



## Capitalism, workers organising and the shifting meanings of workplace democracy

Maurizio Atzeni

To cite this article: Maurizio Atzeni (2016): Capitalism, workers organising and the shifting meanings of workplace democracy, Labor History, DOI: [10.1080/0023656X.2016.1184043](https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2016.1184043)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2016.1184043>



Published online: 12 May 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Capitalism, workers organising and the shifting meanings of workplace democracy

Maurizio Atzeni

School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the limits imposed by a capitalist system of industrial relations on the construction of workplace democracy. It does so by focusing on the experiences of two grass-roots organisations, from both the formal and informal sectors of the economy, in the context of contemporary Argentina. Against one-sided and abstract views of union democracy, the article argues that, for a critical engagement on the issue of democracy, we should go beyond analyses that consider this in isolation from the material, institutional and ideological capitalist context within which unions' actions are inserted. Democracy permeates the life of unions as collective organisations, but the struggle for control in a context of unbalanced power shapes democracy as a practice. Questions about the right balance between democratic decision-making and delegation and between efficiency and accountability in unions remain open.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 December 2014

Accepted 20 April 2015

## KEYWORDS

Workplace democracy; Argentina; social processes and capitalism; democracy and society

## Introduction

The issue of workplace democracy has always been central within the sociology of work. Debates on industrial democracy,<sup>1</sup> on the nature of trade unionism<sup>2</sup> and on alternative organisations<sup>3</sup> have all, in various ways, emphasised how the empowerment of workers within their workplaces and unions, creates citizenship, envisages modes of production based on alternative social relations and contributes to real progressive democracy in societies. In a less political fashion, studies on organisational participation have shown how, in light of profitability, workers' participation in companies' decision-making processes remains fundamental.<sup>4</sup>

Within unions' studies, the issue of workplace democracy has been reconsidered in recent years in relation to debates on unions' renewal.<sup>5</sup> These debates have invariably considered the achievement of a greater level of collective sharing, decision-making and members' activism as pivotal to the renewal project. That democracy is important for unions' renewal is an issue on which many would agree. However, if we really want to go beyond purely abstract or declamatory definitions of the importance of democracy, other questions should be of concern: Is democracy something that trade unions can realistically achieve? How should we frame it and look at it? Is there a long-term benefit to democratic participation?

What internal mechanisms should be in place to guarantee widespread participation? Most importantly: Is it essential to build organisational power and grant workers better representation and protection of their interests?

The point of view expressed in this article is that the form and content of democracy in practice cannot be predetermined since it is the expression of relations of power within the context of capitalism, and thus varies depending on the specific reality of this in a specific workplace. As a consequence, while democracy remains fundamental for the creation of collective identity and solidarity, and certainly the basis for widespread engagement and participation, in the context of struggle and opposition within which workers and their unions are unmeshed. However, it is not necessarily or exclusively the best option workers have for collectively establishing their organisational power.

However, different positions and approaches to these questions seem to exist. A number of empirical studies have tried to substantiate the call for greater democracy within unions by quantifying and measuring it. It has been proved, for instance, that a greater engagement with democracy helps to address union members' disaffection,<sup>6</sup> and that its implementation constitutes a source of power for workers' delegates,<sup>7</sup> strengthening solidarity and militancy.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to this, other studies have looked at the issue from a broader, less normative perspective, by focusing on the intersections existing between internal democracy, effective collective mobilisation and organisation-building. For instance, in her studies on the organisation of precarious migrant workers in the US, Milkman<sup>9</sup> has argued that, while in these new organising drives democracy continues to be emphasised and placed at the core of strategies, effective mobilisations have often been the result of top-down as well as bottom-up strategies. Similarly, in studies on already consolidated unions, it has been noted that there is very often no direct link between members' activism and participation and unions' bargaining power.<sup>10</sup> Even in the most radical experiences, an ongoing dialectic tension between leaders and members and between different levels of representation seems to emerge,<sup>11</sup> despite the importance of unions' militants and leaders with left wing orientation in shaping and nourishing democracy in practice.<sup>12</sup> Thus, contrary to approaches that tend to measure and quantify democracy or to abstract an idealistic and unquestioned vision of it, these findings show a disjuncture between the ideal of democracy and its practical possibilities. Genuinely democratic unions are not necessarily more efficient than authoritarian unions in achieving better deals for workers; and, contrary to this, totally undemocratic unions can gain legitimacy in terms of workers' representation by means other than the respect of formal democratic rules.

As organisations moulded by capitalist social relations, the functioning of unions' democratic mechanisms is inevitably exposed to a combination of factors that profoundly influence unions' internal processes. Pessimistic, 'iron law' views, about the inevitability of bureaucratisation and the impossibility of democracy, which have dominated previous debates, have now been superseded. But recent research continues to underline the role of institutional and ideological factors in undermining democracy within unions. Voss, for instance, puts in evidence how the existence of an institutionally hostile environment, as in the USA, '*heightens the need for skilled leadership and sophisticated research in union organizing strategies*;<sup>13</sup> weakening the possibility of effective democracy. Enlarging on this point, Ross argues that, even in the context of the more protective Canadian environment, where the majority of unions promote a discourse of democracy and members' participation. That '*both leaders and members are ensnared within bureaucratic relationships and socialized to accept*

*the rightness or naturalness of a situation in which elite experts take care of or service the members*<sup>14</sup>.

Considering the evidence provided by these streams of research and following a long-standing Marxist tradition in the study of workers' collective representation, the article aims to offer a more realistic, multidimensional and materialist account of union democracy. The approach used in this article is materialist in considering democracy as a mediated process taking place within social formations shaped by capitalist social relations. These relations define the material conditions and context of struggle, the employment structure, and the legal and institutional framework within which workers are inserted, conditioning their daily practices.

While formal and informal processes of internal democracy are necessary to transform individual interests into collective interests and to give legitimacy and strength to collective organisation and representation,<sup>15</sup> the '*tensions emerging from having to sustain dignified work in a context of powerlessness*'<sup>16</sup> generate complex dynamics and contradictory outcomes in terms of the relations between workplace democracy and workers' organising power. Focusing on these complexities, rather than measuring and assessing workers' attitudes toward democracy in isolation, helps to substantiate and ground what would otherwise be generic and abstract calls for greater democracy within trade unions.

In order to map the interconnections of these dimensions, the article presents empirical findings of two of the most representative cases of democratic grass roots organising that recently occurred in Argentina, in both the informal and the formal sectors of the economy.

The case of Argentina offers a set of contextual and institutional variables that might help to better understand the contradictory dynamics emerging from workers' attempts at building organisational power with democracy. The existence of a legislative framework that grants the State considerable power of intervention in industrial relations and in the regulation of workers' representation has strengthened the tendency to bureaucratisation within national and local level unions. But it has contemporaneously empowered workers in the workplace by granting representative rights to shop steward workplace structures, the so-called *comisiones internas*. Historically, *comisiones internas* have been the means through which grass roots worker mobilisations have recovered spaces of representation within the unions, contesting national or regional trade union leaderships.<sup>17</sup> The resurgence of grass roots mobilisations in Argentina in recent years, with their emphasis on democratic decision-making, has restarted the debate on union democracy and bureaucracy<sup>18</sup> and on forms of representation and methods of struggle in the country.<sup>19</sup> These dynamic combinations of institutional, political and socio-economic factors, in a context of diffused labour conflict, thus make the case of Argentina particularly rich in terms of the variables potentially affecting union democracy.

In the article, two emblematic cases of democratic grass roots movements from both the informal and the formal sectors of the economy are analysed. In the first case, that of SIMECA (*Sindicato Independiente de Mensajeros y Cadetes*, Independent Union of Messengers and Cadets) an association of delivery workers known as *motoqueros* (motorbikers), workers pursued collective organising through democratic decision-making processes in precarious conditions of employment, without legal protection or union recognition. In the second case, that of the Buenos Aires underground railway system (AGTSYP, *Asociación Gremial de Trabajadores del Subte y el Premetro*, Underground Railway Workers' Association, known as

SUBTE), workers' experience with democratic organising took place through conflicts in a highly visible/high impact sector of activity with existing workplace's representation and in a historically unionised sector. The different environment and legal framework in which the two organising experiences took place have been fundamental in shaping the processes through which these groups of workers have moved from forms of 'primitive democracy', as the Webbs would have called it, to less direct, more mediated and institutionalised forms of democracy. The specific historical contexts in which the first organising drives took place have also left important birthmarks on the way in which democracy has been installed in the discourse and practices of workers. In the case of SIMECA, an organisation which took its first steps in the heat of the social conflict and mobilisation of December 2001, voting in the general assembly, though consistently implemented when possible, has hardly ever been the exclusive method of reaching democratic consensus. This is due partly to the nature of the delivery workers' labour process, which is diffused in the urban space, and partly to SIMECA getting its strength as an organisation by the mobilisation of people in massive gatherings for direct action. Similarly, in the case of SUBTE, who started to organise in 1997 as movement opposed to the official union leadership in a moment of high recession and weak labour union power, clandestine activity imposed the search for consensus among workers through means other than the traditional assembly.

Overall these two cases, for the different sectors of the economy and socio-economic contexts in which each was developed, offer a highly contrasting comparison that, it is hoped, can disentangle the complex and contradictory dynamics underlining the relations between workplace democracy and workers' organising power.

### **Workplace democracy and the capitalist context**

The importance of the issue of workplace democracy goes beyond its usefulness and the appeal it might have as a strategy for union renewal. Probably more than with other union-related issues, democracy is at the very core of union identity and purpose, reflecting the possibilities but also the limits of workers' collective organisation within the context of capitalism.<sup>20</sup>

Historically, the debate has been dominated by negative views on the practice of workplace democracy and has been associated with bureaucratic and anti-bureaucratic visions of unions. The Webbs<sup>21</sup> were among the first to emphasise the existence of internal organisational factors leading to bureaucratisation, but saw this as necessary for strengthening unions during collective regulations. Contrary to this, Gramsci<sup>22</sup> explained the tendency to centralisation of decisions within the trade unions. He indicates how this works to the deficit of democracy, as a function of both material and ideological determinations. As organisations that negotiate over the price of labour, trade unions represent workers 'in a form dictated by the capitalist regime'. This determines, according to the type of productive activity, the ways, times and forms in which workers are employed, work is organised and wages are paid. The existence of this structure and the rules and mechanisms imposed by collective bargaining negotiations, shape the ways in which trade unions and their representatives interrelate with the employers and the State. The conquest of 'industrial legality' and the imposition of discipline to respect this becomes almost an end in itself for leaders, further distancing themselves from rank and file workers. Thus, for Gramsci, multiple determinants (material and ideological) and social processes related to the position trade unions have

within capitalism, rather than organisational inertia leading to bureaucratisation, underlie the construction of workers' democratic representation.

Gramsci's argument was to be reconsidered and expanded over the years in the work of Richard Hyman. Central to Hyman's discussion was the idea of the existence of two sorts of pressures on union democracy deriving from trade unions' need to balance two contrasting types of power: power for and power over. Compared to other organisations, trade unions are at the same time the expression of their members' wills, in whose representation they exert power (power for), and the enforcers of collective rules on individual members (power over). As such they are constantly exposed, *as organisations of the relatively powerless in an environment of power*<sup>23</sup> to pressures originating from within the capitalist social structure. This structure contemporaneously poses material barriers and obstacles to internal democracy, forces delegation, and provides the ideological framework that usually leads

to attribute failings in democracy to the personal characteristics of members or leaders: "apathy" on the one hand, corruption and "careerism" on the other. To remain at this level of analysis, however, it is to moralise rather than to explain<sup>24</sup>

This conceptualisation, which is seated on the more general idea of the dual nature of trade unionism, as a class movement and labour market institution,<sup>25</sup> helped to move away from a binary division between rank and file workers and leaders and from one-sided views of unions' bureaucracy which dominated previous debates. As to the first, Hyman supported the view that a clear cleavage could not be made with respect to these two groups, both leaders and rank and file workers were subjected to similar pressures leading to reformist and accommodating tendencies.<sup>26</sup> As to the second, he dismissed the idea of the existence of an 'iron law' of oligarchy within trade unions, for these organisations do not exist independently of their members and of the social relations they establish. *Whether or not union democracy is an efficient method of achieving union objectives, it is subversive of the very rational of unionism to divorce democracy from the formulation of these objectives.*<sup>27</sup> Hyman, in summary, holds a very pragmatic but overall positive view about possibilities for union democracy, notwithstanding its limits.

As different strands of research have underlined, democracy is central to the same idea of unions as collective organisations and at the very base of any spontaneous associations of workers.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is just through formal and informal processes of internal democracy that workers' individual interests are redefined and, in what Offe and Wiesenthal<sup>29</sup> call a 'dialogical process', become collective. Democracy is then the social process linking workers' organisations with their collective interests and attitudes.

While a principle of democracy then permeates unions and more generally the construction of workers' collective identities. Workers' organisational power, however, is not necessarily based on widespread implementation of democratic and participatory practices. This disjunction between democracy as ideal and as a practice, which is reflected in a combination of top-down and/or bottom-up processes of organisation, is not a paradox but a natural situation generated by the relative powerless conditions in which workers' actions usually take place. By not considering this, much of the current literature on union democracy is one-sided. It has limited its analyses to assessments and measurements of democracy in complete isolation from the structural conditions and power relations that the context of capitalist social relations imposes on workers. This context is composed of material, ideological and institutional factors which are constitutive, rather than marginal, processes of the way in which unions' actions and demands are structured. The overall mediations and

variables that can affect unions' actions, once referred to the practice of workplace democracy, always result in a complex dynamic of interrelations between rank and file workers, activists and leaderships. As will be evidenced by the empirical part of the article, democratic decision-making has produced in both cases a redefinition of workers' collective interests and it has given substance to solidarity, political awareness and organisational strength. However, democratic practices have been flexibly adapted to resist material, ideological and institutional pressures.

## Methodology and context

This article is the result of two consecutive phases of fieldwork and research on the issue of workplace and union democracy. The outcome of the first, carried on in 2010 in collaboration with an Argentinean colleague, was a conference paper.<sup>30</sup> This was limited in its focus to the study of SUBTE but represented a preliminary test for ideas developed during the second phase. The methodology adopted consisted of a combination of participant observation (general assemblies, informal social gatherings, informal chats with activists) with analyses of data found in secondary sources of different origins (union pamphlets, online material, published interviews with union leaders in left-wing magazines, press reports of conflicts and videos posted on YouTube). During the second phase, carried out by the author in 2012 in the context of a EU-funded research project on the organisation and collective action of precarious workers in Buenos Aires, the focus was extended to the case of SIMECA. The aim was to compare the issue of democracy in two grass-roots organisations operating in two different legal environments. In this second phase, in depth, semi-structured interviews with workers of both SIMECA and SUBTE were added. These have been complemented in the case of SIMECA with data from secondary sources similar to the ones used with SUBTE.

The organisations studied are very different in terms of their genesis and development. SIMECA has emerged in years of economic and political turmoil in a sector without formal representation. It has been representing workers in the sector for more than ten years but it has never been granted formal representation of delivery workers (*personería gremial*). *Personería gremial* is the legal condition that allows unions to represent workers in conflicts and collective bargainings. It is granted by the Ministry of Labour to only one union per economic sector, normally after a lengthy procedural and political process. In 2011, however, dismissing the claims of SIMECA, the Minister of Labour granted *personería gremial* to another union affiliated to the CGT (the pro government central union federation) which was also claiming the representation of the sector's workers. This decision led inevitably to the gradual disappearance of SIMECA. The de facto representation of SIMECA, the peculiarity of the sector organised, made up of small informal businesses, the distribution of workers across the city, the different mobilising strategies that SIMECA had to put in place to represent its members and the disappearance of the organisation, makes difficult to know how many members SIMECA represented and how many workers belonged to the sector. However, members interviewed have estimated that the organisation had, at its peak, about 400 active members. Contrary to SIMECA, SUBTE's workers belong to an organisation, that while still in a process of consolidation, it is formally established, with its own financial resources, effectively and legally representing workers in the sector. SUBTE's union currently claims a high union density with 2200 members out of the 3024 employees of the company managing the underground services in Buenos Aires (*Metrovías*).

Considering the aims of the research, interview questions were clustered around the following issues: the relations between organisation building and democracy, ideas of democracy and relations to politics, democracy in situations of conflict and changes in the practices of democracy over the years. Twelve workers were formally interviewed. Although these were in the majority men. For the historically limited female presence in the two sectors of activity in the case of SUBTE, where gender issues have taken a prominent role in union policies, four female workers were interviewed individually and three of them as a group. Many of those interviewed were activists or had an active participation in events. These helped in gaining insider views of the complex dynamics of building democracy with organisation and made possible fieldwork access and work on SIMECA, now an organisation that has disappeared. However, activists' views are those of a minority which might not necessarily be coincident with those of the rest of the membership. Depending on the kind of research, this might raise methodological issues. In this case, however, the overall aim was not to assess the level of democracy and eventually to measure the corresponding failure of the organisation and of its leaders in achieving this, but rather to uncover the mechanisms that make democracy an always imperfect practice in a capitalist context. Moreover, activists in both organisations were committed to democracy, but sometimes had frustration, with its full implementation. Considering all this, I believe that activists' interviews provide informed and reliable views of reality.

### **SIMECA: Building democracy and grass-roots organisation in the informal sector**

Delivery workers are employed on an individual basis by a myriad of different employers and have virtually no workplace since they perform their work by moving across the urban space. Despite this, they share similar working and employment conditions: variability of weather conditions, air and sound contamination, the harshness of human relations in the midst of chaotic traffic and mechanical problems affecting their means of transportation (and service production). They are also all exposed to the same dangers and levels of physical exploitation. Their work is structured around urgency and a system of payment based on piece-rate, which increase the rhythms and length of work and in turn increase the probability of road accidents.

Workers that participated in the creation and activity of SIMECA would always emphasise how the sharing of such exploitative material conditions generated identification and solidarity among them.

When, after a rainy winter week, you finally arrive on a Friday afternoon to drink a mate with the other guys that suffered like you, this produces very strong, very human ties. These, later on in the street get transformed into solidarity ... our job is highly individual, you are alone in the street, the boss frightens you, cars run you over, police ask for bribes and the only one that can help you is another delivery worker who has experienced the same situations as you did (SIMECA unpublished material).

In the case of SIMECA, an organisation that emerged in a new, highly precarious and risky sector of activity, among young workers who were not unionised and which was born literally on the street, solidarity and collective decision-making represented the natural bedrock of their collective organising. The first activists would trace back the origin of the organisation to the informal chatting of workers in meeting places in the city centre, chats which were



then reinforced at gatherings held in the usual bars, during football matches or in other social activities outside work. There was overall a diffused sense of identity and strong ties among delivery workers, many of whom came from the same poor neighbourhood. However, this sort of 'built in', spontaneous democracy of grass roots organising, associated with solidarity and embedded within the structure of contradictions of the labour-capital relationship, has been concretely shaped by both internal and external factors.

An important factor has been represented by the socio-political context in which workers organisation initially started and consolidated, the years 2000–3, which coincided with a very turbulent time in the social history of Argentina. In the face of massive unemployment, flexibilisation of labour and a spiralling economic crisis that led to the default of the country on its sovereign debt in December 2001, roadblocks, marches and social mobilisation were frequent reality in the streets of Buenos Aires and other major cities. This state of constant mobilisation, of confrontation with the established power, of refusal of traditional party politics, founded a way of expression in the idea of horizontality in decision-making processes; an idea promoted and present, at that time, in the discourses and practices of many social organisations. SIMECA, at the beginning, was heavily imbued with ideas of collective participation and alternative politics which were often associated with the practice of direct action. This latter was to become one of the central aspects of the mobilisation's strategy of the organisation. This was partly due to the dispersion of workers in different agencies/workplaces around the city, and partly to direct action being the only means available to workers for changing the balance of power with employers in the unprotected informal economy. While in its activities, always promoting and focusing on the immediate needs of its direct constituency, at the beginning the union's character as an organisation was often blurred with its role as social organisation. SIMECA participated in many of the marches led by the movement of the unemployed; members of the union were active in left-wing parties or other territorial organisations operating in the city's poor areas. Thus, we could argue that this specific political context of social unrest in which 'everything seemed to be possible' and the unregulated, non-unionised sector in which workers were organising, acted on the formation of SIMECA very heavily, shaping the character of the organisation: independent, anti-bureaucratic/anti-institutional, horizontal in its decision-making process and direct in its action.

All these foundational features were to remain as part of the genetic code of the union until its last days. However, starting from 2003 the changing economic and political context imposed a differentiation in the strategies and targets of the organisation, moving the axis of its action from the social to the more strictly union sphere. This imposed at the same time a reconfiguration of the relation with the State, the need to conform to its rules and institutions and, for the central role of the State in industrial relations in Argentina, to accept its 'political' arbitration of labour conflicts and disputes for union recognition. Moreover, the newly formed organisation had to inscribe workers' defence and representation within the limits offered by accepted legality.

At the beginning we used to say that we did not need state recognition, we could put 400 motorbikes in front of the Minister of Labour and set it on fire! We were not interested in being defined as a union or otherwise, we were the motor bikers! In 2001 we were not interested, we had our people in the street, making barricades against the bourgeois legality, we went to the front, no problem, the matter was easy. After this, we started to realise that we could not sign a collective agreement, we were winning conflicts against the employers but we were nothing (SIMECA former activist).

These changes and the material conditions in which workers were building organisational power acted on the internal decision-making processes of SIMECA, firstly by redefining the meaning of democracy and then, while keeping this as the central tenet of the organisation's life, by setting the ways and forms in which democratic decision-making processes were promoted and implemented. This, in turn, implied a substantial division of roles between the most active militants and the rest of workers.

The original meaning of democracy was associated with horizontalism. This more idealistic approach however was later criticised and abandoned for leading paradoxically to less democracy.

The horizontal assembly usually ended up as a dictatorship of the minority, of two or three guys who did not work as much as the rest and had the time and physical strength to stay in the assembly until late just in order to get what they wanted. I was totally in disagreement that a matter had to be discussed for a thousand hours. (SIMECA former activist)

Depending on practical circumstances, decisions were taken and executed within SIMECA at different levels. One level was represented by the directive commission which comprised approximately forty of the most active members divided into different areas of work (conflict and negotiation, media, relations with institutions and cultural). Another was the so-called 'periphery', a network of about 400 members diffused throughout the city who were less involved in day-to-day union activities but highly supportive of it and with personal linkages to activists in the directive commission. This group was always involved when important decisions had to be taken, though most often informally. These activists also guaranteed a solid base of support for mobilisation. This structure implied a certain level of delegation. This was, however, accepted as largely based on the recognition of the trajectory of specific individuals and of their honesty in managing the union activity. This trust was reinforced by the fact that all were active workers. Therefore, no real distance really existed between base and structure. Leaders could be questioned by lay workers at any time and 'face to face' in the street.

Delegation was however also an imperative imposed by the different companies' employing workers. Small, unregistered delivery agencies could be forced to improve working conditions but at the risk of being driven out of business leaving workers jobless. Similarly, depending on the product delivered, companies were subjected, to a lesser or greater extent, to the fluctuations of market's demands and competition. As a consequence, they were more or less willing to grant concessions to workers. This diversity of material conditions made it impossible, and somehow not useful, to maintain a widespread process of collective decision-making. There were areas of decisions immediately related to the needs of specific groups of workers and other areas important to all.

Depending on these different claims and on the type of collective action most suitable for the specific situation (direct actions or massive mobilisations), the relation between the directive commission and the rest of workers changed. The function of the directive commission within the overall union's structure changed.

When actively representing the interests of a group of workers the directive commission's role was somehow that of a pressure and support group, helping out in the process of negotiation and conflict with the employer under the terms and conditions set by the workers directly involved. Thus, in this case the commission was almost occupying a secondary or intermediate role. In contrast, when issues were common to all workers of the sector, decisions were taken in a plenary enlarged to all members. But the usually scarce

participation in these activities effectively meant that decisions were taken and then implemented by militants in the directive commission and in the so-called 'periphery'. However, even in these cases, a more varied participation was sought as, for instance, in the composition of workers' delegations, when discussing issues at ministerial level, or in the rotation of speakers during public events.

### **SUBTE: The shifting meanings of union democracy**

The organising process of SUBTE's workers has been praised as a paradigm of union democracy. While this is certainly a salient feature of the experience, different ideas and practices about the meaning of democracy have been competing in the more than a decade-long struggle of SUBTE's workers. These differences can be explained partly by the existence of groups with sometimes opposing ideological visions about democracy and partly by the material and institutional obstacles that, in the course of democratic organising, workers had to face.

As to the first aspect, in the main, it is possible to differentiate between three groups in the SUBTE: grass-root fundamentalists, activists belonging to Trotskyist parties, and a group of radical independent activists. While the first two defend the priority of mass meeting as a matter of principle, although for different reasons, the group of independent activists, which has achieved the leading role in the grass roots organising, has a more flexible and quite pragmatic understanding of union democracy.

These different understandings entail different views about the role of workers' delegates. For those who advocate mass meetings as the cornerstone of decision-making within the union, delegates should be just the voice of the assembly as they consider there is a high risk of bureaucratisation in any decision taken by the delegates without consultation. Contrary to this, the leading group of radical independent activists considers that workers' delegates' lack of a clear plan of action is a sign of weakness in front of their fellow workers in the assemblies, and thus advocate relative autonomy of the delegates from rank and file workers.

In the last decade we have created a situation in which comrades have got used to discussing everything, or almost everything. But there are specific moments in which the direction, for its own role, need to take decisions. I do not see this as necessarily a bad thing, clearly just if these decisions are not going to damage the other comrades. (workers' delegate)

They state that delegates must take on collective responsibility and, on some occasions, take decisions on behalf of workmates, eventually defending and bearing the cost of a decision taken autonomously from the base.

I think that if people do not agree with what a delegate did, that one has to bear the costs. Somebody needs to bear the costs for the decisions taken. That's the difference from union bureaucracy; bureaucrats do not bear costs. (member of directive commission)

This approach rests on the understanding that a pure form of democracy in which all decisions are taken by assemblies is hardly possible to achieve within the dynamics of class struggle and the power relations in which they are forced to act. Indeed, while the sector of the economy in which SUBTE's workers operate is economically strategic, giving them a great advantage at the time of discussing salary and working conditions with the company, it also exposes them to political pressures and to bitter confrontation with the city government, which owns the underground transport system. The dispute with UTA for the

representation of workers in the sector and the negotiation with the Ministry of Labour to obtain full recognition for the *personería gremial*, further influence the collective decision-making process of the union.<sup>31</sup> These multiple pressures and exposures to different power forces, each with its own different logic, demand the predisposition of a wide array of tools to sustain the struggles on the different fronts and the adoption of tactical decisions which are, at times, taken in the heat of political events without widespread and open participation. When asked, workers repeatedly referred to events in which wider consultation was impossible; it would have prevented action or, simply, it would have forestalled surprise, compromising the success of the action.

There are situations in which the difficulty lays in the urgency with which things need to be done. In these moments there is no alternative. There are also things that you cannot openly say otherwise you are making your enemy's life easy. The most important thing is the 'why'. On the 'why' everybody needs to know. But not on the 'how'. The 'how' no, as this has to do with the struggle. (member directive commission)

The relation of forces existing in specific historical conjunctures is also important when considering the issue of democracy. Differently to the experience of SIMECA's workers, who had no other choice for the consolidation of their organisation than to make this visible since the beginning, SUBTE's grass roots organising started clandestinely with wildcat strikes. As typical of other wildcat strike experiences, a quick evaluation of the chances of obtaining support from other workmates led a small group of workers/activists to take decisions which had profound influence on the rest of the collective in the years to come. This type of organisation, which they would later call union's *foquismo*, by reference to Che Guevara's famous guerrilla strategies, precluded, almost by definition, the adoption of open and formal democratic procedures. However, it required keeping a close attachment to fellow workers and fluid channels of informal communication, a condition that remained essential later on when forming consensus among workers. This distance between the democratic ideal and the reality of struggle, and thus the need to combine forms of governance that guarantee collective decision-making while constructing workers' power in adverse conditions, go beyond this foundational moment. There have been indeed many crucial events in the history of SUBTE's workers in which delegates have taken decisions on behalf of the rest of the workers that have proved essential in guaranteeing the success of mobilisations. Also the same delegates have found ways of changing decisions previously taken by workers' plenary assemblies. These events, in the light of SUBTE's organising successes, have been proudly and explicitly defended in accounts of struggles drafted by workers themselves (Bouvet, 2007). Here, a two-way system of communications and decision-making transpires, based on both widespread grass-roots democracy and on the 'executive' role of activism during conflicts.

The way in which work is organised in the SUBTE also adds complexity to the practical implementation of democratic decisions. The six railway lines that constitute the underground transport network operate in relative autonomy from each other and have differences in terms of the technology/automation installed in the trains. Workers work according to the sector, on three to four shifts, are distributed among many different stations along the lines, are divided by the types of activity performed, and activities may be very different from each other dependent on which line. Similarly, there are sectors/stations, usually the end of lines, whose control by workers is fundamental during important mobilisations, thus making the formation of consensus and support of workers from these sectors of primary importance for the whole collective.

Overall, these material conditions impinge upon the collective decision-making process, creating situations in which democracy is almost physically impossible.

As a Utopia, it would be desirable to have somebody in every workshop, on every shift informing comrades about what is happening. Unfortunately this is impossible to do and not for a political but for a physical reason. There is no way of doing it. (member directive commission)

The creation of a new independent union representing SUBTE's workers has re-opened the debate among workers on a whole range of practical aspects connected with guaranteeing an adequate, though necessarily imperfect, development of internal democracy. In relation to this aspect there are ongoing discussions on the instruments that should be used to guarantee within the union's directive commission a voice and an active presence for opposition groups, or on the relation existing between the union's directive commission and workers' delegates, on their respective role and on how to establish forms of fluid communication between these two levels and their responsiveness to lay workers' demands. All these aspects are strictly connected to the role played by the practices and discourses of opposition groups within the union. Understand how these practices shape the balance of power between internal factions remain however an under researched issue.

Connected with these are also the discussions about the overall participation of workers in the internal life of the new union. After years of successful struggles it is felt by many that the organisation is now experiencing a kind of 'crisis of growth'. Conditions are good, wages high, and many workers are new entrants who have not experienced past struggles. This translates to a relative decline of participation which increases dependency on experienced delegates and, in turn, in a lack of leadership renewal.

While the need to keep salaries at the level of inflation (approximately 30% every year) and the SUBTE union's lack of full formal recognition continue to be sources of potential conflict. As the 2012's nine days strike has emblematically shown, the longest in the SUBTE's history, extending participation beyond the moment of conflict and formal election is a crucial issue in the construction of workers' power and in re-signifying through this the meaning of democracy.

As an experienced delegate commented,

Democracy has many aspects. One is participation by electing candidates for the role of delegates. The other is, again, that of participation but not of voting every two years. Rather, participation in the construction of the union. There is now the possibility of another form of democracy, that of material participation, if we want to give a form, a name to it.

## Conclusions

The cases presented, totally different in many ways, give similar insights on the limits and possibilities of democracy in practice within the context of union organising. In both cases, workers have been building their organisations by emphasising the idea of participation and collective decision-making and putting these ideas into practice in formal and informal ways. However, on many occasions decisions have been taken by a small minority. Workers' delegates have sometimes forced decisions or ignited conflicts and these actions have proved decisive in more than one case in mobilising people. Findings like these clearly leave open deeply debated theoretical questions in union studies about the right balance between democratic decision-making and leadership, particularly in situations of conflict. Should leaders just be executors of the majority wishes or should they be able to act in a

more independent way? Would this autonomy necessary lead to bureaucracy? Should democracy be 'sacrificed' when building and consolidating effective workers' power? What sort of institutional mechanisms should be put in place to guarantee widespread participation?

These questions are fundamental to any analysis, but would probably remain meaningless when approaching democracy in isolation, without considering how historical, material, ideological and institutional mediations shaped, in the different cases, the meanings and possibilities of democracy in practice. In this sense, the atomisation and precariousness of workers and the difficulty of defending them efficiently without protection and in a sector at the limits of legality, imposed on SIMECA the use of non-institutional organising practices and direct action. That required, at that time, a decentralised form of collective decision-making and a centralisation of decisions in the hand of activists. This in turn demanded less reliance on procedural, formal democracy and more dependency on informal channels of consensus making. In the case of SUBTE, similar dynamics of informal communications among leading delegates have often represented the first step in the organisation's decision-making processes. Various material circumstances have contributed to this: the distribution of SUBTE's workers on different lines, shifts and jobs; the strategic relevance certain sectors had in making effective a mobilisation; the initial clandestine conditions of the organisation and the constant exposure to political pressures.

The evolving context of struggle has also imposed mediations. In the case of SIMECA, an organisation born mobilising workers in the streets, the state of social mobilisation of the years 2000/3, left its heavy non-institutional/independency birthmarks on the organising structure of the union. This was a formidable machine in terms of mobilising power but, though certainly an example of open organisation, it was far too dependent on a group of core activists. As a result, this structure proved almost unsuitable for representing workers within the more formalised, institutional context of the post-crisis years. Contrary to SIMECA, in the SUBTE's case, the post-crisis context found workers engaged in a struggle against multiple forces but within the limits sets by existing rules and institutions. The insertion in the formal economy, the high visibility of the sector, the existence of a union legally representing workers, helped to legitimise a step-by-step process. In this, the construction of democratic organising went together with the strengthening of workers' power, evolving from the level of the clandestine activity of a small group to the establishment of an independent, effective and highly representative union.

What then are the perspectives for union democracy? The article started with the assumption that union democracy should be seen as a social process whose limits and possibilities are basically those set by the balance of class forces existing at a certain point in time and space within the development of capitalism. This context, while necessarily influencing practices and ideas about democracy, imposes a need to go beyond the linear and uncritical perspectives which have dominated much of the union renewal debate. Questions concerning the relation of democracy with conflict, its sustainability over time, its compatibility with leadership and with processes of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation, which are central to defining the identity and scope of any collective organisation of workers, cannot be judged by the adherence or not of the organisation to a specific model of internal democracy. There are clearly long-term benefits to democratic participation. Mechanisms can be put in place to extend participation and the achievement by workers of a political consciousness and identity certainly help to make this participation active and effective. What it is also clear,

however, is that while democracy is a principle that permeates the collective association of workers, it is not, in the context of capitalism, necessarily the one on which their power is built.

## Notes

1. Ackers, *Collective Bargaining as Industrial Democracy*.
2. Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism*.
3. Parker, Cheney, Fournier and Land, *Alternative Organizations*; Atzeni, *Alternative Work Organizations*.
4. Harley, Hyman, and Thompson, *Participation and Democracy at Work*; Wilkinsons, Gollan, Marchinton and Lewis, *Participation in Organizations*.
5. See for instance, Simms and Charlwood, 'Trade Unions: power and influence'; and Friedman, *Reigniting the Labor Movement*; Tait, *Poor Workers' Unions*; Milkman and Voss, *Rebuilding Labor*; Clawson, *The Next Upsurge*; Fairbrother, *Trade Unions at the Crossroads*.
6. Lévesque, Murray and Le Queux, 'Union Disaffection'.
7. Peetz and Pocock, 'Union Power and Democracy in Australia'.
8. In the studies of Levesque, Murray and Le Queux and Peetz and Pocock democracy has been measured thorough the use of large surveys of unions delegates and members. Answers to questions about workers' participations in the unions' decision-making processes and leaders' accountability have been used as 'indicators' of the degree to which the existence of democratic participation in the unions coincides with members identification with their union (Levesque, Murray and Le Queux ) and 'predictors' for the construction of an index of 'subjective union power' (Peetz and Pocock).
9. Milkman, *L.A. Story*.
10. Hinckey, Kuruvilla and Lakhani, 'No panacea for success'.
11. Connolly, 'Union Renewal in France'; Darlington, 'Leadership and Union Militancy'; and Levi, Olson, Agnone and Kelly, 'Union Democracy Reexamined'.
12. Darlington, 'Agitator Theory of Strikes'; and Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 'Union Democracy, Radical Leadership'.
13. Voss, 'Democratic Dilemmas', 379.
14. Ross, 'Social Unionism and Membership Participation', 150.
15. Offe and Wiesenthal, 'Two Logics of Collective Action'.
16. Martinez Lucio, 'Union Politics, Purpose and Democracy', 42.
17. Atzeni and Ghigliani, 'Labour Movement in Argentina' and Atzeni and Ghigliani, 'Pragmatism, Ideology or Politics': The central role of shop-floor commissions and their historically confrontational attitudes and politics have been all the more important during period of military dictatorships (in 1955, 1966 and 1976), contributing to shape the peculiar institutional and political framework that governs unions' structure in Argentina.
18. Belkin and Ghigliani, 'Burocracia Sindical'.
19. Atzeni and Ghigliani, 'New expression of conflict in Argentina'.
20. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*; Hyman, *The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism*.
21. Webb and Webb, *Industrial Democracy*.
22. Gramsci, *Scritti Politici*.
23. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*: 68.
24. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*: 69.
25. See also Cohen, *Ramparts of Resistance*.
26. Hyman, *The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism*. This came to be known as the bureaucratisation of the rank and file thesis, a highly debatable position, which cannot be discussed here at length, that Hyman has recently confirmed (see Hyman 2012; Darlington and Upchurch 2012; Martinez Lucio 2012).
27. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*, 84.

28. Azzellini and Ness, *Ours to Master and to Own*; Atzeni, *Workplace Conflict*; Fox Piven, 'Power from Below'; Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*; and Cohen, *Ramparts of Resistance*.
29. Offe and Wieselthaler, *Two Logics of Collective Action*.
30. Atzeni and Ghigliani, *Shopfloor democracy and workers' organising*.
31. From 1997 until 2008 workers organised democratically within UTA, the union legally representing workers in the sector. In 2009, they decided to create a new independent union claiming representation for the sector. While de facto representing workers at all levels, the granting of *personería gremial* is still formally pending.

## Acknowledgements

The research on which this article is based has been made possible by a European Union Marie Curie Outgoing Fellowship for the project INFOWORK. The author wishes to thank the *Labor History* reviewers and Peter Ackers for their helpful comments on the article draft and Pablo Ghigliani for insights on the Argentinean Labour Movement developed in previous joint works.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Maurizio Atzeni** is a researcher based in Buenos Aires at the Center for Labour Relations, National Research Council of Argentina (CEIL/Conicet). He has written extensively on work and labour issues in articles and books published internationally. Among his recent publications is the book *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism: Theoretical Themes and Contemporary Issues* (Palgrave, 2014), in which work is analysed from the broader perspective of political economy.

## References

- Ackers, Peter. "Collective Bargaining as Industrial Democracy: Hugh Clegg and the Political Foundations of British Industrial Relations Pluralism." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 45, no. 1 (2007): 77–101.
- Atzeni, Maurizio. *Workplace Conflict: Mobilization and Solidarity in Argentina*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010.
- Atzeni, Maurizio, and Pablo Ghigliani. "The Re-emergence of Workplace based Organisation as the New Expression of Conflict in Argentina." In *New Forms and Expressions of Conflict at Work*, edited by Gregor Gall, 66–85. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Atzeni, Maurizio, and Pablo Ghigliani. "Pragmatism, Ideology or Politics? Unions' and workers' responses to the imposition of neo-liberalism in Argentina." In *International Handbook on Labour Unions: Responses to Neo-liberalism*, edited by Gregor Gall, Richard Hurd, and Adrian Wilkinson, 44–61. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011.
- Atzeni, Maurizio, and Pablo Ghigliani. "Labour Movement in Argentina since 1945: The Limits of Trade Union Reformism." In *Trade Unionism since 1945. Towards a Global History. Volume 2: The Americas, Asia and Australia*, edited by Craig Phelan, 223–248. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009.
- Azzellini, Dario, and Immanuel Ness. *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*. New York: Haymarket Books, 2011.
- Belkin, Alejandro, and Pablo Ghigliani. "Burocracia Sindical: aportes para una discusión en ciernes [Trade unions bureaucracy: A contribution to an ongoing debate]." *Nuevo Topo* 7 (2010): 103–115.
- Bouvet, Virginia. *Un fantasma recorre el Subte: crónica de la lucha de los trabajadores de Metrovias* [A spectre is haunting the SUBTE: Chronicle of Metrovias' workers' struggles]. Buenos Aires: Editorial Desde el subte, 2007.
- Clawson, Dan. *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2003.



- Cohen, Sheila. *Ramparts of Resistance*. London: Pluto Press, 2006.
- Connolly, Heather. "Union Renewal in France and Hyman Universal Dualism." *Capital & Class* 36, no. 1 (2012): 117–134.
- Darlington, Ralph. "Agitator Theory of Strikes Re-evaluated." *Labor History* 47, no. 4 (2006): 485–509.
- Darlington, Ralph. "Leadership and Union Militancy: The Case of the RMT." *Capital & Class* 33, no. 3 (2009): 3–32.
- Darlington, Ralph, and Martin Upchurch. "A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-file Versus Bureaucracy Debate." *Capital & Class* 36, no. 1 (2012): 77–95.
- Fairbrother, Peter. *Trade Unions at the Crossroads*. London: Mansell, 2000.
- Fox Piven, Frances. "Can Power from Below Change the World?" *American Sociological Review* 73, no. 1 (2008): 1–14.
- Friedman, Gerald. *Reigniting the Labor Movement, Restoring Means to Ends in a Democratic Labor Movement*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Scritti Politici*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1969.
- Harley, Bill, Jeff Hyman, and Paul Thompson. *Participation and Democracy at Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005.
- Hinckey, Robert, Sarosh Kuruvilla, and Tashlin Lakhani. "No Panacea for Success Member Activism, Organising and Union Renewal." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 48, no. 1 (2010): 53–83.
- Hyman, Richard. "Will the Real Richard Hyman Please Stand Up?" *Capital & Class* 36, no. 1 (2012): 151–164.
- Hyman, Richard. *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*. London: Sage, 2001.
- Hyman, Richard. "The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems in Theory." *Capital & Class* 54–67, 1979.
- Hyman, Richard. *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*. London: Macmillan, 1975.
- Lévesque, Christian, Gregor Murray, and Stéphane Le Queux. "Union Disaffection and Social Identity: Democracy as a Source of Union Revitalization." *Work and Occupations* 32, no. 4 (2005): 400–422.
- Levi, Margaret, David Olson, Jon Agnone, and Devin Kelly. "Union Democracy Reexamined." *Politics and Society* 37, no. 2 (2009): 203–228.
- Martinez Lucio, Miguel. "Union Politics, Purpose and Democracy: To Be or Not to Be? Optimism, Pessimism and the Continuing Importance of Richard Hyman's Early Contributions." *Capital & Class* 36, no. 1 (2012): 35–51.
- Milkman, Ruth. *L.A. story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the US Labor Movement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.
- Milkman, Ruth, and Kim Voss. *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Offe, Claus, and Helmut Wiesenthal. "Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organisational Form." *Political Power and Social Theory* 1 (1980): 67–115.
- Parker, Martin, George Cheney, Valerie Fournier, and Chris Land. *Routledge Companion on Alternative Organisations*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Peetz, David, and Barbara Pocock. "An Analysis of Workplace Representatives, Union Power and Democracy in Australia." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 47, no. 4 (2009): 623–652.
- Ross, Stephanie. "Social Unionism and Membership Participation: What Role for Union Democracy?" *Studies in Political Economy* 81, (2008): 129–157.
- Simms, Melanie, and Andy Charlwood. "Trade Unions: Power and Influence in a Changed Context." In *Industrial Relations: Theory and Practice*, edited by Trevor Colling and Michael Terry, 623–652. Chichester: Wiley, 2010.
- Stepan-Norris, Judith, and Maurice Zeitlin. "Union Democracy, Radical Leadership, and the Hegemony of Capital." *American Sociological Review* 60, no. 6 (1995): 829–850.
- Tait, Vanessa. *Poor Workers' Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below*. New York: South End Press, 2005.
- van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Voss, Kim. "Democratic Dilemmas: Union Democracy and Union Renewal." *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 16, no. 3 (2010): 369–382.
- Webb, Sidney, and Beatrice Webb. *Industrial Democracy*. London: Longmans, 1897.
- Wilkinson, Adrian, Paul Gollan, Mick Marchinton, and David Lewin. *The Oxford Handbook of Participation in Organisations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.