

Social Conflict in Argentina

Land, Water, Work

by

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Social conflict in postcrisis Argentina can be divided into three kinds: that concentrating on land issues and the ability to subsist beyond the market, that confronting the environmental degradation resulting from mining, and that focused on the current dilemmas of labor and union organization. Workers did not disappear as collective subjects in conflict but, starting from their positions in production or in “unproductive” activities such as government services, challenged the dynamics of capital from both old and new social spaces. Their singular practices are part of the conflictual scenario that Our America is currently experiencing and of the resistance in the region that brings new urgency to “living with dignity.”

El conflicto social en la Argentina posterior a la crisis se puede dividir en tres tipos: el que se centra en cuestiones de la tierra y la capacidad de subsistir más allá del mercado, el que enfrenta la degradación ambiental resultante de la minería, y el que se centró en los dilemas actuales de la organización laboral y sindical. Los trabajadores no desaparecieron como sujetos colectivos en conflicto, sino que, a partir de sus posiciones en la producción o en actividades “improductivas,” tales como los servicios públicos, desafiaron la dinámica del capital de los viejos y nuevos espacios sociales. Sus prácticas singulares son parte del escenario conflictivo que Nuestra América está viviendo y de la resistencia en la región, que trae una nueva urgencia a “vivir con dignidad.”

Keywords: Argentina, Social conflict, Social movements, Subjects

Political activity is what displaces a body from its assigned place or changes the fate of a place; it makes visible what there was no reason to see, creates discourse where there was only noise.

—Jacques Rancière

After the 2001 crisis that reined in the intensification of neoliberalism in Argentina, it appeared as if the revulsion of numerous organizations and movements had dissipated. Their experience remained embedded, however, in many of the practices of those who resisted global capital’s tendency toward

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exploitation (of labor), destruction (of nature), and colonization (of land). In examining the trajectory of the continuation of resistance and struggle, I will focus on three representative processes: the struggle for land, the defense of communal property against the contamination produced by large-scale mining, and the crisis and revitalization of union activity. Each of these conflicts will be illuminated by a concrete case in an attempt to reveal the tensions experienced by subjects who challenge capital in old and new ways. The cases come from research undertaken in 2007 by the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo de Mendoza and continuing under the Observatorio de Conflictividad Social de Mendoza.¹ My intention is to reflect on the present from the perspective of the mobilization of 2001, linking national processes to local experiences in an effort to produce a complete picture of Argentine society at the dawn of the new century.

LAND: RURAL WORKERS AND RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

Our nation's rural population is suffering renewed territorial segregation as a result of the success of agribusiness and the deepening of the exploitation of natural resources. The soybean zone has advanced from the humid pampas to the point where soil conditions and climate limit the profitability of its cultivation (Teubal, 2005: 6):

Soybean production has exceeded the 3.7 million tons harvested in 1980–81, increasing to 10.8 million tons in 1990–91, 35 million tons in 2002–03, and, finally, 54.8 million tons in 2010–11. It represented 10.6 percent of production in 1980–81, 28.4 percent in 1990–91, and 49.2 percent in 2002–03. The land devoted to soybean production has increased from 9.1 percent of the total planted in cereals and oil products in 1980–81 to 24.8 percent in 1990–91 and more than 46 percent in 2002–03.

Paraphrasing Karl Polanyi, the “great transformation” of Argentina's agricultural sector began with the introduction and consolidation of the transnational corporations at the peak of the period of import-substitution industrialization and continued with the deregulation of markets that reshaped the regional economies of the nation during the mid-1990s (Giberti, 2001; Gras and Hernández, 2009; Rofman, 2000; Teubal and Rodríguez, 2002). Norma Giarracca (2006: 7) says of this new model:

Deforestation, according to figures supplied by Greenpeace-Argentina, has exponentially increased. It is estimated that some 250,000 hectares a year have been cleared. It is not only new investors who are engaged in this type of economic activity; the older sugar industry and other long-established agro-industries have also adopted the same logic. Hence the struggles over land throughout the country.

The renewed dynamic of capital has had a paradoxical effect since the end of the century. It showed the direction in which the accumulation process in the region was headed while revealing hidden social relations and subjects. In recent history, the predominance of economic activities linked to import-

substitution industrialization and industrialized agriculture, in which the urban wage-based mode of social integration prevailed, caused questions regarding “land,” its “ownership,” and its “use and usufruct” to be marginalized or dismissed as “the peasant question.” The expansion of agribusiness and the rationalization of agricultural activities reinforced and expanded land “enclosures,” giving visibility to the population that in one way or another depended for its subsistence on production for its own consumption and was not integrated (or only partially integrated) into the market economy (Barbetta, 2009: 10). Something similar happened with the indigenous people, who came together after the disintegration of a wage-based society and the possibilities opened up by the constitutional reform of 1994 of demanding “legal” authority over their territories (Agosto et al., 2008; Kropff, 2005; Lenton et al., 2011; Mariotti, 2004).² In all of these cases, it was apparent that organization was necessary to avoid gradual expulsion through enclosure, eviction, or criminalization (Barbetta, 2009; Durand, 2007; GER, 2004; REDAF, 2010). It was only after the 2001 crisis that various collectives were consolidated, opening up the possibility of reviving the social networks linking the various social movements (rural, peasant, indigenous, unemployed, student, labor, socio-environmentalist), a process that broadened and strengthened their demands, identities, and participation (Almeyra, 2004; Battistini, 2003; Giarracca, 2001; Scribano, 2003; Zibechi, 2003).

Although some recognize a broader organizational genesis for them, movements with a focus on land appeared on the scene as one of the many social movements that rejected the neoliberal program in its various facets. Their generalization can be explained in terms of their links to countless base communities.³ Their names represent the political division of the nation’s different provinces or regions, such as the Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero (Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero—MOCASE), the peasant movements of Forma (MOCAFOR), Jujuy (MOCAJU), Córdoba (MCC), and Misiones (MOCAMI), the Unión de Pequeños Productores del Chaco (Chaco Union of Small Producers—UNPEPROCH), the Red Puna: Comunidades Aborígenes y Campesinas de la Puna y Quebrada de Jujuy (Puna Network: Indigenous and Peasant Communities of the Jujuy Plateau and Valley), the Encuentro Calchaquí (Calchaquí Conference [Salta]), and the Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado—Mendoza (State Workers’ Association—Mendoza). Besides these, indigenous communities have made common cause in the Coordinadora de Comunidades Rurales de Argentina (Organization of Rural Communities of Argentina—COCITRA), the Consejo Asesor Indígena (Indigenous Advisory Council—CAI), the Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena (National Indigenous Peasant Movement—MNCI), and the international networks Via Campesina and Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations).⁴ Throughout the territory, these organizations recreate a tradition of struggle that centers on agrarian reform, food sovereignty, and self-determination in the social, political, and economic spheres, beyond the reach of the state and the market (Coordinadora de las Organizaciones de Pequeños Campesinos y Pueblos Indígenas, 2008; Encuentro Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y del Campo Popular, 2011).

As an example of the complexity of the struggle for the land, I have selected a little-known case, that of the Organización de los Trabajadores Rurales de Lavalle (Lavalle Rural Workers' Organization—OTRAL) in the province of Mendoza.⁵ This case has many elements in common with the movements mentioned above, among the most important being its consolidation as a subject facing the productive transformation of the territory, land occupation as a means of resistance and a locus of struggle, "re-peasantization" as a defense against marginality and social exclusion, the ways in which the state operates (which range from "consensual" forms of social programs to the repression of protests), the communitarian option for solving the problem of subsistence, and the politicization of substantial aspects of the organization of production.

The organization's origins may be traced to the productive restructuring promoted in the area during the 1990s (focused on the "modernization" of viticulture), which led to land concentration and the abandonment of cultivated areas because of the contraction of internal demand and/or the inadequacy of their products to the demand on the world market (Azpiazu and Basualdo, 2003: 28–48). This process left smallholders (owners of fewer than 10 hectares) with the choice of changing or disappearing. Between 2002 and 2008 20.9 percent of the productive units of the province of Mendoza disappeared (Argentina, 2008). In this context, rural workers found it necessary to provide subsistence in a communitarian manner—in their own words, "to live by what we produce and to do it with dignity." The majority (migrants from the other provinces of northern Argentina or from Bolivia) were temporary workers for large viticulture firms who were summoned cyclically during the harvest only to be expelled once again in the winter through massive layoffs until the next seasonal work period.

Since its origin, the OTRAL's objective has been achieving and maintaining autonomous sustenance. It is distinctive for its linkages among base organizations with egalitarian representation organized horizontally rather than hierarchically, with rotation of offices and egalitarian participation, and assemblies as the forum for discussion and decision making. At present it consists of 100 families (more than 400 members) in eight base organizations.

Its identity is based on the constant tension over the meaning of "living with dignity," given members' lack of ownership of or access to land, their limited options for acquiring financing, their cultural model regarding consumption, and their rules about distribution.

The organization has been asked to identify arable parcels with access to water and evaluate their possibilities for production. The land occupations undertaken so far (almost 200 hectares) have not been a solution to the precariousness of members' lives, since they lack the means to make them productive or to do so sustainably. At the same time, a substantial change in the permeability of the state with regard to land occupations has been registered. Since the end of the crisis and in view of the institutional weakness of successive governments, the repertoire of the national state has consisted of making conflict a judicial matter. The municipal government has created the greatest obstacles by denying essential services (drinking water and electricity) in an effort to end the occupations by making them unfeasible.

The second of these tensions is marked by the possibilities for obtaining means to produce. The only funding was credit provided by the national government for financing self-management projects, but the logic behind the use of this credit went against what the communities intended. While access to land meant long-awaited autonomy from the state and from bad working conditions, these lines of credit reinforced workers' dependence on the state and transformed the communities into "project managers," making the planning, evaluation and consecution of these projects the central focus of the organization.

A third line of tensions involved the consumption patterns associated with notions of the "good life." This brought a set of novel practices that went two separate ways: learning again and unlearning what had already been learned. In this particular case forms of autochthonous production and consumption (among them ways of making and conserving foodstuffs) have been relearned and habits of consumption imposed by the distribution of commercialized foodstuffs have been abandoned. Returning to gardening and livestock raising has meant recovering traditional knowledge and reevaluating various practices—uniting production with reproduction and consumption.

The criteria by which collective goods acquired were to be distributed constituted another of the tensions that this organization experienced. The valid measure of each family's efforts (at the service of the needs of the whole community) was set according to the level of commitment to the organization and the time its members had available after work in their temporary jobs.

While members apparently had no problem with perceiving the land and its products as communal, there were disputes over the use and availability of particular goods and services of an individual character (such as clothing, household products, the amount of energy used by each family, or the water quota per household). These dilemmas were perceived by the communities as a result of "human misery," a tension that renewed itself between the individual and the collective.

These tensions (access to land, means of production, and patterns of consumption, distribution, and appropriation) have raised the need for discussion and the creation of opportunities for reflection and learning within the organization, demanding constant reevaluation of the concrete practices of the participants in relation to the guidelines of the "good life." The necessity of transcending both dependence on the state and the commodification of communal life has predominated.

As do most of these movements, the OTRAL confronts challenges. Perhaps the most important one has been fragmentation because of the state's attempts at recruitment of its members. Nevertheless, the expansion of its horizons by working with other similar organizations (not only within the country but also elsewhere in Latin America) contributes to its empowerment with general knowledge of the forms of expropriation adopted by the capital in the region. Confronting agribusiness, efforts to return to a primary economy, and the exploitation of nature and its biodiversity unify the struggles under the banner "Land for Those Who Work It—We Are Land to Feed the People" (Red Puna, 2010).

WATER: CIVIL DEFENSE OF COMMON GOODS

The singular attraction of mining investments in Argentina in recent decades has had three sources: the richness of the deposits, the availability of an appropriate legal framework, and the support provided by the national government. With regard to the first of these aspects, Argentina's mining sector is sixth in the world, with 75 percent of its territory still not having been surveyed. A sample of that is the record number of projects submitted in 2008: 403 projects in total and investments of more than 7.35 billion pesos (IERAL, 2011; Svampa and Antonelli, 2009: 35–37). A body of liberalizing laws established important incentives for the sector during the 1990s, the most important of them being limiting the state's ability to explore and exploit its own natural resources, fiscal stability (for 30 years), tax exemptions, the elimination of territorial restrictions on mining, and the temporary extension of rentals and grants of usufruct (Svampa and Antonelli, 2009: 36). The picture was completed by the National Mining Plan, which since 2004 has prioritized mining as a "public-interest enterprise" and the motor of "sustainable development." The plan offered the following explicit support for mining: declaring it state policy, creating a favorable investment climate and favoring exports, ensuring complementation with other productive sectors, collaborating for sustainable relations between the community and development, making regional integration viable, and promoting the development of infrastructure (Arias, 2009; Wagner, 2007).

In this context, actions challenging large-scale mining originated in the city of Esquel, in Argentine Patagonia (northwestern Chubut Province, 1,900 kilometers from the nation's capital), with its natural beauty and rich biodiversity. When a transnational corporation attempted to establish an opencast gold and silver mining operation in the region the population as a whole mobilized (Svampa and Antonelli, 2009). In 2003 a plebiscite was held in which 81 percent of the population rejected mining, and a nationwide socio-environmental movement against extractive depredation was generated.

The experience of Esquel and its assembly spread to every corner of the territory. Nowadays there are more than 70 socio-environmentalist assemblies resisting mining, incorporating numerous grassroots organizations located in 14 Argentine provinces and grouped by region.⁶ Their expansion followed the geometric increase in the number of proposed projects, the majority of them for opencast mining projects that excavated significant areas, employed toxic substances, and required an enormous amount of water and energy for the production process and the disposal of waste (Rodríguez, 2009).⁷ A major achievement of the assemblies was that they broadened the meaning of the struggle and brought it to a national level, disputing the notion that mining was the single best way of developing their regions and improving the standard of living of their inhabitants. Their success was demonstrated by the passage of national and provincial laws and municipal ordinances that prohibited the use of toxic substances in the various phases of mining exploration and operation.⁸ Big demonstrations and roadblocks to prevent the provisioning of these operations (fundamentally the transporting of explosives and toxic substances) have been and remain the privileged tools of the assemblies, maintained by an extensive

network of alternative communication and training that allowed the diffusion and justification of their claims, access to information, reporting on the consequences of mining, and coordination with other national organizations.⁹

To delve deeper into the ways in which this movement was constituted and constructed, I shall focus on an emblematic example from Mendoza Province. This is a region of oases surrounded by dry land (rainfall is about 200 mm per year), and a culture of water and irrigation makes the inhabitants knowledgeable about the limits that nature imposes. Their main motto, "Water is more valuable than gold," summarizes a socio-historical path in which economic development has always been conditioned by the rational use of the water flowing from the Andean cordillera. Investors have sought new areas for cultivation in the region, mostly in places that are socially, economically, politically, and geographically peripheral. The *Asamblea de Vecinos Autoconvocados de San Carlos* (San Carlos Self-Organized Neighbors' Assembly)¹⁰ is located about 100 kilometers from the provincial capital of Mendoza in a region with more than 20,000 hectares of vineyards and 60 operating wineries (INTA-COVIAR, 2009).

It was here that the citizenry for the first time stood up for the defense of common goods as something worth saving, "belonging to everyone, and part of their past, present, and future" (Onofrio, 2009: 2).¹¹ Organization began in 2004 with an informal word-of-mouth network through which the locals discovered the prospecting undertaken by numerous mining companies in the vicinity of the Laguna del Diamante reserve (which contains the Maipo volcano and a lake at an altitude of 10,662 feet). The resistance was characterized by its grassroots organization, its communal construction of knowledge, and its solidarity strategies. Self-organization and self-management strengthened its horizontal structure, which was foreign to that of political parties, unions, and civic organizations and was expressed by questioning of the traditional forms of participation and the pursuit of alternatives.

Thus, from the beginning, the movement's young people demonstrated during local fiestas and parades, using different kinds of visual expressions, such as graffiti, with the slogan that dominated the foundational phase of the movement: "No to Mining Pollution." The aesthetic to which they appealed combined color and joy in the defense of water as a necessity of life and associated darkness and death with mining pollution. In the miners' discourse, mining was a means of salvation for areas in which the population had felt "abandoned" and "foreign" to modernization and economic progress, thus making the land "expendable" (Svampa and Antonelli, 2009: 43). The movement introduced a counterdiscourse based on the proposition "A different development is possible (UAC, 2011b). This singular language corresponded to a logic whereby "self-organization" meant that debate and action occurred without party or economic affiliation and that the effort and capacity of every participant was valued equally, while "self-management" meant relying on one's own resources, assuming an active commitment, with each task previously agreed-upon by the assembly. Communications were strengthened by a network that included face-to-face communication, PTA meetings, posters, e-mail, and local radio. In the competing readings of mining and its consequences, the different actors involved were not on equal terms. Collectively constructing "knowledge" about the problem was key in challenging an argument legitimated

by legislation, jargon, and a dominant discourse about the “viability,” “feasibility,” and “sustainability” of such enterprises.

Assembly members’ activities developed on various fronts. Participants underwent a training process that they called “self-education,” laying bare the legal consequences of the mining reforms, analyzing mining maps of the country created by the assembly itself, and entering into alliances with people who had had similar experiences.¹² Furthermore, they appealed to the various members of the community who were in one way or another associated with institutionalized education to become the principal spokespersons in defense of water. The various modes of participation developed by the assembly can be assessed in terms of the popular education that they encouraged, the organizational innovation that they established in the community, the opportunities for debate that they recovered, their reframing of the bonds among neighbors, and, finally, their mass character.

One of the many achievements of the assembly was the passage of a municipal ordinance that declared San Carlos “a nontoxic and environmentally sustainable municipality” (1123/06). The municipalities of Tunuyán and Tupungato followed suit (1940/06 and 001/07 respectively). Finally, all the assemblies of the province achieved the passage of Law 7.722 prohibiting the use of cyanide, mercury, sulfuric acid, and other toxic substances in prospecting and mining by any method anywhere in Mendoza Province. The growth of solidary networks extended beyond San Carlos, propelling the organization of assemblies in other localities of the province. By December 2006 the first assemblies defending water and against mega-mining converged in the creation of a common organization, the Asamblea Mendocina por Agua Pura (Mendoza Assembly for Pure Water—AMPAP), which to this day coordinates the demands and actions of all the organizations in the province. In the same year the Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas (Union of Citizen Assemblies—UAC), uniting all the nation’s organizations and movements defending common goods and resisting socio-environmental degradation, was created. In 2011 the provincial movement paralyzed a gold and copper mining operation in the Andean valley of Uspallata, Mendoza, and the people of Famatina in La Rioja later did the same (*Clarín*, February 20, 2012; *Página/12*, January 27, 2012; *Los Andes*, January 19, 2012).¹³

The Mendoza assemblies can be understood as one of many similar experiences in the rest of the country with regard to their horizontal and democratic structure, the territorial thrust of their membership, their establishment of community-based networks, and their gradual dissemination of knowledge about the mining problem—its causes and consequences and the immense power of the adversary.¹⁴ The assemblies discovered a way of limiting the commodification of common goods: the social license. Without the support of the communities affected as a nonnegotiable brake on the destruction of the environment and the commodification of nature, the possibilities for transforming the productive profile would have been limited.

WORK: THE DILEMMAS OF CONTEMPORARY UNION ORGANIZING

The introduction of the neoliberal program in Argentina had at least three important consequences for workers. First, the unprecedented escalation of

unemployment drove large numbers into homelessness and marginality (Svampa, 2005). While the workers incorporated into the market, experiencing the worsening of working conditions and labor relations, accepted the instability of their lives as “the new normal” (Testa and Figari, 1996; Villanueva, 1997), unemployed workers created new forms of association and mobilization that contributed to a major debate about the demise of the labor movement (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2008; Senén and Haidar, 2009). However, after the economic and job recovery produced by the transformation of capital, ordinary unionism resurfaced in the context of a general reconfiguration of work (Iñigo Carrera, 2009; Palomino, 2005; Piva, 2006). Since 2003, its recovery has been apparent in the increase of labor conflict (the central issue being wages) and in its role as a political-economic actor at the right hand of the Peronist national governments. Support for it has come from the combination of monopolizing representation and identifying workers’ health as a matter for the state and, therefore, for union management (Danani, 2011).¹⁵

The unions that were better positioned in this new cycle of accumulation were favored by the expansion of formal employment, an increase in collective bargaining (by company and by branch of industry), and the gradual recovery of wages and, along with it, an increase in medical insurance contributions (Palomino and Trajtemberg, 2006).¹⁶ Regarding the administration of unions’ social services, there was a resurgence of resistance to the privatization of medicine. The Social Plan (Decree 9/93), also known as Free Election of Medical Insurance, weakened the unions’ capacity for managing these funds, destroyed the solidarity that reduced differential access to health care for different workers, and allowed the entry (forbidden up to this point) of companies offering prepaid medical care (Danani, 2011: 46). In this context, a revitalized “old unionism” sought to avoid union freedom and the democratic transition, but mobilization and the renewal of political organization and participation did not end at the doors of the workplace. It managed to evade the modern disciplinary mechanisms, the reorganizations and productive rationalizations, and the generalized fragmentation of the workers’ collectives. Instead of a new labor culture seeking consensus, a renewed confrontational politics emerged (Figari et al., 2010). The labor movement split into two blocs, one that challenged the traditional hegemonic model from the base and another that attempted to transform its practices within the confines of Argentine unions’ cultural, institutional, and normative experiences. Thereafter, there were two types of fissures in hegemonic unionism: one rejecting the traditional hegemonic union model and the other, while within the cultural, institutional, and normative limits of Argentine unions, attempting to sustain workers’ fighting spirit and broaden their aims, participation, and demands.

The first challenge faced by the revitalized unions and perhaps the most disruptive was recognizing the historically preeminent role of bodies of delegates and internal committees in the Argentine labor movement (Basualdo, 2009). This challenge was manifested in struggles such as that of the Asociación Gremial de Trabajadores del Subterráneo y Premetro de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Subway Workers’ Union) (Ventrici, 2012), the internal committee of Kraft Foods–Argentina (Varela and Lotito, 2009), and the self-organized teachers of the provinces of Salta and San Luis (Gindin, 2011), which

opposed their respective unions and in some cases were able to organize their own independent unions. In addition to these cases, grassroots advocacy expanded across various economic sectors and territories.¹⁷ Thus the past few years have seen intense confrontations in industries such as chemicals, metalworking, food, transportation, the press, textiles, and banking (Ventrici, 2012). Juan Montes Cató (2011), using a nationwide database from the Observatorio del Derecho Social (2009), has estimated that those conflicts outnumbered those of the traditional organic unions. A large majority (78 percent) were confined to a single company; 64 percent involved local or sectoral unions, and 14 percent were undertaken without union representation.

The second expression of revitalization was the emergence of union currents that confronted their traditional leadership within the institutional union framework. This process began with the creation in 1992 of a new union central, the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (Argentine Workers' Central—CTA), which opposed the Confederación General de Trabajo (General Confederation of Labor—CGT) because of its documented role as a negotiator during the neoliberal apogee. The new labor legislation sought to respond to workers' growing dissatisfaction with the nation's economic and political direction, beginning with the demands of the workers most affected by the transformation of the state, those in education, health, and public administration (Duhalde, 2009: 5). The constitution of the new central propelled organizational and political changes aimed at breaking the hegemony of the "business union" current. A social and political adaptation to the times by including all the base workers who had been laid off was also proposed. This allowed the CTA to articulate with movements of the unemployed and other social organizations of the territorial base (CTA, 2006). Its principles were expressed in its inaugural manifesto, which declared the necessity of autonomy from the state, business, and political parties and the revalorization of union unity and labor ethics (Andriotti, 2008: 8). However, its deep bonds with Peronism (in power since 2003) brought it into conflict with a large number of sectoral and regional dissidents who opposed the national trends that at one time had favored its growth. Currently, the new central has split, with some sectors casting their lot with the government while others seek to deepen the organization's original program, constructing a new dissident role that unites educators and state workers throughout the nation (Gindin, 2011; Soul and Ciafarelli, 2011).¹⁸

The Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado—Mendoza (Mendoza Association of State Workers—ATE-Mendoza), made up of provincial public administration, health, and transportation employees, has taken a leading role in this process.¹⁹ The unionism that the ATE-Mendoza promotes is based on democratic decision making, the direct participation of its members, and the recruitment of members from various sectors (transcending its jurisdiction). Its challenge has been managing corporative interests in order to consolidate a broad program counter to the transformation of the state (ATE-Mendoza, 2009):

The distribution of wealth, with a tax structure in which those who earn the most pay more, a starting wage equal to the cost of living while being legally employed and receiving all social benefits, health, education, and justice for everyone guaranteed by the state and conceived as fundamental social and

human rights, state ownership of our natural resources with social control, authentic participatory democracy.

Its profile has led this organization to adopt as its own the demands of workers who are not unionized or whose unions ignore them (as in the case of health workers), thus constantly broadening the notion that the ATE is a “combative union.” The necessity of intervening in new social problems and the search for alternatives have led it to prepare its delegates through a project based on popular education and oriented toward recovering the memory of the struggles of the workers’ movement and providing training in workers’ rights and defensive tools and discussion of the role of the union (ATE-Mendoza, 2012).

The actions of the ATE-Mendoza have included, besides the classical forms of protest (strikes, withdrawing support, and mobilization), new strategies such as pickets (blocking streets and highways) and *escraches* (public denunciations of selected public officials at their homes). To this was added direct decision making during labor conflicts, when there was discussion by the base in every workplace whether the workers were union members or not. All of these changes contributed to an increase in the participation of provincial state workers from a low of 4,000 in 2007 to 15,562 by 2011 and an increase in participation in the labor struggles of the province: state workers were participants in 64 percent of the labor struggles undertaken in the period between April 2009 and April 2011 (Observatorio de Conflictividad Social de Mendoza, 2009–2011). The state responded to this activism mainly through judicial means: criminal prosecution (especially of the leadership) and civil proceedings, expressly curtailing not only the constitutional right to petition the authorities but also the right to strike (Argentina, 1994: Article 14 bis).

As we can observe in this case, the revitalization of Argentine unions has had two aspects: the revaluation of organization not only as a tool for the defense of workers and their struggle but also as the preferential means of channeling protests and the end of the fragmentation that had been experienced by the labor movement and its organizations, revealing the movement as the foundation from which workers must present their demands. The experiences of democratization, autonomy, and confrontation have made it possible to renew forgotten solidarity networks, reject the dominant union, and advance proposals that go beyond corporative interests. In this situation, government workers are in a favorable position: their presence at the center of activities that contribute to the social reproduction of capital may be the key that will allow them to dispute the meaning of *what to do with the state*.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This article has attempted to explain the tensions that are generated in the current era of globalized capitalism by examining some of Argentina’s paradigmatic conflicts over land, water, and work. In it I have sought to demonstrate that the 2001 crisis opened up a process of social mobilization that made possible a challenge to the direction of various changes produced by neoliberalism and can be regarded as the end of the social lethargy that began with the military dictatorship.

However, it may also contribute to a deeper discussion of the metamorphosis of work and the disappearance of its active subjects. Observing the dynamism of the expansion of capital and the contradictions inherent in it, we can assert that the subjects challenging its expansion and transformation are not limited to those formally subjected to the logic of exploitation. Those who have been reduced to pauperism and whose only means of subsistence disputes the ownership of the means of production are returning to the scene as “territorial organizations” in pursuit of self-management and self-sufficiency. From another perspective, assembly members or citizens are confronting new extractive activities whose social-environmental impacts on their territories and communities are difficult to predict. At the same time, state workers have provided an obstacle to the reduction of public expenditure that allowed the broadening of the margins for capital reproduction. Their struggles aimed to tackle the breakdown of social citizenship and with it the right of the community to health, education, and housing. Even in a situation that was highly disadvantageous, given the deterioration of working conditions and the specter of unemployment or precarious work, they modified their practices to return the political to the workplace. The positions occupied by work and its subjects in the new movements and organizations are, however, contradictory. I have tried to show some of its various characteristics, among them those that represent the disruptive potential of its contestation and those that demonstrate the magnitude of what they confront.

A final assessment: In the public sphere of the past five years, collective actors (landless workers, oppositional unions, and assembly members in defense of water rights) have shared numerous actions that have challenged the direction of development and economic modernization and, with it, the passive stance and political apathy that they had been assigned. Instead of noise (paraphrasing Jacques Rancière), the word and its subjects have taken their rightful place.

NOTES

1. The projects mentioned are 2007–2009, “Identidad y conflictos en Mendoza en tiempos de refundación del Estado” (Diego Escolar and Patricia Collado, directors); 2009–2011, “Transformaciones del capital y conflicto social en la Provincia de Mendoza” (Sergio Onofrio and Patricia Collado, directors), and 2011–2013, ‘Trabajo y bienes comunes: Lo que está en disputa en el escenario social de la Mendoza actual’ (Patricia Collado and Sergio Onofrio, directors), all of the Secretaría de Ciencia Técnica y Posgrado, Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, Mendoza.

2. In 2010, indigenous communities throughout the country demonstrated in defense of their lands (*Página/12*, May 21, 2010).

3. According to estimates by Giarracca and Teubal (2010: 130), there are 20,000 peasant families throughout the country with a high level of organization and demands. Barbara Durand (2007) estimated that the MOCASE–Via Campesina had 9,000 members in 2005.

4. On the rural farm movements, see Barbeta (2009), Micchi (2010), GEPCyD (2010), and Giarracca and Teubal (2010).

5. The study was based on interviews of key individuals and groups and participant observation in training workshops and land occupations during the months of July and August 2008. Follow-up studies continue to the present through the Observatorio de Conflictividad Social de Mendoza.

6. Santa Cruz, Chubut, Río Negro, Neuquén, Mendoza, San Juan, San Luis, La Rioja, Córdoba, Santiago del Estero, Tucumán, Catamarca, Salta, and Jujuy. <http://asambleasciudadanas.org.ar> (accessed March 14, 2012).

7. The first opencast mining venture was established in 1997 in the province of Catamarca—the Minera Alumbrera Ltd., which now operates not only in Catamarca but in Tucumán, Santiago del Estero, and Santa Fe. On the resistance to this venture see Comelli (2009).

8. The laws in question are the following: National Law No. 26.639/1010, on the protection of glaciers and the periglacial environment, the provincial laws of Chubut (5001/2003), Río Negro (3981/2005), Tucumán (7879/2007), La Rioja (8137/2007 [repealed in 2008]), Mendoza (7722), Córdoba (9526/2008), and San Luis (IX 6342008/2008), and the municipal ordinances of Abra Pampa–Jujuy (51/10), Tunuyán (1940/06), and Tupungato (001/07). On their content see *Voces en Alerta* (2011: 171–180).

9. For details see the following web sites: <http://www.tinogasta-catamarca.com.ar>; <http://prensaelalgarrobo.blogspot.com.ar>; <http://www.noalamina.org>; San Carlos, <http://www.poraguapura.com.ar>; <http://asambleapopularporelagua.com.ar>; <http://boletinmovidaambiental.blogspot.com.ar>; and <http://agalon.com.ar> (accessed April 10, 2012).

10. Research in San Carlos took place during various periods: in March 2007, March 2008, and October 2009. Various interviews were conducted with key informants and the local newspaper *El Periodista XXI*. The proceedings of the Mendoza assemblies are recorded by the Observatorio de Conflictividad Social de Mendoza.

11. “Citizen assembly” is a term employed by the Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas (Union of Citizens’ Assemblies—UAC), a network that links all of the country’s socio-environmentalist assemblies. The term was discussed and agreed upon during the network’s sixth conference in Capilla del Monte, Córdoba, in 2008. “Citizen” was taken to mean “the individual exercising his rights” and “assembly” “any form of ‘horizontal’ organization (unmediated by institutionalization, delegated representation, or party affiliation)” (UAC, 2011a).

12. See the mining map available at iconoclasistas.com.ar/2010/05/30/el-grito-de-la-tierra (accessed April 10, 2012).

13. On the “historic march” of February 22, 2011, see <http://youtube.com/watch?v=TmORcVkmU3Q> (accessed April 25, 2012).

14. The importance of the process is demonstrated by the state’s response with the creation of the Organización de Estados Mineros (Organization of Mining States—OFEMI). <http://www.fundamin.com.ar> (accessed April 25, 2012).

15. The Law of Professional Associations (23551/88) establishes that worker representation in the workplace is through the union with legal standing.

16. According to Etchemendy (2011: 7), “In the postliberal stage there are other organizations that are relevant to or take the lead in mobilizations: transportation unions, especially truck drivers, benefiting from the boom in commodities; sectors of renewed leadership in an open economy such as the food industry, the private oil industry, the auto industry, and the fishing industry; the large service unions in commerce; and, finally, the state workers who were most protected during the adjustments of the 1990s.”

17. Patricia Ventrici (2012) has identified the struggles for recognition of grassroots organizations: mining (San Juan), plastics (Mendoza and Tierra del Fuego), petroleum (Santa Cruz), cotton (Entre Ríos), fishing (Mar del Plata), informal chainsaw operation (Misiones), bakery (Córdoba), energy (Chaco and La Pampa), and sugar (Salta and Jujuy), among others.

18. The educational sector has logged the most strike days in the past few years. According to Gindin (2011: 67), in 2006 and 2007 education workers were on strike for an average of more than 15 days per year, while the average for the principal unions was no more than 1 day per worker per year.

19. The study was done through interviews with key participants in the transportation sector in December 2007. In March 2008, a questionnaire was administered to 200 delegates of the ATE-Mendoza in order to establish the characteristics of union participation. From 2009 to the present, studies of the union’s protest actions have continued through the Observatorio de Conflictividad Social de Mendoza.

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