Radical Political Unionism as a Strategy for Revitalization in Argentina

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The grassroots union experiment undertaken at the Lear automotive parts factory in Argentina can be seen as a paradigmatic struggle for an understanding of the relationship between unionism and politics. The Lear case reveals that the distinctiveness of radical political unionism lies in the democratic elements of its decision making and its appeal to direct action, its construction of alliances with other social organizations, its linkage of economic demands with broader political objectives, its identification of the management, the state, and the union bureaucracy as adversaries, and its transmission of a leftist political culture.

La experiencia sindical de la fábrica de autopartes Lear en Argentina puede ser analizada como un conflicto paradigmático para comprender la relación entre sindicalismo y política. El caso de Lear revela que el carácter distintivo del sindicalismo político radical se encuentra en los mecanismos democráticos de toma de decisiones y en la apelación a medidas de acción directa, la construcción de alianzas con otras organizaciones sociales, la vinculación de las demandas económicas con objetivos políticos más amplios, la identificación de la empresa, el Estado y la burocracia sindical como adversarios y la transmisión de una cultura política de izquierda.

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Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, discussion has arisen around the so-called crisis of the labor movement (Silver, 2005). Along with theories questioning the capacity of unionism to represent an increasingly heterogeneous working class, more relevant approaches have focused on strategy for strengthening union organization in a context marked by neoliberalism and globalization. Thus, in the English-speaking nations the concept of "union renewal" has emerged (Beherens, Hamann, and Hurd, 2004; Frege and Kelly, 2003). In Argentina these approaches have been adopted in the context of a strengthening of union organizations since 2004 (Etchemendy and Collier, 2008; Senén Gonzalez and del Bono, 2013). The discussions have centered on

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arriving at an understanding of whether this strengthening reflects a qualitative change in union actions or is only a resurgence of traditional practices (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007). These debates have enriched the study of grassroots unionism. Some writers question the existence of a transformation in the activities of the leadership, asserting that elements of revitalization lie in the grassroots (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2013; Lenguita and Montes Cató, 2010; Longo, 2014; Varela, 2015) and raising new questions regarding what distinguishes this unionism from that of workplaces dominated by traditional unions. These questions are also present in international debates. In the past few years, English-speaking intellectuals have demonstrated the importance of the debate over union strategies. Questioning in particular the idea of social movement unionism, they have proposed the designation of radical political unionism as one of the strategies by which unions might confront the crisis. This strategy is characterized by its appeal to direct action and its politicization of workers' struggles.

The objective of this study is to contribute to this rich debate with a critical rethinking of this literature through the study of an important conflict initiated by the automotive parts manufacturer Lear of Argentina. This conflict had its epicenter around mid-2014, when the management laid off more than 100 workers and blocked the representatives of the workers' internal committee from entry to the factory. Its methods and the relation between unionism and the political permit the designation of this conflict as an expression of radical political unionism, but they took place in the context of the strengthening of traditional unions and labor institutions. Therefore the following questions motivated our analysis: Is it possible to consider the experience of the Lear workers as an expression of radical political unionism? How does the political operate in the configuration of union strategies? And, finally, what are the limits and possibilities of this union strategy?

In order to answer these questions, we will analyze five interrelated elements of the conflict that will permit us to characterize the orientation of the workers' actions: the mechanisms of decision making and direct action, the structure of alliances that they establish with other organizations and actors, the politicization of their demands, their identification of adversaries, and their linkages with political organizations. Analysis in these terms will contribute to a deeper understanding not only of the Lear case but also of grassroots labor struggles in general. We conducted a quantitative analysis of the conflicts in the automotive industry and at Lear between 2006 and 2014, utilizing the data base supplied by the undersecretary for technical programming and labor studies of the Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security, and a qualitative analysis of news stories and union documents that permitted us to identify the features of the union strategy.

RADICAL POLITICAL UNIONISM IN THE DEBATES ON REVITALIZATION

Radical political unionism is presented in the scholarly literature as one of the alternatives by which unions can confront their decline as representative

institutions of the working class (Taylor, Mathers, and Upchurch, 2012). Three strategies for revitalization[1] have been developed in the context of capitalist restructuring: (1) social movement unionism, the enrollment of new members and the strengthening of alliances with other social action organizations (Fantasia and Stepan-Norris, 2004; Mezzi, 2013; Moody, 1988); (2) social partnership, the building of coalitions with the government and employers (Fichter and Greer, 2004; Upchurch, 2009); and (3) radical political unionism, collective action that questions the union and employer bureaucracies (Connolly and Darlington, 2012; Upchurch and Mathers, 2011).

Upchurch and Mathers argue that globalization can lead to the development of radical strategies on the part of unions, but they note that these strategies cannot be satisfactorily understood through the concept of social movement unionism, which overlooks political identity and the relationship between the union and the state. They propose the concept of radical political unionism, which they believe allows the identification of oppositional union practices while keeping in mind both their social and political determinants and the role of agency and leadership. Furthermore, they argue that the development of this type of unionism is shaped by the relationship between the union leadership and the institutional context, concluding that "the conditions for the development of radical alternatives exist where there is little institutional support for trade unions . . . or where the institutional infrastructure is decomposing or withdrawn" (Upchurch and Mathers, 2011: 277).

Similarly, Connolly and Darlington (2012) indicate that it is necessary to differentiate between external, objective factors (the economic and political context, union density, occupational identity, and the strategic position of the sector) and internal, subjective factors (the role of the national leaders, the role of the activists and representatives in the workplace, and the existence of a leftist political culture). Thus, they seek to recognize the existence of a structure that simultaneously conditions and facilitates. In other words, the national, regional, or local context may constrain union action but also produce political opportunities. In any case, the predominant element is the political leadership, which reads the situation and employs the objective conditions to promote a sense of collective identity among the workers and create a sense of injustice that motivates them to organize and mobilize.[2]

While the characterization of radical political unionism has achieved relevance in the English-language literature, the debates found there do not explicitly conceptualize the singularity of this type of union strategy. Instead they have revolved around describing its methods of struggle and highlighting its differences from other variants, especially social movement unionism. The problematization of the political in this type of union strategy is limited to emphasizing the presence of leftist organizations and leaders.

In attempting to advance a more precise conceptualization as a point of departure, it is necessary to point out that the term "radical" is presented not as a synonym for "anticapitalist" but as the opposite of either a conservative or a liberal perspective. This union strategy is distinguished by its creating a political opposition that is constructed from a class perspective and concentrating its practices and discourses on the struggle that is inherent in the relations of production. Consequently, union demands, for example, are linked with salary

or working conditions demands developed in the framework of questioning not only the employer but also the state and the union bureaucracy, with the result that immediate economic objectives are combined with a broader political one. Thus radical political unionism is "political" in that it reintroduces the debate regarding the role of the state and employers in workers' struggles and "radical" in that it does so in relation to leftist political strategies. The novelty of this definition is that it identifies this type of unionism not only in terms of its practices with regard to decision making and actions but also in terms of the strategic orientation of its actions.

Critiques of this perspective are oriented toward questioning the emergence of radical political unionism as an established strategy. McIlroy (2012) maintains that there is no empirical evidence for arguing that radical political unionism is a leftist alternative to the social democratic union model. He says that instances of it are few, scattered, and incoherent. In contrast, Denis (2012) considers the use of the term "political" highly normative and proposes the alternative term "militant" to characterize union strategies marked by a high level of mobilization and confrontation. At the same time, he points to the limits of this type of unionism, arguing that it will be met with reluctance by workers who take more moderate positions and that it requires a high level of militancy and politicization that runs counter to the general tendency toward depoliticization of contemporary capitalism.

Taking these critiques into account, we suggest that an analysis of radical political unionism has the virtue of situating it anew. This focus brings new elements to studies of revitalization that often place more emphasis on the increase in union power than on the direction of union actions. An element that tends to be absent in these debates is an analysis of the singularity of the political in union activity. While the focus is on the centrality of the leaders, the relationship between them and political parties, and the existence of a leftist political culture, empirical studies do not examine the characteristics of these relationships. In other words, there is no detailed investigation of the way in which the political dimension structures union strategy.

POLITICS IN UNION ACTION: REVISITING THE CLASSICAL STUDIES

The available empirical studies of radical political unionism tend to limit their analysis of union dynamism to a focus on contextual variables rather than examining the way class contradictions are crystallized in the workplace and/or in the process of struggle.[3] Richard Hyman's *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (1978 [1973]) analyzes the concepts developed by socialist theorists in relation to the political potential of union activity. On the one hand, he organizes the arguments in terms of the opposition between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" assessments. The first group considers unionism a fundamental means of organizing the working class for a direct assault on capitalist society; the initial writings of Marx and Engels fall into this category. The second group maintains that the rise of unionism will not lead to the overthrow of capitalism; Lenin, Michels, and Trotsky are in this group, which concentrates on aspects of

unionism that appear to inhibit any challenge to capitalism such as corporatism, bureaucratization, and assimilation. Hyman argues that there is a gap between the actions and the consciousness of organized workers that is reflected in the absence of any general questioning of the conditions of production in a capitalist society. Nevertheless, citing Gramsci (1919), he maintains that the organization of grassroots workers tends to constrain the autocracy of the leaders, calling into question the thesis of integration and bureaucratization. The political and the disruptive, for Hyman, are present in the workplace not because of the characteristics of capitalist production but because of the dynamism that union representation assumes there.

Perry Anderson (1973 [1968]), in "The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action," develops a theoretical review of the relationship between unionism and politics. In principle, he notes, in Lenin's theory and those of Marx and Gramsci unions by themselves cannot lead to socialism. He highlights his first disagreement with the division established by Hyman: the weakness of unions is structural, residing in their corporative character, but this does not mean that they lack strengths necessary for working-class identity such as the defense and betterment of workers' quality of life. For Anderson, while unions create working-class consciousness (identity as a social force), a political party produces socialist consciousness (a hegemonic determination to create a new social order). Unionism is therefore paradoxical, since it is a component of capitalism that in essence is antagonistic to it. In Anderson's analysis, the political does not appear in the singularity of its representation in the workplace but is located in the relationship between the union and political parties. In other words, in his analysis differences appear not in the various levels of union organization but in the types of working-class organizations.

The arguments of Sheila Cohen (2011) are relevant to these reflections in that they explore the concept of leftist agency by investigating the way in which workers' actions are politicized in the workplace and, concretely, the way in which grassroots organizations are linked with the politics of leftist parties. She questions the militancy of leftist activists in the workplace during the 1970s and 1980s by arguing that the resistance to neoliberal policies was weakened by the leftist militants who presented an agenda with "outside-work" slogans. She points to the following paradox (2011: 384): "While classical Marxism and Leninism are in no doubt that the working class is at the centre of the socialist project in both structural and 'agency' terms, most organisations laying claim to this revolutionary tradition seem curiously reluctant to centre their activities where the working class can still, despite the ravages of neoliberalism, be found—the workplace." Thus Cohen focuses, as does Hyman, on the importance of the production process and goes on to ask what politicizing workplace demands means. Along these lines, she investigates two meanings of the term "political." The first, which she rejects, is the "Political" as introducing themes that are strictly political such as war or racism into the workplace. The second, which she defends, is "the political," the raising of consciousness regarding class contradictions. Thus, she explains that the praxis of leftist activists should be to modify the demands that have a more "revolutionary" tinge in order to make their politics a "practical politics." She concludes that leftist parties have a fundamental role to play in utilizing the ideas of Marxism and Leninism to

construct a movement "from below" and influence the direction of class victories at the same time as developing the struggle for the material conditions of reproduction of the labor force. Thus she recognizes the singularity of the workplace as the area of production and representation and at the same time emphasizes both the presence of leaders and political parties and the characteristics of their militancy.

In summary, these discussions allow one to reflect on the way in which the economic and the political are expressed in the framework of union strategy. While these contemporary debates are problematic with regard to the revolutionary prospects of union activities, they do consider it important to investigate the possibilities that are opened up by the collective organization of workers to transcend purely economic demands. Along these lines Hyman gives us concepts for understanding the importance of the grassroots organization of workers, Anderson highlights the importance of the party and the capacity to create collective identities within a union space, and Cohen points to the centrality of the workplace and the importance of rethinking not only the existence of leaders but also the characteristics of political praxis.

THE CONFLICT AT THE LEAR AUTOMOTIVE PARTS FACTORY: RADICAL POLITICAL TRADE UNIONISM IN ARGENTINA?

The automotive parts factory Lear S.A. is located at kilometer 31 of the Pan-American Highway in the northern area of metropolitan Buenos Aires. Established in 1995, it produces auto wiring, and its principal client is the Ford Motor Company. It had once employed more than 1,000 workers but at the time of the conflict, after a period of "voluntary retirements," its workforce had shrunk to approximately 600. Lear belongs to one of the most significant segments, the automotive parts industry, that, along with the automotive terminals, the concessionaires, and the raw-materials subsector, constitute the production chain of the sector. According to official figures, the automotive terminals employ 29,000 workers throughout the country. The automotive parts sector, composed of a network of 400 firms, employs more than 65,000. The Sindicato de Mecánicos y Afines del Transporte Automotor (Mechanical and Allied Workers' Automotive Transport Union—SMATA) and the Unión Obrera Metalúrgica (Metal Workers' Union—UOM) are the predominant union representatives, with the SMATA being the union that represents the Lear workers.

The northern zone of metropolitan Buenos Aires is one of the most important industrial areas in Argentina. Numerous factories are concentrated there, principally along the Pan-American Highway, which links the cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario. The development of this area began early, but its industrialization intensified during the 1950s and 1960s, when, as a result of government policies, food, metallurgy, textile, printing, and chemical factories were relocated there from the western area of metropolitan Buenos Aires and its suburbs (Schneider, 2007). The asymmetry of the suburbs of Buenos Aires increased during the last military dictatorship. Thus, while the southern and western areas "were characterized by deindustrialization, the northern area of Buenos

Aires was consolidated as the nation's most important industrial center" (Varela, 2015: xxiv).

The concentration of industrial establishments in the area is linked to a second element: the existence of working-class traditions.[4] In this context the revitalization that reflected union dynamism after 2004 acquired a particular symbolism in the factories of the region. Elbert (2015) has argued that the rank-and-file organization is a necessary condition for the development of union strategies aimed at revitalization. Studying three factories in the northern area of metropolitan Buenos Aires, he found that where unions were organized in the workplace their struggles included the community. Comparison of these cases suggests that the existence of internal "combat" committees with leftist leaders and activists encouraged instances of solidarity between formal and informal workers, a model resembling social movement unionism, one strategy for union revitalization.

The revitalization of the internal committees vindicated the methods of democratic organization and direct-action union conflicts that began early in some of the area's food industries and eventually spread to other sectors (metallurgy, printing, automotive, and auto parts). In 2009 the extensive conflicts in the Kraft factory became a benchmark for industrial unionism (Cambiasso, 2015; Campos and Lira, 2011; Varela, 2015). In 2014 conflicts led by the revitalized internal committees and associated with leftist organizations began to follow one another in the various factories of the region, this time promoted principally by laid-off delegates and activists in a context of suspensions and conflicts provoked by a crisis situation (CTA, 2015). In May some workers occupied the automotive parts factory Gestamp, paralyzing the production of automobiles at Ford, Volkswagen, and Peugeot. In August the Donnelley printing plant closed its doors and more than 400 laid-off workers initiated self-management. Conflicts also paralyzed other factories such as the WordColor printing plant and the Kromberg and Schubert automotive parts factory (CTA, 2015). The conflict in the Lear automotive parts factory was part of this increased regional dynamism, but it was distinctive in that it had no established tradition of struggle; the majority of workers were young, given that the factory had been established only in the 1990s.

A second factor that allows us to understand the struggle at Lear is the dynamics of the conflict in the automotive sector. Between 2006 and 2014, 173 labor conflicts were identified in the sector, primarily utilizing roadblocks, blockades, and occupations (Figure 1). The majority took place in automotive parts factories (100) and automotive terminals (37). The unions that led the majority of these labor struggles were the UOM (76) and the SMATA (50), but collective actions were also mobilized or organized by the workers themselves through their internal committees (36). Among these, conflicts that involved opposition to the union leadership stand out, with the workers associated with the SMATA participating in the most confrontations (25). Studying the pattern of conflicts per year, we note an ascending tendency between 2006 and 2009, a sharp decline in 2010, and some stability until 2014, when conflicts flared up again. The intensification of collective action in 2009 is explained by the impact of the economic crisis on the sector (D'Urso, 2013), and in 2014 the roadblocks and demonstrations associated with the conflict at Lear influenced the range of
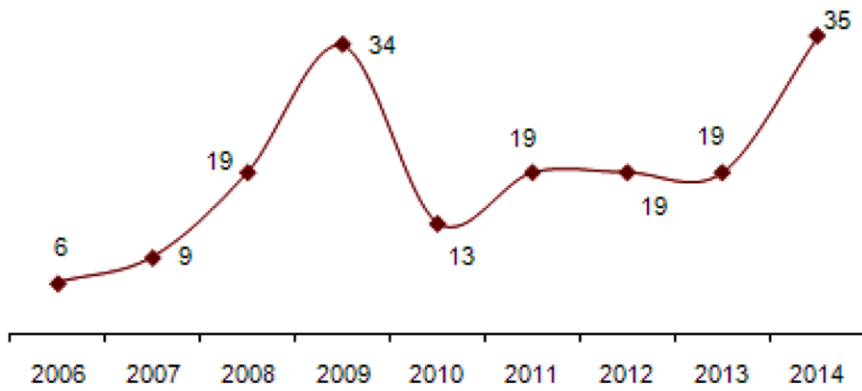
Figure 1. Distribution of labor conflicts in the automotive sector by year, 2006–2014 (MTESS, 2015).

TABLE 1
Labor Conflicts in the Automotive Sector by Type of Demand, 2006–2014

Type of Demand	Number of Conflicts
Wages	
Better general wages	28
Better specific wages	5
Back payments	31
Bargaining or parity (salary)	8
Total	72
Other than wages	
Layoffs or contract renewal	93
Discriminatory treatment or fines	5
Institutional (representation, collective bargaining, nonwage parity)	3
Total	101

Source: MTESS (2015).

collective actions that characterized the struggles of that year. Among the demands that led to these actions, those that involved something other than wages, especially layoffs, were predominant (Table 1). The prevalence of this type of demand in the sector was a marked difference from the dynamics of labor struggles on the national level, where wage demands were the majority.[5]

A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF CONFLICTS AT LEAR

The conflict at Lear was part of the dynamics of the struggles in the automotive industry both in its demands and in its development at the workplace level, and it took place in an automotive factory as did the majority of the sector's workers' struggles. Nevertheless, it differed substantially in its political component. In outlining its beginnings we must return to 2007, when for the first time an independent committee was elected in internal elections. In the

subsequent elections, independent workers and others associated with leftist political parties won positions on the internal committee. In the 2011 elections the Light Blue ticket won, replacing all the members of the committee who belonged to the Green ticket, which controls the SMATA at the national level.

Although there had been a number of conflicts in the factory since 2007, the conflict that erupted in 2014 was the first one defined as a political conflict by the leftist political parties and the internal committee as well as by the company, the unions, and the government. While all the actors recognized its political nature, they highlighted different elements. The leftist political parties pointed to union persecution of opposition activists and delegates (*La Verdad Obrera*, July 3, 2014). The union and the company stressed the conflict's political character in an effort to delegitimize the internal committee, highlighting that those who carried out the conflict were "pseudo-representatives" of the workers allied with leftist political parties. Finally, the national government identified the political with the minority, noting the existence of party interests and therefore refusing to recognize it as a "collective conflict" (*Telam*, October 24, 2014). In our analysis we will attempt to approach the political from a different perspective. As our point of departure we consider all open conflict as involving opposing interests. Therefore, we focus on the ways in which the relationship between unionism and the political was expressed, giving particular attention to the workplace as the space where the class contradictions of the social relations of production materialized.

Although we find antecedents to the conflict that paralyzed the factory during much of 2014, the level of confrontation accelerated after the company's decision to lay off more than 100 workers, suspend another 100 without pay, and bar the internal committee members from the factory. The first stage of the conflict began in May when the company, citing a decline in production, suspended 330 workers indefinitely. It intensified at the end of July when the company sent layoff telegrams to 121 of the suspended workers. These layoffs were considered illegal because the Labor Ministry had not approved the company's crisis prevention procedure. From that point on the conflict was continuous, with numerous actions by the workers, the company, the union, and the state over a period of six months. During this first stage the factory was completely shut down for about 18 days and there was a dramatic decline in production. The company reinstated 61 workers and offered "voluntary retirement" to the rest of those laid off, but by the end of August approximately 60 laid-off workers were still on strike, with the number decreasing to 40 by the end of September and 30 by the end of November. The major turning point occurred in December, when the Fifth National Court of Appeals ordered the company to reinstate the 28 workers who remained on strike (*La Izquierda*, December 17, 2014). At that point it appeared as if a resolution had been found (*Boletin de Lucha*, no. 58), but the workers never effectively rejoined the workforce. The company gave early vacations to all of the workers at the end of December (*La Nación*, December 23, 2014), and on January 19, when 16 reinstated workers returned to the plant and attempted to resume work, they were refused entry and subsequently suspended again. After this measure the conflict was renewed, and this initiated its second stage. In January the company submitted a new crime prevention procedure, which was approved by the Ministry of Labor at the end of February,
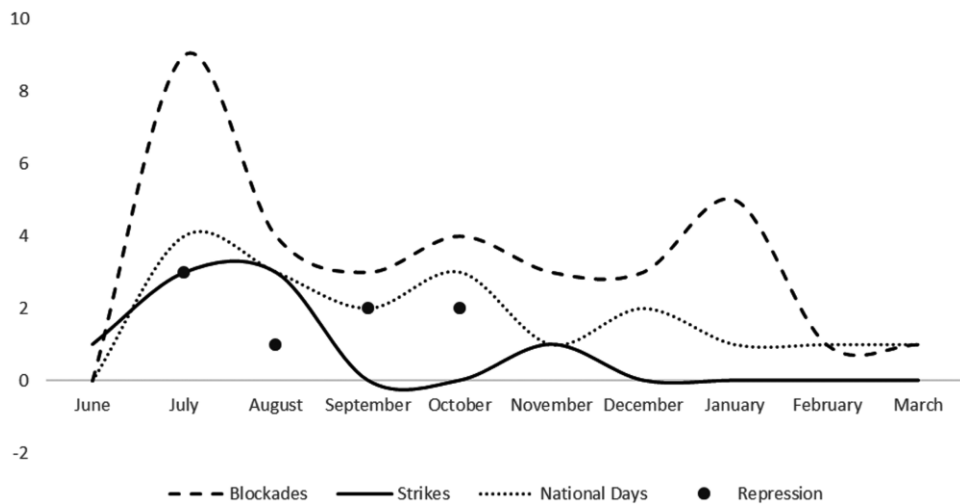
Figure 2. Workers' actions, June 2014–March 2015 (MTESS, 2015).

thus legitimating the layoff of the reinstated workers. In this second stage the workers' actions were spread out over time and did not receive the active support of the plant's workers, instead being based principally on legal proceedings (Figure 2).

THE SINGULARITY OF RADICAL POLITICAL UNIONISM
IN ARGENTINA

The conflict at Lear represented both elements of grassroots unionism and, in the variety and orientation of its actions, some elements associated with radical political unionism, as follows:

1. *Decision-making procedures and direct action.* Similar to grassroots unionism, radical political unionism is characterized, in the first place, by its methods of decision making and direct action. These elements were present at Lear before the conflict and were recreated after it, since assemblies could not be developed in the workplace. There was no union representation during the conflict, and since the factory's production was virtually paralyzed the strike lost its effectiveness. During the first stage the workers set up encampments at the factory gates in which they voted on a struggle plan that combined highway closures, blockades of the gates, and a motorcade on the Pan-American Highway[6] and work stoppages within the factory. These measures were accompanied by solidarity actions that coalesced in what became known as the National Days of Struggle, led by the Lear workers and joined by other factory workers, students, activists, and militants from various leftist groups and political parties. Although the actions occurred over a six-month period, the peak of the struggle took place in July and August. As the conflict developed, these actions become more widely spaced in time as the company slowly resumed

production. In the second stage of the conflict workers' actions declined markedly. In both stages of the conflict the direct actions of the workers were accompanied by various judicial measures, raised in both the labor and the criminal courts.

2.   *Alliance structure and visibility.* The construction of coalitions and alliances with other social organizations is a central element in the theory of social movement unionism. The literature on radical political unionism stresses that, although this is important, the workplace is central for the development of an oppositional political strategy. In the case we are analyzing, while the workplace was central the participation of other political and social organizations was fundamental for the achievement of visibility. In the workers' "struggle bulletins,"[7] as much space was devoted to demonstrating support for the struggle as to highlighting the workers' actions. The broad support for the workers' struggle included human rights organizations, combative internal committees, union centrals (both oppositional and official), and members of Congress of various political parties as well as actors, musicians, neighbors, and academics.

3.   *Politicization of demands.* The third characteristic of radical political unionism is the linkage of the most immediate economic demands with political demands that transcend the sphere of production. Seeking only to differentiate strictly economic demands from political ones can lead to simplifications. In the Lear case there was increasing politicization of demands emerging from the sphere of production itself with the intensification of the confrontation with the union leadership, the company, and the state and the intervention of the leftist leadership, signifying the transformation of a conflict that had begun with layoffs into a class conflict: "A great class conflict is coming that can only grow and harden" (Lear's delegate, quoted in *La Verdad Obrera*, July 3, 2014). The political did not come from "outside" but was constructed and intensified in the process of organization and struggle itself.

4.   *The identification of adversaries.* The political character of the conflict is observed not only in the demands but also in the identification of the adversaries. The tensions with the union leadership had been made explicit before the 2014 conflicts, but they changed thereafter. Not only its "bureaucratic" methods but its position with regard to the workers were challenged. There was a change in the practices of the SMATA leaders who participated daily in the conflict and explicitly opposed the delegates, refusing to recognize them, having them directly attacked by gangs, or rejecting their demands (*Ámbito Financiero*, August 12, 2014). In this context, there was questioning of both the company and the union, denouncing not only their collusion but also their coordinated action (*Comunicado de la Comisión Interna*, July 16, 2014):

> The management of the Lear Corporation . . . began a campaign of intimidation in the factory when they obliged workers to sign a petition "asking" for the recall of their representatives, . . . threatening anyone who did not sign it with immediate dismissal. This is an action that violates the most elemental union rights. . . . This fraudulent activity is taking place with the approval of the SMATA leadership, which did nothing against the layoffs and suspensions of its own members and is now acting as a virtual human resources manager for this North American company.

Besides the union and the company bureaucracy, the workers identified a third adversary: the state. In the first place, after the layoffs the immediate surroundings of the factory plant were militarized and the workers' actions, especially the blockade of the Pan-American Highway, were repressed on numerous occasions by the national gendarmerie, along with the federal and the Buenos Aires police. The workers identified the state as an adversary in denouncing this repression. Further, the state acted through a policy articulated by the Labor Ministry, and here the workers' position was more ambivalent, criticism being directed at first at the slow pace of its action and later at the absence of such action. While during the first days of the conflict the laid-off workers and the internal committee demanded governmental regulation, later they denounced what they called the government's "double action" (*Comunicado del Comisión Interno*, October 14, 2014):

> The workers in struggle and the organizations that support us have met several times with the government. . . . The national government informed us that it had met with the directors of the company to find a solution but that this vulture of an automotive parts factory rejected one. We denounce the government for itself providing Lear with a large number of gendarmerie and police units, allowing it to employ illegal measures such as massive layoffs without a declaration of crisis prevention and later a lockout, and allowing to this day the import of cables from foreign suppliers.

Despite the politicization of adversaries, it is difficult in this case to see the questioning of the management, the state, and the union as the result of leftist ideological opposition to the company and the state. Although before the conflict there was opposition to the union leadership and the management, these definitions were radicalized by the dynamics of the struggle.

5.   *Linkages with political organizations.* As we have noted, the demands and adversaries were politicized both because of the dynamics of the confrontations and because of the leadership of leftist political parties, which were entrusted with transmitting a political culture, generating a shared identity among the workers, and transforming demands linked to the production process into political demands. The link between political parties, activists, and workers in the Lear case was specific to that situation. The organization of the factory in 2007 had been undertaken by militants of the Socialist Workers' Party, independent activists, and workers who became activists during the conflict. The political identity of the workers in conflict was constructed by invoking the condition of the Lear workers, which emerged from the link between independent activists and leftist party militants.

A final point specific to this case—transcending the categorization of radical political unionism—was the role played by institutions. The English-language literature holds that the emergence of strategies associated with radical political unionism is subject to the institutional context—that the absence or weakness of labor institutions has given rise to this type of unionism as a strategy for confronting the crisis (Upchurch and Mathers, 2011). The Lear experience emerged, however, in an institutional context in which the Labor Ministry played a fundamental role in producing instances of social dialogue and mediation in labor

conflicts and in the context of a revitalization of union organizations. The question, then, is why workers in some factories would support a strategy of opposition such as radical political unionism. In answering this question, we must avoid some of the contradictions presented by this scenario, which influence the configuration of union strategies and the ability of the state to regulate the capital-labor relationship. Increasingly since the 1990s, collective bargaining has not been accompanied by substantial change in the issues under negotiation, which have included the continuity of the variable mechanisms of the salary scale, the mobility of workers between jobs, flexible hours, fixed-term contracts, and subcontracting (Marticorena, 2014). These regressive elements have been questioned by workers through struggles that principally took place in the workplace and whose demands were principally tied to the precariousness of working conditions and the weakness of union representation (Longo, 2012). The fissures in the prevailing system of labor relations generated possibilities for union experiences of opposition that in some cases, such as the one studied here, acquired the characteristics of radical political unionism. This also explains the combination of direct action with measures that took advantage of a series of institutional instances (in which judicial measures became relevant) to mobilize for their demands.

In conclusion, while the elements of radical political unionism are present in the Lear case, it also had its own dynamics. The five aspects just highlighted permit us to understand the similarities of the Lear case to radical political unionism but also to see its distinctive features. Furthermore, the conceptualization proposed complicates general definitions with those that have been addressed by the oppositional union experience in the Argentine case, for example, grassroots unionism. Identifying types of unionism without taking into account their orientation can cause confusion in union studies. In the case analyzed here, while direct action played a central role, it was combined with institutional measures to resolve labor conflicts. The concept of radical political unionism, with adaptations to the political and social reality of our nation, permits us to introduce elements for analyzing the present tensions within the union structure as a whole.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In this article we have examined the case of the conflict at the Lear factory not only as an expression of radical political unionism in Argentina but also as an opportunity to reopen the debates on unionism and politics. The English-language literature focuses principally on analyzing the methods of struggle and the role played by the leftist leaders and political parties, but the distinctiveness of radical political unionism is not simply its higher level of mobilization and confrontation but its strategic orientation and the meaning that these practices and discourses acquire in the struggle. In our in-depth study of this case, we have identified five variables for an understanding of labor conflicts and analyzed the union strategies that orient them. The singularities of radical political unionism proved to be the democratic elements of its decision-making process and the appeal to direct action, its construction of alliances with other social organizations, its linkage of economic demands with broader political

objectives, its identification of the management, the state, and the union bureau-cracy as adversaries, and the transmission of a leftist political culture.

All union strategies have political components that, in the final analysis, express the struggle between capital and labor. The political goes beyond actions and decision making and immediate demands. Conflicts that appear to be linked to economic questions have a political component that takes on radical significance as the struggle intensifies. As Cohen (2011) has pointed out, the political does not come from outside but emerges from the contradictions inherent in the productive sphere as leaders infuse these contradictions with meaning based on class terms and the dynamics of the struggle.

The principal limit to the possibilities of this type of unionism demonstrated by this case, as Denis (2012) has suggested, is that it requires a high level of involvement on the part of the workers. This involvement is related to a heightened level of mobilization and confrontation with management, the state, and the union. That a conflict with such a high level of confrontation could last for six months is attributable to its questioning of the legitimacy of the union strategies themselves. To understand the role of radical political unionism in Argentina it is necessary to consider the contradictions and tensions that emerged within unionism. The progress of radical political strategies revealed fissures in traditional union structures that were presented as hegemonic. The five variables considered here are useful in deepening our understanding of other conflicts that have similar characteristics with regard to their political components and level of radicalization and, far from being isolated experiences, may express a tendency of Argentina's union model.

NOTES

1. For these writers, there is fourth strategy, continuity or social democracy (Taylor, Mathers, and Upchurch, 2012).

2. Here the authors point to the concept of injustice that John Kelly (1998) proposes as a central element for thinking about the possibility of collective organization and mobilization. This explanation has been strongly criticized for being subjective and individualistic and therefore incapable of explaining the mobilization of the workers (Atzeni, 2010; Cohen, 2011).

3. Upchurch and Mathers (2011) identify the singularity of the institutional contexts in South Africa, the United States, Western European countries, and some of the nations that went through the experience of communism. Connolly and Darlington (2012) provide a case study of the French Federation of United Democratic Trade Unions in Solidarity and the British National Union of Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers but do not examine the way in which politics is related to union practice in the workplace and in the process of struggle.

4. In the 1970s Cordoban classism arrived in the factories of the northern area (Werner and Aguirre, 2006), and many of the region's factories functioned as clandestine centers that disarticulated union opposition (Basualdo, 2006).

5. According to the Labor Ministry report on labor conflicts during the first semester of 2014 (MTESS, 2015), at the level of the branch of activity 75 percent of the conflicts originated around demands for salary increases and 43 percent around conflicts in the workplace.

6. These caravans consisted of partial blockades by private vehicles owned by workers and activists that slowed down as they drove in front of the factory or stopped on the highway. This new form of blockade began after the repression of the workers who attempted to block the Pan-American Highway.

7. Fifty-eight "struggle bulletins" were published during the conflict, reporting the principal methods used by the workers, the support they received in their struggle (testimonies, demands

and declarations, photos, and, in some cases, reports on visits to the workers' tent city), and media coverage of their actions.

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