

# Union Organizing after the Collapse of Neoliberalism in Argentina: The Place of Community in the Revitalization of the Labor Movement (2005–2011)

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## Abstract

Recent Argentine history showed that since 2003 the labor movement became increasingly relevant due to protests organized by unionized formal workers. Labor revitalization in a context of persistent informality raised the following question: Were there union organizing strategies that related formal workers to the broader working class community that included informal workers? This article answered the question through the analysis of union strategies from three formal sector firms located in one city of the Northern Gran Buenos Aires, Argentina, between 2005 and 2011. The evidence from this comparison showed that in two of the factories there were union strategies to reach the community. The existence of a grassroots democratic union in the shop floor appeared as a necessary condition for inclusive union strategies. The scale of those relations varied according to the geographical pattern of workers' housing, which was the result of the company's localization strategy.

## Keywords

Argentina, informality, labor movement, Latin America, neoliberalism, sociology, union strategies

## Introduction

In a world facing increasing social inequality and deteriorating work conditions, labor activists and scholars face an urgent question: Is the labor movement still capable of leading the struggles for social justice and social change? The debates around this question centered on the strategies that unions developed to broaden their constituency and include groups that have been historically marginalized from the labor movement (Seidman, 1994; Moody, 1997; Collins, 2003; Clawson, 2003).

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In Latin America, one crucial question was whether or not unions developed relations of solidarity with informal workers, defined as those employed or self-employed in jobs that were not recognized or protected under the legal and regulatory frameworks (Castells and Portes, 1989: 12). Operationally, the informal workforce included “the sum total of own account workers (minus professionals and technicians), unpaid family workers, domestic servants, and waged workers without social security and other legal protections” (Portes and Hoffman, 2003: 50). The International Labor Organization estimated that this group represented half of the urban employed workforce in the region (ILO, 2013: 63).

There were intense debates about the causes of the deterioration of labor markets and intensification of social inequality in Latin America. Some authors pointed to the lack of stable market institutions that could allow a sustained growth in the region (Edwards and Lustig, 1997). This diagnosis provided the basis of policy recommendations by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Cook, 2007: 32–35). Other authors focused on the negative social and economic effects of neoliberal reforms (De La Barra, 2006). In the case of Argentina, it has been shown that neoliberal reforms affected workers’ basic rights and incremented social inequality (Sautu, 1998; Vilas, 2006: 166; Dalle, 2011; Beccaria and Maurizio, 2012). During the final crisis of neoliberalism in 2002, the unemployment rate was 18% and 44% of waged workers had informal jobs (CEDLAS and The World Bank, 2014). Weakened unions defended their basic organizational assets but did not struggle for better working conditions or salary increases with a heterogeneous workforce (Murillo, 2001).

In post-crisis Argentina, sustained economic growth led to a reduction in the rate of unemployment but high levels of informality persisted: by 2010 34.6% of waged workers had informal jobs (CEDLAS and The World Bank, 2014). This figure represented an improvement when compared to the crisis years but it was higher than the average informality of the pre-crisis period (33.3% average between 1991 and 1997). Adding all types of unregulated employment (informal waged workers + informal self-employed), 45.5% of the active labor force in Argentina was informal in 2010 (Tornarolli et al., 2014).

In the context of persistent working class fragmentation and economic recovery, the labor movement had a crucial role in the dynamics of social conflict thanks to the protests of unionized formal workers (Etchemendy and Collier, 2007; Palomino, 2007; Senén Gonzalez and Del Bono, 2013). In particular, grassroots unionism combined the pursuit of radical goals in the shop floor and beyond with grassroots-democratic decision-making processes (Montes Cató et al., 2010: 37).

This research asked whether or not, in the context of labor movement revitalization, Argentine unions developed strategies beyond the workplace to establish relations of solidarity with informal workers. I conducted fieldwork research centered around one city of the Northern Gran Buenos Aires (Argentina) between April 2010 and March 2011. The research focused on union strategies towards the community in three formal sector factories located in the city. Labor revitalization in two of the firms included new strategies of labor to establish relations of solidarity with the community, although there were differences in the geographical scale of those relations. The comparison suggested that the existence of a grassroots democratic union in the shop floor was a necessary condition for inclusive union strategies. The scale of those relations varied according to the geographical pattern of workers’ housing which was the result of the company’s localization strategy.

## **The Class Analysis of Labor Organizing in High Informality Labor Markets**

The dynamics of peripheral capitalism in Latin America led to the existence of an urban informal sector based on the unregulated production of commodities in micro-enterprises side to side with

the capitalist nucleus of the economy. Regarding the class location of informal workers, authors first suggested that informal workers belonged to a marginal mass never incorporated to the capitalist nucleus (Nun, 1969). This notion prevailed until the 1980s when Portes defined the informal economy as a process of income-generation that was not legally regulated and stated that the common feature of informal activities was the connection to the formal economy (Portes and Benton, 1984; Castells and Portes, 1989: 12).

This perspective challenged the argument that individuals employed outside the capitalist nucleus were 'classless'. Instead, informality was identified as a new class cleavage based on different modes of remuneration through which social classes received their means of consumption (Portes, 1985: 8). With regards to waged workers, the cleavage separated the informal proletariat from the formal proletariat because difference in modes of remuneration to labor generated groups with different material interests.

This approach helped to overcome the idea that informal workers were part of an excluded marginal mass and recognized the growing importance of informal employment in the mainstream economy. The problem with the definition of informality as a class cleavage was that it led to a strong structural argument that high informality necessarily caused the fragmentation of the working class and blocked labor mobilization in the region. From this perspective the variation in wages, work conditions, job security, social benefits and relations with capital across different categories of workers undermined workers' collective identity and collective action capacities (Roberts, 2002: 22; Roberts and Portes, 2006; Collier and Handlin, 2009).

This view was inappropriate to study the relationship between informality and labor mobilization because it could be the case that high levels of informality did not necessarily mean the absence of relations between formal and informal workers. In this article, I proposed an alternative answer to the question of the class position of informal workers. Based on a definition of social class inspired in the Marxist tradition, this view challenged the idea that the contrast between the formal and the informal working class had the conceptual status of a class cleavage. Instead, I retained the basic class schema proposed by Erik Olin Wright and treated informality as adding complexity to class relations at a subsidiary level through temporal and mediated class locations (Wright, 1997: 18, 393). This alternative view proposed that formal and informal workers belonged to the same social class and aimed to study the specificity of the social relations that linked (or separated) these two fractions of the working class.

With respect to the study of the class structure, research showed that in post-crisis Argentina there was an interconnected type of informality because of the high probability that workers had job trajectories across the informality frontier and the presence of family links that related formal and informal workers (Elbert, 2013). In this new structural context, the question was if there were new union strategies connecting formal and informal workers. The study of the organizing links between formal and informal workers was guided by the distinction between two types of labor organizing: *exclusive* organizing happened when formal sector unions had no ties with community organizations while *inclusive* organizing meant that unions established relations of solidarity with community organizations. Solidarity was defined as the willingness of one group to make sacrifices for the interests of the other group.

The definition of *inclusive* organizing was based on research that described models of fusion that tied labor organizing to community organizations. This literature suggested the importance of studying union strategies outside of the workplace, which was much broader than workplace unionism (Seidman, 1994). The objective was to determine whether or not unions developed inclusive organizing and explained the sources of variation in their scaling. The two characteristics of each case that I took into account were the *localization strategy* of the company and the *organizational logic* of the union.

The firm's *localization strategy* referred to the site-specific character of labor control strategies through which companies related to communities and labor markets. This was one dimension of the factory regime defined as the combination of the political and ideological effects of the organization of work and the apparatuses of production which regulated production relations (Burawoy, 1985: 7; Lee, 1995: 384; Collins, 2003: 12; McKay, 2006: 4).

In particular, I analyzed from which neighborhoods management recruited workers because geographical pattern of hires determined the workforce housing pattern. I distinguished between dispersed and concentrated workforces. A workforce was concentrated when the majority of the workers lived in the nearby neighborhood, such as in the case of FR-Meat. On the other hand, a workforce was dispersed when only a minority of the workers lived in this neighborhood, which was the case of K-Foods and V-Car. Because the majority of neighborhood residents had not finished high school this variation was explained by the skill requirements of each industry.

I also took into account the shop floor union's organizational logic, which distinguished between grassroots-democratic unions and top down-bureaucratic unions. I defined a union as grassroots-democratic if it confronted pluralist elections and used deliberative decision-making processes (Fung and Wright, 2003: 5). This description fitted unions at K-Foods and FR-Meat which emerged from organizing processes in the framework of a broader movement for grassroots unionism in Argentina. On the contrary, I defined the shop floor union at V-Car as top down-bureaucratic because of the absence of pluralist elections and the exclusion of rank-and-file workers from the union's decision-making process. Offe and Wieselth (1980: 216–217) stated that a union was bureaucratic when the organization's survival was as independent as possible of the motivation, the solidarity, and the 'willingness to act' of the members.

The main hypothesis in this schema was that the firm's relationship to the community determined the *structure of opportunities* for the local union to develop *inclusive organizing strategies*. On the other hand, the organizational logic of the union explained the union's *motivation* to establish relations of solidarity with informal workers beyond the workplace. This perspective was intended to replace strong structural explanations of the causal links between informality and labor struggles with a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between social structure and organizational dynamics in the making of labor protests at the local level.

## Work and Community in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires

The Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region included the city of Buenos Aires and 24 surrounding districts. Neighborhoods in the region were socially segregated between the upper middle class of the new suburbs and the working class and the urban poor who lived in neighborhoods with serious service and infrastructure deficits (Cerrutti and Grimson, 2005: 75). This article is based on in-depth interviews and participant observations that collected evidence on union strategies towards the community in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires, which included nine districts in the North and Northwest of the City of Buenos Aires, located around the Pan-American Highway (See Table 1 below for a descriptive summary of the three cases included in the analysis).

Since the second stage of Import Substitutive Industrialization in the late 1950s, the Northern Gran Buenos Aires attracted capital investments into new medium and big manufacturing plants of heavy industrial products. This geographical orientation of investments was deepened during the discontinuous periods of economic growth, centering around the Pan-American Highway because it allowed inter-metropolitan circulation and direct access to regional productive spaces of the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR) (Briano and Fritzsche, 2007: 742; Di Virgilio, 2011: 180). This resulted in the emergence of industrial complexes such as the one that contained the three firms included in the study, located right next to the Pan-American Highway.

**Table 1.** Case studies in the formal sector.

	Case Study		
	K-Foods	V-Car	FR-Meat
Industry branch	Food	Auto	Meat
Total workforce	2100	3000	700
% workers in selected nearby neighborhood	10%	3%	60%
% workers in other Northern Gran Buenos Aires locations	60%	52%	30%
Union's organizing logic	Democratic	Bureaucratic	Democratic

Source: Own estimation based on interviews with workers, union activists and managers. Total workforce included: only standard workers.

The majority of workers employed in the firms lived in neighborhoods located in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires. This region represented for workers a single urban entity because it was the geographical space of their daily movements between work and residence. In this study I identified this area as the potential *regional scale* for the community activism of the unions.

I explored the *local scale* of the activism through the relationship between unions and the residents of one nearby working class neighborhood. Most houses in the neighborhood were not legally recognized and lacked natural gas, running water and a sewer system (Marchesotti and Said, 2006). Health related problems included a high teenage pregnancy rate, high infant mortality and contamination-related diseases. According to the 2001 census only 11% of adult residents in the neighborhood finished high school and the majority of residents were part of a broadly defined informal working class (Boniolo, 2013: 63).

The neighborhood was a center of intense political and social activism. The majority of residents voted Peronism and the networks of the Peronist party were at the center of local politics. There were also grassroots organizations such as soup-kitchens and adult education centers which were part of an emergent grassroots activism which dealt with environmental problems and the lack of housing and infrastructure.

Because of the combination of neighborhood characteristics and the new labor activism in the factories this was a good scenario to study the local scale of changing relations between unions and communities. I conducted participant observations of union and community activism in the area between March 2010 and April 2011. In addition I interviewed formal workers (some of them lived in the neighborhood), union activists and managers in the formal sector factories, and residents and grassroots activists in the neighborhood (in total, I conducted 60 interviews as part of the broader project). I was allowed to visit the shop floor in two of the factories. This information was supplemented with the analysis of union publications and media articles on labor and community activism. I also visited the neighborhood at least once a week as a teacher in one of the adult education centers.

## Sources of Variation in Union Strategies in the Community

### *K-Foods: Multiple Solidarity Strategies at the Regional Scale*

The company entered the Argentinean food market in 1990. Its main plant was located in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires and produced chocolates, cookies, crackers, soft drinks, and pasta.

**Table 2.** K-Foods: Geographical distribution of workers' place of residence.

	% of Workforce
Northern Gran Buenos Aires (except nearby neighborhood)	60
Nearby neighborhood	10
Other locations	30
Total Workforce	100 (2100)

Source: Own estimation based on interviews with workers, union activists and managers. Total workforce includes only standard workers.

The factory regime combined the statistical control of production with management's imposition of production policies including temporary contracts and subcontracted operations.

Workers that lived in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires were dispersed across different districts. This dispersion of the workforce was a direct consequence of management's recruiting and retention decisions. The company required that new employees had completed high school and had experience in factory work. In addition, managers preferred to hire workers living in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires because it was easier for them to get to work (K-Foods Manager, personal interview, 31 March 2011). As shown in Table 2, within the region, only a small proportion of workers lived in the neighborhood.

*Union politics: The making of a grassroots democratic union.* The Food Industry Workers' Federation (FTIA) and its powerful Buenos Aires branch were led by a Peronist group that had run both organizations for the last three decades. Alternatively, the shop-floor union at K-Foods was led by an oppositional group of leftist orientation and based on a grassroots-democratic logic. In 2009 this group won shop-floor elections and the union became one of the most prominent examples of grassroots unionism.

*Union strategies in the community: Building solidarity in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires.* The geographical pattern of workers' housing presented a challenge to a democratic-grassroots union that aimed to expand its influence beyond the workplace. Given that the workers were dispersed across quite a few districts, and specifically that the majority of them did not live in the neighborhood immediately adjoining the factory, the union's creative response was to focus community organizing on the Northern Gran Buenos Aires.

The development of workplace campaigns based on the shop-floor and the neighborhoods was one of the innovations that grassroots activists brought to K-Foods' union politics. In multiple instances activists used working class neighborhoods as sites that facilitated building solidarity during organizing campaigns. One of these instances occurred when the group led a campaign to win standard contracts for a group of subcontracted lift-truck drivers between 2005 and 2007. The group's first step during the campaign was to organize social activities such as soccer matches and birthday barbecues:

The unity [between standard and nonstandard workers] is the result of an organizing strategy, which started from the basics, such as organizing a soccer match. We also organized birthday celebrations for our co-workers. We used to organize a birthday barbecue after work, soccer matches, etc. So workers created the tradition that the birthday person had to pay for the barbecue. If he couldn't afford it we would all pay for it, but in any case we would celebrate. We also regained the working class tradition of helping your co-worker to build his house. That is very common right now, and everyone participates, including standard and nonstandard workers. We shared birthday celebrations, we used to go to the children's

birthdays, and we helped each other to build our houses. That way, your co-worker becomes part of your life, and you don't want anyone to hurt him. So, if the company attacked a co-worker, everyone would support him. We didn't even have to go to the [national] union because everyone in the shop floor would defend him, no matter if he was standard or nonstandard worker. That solidarity was the result of our grassroots strategy to unite standard and nonstandard workers. (K-Foods' union activist, personal interview, 28 April 2010)

After a few months, the organization of social activities became core instruments in the creation of solidarity ties between standard and nonstandard workers. The best example of this was a soccer tournament that included teams of factory workers as well as two teams representing informal workers living in the neighborhood:

When we started with our strategy of non-collaboration in the plant, the company fired one of our coworkers. So we organized a soccer tournament to collect money for him. More than 30 teams signed up for the tournament, that's a lot. That was in the beginning of 2006. It was fully organized and managed by [nonstandard] workers. We collected the money and bought the prizes. The prize for the winner was meat and beverages for a barbecue, and the second place also got meat, but a bit less than the first place. Except for the money that we spent on the prizes, all the rest was given to our coworker. There were also teams from the nearby neighborhood. I invited one team from [neighborhood], and another guy invited a team from [another neighborhood]. (K-Foods' union activist, personal interview, 21 May 2010)

The campaign succeeded in winning standard contracts for lift-truck drivers. In the narratives, activists suggested that social activities were instrumental to this success because they were sites of recruitment of new activists and they strengthened the relations of solidarity between standard and nonstandard workers.

Another example of the union's effort to take labor organizing beyond the workplace was the 2009 'swine flu conflict' which led to the emergence of a community solidarity network. The conflict started because the company attempted to close down child care facilities during the swine flu outbreak without the provision of paid leaves to workers. The struggle included strikes and a factory takeover but most of the actions happened outside the factory after the police ousted workers from the plant. Activists developed a solidarity network linking the struggle to the broader working class community of the Northern Gran Buenos Aires. The main actors within this network were the grassroots unions of other factories located in the region and workers at FR-Meat conducted a one hour solidarity strike.

With respect to the community there was an active involvement of regional representations of unemployed workers' movements, left parties, human rights organizations and student organizations. The network also included organizations of the neighborhood such as churches and adult education centres. The participation of neighborhood organizations in the actions of solidarity was followed by solidarity of union activists during the struggles of the neighborhood regarding infrastructure and environmental problems. For example, the union expressed its solidarity with activists fighting against the contamination of the nearby water stream and offered their help in order to determine whether or not the company was contributing to the pollution (K-Foods worker, personal interview, 22 June 2010). Union activists were also present during a land occupation in the nearby neighborhood.

Another strategy to extend organizing beyond the workplace was the creation of a network of grassroots unions of the Northern Gran Buenos Aires that met twice during the fieldwork period. The meetings showed a clear political orientation to organize across the informality divide. This orientation was expressed in the flyers for the meetings, as well as in the speeches of union activists. Although there was a small presence of organizations of informal workers the orientation was

**Table 3.** V-Car: Geographical distribution of workers' place of residence.

	% of Workforce
Northern Gran Buenos Aires (except nearby neighborhood)	52
Nearby neighborhood	3
Western Gran Buenos Aires	28
Other locations	17
Total Workforce	100 (3000)

Source: Own estimation based on 2009 data provided by the shop-floor union and interviews with workers and union representatives. Total workforce includes only standard workers.

sincere and activists honestly placed their bets at a union activism that could unite formal and informal workers.

Labor revitalization in K-Foods was explained in part by a new systematic union strategy based on community activism in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires. This involvement included the strategic use of social activities in the workers' neighborhoods as well as local solidarity with residents of the nearby neighborhood. Local organizations participated in the solidarity networks of the union and union activists expressed their solidarity with the livelihood struggles of neighborhood residents. Activists could not focus exclusively on the nearby neighborhood because workers were dispersed across the region. On the other hand, they needed more resources than they had if they wanted to reach out to the multiple neighborhoods where workers lived. The grassroots meetings of unions located in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires were a creative and effective union strategy in the community given the geographic constraints to their activism.

### *V-Car: Uncomfortable Coalitions beyond the Workplace*

In 1980, the European car maker V-Car began its operations in Argentina. The performance of the company alternated periods of production growth and decline. After 2003 it experienced a sustained growth in production output following the trend of the country's economy. In this framework the factory regime here was hegemonic despotism, based on the cooperation between management and the union under the constant threat of capital flight (Burawoy, 1985; Santella, 2012). This guaranteed high salaries in exchange for workers' collaboration in production and the union's compliance to nonstandard work arrangements. The growth in production after 2003 resulted in the growth of the workforce. The plant included in the study increased the number of employees from around 1200 in 2006 to around 4600 in 2010. According to union activists, 3000 of these employees were standard workers involved in production tasks. More than half of these workers lived in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires but less than 3% resided in the nearby neighborhood, as shown in Table 3.

The company preferred to hire workers who lived in Northern Gran Buenos Aires districts that were well-connected to the plant through the Pan-American Highway but it did not privilege a particular city or neighborhood. Only a small proportion of workers came from the local neighborhood because of the skill requirements of the jobs.

*Bureaucratic unionism in the auto industry.* Auto workers from V-Car were members of the Automotive Union of Mechanics and Related Trades (SMATA) which represented most workers employed in the auto factories. This union had a history of moderate unionism, which "has its roots in the corporatist and populist era that began in the 1930s and 1940s [in South America],



where class collaboration was favored over class conflict” (Anner, 2011: 140). Neoliberal reforms of the 1990s weakened the class collaboration approach at the national level but in the auto industry it was replaced by cross-class collaboration at the plant level, defined as microcorporatism (Anner, 2011: 141).

In this context, the shop-floor union at V-Car was a powerful union with a top down-bureaucratic organizing logic. The same group had run the union since the company’s arrival in Argentina and impeded opposition through a combination of threats of physical repression to activists and the use of the alliance with management to fire workers that aimed to organize oppositional groups. The decision-making process of the union during conflicts was based on private meetings of the leadership committee with national union leaders, and the union was rarely confronted with the views of the rank and file.

*Union politics beyond the workplace.* During the fieldwork period there was no single instance in which the V-Car shop-floor union reached organizations of the neighborhood or when these organizations expressed solidarity during a workplace conflict. The combination of a dispersed workforce and a top down-bureaucratic union resulted in the absence of a conscious strategy to organize in the community. However, the fact that the union did not relate to neighborhood organizations did not mean that it was not engaged in politics beyond the workplace. The union’s political engagement happened within the framework of the Peronist party.

Union activists did not see grassroots neighborhood organizations as valid interlocutors for their activism beyond the workplace. The coordinator of the shop-floor union explained me that they established relations to poor neighborhoods through the company’s campaigns but never directly from the union:

Sometimes the company raises funds for poor neighborhoods. We can help them, or communicate that to the workers. If they ask for our help, we help. We [raised funds] for schools located in [poor regions of the country]. But we don’t do that on our own. For example, in my neighborhood no one knows that I’m a union activist. They know that I work for V-Car, but that’s it. We don’t translate [the activism] outside the workplace. I don’t know if there is a reason. Maybe it’s because there is so much to deal with in the workplace that when you get home you want to forget about those issues. These might not be huge problems, but still you have to be alert all day. So, in my neighborhood no one knows I’m a union activist. It might also be because of the politics of the neighborhood. In the past, the neighborhood organizations were part of the Peronist party, but nowadays they are aligned with the left. I don’t think the left is bad, but if you ask me for a reason, maybe that’s the reason. (V-Car’s union activist, personal interview, 6 September 2010)

In the absence of an organizing strategy linking the workplace and the community, union activism was channeled through the National Labor Federation’s (CGT) intervention in national Peronist politics. This is coherent with SMATA’s history of political involvement within the Peronist party (Anner, 2011: 150). In this period there were two instances in which the union was involved in political events that brought autoworkers together with informal workers: the remembrance of Eva Peron and the memorial service of former President Nestor Kirchner. These events were party initiatives, and the shop-floor union took part in these as part of the CGT.

On the evening of 26 July 2010 around 50,000 persons marched in downtown Buenos Aires holding candles in memory of Eva Peron. The activity was organized by the strand of the Peronist movement which supported the government of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. There were other strands with different and sometimes opposing strategies but this one was prevalent in the analyzed period (Levitsky and Murillo, 2008). The main speaker at the event was former President Nestor Kirchner who was the most likely Peronist presidential candidate for the coming election. The

novelty was not to be found in Kirchner's speech but in the fact that the event was jointly organized by the CGT and the unemployed workers' movement *Movimiento Evita*.

The event was presented as a joint effort of formal and informal workers to remember the legacy of Eva Peron and the speeches of the leaders of both groups emphasized the need of solidarity between the groups. In spite of the good intentions expressed by the leaders the relationship between the organizations did not last long. On the contrary, in the following months the CGT increased its pressure to include union activists among the legislative candidates. This increased the tension between union leaders and the party leadership.

In spite of these tensions, both organizations gathered together for the memorial service of Nestor Kirchner who passed away in the morning of 27 October 2010. This was the last event where these organizations acted together. The relationship between these organizations changed throughout the fieldwork year depending on their positioning within Peronism. In July they organized a joint event to remember Evita, which provided a unique opportunity to study the common grounds between the two groups. By October the relationship was not fluid but both groups participated in Kirchner's memorial. These two events were rare moments of unity between organizations representing formal and informal workers within the Peronist party.

The existence of unstable relations between organizations of informal workers and unions in this period was the result of the history of increasing tension between the political and the union leadership of the movement. During the 1980s and 1990s this tension was translated into the radical de-unionization of the party (Levitsky, 2004: 4). The case of V-Car provided one more example of the difficulties of the union leadership to maintain stable alliances with the political leadership of the movement.

The party leadership initiative to create different kinds of events bringing together these groups was one more indicator that in Argentina there was a weakening of the boundary between formal and informal as a cleavage and more as a problem to be dealt with. This represented a change in the broader set of relations between the formal and the informal working class. In the case of a top down-bureaucratic union that represented a dispersed workforce, this new scenario did not generate any meaningful solidarity from the union towards informal workers.

### *FR-Meat: Local scale union–neighborhood solidarity*

By 2010 FR-Meat was considered the biggest employer in the Argentinean meat industry. The factory regime here was despotic (Burawoy, 1985; Lee, 1995) and recruited its workers mostly in the nearby neighborhood, as shown in Table 4 below. In production despotism was characterized by the imposition rather than the negotiation of production policies and it was reinforced through nonstandard work arrangements such as temporary work and subcontracting.

The firm treated the neighborhood as a pool of readily available labor, taking low-paid, low-skilled workers who lived nearby. One of the managers told me he preferred to hire workers from the nearby neighborhood because they cared more about the job, didn't spend money on transportation and proved to be loyal to the company (FR Manager, personal interview, 15 July 2011). The local roots of the regional union and the Peronist party were the main informal recruiting agencies that linked the company to the neighborhood. The union–neighborhood network was centered around the current general secretary of the meatpackers' regional federation while the party network was centered around a local party boss.

*Grassroots unionism in the meat industry.* A corrupted shop-floor union was the key element for the imposition of despotic localism at FR-Meat. The union was led by a Peronist group until 2008. The group used violence to avoid opposition and agreed to management's policies in exchange for

**Table 4.** FR-Meat: Geographical distribution of workers' place of residence.

	% of Workforce
Northern Gran Buenos Aires (except nearby neighborhood)	30
Nearby neighborhood	60
Other locations	10
Total Workforce	100 (700)

Source: Own estimation based on interviews with workers, union activists and managers. Total workforce includes only standard workers.

economic gains for union activists. In 2008 the split of the group in two factions with different candidates opened up the space for grassroots activists to win the shop-floor union elections. The group included dissident Peronist activists, left party activists and dissatisfied rank-and-file workers.

After the election the group was confronted with all types of violent threats and offers of bribery to accept the corrupt agreement. The leading activists rejected the offer and had to develop their activism under constant threats from the company and the regional federation. Under their leadership the union became a lively example of grassroots democratic unionism. Decisions about salary negotiations and strikes were made in meetings that included rank-and-file workers and the group confronted regular elections running against an established opposition.

*Union–neighborhood solidarity.* Similar to the case of K-Foods one of the innovations of the grassroots union here consisted of campaigns that combined workplace and community organizing. In this case, the main site of the effort was the nearby neighborhood. One of the instances of this synergy was a labor action in 2011 to demand standard contracts for nonstandard workers and a salary rise for all, which led the subcontractor to dismiss 14 workers.

The workers' response was a week-long strike, road blockades, protest rallies and a music festival. During these actions, workers counted on the solidarity of neighbors and neighborhood organizations. Members of adult education centers helped in collecting food and money for the striking workers. The meatpackers made a poster where they expressed their gratitude to the supporting organizations, mentioning adult education centers, unions, movements of unemployed workers and college students' organizations.

When the labor office ordered the end of the strike the meatpackers decided to go back to work and deepen their strategy of taking the conflict into the community. The expansion of the conflict to the neighborhood was based on the self-presentation of the protestors as both workers and neighbors. The best example of this self-presentation was the following public intervention during the blockade of the Pan-American Highway:

They should pay more attention to us. This conflict affects the 600 families of the workers. But it also affects all the neighborhoods that surround the meatpacking plant. That's because at least half of those who live in these neighborhoods is currently working for the plant, or has at some point worked here. And they all know the awful working conditions and the hyper exploitation that has been going on in this plant for more than 40 years. We finally stood up against these conditions, and we won't surrender until we win. The blockade of the Pan-American Highway is one of the ways in which we can protest. That's because if we keep the protest within the workplace, our employer, with the help of corrupt public officials, will weaken us and defeat our struggle. That's why we come here to tell all the working people that with our salaries we can't afford to buy the meat that we produce in this plant. (FR-Meat's union activist, C5N TV News Report, 12 April 2011)

Workers also distributed a flyer in the nearby neighborhood and in the plant's entrance during street blockades to explain the reasons for the conflict and express their gratitude to the neighbors. This provided great visibility of the conflict and workers were invited to talk in schools during the commemoration of the international workers' day. Although the strategy was focused on the nearby neighborhood the meatpackers also distributed the flyer during massive public activities in the district such as a tennis exhibition featuring past world class players. This action of protest won the workers a meeting with the district's mayor, who received them as 'workers and citizens of our district'.

In the subsequent weeks workers forced the subcontractor to hire eight of the laid-off workers and all workers got the payment that the company owed them. Part of the success of this struggle was to be found in the effort to take the conflict outside the workplace and into the neighborhood. Once they were in the streets, the decision to focus the solidarity in the nearby neighborhood was based on the fact that the majority of the workers lived there.

The geographical concentration of the workers' place of residence also explained the strategy of solidarity with neighborhood based activism. One example of this solidarity was the role of the union during the occupation of a public lot by a local group who demanded social housing. The occupation lasted two months and finished when the police violently expelled the 32 families that sustained the occupation.

One of the persons at the center of the occupation was Marcos, a union activist from the plant who was also a long-time neighborhood resident. At the time of the occupation he was 25 years old and had worked at FR-Meat for around five years. He had lived in the neighborhood all his life and told me that 'everybody knows me and I know everyone'. After a period when he abandoned school and became part of the local youth gangs, Marcos decided to follow his father's example and get a job at the meatpacking plant.

When participants explained Marcos's leading role, they emphasized two dimensions of his experience as a union activist: that he knew how to express his ideas and that he 'would know other people' that could support their cause. A good example of the first dimension was his role as spokesperson at the district's board of representatives. Marcos recalled a one-to-one discussion with the local Peronist boss, who was also the vice-president of the board:

I knew her from the neighborhood and from the meatpacking plant. At some point in the meeting she said 'I have helped a lot of people to get a job in the meatpacking plant'. So I replied, 'Don't be shameless. How many people have you helped?' And she said: 'A lot. More than 100'. So I told her, 'Yes, you help them, but for how long can they keep their jobs? You help them in, but after two months they are jobless again. You have never helped anyone. I have worked in the meatpacking plant for a long time'. I don't mind telling them the truth. When I got to the board I said, 'I'm a union activist at the meatpacking plant'. And I also told her once: 'If you want to talk to the company's manager about me, just do it. I'm not afraid of you or him'. (FR-Meat's union activist and occupier, personal interview, 21 July 2010)

Marcos also played a leading role in the occupation because he 'knew more people' than a non-activist neighbor. Due to his request union representatives from the meatpacking plant supported the occupation. Activists and workers distributed flyers, provided meat for their meals and helped with fundraising efforts. Union activists were also present during key events such as the resistance to police expulsion, road blockades and public demonstrations.

Workers and union activists got involved in the land occupation because of the deep connection between the workplace and the neighborhood: most workers lived there and many of the residents worked (or had worked) in the meatpacking plant. Meatpackers' solidarity was also the result of the political orientation of the grassroots union. They supported the occupation because they

**Table 5.** Analytical comparison of union strategies.

		Workforce housing pattern	
		Dispersion	Concentration
Union's Organizing logic	Democratic Bureaucratic	K-Foods: Regional scale V-Car: No solidarity	FR-Meat: Local scale

Source: Author's elaboration.

thought it was a fair demand but also because this could win them the neighbors' support for their workplace struggles.

**Conclusion**

There were new strategies of solidarity that connected formal and informal workers in two of the three factories included in this study. The comparison between the successful cases suggests that there were multiple potential geographical scales of solidarity: the local neighborhood nearby the factory and the broader community of workers who lived in the Northern Gran Buenos Aires. What are the variables explaining variation in solidarity strategies? Table 5 shows the interaction between the geographical pattern of workers' housing and the organizational logic of the union, which are the main explanatory factors of variation here:

The only company that hired mostly from the nearby neighborhood was FR-Meat, because it didn't require high school education for its workers. As a result of this geographical concentration, the union at FR-Meat developed a successful strategy of solidarity with local community organizations. The best example of this solidarity was the union's involvement in a land occupation. Although most of its energy was focused on the neighborhood, the union also participated in regional events such as the meetings of grassroots unions organized by K-Foods' workers.

Similarly, K-Foods workers' union developed solidarity campaigns beyond the workplace in the past years. In this case, the geographical focus of the campaigns was the Northern Gran Buenos Aires which included the neighborhood but was not mainly focused on that scale. In this case, we should replace the notion of *union-neighborhood* relations with the idea of *union-community*, which better captures the character of the extension of union strategies and worker lives/struggles beyond the workplace.

In spite of their differences, both unions showed solidarity towards informal workers. The contrasting case was that of the union at V-Car, which was an extreme example of workforce dispersion. This dispersion was a consequence of the skill requirement of hires which was not met by neighborhood residents. In this case the combination of a dispersed workforce and a top-down bureaucratic union resulted in the absence of activism in the neighborhood. Instead, the union developed institutionalized relationships with informal workers through established political organizations of the Peronist party.

There has been a growing debate about the characterization of political regimes that emerged in Latin America after the crisis of neoliberalism (Dello Buono, 2011). In Argentina, unemployment was drastically reduced and the government allowed the comeback of national level collective bargaining. However, the Argentine state tolerated labor informality in order to foster capital investments. In this context, the present study provided evidence of union solidarity strategies towards informal workers. In a broader sense, it showed that workers were not passive victims of

labor fragmentation policies but did have agency and were fundamental in developing strategies of resistance to the persistent inequality of capitalism in Argentina.

By the time I finished fieldwork research, union activists had oriented their efforts in scaling up solidarity. As part of the increasingly influential movement for grassroots unionism, workers from K-Foods and FR-Meat led oppositional electoral lists at the national federations of food processing industries and meat-packing industries, respectively. In addition, activists were part of a left oriented electoral front in the presidential elections of 2011, and some of them were candidates for local level positions.

What are the odds that the labor movement as a whole supports this type of solidarity in the near future? These cases indicated that, even in an unfavorable environment of degraded work and corrupt unions, militant unionism was able to build power and forged successful alliances with working class communities. In the context of the growth of the political left and the greater visibility of grassroots unionism it is likely that greater fractions of the Argentine working class will support a strategy of solidarity with informal workers. In any case, the capacity of the labor movement to confront a coming economic crisis in the country depends on the success of this strategy.

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