, *El radicalismo argentino*, 146–51. See also República Argentina, Dirección General de Ferrocarriles, *Estadística de los Ferrocarriles en Explotación*, vol. 22, *Año 1913* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos del Ministerio de Obras Públicas, 1916); República Argentina, Dirección General de Ferrocarriles, *Estadística de los Ferrocarriles en Explotación*, vol. 26, *Año 1917* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos del Ministerio de Obras Públicas, 1924).

48. Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, "Household Strategies for Survival: An Introduction," supplement, *International Review of Social History* 45 (2000): 1–17; Lisa A. Lindsay, "Domesticity and Difference: Male Breadwinners, Working Women, and Colonial Citizenship in the 1945 Nigerian General Strike," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 783–812.

49. *LE*, 15 Aug. 1917; *LN*, 16 Aug. 1917.

50. Bunge, *Ferrocarriles argentinos*, 311–25.

did not hold jobs. Ruzo calculated that at the Pérez workshops "a male worker who earns 39 cents per hour, an average wage, earns $41.02 in 16 days with which [alone] he has to support his family, because in this region women have no jobs."[51] His insightful remark deserves an explanation. As Argentina transformed into a major exporter of grains and beef, labor demand for women in the rural areas decreased due to the mechanization of agriculture and reliance on seasonal male laborers for the harvest. In the main cities, working-class women could count on regular employment at large-scale enterprises or at small workshops that produced all sorts of light consumer articles. Women could also earn money through retail activities, domestic service, or even sex work. Alternatively, those associated with activities such as garment production, for instance, could work from home on a piecework basis. In some suburbs with meatpacking plants, women became a substantial component of the workforce. However, in small railroad towns fewer of these options were available, particularly in times of economic recession.[52] In such a difficult economic context, young males did not have much brighter job prospects. Even when they could land a job, they could not make substantial contributions to their family's budget due to their meager salaries. Ruzo indicated that the Ferrocarril Central Argentino paid very low wages to the 500 youngsters employed as apprentices, and even after three years on the job none of them had been promoted to a higher position.[53] Against this background of scarce demand for female labor and insufficient wages for male youngsters, it was reasonable for Ruzo to assume that the pressure of maintaining the family fell heavily on the shoulders of adult males.

To make matter worse, the world had become more uncertain for working-class families on both sides of the Atlantic. Unlike in difficult times in the past, immigrants could no longer easily return to their homelands, due to the escalation of the First World War. These dramatic circumstances put even more pressure on the family budgets of immigrants in Argentina, as their relatives left behind in Europe became increasingly dependent on the remittances from those who had settled in the Americas. Moreover, the European states at war requested that their émigré citizens return to their fatherland to comply with their military duties, which could eventually mean losing the earnings of a family member.[54]

51. *LE*, 16 Aug. 1917.

52. Mirta Zaida Lobato, *Historia de las trabajadoras en la Argentina (1869–1960)* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2007), 19–79.

53. *LE*, 15 Aug. 1917; *LN*, 16 Aug. 1917.

54. David Rock, "From the First World War to 1930," in *Argentina since Independence*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 142–43. See also Jose C.

At a moment when working-class families found themselves with less job opportunities and meager salaries, scarcity and inflation pushed up food, housing, and health-care expenses. Once again, Ruzo took careful notice of this issue. He indicated that rents in Pérez were as high as in the capital city and that many families owed up to a whole year's rent, unable to afford basic food items or other daily necessities. Considering the severity of the situation, the Storeowners' Center of Rosario recommended that storekeepers open unlimited lines of credit for those living in the Talleres neighborhood for the duration of the strike. In the meantime, however, the Ferrocarril Central Argentino kept making deductions from workers' paychecks for health-care dues, a matter that later became a point of controversy.

It should come as no surprise that railwaymen took into account overall family needs in defining their list of grievances. They asked for a general increase in wages as well as for a set minimum wage. Railroad workers expected company executives to concede the notion of a guaranteed income, which was crucial for protecting working-class families from the uncertainties of unexpected wage cuts. They were also concerned with securing jobs for adult males and youngsters. Although shopmen opposed the companies' hiring of youth under 16 years of age, they demanded that journeymen be promoted in their fifth year on the job.[55] In addition, railwaymen called for improvements in their extrawage benefits to ensure the well-being of their families. In Tafí Viejo, they asked for the presence of a licensed physician at the workshops, upgrades in the infrastructure of the working-class neighborhood, reductions in the rents of company housing, and free passes to take the train to the city of Tucumán. Last but not least, they requested the opening of the sixth grade at the town's elementary schools as well as facilities for vocational training.[56] Likewise, the workers at the Ferrocarril Central Argentino demanded better quality services at lower costs from the mutual aid society run by the company and the possibility of choosing their physicians and drugstores at will. Furthermore, they insisted that the mutual aid society make public its balance sheets. Evidently, railroaders attempted to fulfill their role as family providers no matter how hard

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Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1930* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 259–67; Hernán Otero, *La guerra en la sangre: Los franco-argentinos ante la Primera Guerra Mundial* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2009); Samuel L. Baily and Franco Ramella, eds., *One Family, Two Worlds: An Italian Family's Correspondence across the Atlantic, 1901–1922* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988), 161–93.

55. *LP*, 23 Sept. 1917.

56. *LP*, 25 June 1917, p. 7; *LP*, 27 June 1917, p. 8–9; *EOF*, July 1917.

it was for even a skilled adult worker to live up to those expectations. Although further research is needed on prescriptive norms for family models in modern Argentina, the ideal of a responsible fatherhood appears to have shaped workers' demands and the specific way they legitimated their claims.[57]

To be sure, this paradigm of a respectable man and exemplary father encompassed not just economic obligations but moral responsibilities as well. A decent, loving father was supposed to spend time at home, naturally not doing household chores but rather sharing his time off with his wife and children. Leisure time was as prominent as monetary considerations in the list of grievances elaborated by railroad workers. They fought for a shorter working day and more predictable work schedules. In this regard, the railroad regulation decreed by President Yrigoyen did not satisfy them completely. While an 8-hour working day was granted to shopmen and some sectors of traffic personnel, many engine drivers, firemen, and track laborers continued to spend 9 to 12 hours a day at work. In addition, railwaymen demanded the right to 15 days of paid holiday, to which they usually added the benefit of free passes for themselves and their families to travel on their company's railway. In this respect, at least, the presidential decree meant a partial victory. The governmental regulation of railroad work guaranteed the requested annual paid holiday for all workers with one year of service at the company. Evidently, in their efforts to become respectable fathers, railwaymen did not choose between bargaining for either time or money; rather, they confronted the company over both issues.

In truth, the model of responsible fatherhood underlying workers' claims was an ideal that the railroad management had promoted among their personnel. After recovering from the crisis of 1890, the companies established a set of extrawage benefits on the principle that modern firms—as railroads were supposed to be—had to ensure that their employees and workers could provide their families with a decent way of life. Large companies boasted of offering not only good salaries and a lifetime career for their workers but also social benefits for their families. The building of residences close to workshops or main stations was a perfect example of this, as it made it possible for workers to rent or buy a house at low prices or through affordable credit. The companies also set up pension plans, health-care services, and recreational facilities, which competed with those services provided by mutual aid societies, immigrant associations, and trade unions. Besides fostering workers' loyalty, these programs

57. Eduardo Míguez, "Familias de clase media: La formación de un modelo," in *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina*, vol. 2, *La Argentina plural, 1870–1930*, ed. Fernando Devoto and Marta Madero (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1999), 21–45.

embodied a distinctive notion of masculinity. The message conveyed was clear: working for a railroad allowed male workers to fulfill the obligations prescribed for their sex, and a loyal employee had the prospect of becoming an exemplary father. In return, companies expected unconditional cooperation and sympathy from both workers and their families. However, the recession that followed the start of World War I made it difficult for railroad administrations to keep their promise. In turn, this compromised the working-class families' willingness to cooperate.

As Ruzo's influential report demonstrates, state officials also approved of this model of responsible fatherhood. For many social reformers, particularly the members of the DNT, government regulation of labor relations had to ensure that railwaymen would be capable of meeting their obligations as heads of household. The state had to assume the responsibility of assisting railroad workers in fulfilling these duties, particularly when an economic crisis or company policies put them at risk. Just as protective legislation for working-class women sought to ensure that they were in a position to fulfill their maternal role, national laws had to guarantee male workers' rights as breadwinners.[58] As would be expected, these ideas were at odds with railroad management's stance on the conflict, given that they systematically rejected state intervention in labor affairs. Indeed, both company executives and the state bureaucracy agreed on recognizing the prerogatives of male workers as family providers. Yet despite sharing the same gender ideology, they profoundly disagreed in their positions regarding how to ensure this for railway workers. To railroad managers, it was exclusively up to the companies to set wages and benefits that would allow workers to act as responsible heads of household. State officials, on the contrary, were convinced that the welfare of working-class families could not be left in the hands of companies; workers' status as breadwinners had to be regarded as a basic right, which in a supposedly modern republic had to be granted by the law.

The fact that the ideal of responsible fatherhood defended by railroad workers was also endorsed by both the companies and the state buttressed the legitimacy of the labor protest. Moreover, by invoking the welfare of their homes as the fundamental cause of their struggles, railwaymen defied a deep-rooted motif in the rhetoric of some members of the elite that pointed to foreign militants as the main instigators of social turmoil. With its traditional eloquence, *La Protesta* questioned this prejudice, emphasizing that

58. For an insightful approach to state reform and the making of male workers as heads of household, see Karin Alejandra Rosemblatt, *Gendered Compromises: Political Cultures and the State in Chile, 1920–1950* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000).

> Strike actions are not like they [the capitalists] say, the labor of "agitators by trade," but rather the result of the needs of the homes of those who produce everything. . . . When we see children in our homes who cry for bread and more bread, and when a tired, sweaty father arrives at this scene, hearing the plea for bread and more bread is like the branding of a hot iron in his ears, searing his eardrums.[59]

But how did the claims and personal aspirations of the wives, sisters, and daughters of railwaymen relate to this gender ideology? This issue has been at the center of current debates regarding the relationship between economic change and family models. It has been argued that, to the extent that the proletarianization process became associated with acknowledging working-class men as the key providers of the family, the advance of labor rights and union organizations put at risk the recognition of women's rights as individuals, workers, and political subjects.[60] Given that improvements in the working conditions of male workers seemed to run parallel to the crystallization of the ideology of domesticity, we should now examine how railroad workers' female relatives—who so fervently joined the labor agitation—conceived of their status in social life.

There is little doubt that women justified the strike in terms similar to those articulated by railwaymen. Like their males relatives, they insisted that company rationalization programs profoundly affected their homes. They made it clear that exploitation victimized not only male workers but also the proletarian households themselves. On August 11 in Rosario, strikers' wives organized a meeting, and several of them addressed the audience, "expressing their will and the need—in view of the development of the movement their husbands had started—to assist them [their husbands] in order to prevail over the whims of the directors of railroad capital, who were pushing working-class homes into destitution."[61] Some days earlier, at a conference of about 4,000 people held at an LF union branch, Aída Tarija recommended that her fellow women "take to their own homes and companions the encouragement for them to contribute, if necessary, in any possible way and as much as they possible could, to their comrades' struggle, so that they could achieve a great success for the dignity of every proletarian home."[62]

59. *LPro*, 22 Sept. 1917.

60. Wally Seccombe, "Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Social History* 11, no. 1 (1986): 53–76; Angélique Janssens, "The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family? An Overview of the Debate," supplement, *International Review of Social History* 42 (1997): 1–23.

61. *LV*, 12 Aug. 1917, p. 2.

62. *LV*, 4 Aug. 1917, p. 2.

What were the implications of this defense of working-class homes for the status of working-class women in the public and private spheres? First, it is clear that, given the characteristics of the labor market in modern Argentina, claims for better wages and other benefits for male workers did not necessarily mean that women expected to act solely as housewives. As explained above, the predominance of working-class homes with adult male breadwinners did not derive from the relative prosperity of railroaders or from their relatives' deliberate choice but rather came as a consequence of the lack of employment opportunities for women and youths. As a matter of fact, the great railroad strike reopened the debate on female education and work. For example, in talks delivered during the protest, speakers like Siberiano Domínguez, representative of the anarchist FORA's Fifth Congress, denounced before a huge crowd of women and children in Mechita, Buenos Aires, the fact that the 1907 law regulating female work in truth limited women's entry into the labor market.[63] In Rosario, at a meeting of almost 5,000 workers, two women emphasized that "if male workers concerned themselves with educating their wives and daughters, they would support their husbands and fathers at all times."[64] This expressed an original claim on behalf of the cause of women, even if it appeared subordinated to the workers' victory. Ultimately, the welfare of the proletarian home was not exclusively founded on the rights of the male breadwinner, but it encompassed educational and employment opportunities for all family members. The two claims were not mutually exclusive but rather supplementary.

Second, the railroad strike made it possible for working-class women to fully exercise their civic liberties. While male workers held union meetings to set their list of grievances and to discuss the negotiation process, women paraded the streets with banners, attended talks and outdoor meetings, organized propaganda campaigns, and improvised forums at which they displayed their oratory skills. Women acted in the public arena on behalf of the interests of their families and communities, which was characteristic of the social mobilizations that stirred European cities in the early twentieth century.[65] During the great railroad strike, the prevailing discourse stated that a good wife or mother had the duty to participate in public actions for the sake of their family's well-being. In the name of solidarity with their homes and their class, women reconciled their female and maternal decorum with their presence in the public sphere.

63. *LPro*, 8 Sept. 1917.

64. *LP*, 19 Aug. 1917, p. 7.

65. Temma Kaplan, "Conciencia femenina y acción colectiva: El caso de Barcelona, 1910–1918," in *Historia y género: Las mujeres en la Europa moderna y contemporánea*, ed. James Amelang and Mary Nash (Valencia, Spain: Ediciones Alfons el Magnànim, 1990), 271–73.

Just as the notion of material need often allowed women to transcend the ideal of female domesticity and justify their incorporation into salaried work, it also legitimized their involvement in politics.[66]

Nevertheless, some women vindicated their actions by reclaiming their right as individuals to act in public space rather than solely appealing to the needs of the proletarian home. Just as the above-mentioned spokeswoman at the meeting in Rosario put it, they manifested "their will and the need" to participate in the public realm. It is likely that some of them had a real vocation for politics, as seems to have been the case for Emma Rola, who was first a Socialist and then later a member of the Communist Party, or for Felisa Romani, a 24-year-old woman famous for her incendiary oratory. Very little is known about their lives, although the memoirs of activists indicate that some of these female militants had their own credentials as trade-union organizers. Evidently, the great railroad strike profited from their past experiences and, in turn, boosted female activism. Thus, when the Federación Obrera Local Santafesina (Santa Fe Local Labor Federation) was set up, it counted among its members the powerful local chapter of the FOF as well as a "resistance society" composed of 200 women.[67]

Aside from these few women who had a genuine calling for politics, the will of women to take part in public life was manifested through the particular ways they got involved in collective action. As I have shown, there was no sexual division of labor in the modes of mobilizing working-class families during the great railroad strike. In contrast to the strike of truck drivers in the United States in the 1930s, where the gender divide in the domestic sphere tended to reproduce itself in the public arena (limiting women to doing domestic tasks at union branches or to organizing soup kitchens for the strikers, among other activities), the participation of women and men in the 1917 railroad strike was by and large egalitarian.[68] According to press reports, women got involved in all sorts of meetings, rallies, and other actions organized to support the strike, including violent ones. Their activism was not confined to their neighborhoods or to other realms of female sociability, but it reached into the (male) workplace

66. Mirta Zaida Lobato, "Lenguaje laboral y de género en el trabajo industrial: Primera mitad del siglo XX," in Gil Lozano et al., *Historia de las mujeres*, 95–115.

67. Arturo M. Lozza, *Tiempo de huelgas: Los apasionados relatos del campesino y ferroviario Florindo Moretti sobre aquellas épocas de fundaciones, luchas y serenatas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Anteo, 1985), 163; *LPro*, 20 Sept. 1917.

68. Marjorie Penn Lasky, "'Where I Was a Person': The Ladies' Auxiliary in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' Strikes," in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge, 1985), 181–205.

as well through intense propaganda campaigns. Whether individually or collectively, women consistently acted alongside their male relatives and shared with them the same spaces of political action. In brief, in the great railroad strike, women did not act as auxiliaries; they were "strikers."

To conclude, both railwaymen and their female relatives reinforced the moral strength of their demands by appealing to the welfare of the working-class home, a notion that neither the companies nor the authorities could question. But the active role of women in the labor protest seriously challenged traditional stereotypes of female propriety and, in the last instance, the respectability of railroad families at large.

Working-Class Respectability under Dispute

While newspapers in general agreed in their portrait of male militancy, they substantially disagreed in their representation of female activism. *La Prensa*, *La Nación*, and *La Época* tended to disqualify women's involvement in the conflict, whereas left-wing—anarchist and socialist—publications praised it. In fact, the characterization of women's collective action became a crucial criterion for assessing working-class respectability. Early in September, *La Vanguardia* published an editorial poignantly entitled "Women in the Strikes," which remarked that "the authorities' and the bourgeoisie's" condemnation of women's participation in the conflict turned into an excuse for "harshly execrat[ing] those noble and devoted working women." This column disapproved of those who predicted that female involvement in the public sphere would necessarily undermine family values and social order.[69] Evidently, right from the beginning of the labor strife, gender roles became a subject for heated public debates.

Press accounts in *La Prensa*, *La Nación*, and *La Época* drew a clear distinction between male and female activism, commending the former while discrediting the latter. If the protest moved in the direction of restraint and nonviolence, it was presumed that this was thanks to the civility and honorable behavior of the railwaymen. Such a positive description, however, was never extended to their female relatives. At the beginning of the walkout at Tafí Viejo, *La Prensa* reported that "all the stores closed their doors . . . as requested by the [male] strikers. They are always composed. It is women from working-class neighborhoods who engage in heated discussions. Strikers' wives scorn the wives of the few workers who still go to work."[70] More often than not, railroaders were

69. *LV*, 6 Sept. 1917, p. 3.
70. *LP*, 27 June 1917, p. 9.

praised for ensuring that the strike progressed without disturbances. Their moderation and self-discipline reassured public opinion regarding the peaceful character of the labor conflict, and this was a message that national newspapers were willing to reiterate. After patrolling the railroad line from Avellaneda to Quilmes, the chief police inspector stated that "he was quite impressed by the behavior of both the troops and the [male] strikers."[71] In Avellaneda, shopmen from the Ferrocarril Sud organized committees to ensure that "no workers came into the shops, and recommended that strikers stationed on the sidewalks abstain from raising havoc or attacking people or property."[72]

The press also applauded those railroad workers who took pains to avoid clashes with company authorities and the police. On occasion, railwaymen even appeared to safeguard private property and neighborhood safety with more zeal than the security forces themselves. For instance, in Lobos, a small town in the province of Buenos Aires, the strike by no means disrupted social harmony. According to *La Prensa*, "the strikers watch over company interests. The Chief of Police in charge, Juan A. Jiménez, keeps a proper stance, deserving of the strikers' respect."[73] Railwaymen then were generally portrayed as models of sobriety, self-possession, good behavior, and civic responsibility. With respect to an alarming incident at a station close to Avellaneda, *La Prensa* reported that "there have been several draftees and guards who, evidently inebriated, have caused incidents with the strikers and the citizens passing by the station. Strikers denounced these harassments to the police in order to deny any responsibility."[74] Interestingly, national newspapers did not report any incidents associated with alcohol abuse on the part of the strikers. This is not to say that there were no detailed accounts of physical and verbal assaults by workers or of sabotages and intentional damage to private property. Nevertheless, instead of blaming them on the male strikers' alleged lack of self-control, the papers attributed these disturbances to the deliberate provocation of social agitators, particularly anarchists. Unruliness, therefore, did not function as a symbol of working-class masculinity but as a trademark of specific political affiliations.

Representations of female behavior were quite another story. National newspapers typically qualified the oratory and actions of females as aggressive and rude. Verbal hostility and intimidation seemed to be natural traits of female militancy. From the city of Córdoba, a correspondent informed readers that on

71. *LP*, 25 Sept. 1917, p. 10.
72. *LP*, 29 Sept. 1917, p. 8.
73. *LP*, 25 Sept. 1917, p. 10.
74. *LP*, 2 Oct. 1917, p. 6.

September 23, a day before the general strike was announced, everything was in order, even though "the female element, all of them relatives of the workers, attended the meetings and for the most part called for violence."[75] The press systematically criticized women's campaigns in favor of the protest and blamed female participation for its radicalization. "[People's] dispositions are quite agitated," *La Época* explained regarding the August strike at the Ferrocarril Central Argentino, "and they get even more excited when they see women and children of both sexes actively supporting the strikers."[76] From Rosario, *La Prensa*'s correspondent wrote that "emotions surge high among workers, and their wives are heavily to blame for this commotion. . . . These same women have instigated some incidents today, without major consequences, although this does not mean such acts are not inconvenient or even reprehensible."[77] Aside from breaking railroad signals and crossing gates, women threatened those who refused to join the strike. The following day, the reporter added that "women take part in every unpleasant incident and they are the most dangerous element, since they are generally the instigators of the confrontations. . . . Large groups have visited the company homes of employees and workers, threatening them with dire consequences if they failed to join the movement. [Male] strikers have also threatened many people."[78] These quotes illustrate that while railwaymen also participated in "reprehensible" incidents, newspapers pointed to female militants as the main culprits for disrupting the cordiality among neighbors and fellow workers.

To portray women's unruly behavior, press stories often conjured up images of female crowds armed with sticks. Reporting on the progress of the strike in Rosario, *La Época* stated that "workers' wives firmly persist in their hostile attitude toward the company; they fail to show the least respect for national and police forces. They parade the streets with heavy clubs, hailing the strike and forcing those who are still peaceful to join it."[79] According to the national press, women's behavior fully warranted the intervention of police and security forces. Regarding the steady increase of police surveillance in Rosario, *La Prensa* reported that "the police have had to respond to several requests by workers and employees of the Ferrocarril Central Argentino whose homes were attacked by mobs of strikers' wives and some of their husbands."[80]

75. *LP*, 24 Sept. 1917.
76. *LE*, 13 Aug. 1917.
77. *LP*, 13 Aug. 1917, p. 7.
78. *LP*, 14 Aug. 1917, p. 8.
79. *LE*, 14 Aug. 1917.
80. *LP*, 14 Aug. 1917, p. 8.

It is worth noting that, notwithstanding the endless repetition of such images, women's actions were much more inconsequential than stated by the press. Public displays of force were mostly acts of intimidation rather than actual acts of aggression. In fact, very little of the violence attributed to women could eventually be proven. Some days after the widely reported alleged assaults on white-collar staff in Rosario, newspapers recognized that they turned out to be false rumors.[81] Surmising the possible roots of such hearsay, *La Prensa* admitted that "it is remarkable the amount of employees that have filed complaints to the police fearing attacks against themselves, their homes, or their families. It may well be that this is just a way of evading their duties to the company after having committed themselves to it and of getting on the strikers' good side."[82]

Such a breach in the consistently assertive tone of journalistic discourse invites us to inquire into the social meanings of gender representations. If the actual physical damage provoked by working-class women was rather minor, in what did their alleged dangerousness lie? An incident between a railroad executive and the strikers that became a cause célèbre may suggest an answer. At the beginning of October, a locomotive inspector of the Ferrocarril Oeste claimed to have been abused at the hands of strikers. The episode became known once the newspapers published a letter sent by the company's attorney to the minister of public works requesting that he file criminal charges against the strike committee, which the attorney held responsible for this attack. On the afternoon of October 9, about 1,000 strikers, alongside their families, stopped a train that was arriving at Liniers station, which was located in the west of the city of Buenos Aires. The engine driver, a mechanic from the navy, was assisted by a locomotive inspector, an Englishman named Mr. Jones. Later, on his way home, Jones was seized by a group of strikers and was taken to the local FOF headquarters. After ripping his clothes and pulling at his arms and legs, workers forced Jones to get on the stage, kneel on a bench, and "swear that he would not get on a locomotive again for the duration of the strike." Finally, Jones had to "endure the insults of some forty women who paraded around him and spat on him."[83] According to press reports, the incident concluded at 8 p.m., when a worker intervened on Jones's behalf and some members of the strike committee

81. *LP*, 12 Aug. 1917, p. 8; *LN*, 12 Aug. 1917.

82. *LP*, 16 Aug. 1917, p. 8. I will examine the stance of technical personnel in the conflict in my future research. Regarding the relevance of placing white-collar workers on the agenda of labor history, see John D. French, "The Latin American Labor Studies Boom," *International Review of Social History* 45 (2000): 279–308.

83. *LP*, 11 Oct. 1917, p. 8; *LE*, 10 Oct. 1917, p. 2.

walked him home. Echoing the company's legal representative, *La Época* and *La Prensa* described the event as a genuine "outrage."[84]

This incident reveals one of the ways by which protesters undercut the authority of railroad companies: damaging the public prestige of their executives and technical personnel. By taking part in these events, women simultaneously challenged social and gender hierarchies, which were prevalent both inside and outside the workplace. The significance of the threats and affronts therefore consisted in their symbolic radicalism, not in the actual physical harm caused. As the company lawyer acknowledged, this episode did not result in personal injury to Mr. Jones. However, as we can infer from the lawyer's letter, the public reputation and managerial authority of Mr. Jones were indeed damaged. In his complaint, the company attorney described Mr. Jones as "a competent, well-mannered employee, loved by his personnel because he has always acted fairly." He added that "although he is a foreigner, he has married an Argentine woman and is the father of several Argentine children."[85] For the company, Jones was a valued employee whose professional skills and personal credentials deserved workers' respect and appreciation. As some scholars have recently argued, industrialists blamed the crisis of company authority on the intervention of professional agitators and state officials, whom they regarded as aliens to the "industrial family."[86] I would contend that in the 1917 railroad strike women activists may very well be included among those outsiders: their intrusion into the world of railroad work not only altered the alleged harmony between business and labor, but it also provoked unease in a universe structured by male codes and solidarities. Female militancy was probably the railroad administrators' worst nightmare. Nothing could have been odder, more improper, or more outrageous to the administrators than having their authority publicly discredited by even the female relatives of railwaymen.

Hence the incensed reaction of *La Prensa*, *La Época*, and *La Nación* in the face of women's acts of blatant contempt toward company managers as well as state authorities. Regarding the hostile reaction that the military officers' harangues raised on the part of demonstrators obstructing the railroad tracks in Rosario, *La Prensa* sorely regretted that "army officers and commanders are

84. *LP*, 10 Oct. 1917, p. 9; *LE*, 10 Oct. 1917, p. 2.

85. *LE*, 10 Oct. 1917, p. 2; *LP*, 11 Oct. 1917, p. 8.

86. Fernando Rocchi, "Un largo camino a casa: Empresarios, trabajadores e identidad industrial en Argentina, 1880–1930," in *La cuestión social en Argentina, 1870–1943*, ed. Juan Suriano (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Colmena, 2000), 186.

disrespected and strikers mock their advice." It also added that "it is women and children who defy the troops; children shout at conscripts so that they do not shoot at their mothers."[87] Clearly, by turning out en masse and taking an active part in the protest, working-class women challenged both class hierarchies and the principles of male honor upon which industrial authority and social order were predicated.

In brief, whether critical or supportive of the Yrigoyen administration, national newspapers agreed upon a double disqualification of the involvement of working-class families in the labor protest. First, echoing entrenched gender conceptions of the time, press reports reinforced the dichotomy associating femininity with passionate behavior and masculinity with rational conduct.[88] In the eyes of the press, railwaymen exhibited civility and levelheadedness characteristic of responsible, law-abiding citizens, even in the extraordinary context of a national strike. Working-class women, on the contrary, could not help acting riotously and foolishly, which proved their unsuitability for republican liberties. Secondly, by stigmatizing women's presence in the public sphere, national newspapers went beyond reinforcing a stereotyped representation of working-class femininity to question the respectability of the railroad communities and, ultimately, the legitimacy of their cause.

Both anarchists and socialists systematically challenged these gendered representations of the popular protest, although they did so for very different reasons. The articles and reports they published justified labor claims on similar grounds: the needs and deprivation of the railroad families. There was no question regarding the justice of the workers' claims or their methods of struggle. Yet, despite this basic common ground, they constructed two sharply different visions of working-class femininity. In the pages of *La Protesta*, anarchists openly celebrated the violence and radicalism incarnated by female activism. While they did not contest the narrative of the events presented by what they called the "bourgeois" press, they did reverse the value judgment. Socialists, on the contrary, advocated for the respectability of working-class families by constructing an image of working-class women who were just as rational and judicious as their male relatives.

87. *LP*, 16 Aug. 1917, p. 8.

88. Anna Clark, "Manhood, Womanhood, and the Politics of Class in Britain, 1790–1845," in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), 263–79; Keith McClelland, "Rational and Respectable Men: Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain, 1850–1867," in Frader and Rose, *Gender and Class*, 280–93.

Anarchists' accounts of the protest linked female collective action to qualities such as spontaneity, sensitivity, and passion, which were considered to be intrinsically feminine traits. These traits were vindicated because they allowed women to give themselves over to the anarchists' preferred method of struggle: direct action. It was precisely female virulence in rhetoric and action that *La Protesta* commended the most. A report on a meeting organized by the Female Society in Santa Fe provides an excellent example of this. At that gathering, several railroad leaders addressed the audience with what was dubbed, approvingly, an "incendiary combative oratory." The correspondent added:

> The person who really gave the note of rebellion and barricade was a female comrade, whose name I ignore. She sprang like lightning from among the audience, and in her booming voice she urged everyone to join the strike when the day came. . . . She also said that if railroad workers went on strike, it was necessary to help them, and that if scabs tried to move any trains, they had to be stoned and clubbed.[89]

La Protesta, as can be observed, was not in the least interested in denying portraits of violent female militancy or rumors about unruly behavior, which were exactly what leading national newspapers condemned. Rather, anarchists celebrated this impetuous style. Commenting on the stoppage at the Ferrocarril Central Argentino, *La Protesta* stated that there were women who "lead by example with their fiery action."[90] Unlike the national press, anarchists insisted that this was not unwarranted, mindless violence but rather the result of workers' frustration with their destitution and lack of opportunities. A report on the arrest of Marina Villegas, who assisted in setting a local train on fire, documents the anarchists' efforts to highlight the sufferings that provoked and legitimated this kind of attack. As *La Protesta* pointed out, "She is a widow and mother of four, one still a nursling; once before she tried to throw herself in front of a train with all her children; she said in her deposition that when she heard that a fire had started she wanted to boost it."[91] Readers of *La Protesta* could not draw an incriminatory conclusion from this dramatic incident: to the extent that the violence of female activists was a consequence of need, it was not a crime.[92] And it was most certainly not irrational, either. Moreover, as women knew better

89. *LPro*, 20 Sept. 1917.
90. *LPro*, 16 Aug. 1917.
91. *LPro*, 14 Aug. 1917; *LPro*, 17 Aug. 1917.
92. Juan Suriano, *Anarquistas: Cultura y política libertaria en Buenos Aires, 1890–1910* (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2001), 279–83.

than anyone else the daily hardships of working-class homes, they had just as much right and authority as did men to get involved in revolutionary struggle.

To certain anarchists, female activism was indeed the most precious legacy of the great strike. According to their philosophy, no matter the material gains obtained by the workers, the advance of state intervention in labor affairs constituted a resonant defeat for organized labor. Yet the sense of solidarity among working-class families forged during the protest attested to the viability of the egalitarian utopia desired by anarchists. A letter that Angel Núñez, a railwayman, sent to *La Protesta* describing the celebration of the strike's end in his small town of Trenque Lauquen suggested that, on such occasions, utopian ideals could indeed come true: "They put up a people's podium in the plaza, where those who so desired climbed up to speak. Several male and female comrades as well as young women addressed the audience, and after all the speeches there was a spontaneous round of applause, because everyone condemned the victimizers of our suffering people."[93] Though the overall choreography of this celebration did resemble republican rituals, the main characters were certainly different. In traditional public meetings, male intellectuals, journalists, and aspiring politicians addressed the audiences, while at this "people's podium" both men and women, regardless of their differences, whether adult or young, could speak out, provided that they shared the language of condemnation against those whom the anarchists called their oppressors.[94]

Socialists, for their part, saw the virtues of female militancy from a completely different point of view. Forms of female collective action were appraised for their moderation. For the socialist press, the strike demonstrated that women were perfectly capable of persuading public opinion of the justice of the labor cause. For example, *La Vanguardia* emphasized that, in her address, the wife of a railroad worker formulated "fair comments on the meaning of labor struggles, arguing the need for women to contribute to the workers' cause as much as they could."[95] By the same token, Luisa Rossi spoke at the same meeting, "explaining clearly and precisely the origin of the current protest. She condemned the company's stance of refusing to acknowledge the organization of the men who, through their labor, helped them amass large dividends."[96] *La Vanguardia* described women as "female citizens" and their speeches as "dis-

93. *LPro*, 27 Oct. 1917.

94. Hilda Sabato, *The Many and the Few: Political Participation in Republican Buenos Aires* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), 117–37.

95. *LV*, 17 Aug. 1917, p. 1.

96. Ibid.

sertations." It made the point of referring to them by their names and commending their wisdom and intellectual ability to address complex political and social issues. In other words, women were recognized as individuals, as rational subjects gifted with the same talents as working-class men.

By providing such a representation of working-class femininity, *La Vanguardia* explicitly disputed the derogatory depictions of female activism promoted by the national press. Furthermore, socialists felt compelled to question the veracity of the leading newspapers' reports on female violence. Rebuffing a story published by *La Prensa*, *La Vanguardia* stated that at the assembly held in Córdoba women had proven to be judicious, "advising strikers to be calm and composed, keeping a peaceful attitude."[97] Regarding the news stories denouncing a large female crowd armed with clubs for injuring an engine driver and other train personnel, *La Vanguardia* called attention to the fact that "the official report turned out to be inaccurate, especially taking into account that armed agents were riding in the train."[98] Socialists were keenly aware of the political damage that national newspapers inflicted on the labor cause with such pejorative representations of female activism.[99] Thus they were not so much interested in rationalizing popular violence as in vindicating the respectability of working-class families.

The socialists' systematic efforts to question the accuracy of the most widely circulated newspapers did not mean denying that there were indeed rallies of women "brandishing sticks" aimed at intimidating strikebreakers or, as was often the case, disrupting rail traffic.[100] Yet *La Vanguardia* maintained that the passengers of the intercepted trains did not feel threatened by women's virulence and that on some occasions they even responded by getting off the train to "cheer the strikers."[101] Moreover, socialists insisted on portraying women as victims of state repression; if they got involved in armed skirmishes, it was only to defend themselves from police or army violence. For the socialists, the presence of women fostered empathy between the protesters and the public rather than exacerbating social antagonism. An editorial summed up this motif in this way: "What stands out about this movement, its most *sublime* feature, is

97. *LV*, 22 Sept. 1917, p. 1.

98. *LV*, 15 Aug. 1917, p. 1.

99. On the socialist parties' strategies to defend working-class respectability, see Madeleine Hurd, "Class, Masculinity, Manners, and Mores: Public Space and Public Sphere in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Social Science History* 24, no. 1 (2000): 75–110.

100. *LV*, 11 Aug. 1917, p. 1.

101. *LV*, 13 Aug. 1917, p. 3.

the active participation of women in it."[102] What was so inspiring about female activism was that it simultaneously reinforced the legitimacy of labor demands and corroborated women's readiness to exercise their political rights.

Following a long-standing and distinctive party stance in favor of political gender equality, *La Vanguardia* endeavored to prove that working-class women possessed the same qualities as men, enabling them to incorporate into the national community as full citizens. As a matter of fact, during the interwar years, when women's civil and political rights became a matter of heated public debate in Argentina, socialists campaigned in favor of this cause alongside female associations from different sectors of the political spectrum. In the parliament, the Socialist Party consistently supported proposals for granting women the right to vote on equal terms with men, subscribing to an unconditional defense of gender-neutral universal suffrage.[103] The socialists' commitment to gender equality permeated their assessment of the significance of family mobilization in the great strike. An editorial by *La Vanguardia* stated that working-class women were capable of "functions more elevated" than just "domestic chores" or "mechanical procreation." Refuting the "reactionary writers," it insisted that they could choose to control how many children they had, improve their lives through education, and get involved in politics. The editorial concluded by evoking the English suffragists, who the socialists argued provided a model of female organization and mobilization for local working-class women to emulate. The leading role of women turned the 1917 strike into a landmark of collective action on behalf of both class and gender rights. It represented significant progress on the road to social and political modernity, a promising first step in the conquest of labor as well as civic rights. The working-class women who supported this labor protest with as much determination as good sense appeared here as an emblem of the new emancipated woman, a working-class version of the modern woman that emerged with the advent of mass society and mass culture during the interwar years.[104]

In conclusion, both anarchists and socialists celebrated the joint partici-

102. *LV*, 18 Aug. 1917, p. 4. Emphasis added.

103. Dora Barrancos, *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina: Una historia de cinco siglos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2007), 121–32; Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995), 129–34.

104. *LV*, 6 Sept. 1917, p. 3; Nancy F. Cott, "The Modern Woman of the 1920s, American Style," in *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 5, *Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Françoise Thébaud (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 76–91.

pation of men and women in the 1917 great strike. Indeed, as the historical literature has indicated, the ideas of these two political groups on the role of women in their own emancipation and in the emancipation of society at large were plagued with contradictions: unprejudiced and radical visions of femininity coexisted with rather paternalistic and conservative ideas.[105] Yet despite their inconsistencies and ambiguities, socialists and anarchists were of the same mind when it came to defending the equal participation of men and women in the labor protest. As I have just shown, in their vindication of female mobilization these groups appealed to very different—even antagonistic—ideological reasons. But no matter how disparate their conceptions of gender were, their ideas allowed them to regard the crucial role of women in the labor movement as strengthening the respectability of working-class families. In this way, both anarchists and socialists articulated a more inclusive vision of the working-class community.

Conclusions

The 1917 great railroad strike was clearly a family enterprise. By examining working-class mobilization from the perspective of gender, this study has unveiled the crucial role of women in a modern labor conflict and has shed new light on working-class politics and culture during the democratic republic in Argentina. The examination of working-class organizations and (male) trade-union activism, which is traditionally emphasized in historiography, must be complemented with an analysis of family mobilization. Working-class families displayed a diverse repertoire of modes of collective action rooted both in male unionization and in the traditions of anarchist and socialist activism. The long-standing republican culture of the country and the dynamic political competition made possible by the 1912 electoral reform undoubtedly strengthened those repertoires of political action.

By blurring the public/private dichotomy, this article has attested to the centrality of both family life and the household to politics. Linking the domestic and the political, two presumably autonomous or oppositional spheres, allows us to elucidate how issues of social reproduction mattered in defining both men's and women's claims as workers and citizens of a republic. While the struggle

105. Mirta Zaida Lobato, "Entre la protección y la exclusión: Discurso maternal y protección de la mujer obrera, Argentina, 1890–1934," in Suriano, *La cuestión social en Argentina*, 245–76; Maxine Molyneux, "No God, No Boss, No Husband: Anarchist Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Argentina," *Latin American Perspectives* 13, no. 1 (1986): 119–45; Suriano, *Anarquistas*, 147–53.

en nombre del hogar proletario buttressed workingmen's status within both the household and the nation, it also provided an opportunity for working-class women to get involved in public life. Thus, this gendered study of the great railroad strike sheds light on the strength of the politics and class identity of railroad communities, the empowerment of working-class men as breadwinners, and the making of working-class women as political subjects.

During the 1917 strike, the scope and depth of local mobilization in small towns genuinely amazed journalists and reporters. Yet by no means can we assume that these modes of political participation were totally novel or that they constituted women's first entry into the public arena. Evidently, the busy sociability of working-class families during the national strike was just the tip of the iceberg, a rich sample of a set of practices that, although intensified during the protest, were actually part and parcel of their daily lives.[106] As recent studies on anarchist, socialist, and communist culture in Buenos Aires have shown, conferences, lectures, books, journalism, celebrations, and rituals all profoundly shaped the worldview of the urban working classes.[107] My examination of family mobilization during the 1917 strike reveals the vigor of analogous social and cultural networks in small railroad towns.

Contrary to Bialet Massé's reasoning, it was not isolation or a lack of cultural horizons that inclined working-class families in small villages to embrace radical convictions but rather a vibrant cultural life with strong connections to the outside world. The memoirs of Cruz Escribano, an anarchist activist who was a child living in Tafí Viejo at the time of the great strike, are illuminating in this regard.[108] He remembered attending May 1 celebrations in the central plaza, where he listened to socialist legislators visiting town, and he evoked anarchist magazines his family subscribed to as well as fragments of a poem his father wrote about the great strike. Cruz also recalled his conversations on

106. On working-class culture and the public sphere, see Geoff Eley, "Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture: The Making of a Working-Class Public, 1780–1850," in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1990), 12–49.

107. Dora Barrancos, *La escena iluminada: Ciencia para trabajadores (1890–1930)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Plus Ultra, 1996); Hernán Camarero, *A la conquista de la clase obrera: Los comunistas y el mundo del trabajo en la Argentina, 1920–1935* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2007); Mirta Zaida Lobato, *La prensa obrera: Buenos Aires y Montevideo, 1890–1958* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2009); Suriano, *Anarquistas*.

108. Cruz Escribano, *Mis recuerdos: Acontecimientos del gremio ferroviario, Tafí Viejo 1917, Cruz del Eje 1919, presos de Bragado, "La Ilícita" y otros recuerdos* (Buenos Aires: Cooperativa Gráfica Gral. Belgrano, 1982), 11–32.

the anarchist movement with a young man from Asturias who boarded at his house, worked at the workshops, and—not surprisingly—joined the strike. His recollections suggest that small-town inhabitants could share the same cultural universe with workers living across the nation and even abroad. In a country linked by an extensive transportation system and with a relatively robust system of public education that insured high literacy rates among popular sectors, an organized labor movement whose arms reached into most of the national territory, and a competitive electoral system, small railroad towns were well connected to nationwide cultural spheres. They also maintained close ties to international political trends through exchanges made possible by international migrations, exchanges that intensified in the context of the political and ideological transformations resulting from the Great War and the Russian Revolution.

This present exploration of the 1917 great railroad strike, therefore, indicates that the political sociability of railroad communities, so profoundly marked by the lively activism of working-class women, was neither novel nor parochial. In early twentieth-century Argentina, railroad towns might have been geographically dispersed, but their families, who mobilized in favor of the strike, had been culturally integrated into national and international networks for quite some time. Their cultural geography thus transcended the geography of their immediate social experience. Studies on popular culture therefore must broaden their scope beyond the boundaries of major Argentine cities, since small working-class towns of the time were demonstrably an integral part of the changing dynamics of associational practices and political sociability as well as the development of trade-union organization and electoral politics.

Just as the collective action carried out by families was crucial to railroaders' mobilization, so were the imperatives of family responsibilities and respectability to the workers' political language. The fact that labor demands appeared associated with the welfare of working-class homes ultimately empowered and legitimated the protest. Moreover, by conceptualizing the strike as an action aimed at protecting the welfare of the proletarian household, workers embraced a more inclusive definition of the railroad community. Whereas the mere defense of trade privileges could have undermined the unity of the labor movement, the demands of very different trades fell into an all-encompassing idea of responsible masculinity with which any railwayman could identify. By formulating the causes of the movement in those terms, the great railroad strike cemented solidarities in a highly heterogeneous occupational community fragmented by a wide diversity of skills, ages, and national origins. And, let us emphasize once more, leading a protest in the name of the proletarian family enabled the workers' female relatives to join the movement and to voice

their own needs and longings. Women, who at that time lacked political rights and faced systematic detraction on the part of the leading national newspapers, could find in the movement a space to act simultaneously as guardians of their families, members of working-class communities, and political subjects.

To be sure, the 1917 strike unleashed a heated debate on gender relations. On the whole, it strengthened public discussions about the status of the railwaymen as heads of household. In the subsequent years, the approval of different legislative proposals, particularly the passage of a revised version of the retirement law, would secure railwaymen's labor rights. Still, whereas the railroad workers' ideal of the male breadwinner gained substantial ground, working-class women's participation in the public arena provoked great controversy and was ultimately dismissed. Women had been the main target of the national press, which questioned their vociferous presence in politics and, through it, the respectability of railroad families. In response, as I have shown, during the course of the strike trade unions and especially the left-wing press committed to defending an inclusive railroad family and the equal participation of men and women in the public sphere.

Paradoxically, by the mid-1930s and 1940s, when LF and the Unión Ferroviaria (the FOF's successor) published their first official trade-union histories, little was left of the earlier vindication of family and female mobilization. The process of dignifying the trade unions' lineage implied constructing a historical narrative wherein moderate men and disciplined organizations took exclusive charge of the strike and led railwaymen to victory, therefore deserving full credit for the strength of the labor movement.[109] The massive participation of women, which had formerly elicited such a negative response from the national press, was no longer vindicated. It was not disowned; it was simply condemned to oblivion. Thus official memories of the railroad unions reconciled the ideal of the male breadwinner with that of female domesticity, constructing a model of the working-class family, along with the corresponding gender roles, that was a far cry from the spirit of the turbulent days of the winter and spring of 1917.

109. On female invisibility in official labor narratives, see Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 120–51.