Gonzalo Pérez Álvarez is a investigative of the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas and professor of Argentine and Latin American social history at the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia in Trelew, Argentina. Rachel Grace Newman is a Ph.D. candidate in International and global history at Columbia University.

Continuity and Rupture in the Labor and Piquetero Movements in Argentine Patagonia,

1990–2011

by Gonzalo Pérez Álvarez

Translated by Rachel Grace Newman

The piquetero (picketer) movement of unemployed workers developed in a region of Argentina whose socioeconomic structure was profoundly transformed in the 1990s by the changes brought about by neoliberalism. The development of the movement revealed both continuity and change with regard to organizational traditions among the region's working class, including organizational forms, methods of protest, and relationships among different groups of workers. In 2001 the working class's potential for protest produced a rupture in the formerly dominant bloc, but this potential had its limits: there was no capacity for formulating an alternative program. The employed working class did not take on the role that would have been necessary, and without its participation the tasks at hand were too great. In the context of economic recovery, the majority of the working class opted to improve their personal situations rather than question the fundamental elements of the social order. However, a new level of consciousness was expressed through the increasing importance of union opposition and the continuity of protest strategies with elements of strong social confrontation.

Keywords: Piqueteros, Working class, Patagonia, Unions, Consciousness

This article seeks to understand the transformations in the working class of northeastern Chubut, in Argentine Patagonia, in recent decades, focusing on the forms of organization that have developed, changes and continuities in the movement's levels of consciousnessness (Gramsci, 1997), and the limits and possibilities of its social practices. It considers the piquetero (picketer) movement from the perspective of the working class itself rather than as an expression separate from that class. This organization of unemployed workers began in 1990, but it was in 1997, with the organization of roadblocks in Chubut's three major cities, that permanent groups began to emerge.

These groups, already institutionalized to a certain extent, generated a lasting relationship of tension, confrontation, and negotiation with different levels of the state apparatus, and this relationship was fundamental to the rebellion's[1] growth in 2001–2002. This was a moment when various protest strategies, especially roadblocks, were developed to demand employment plans and/or subsidies for workers' families; these activities were part of broader changes in the traditional context of street protests in Argentina. In this way, a new subject emerged that was different from traditional union organizations although with some continuities steeped in the traditions and prior experiences of the Argentine working class.

With the change in Chubut's government in 2003, when the Partido Justicialista (Justicialist Party—PJ)[2] took power after 12 years of Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civic Union—UCR)[3] rule, the state's efforts at co-optation of piqueteros assumed importance. By 2005 the process was marked by tension resulting from some groups' effort to maintain their independence, other groups' attempts to join the government, and the difficulties of maintaining the intensity of confrontation with the state in a period of economic recovery.

The idea here is to clarify this dynamic so as to call attention to the organizational capacity of these men and women whom many considered simply "excluded" (see Rosanvallón, 1995)[4]. The article opens a window onto this organization process and the

levels of consciousness that were developed, as well as piqueteros' intention or capacity to articulate an alternative to the hegemonic project. To do so, it is important to understand what the majority strategy[5] entailed, for that strategy was evident throughout the various conflicts in which these collectives engaged. It did not operate in isolation but rather reflected their relations with other mobilized sectors. For this reason, the article describes the continuities and ruptures in unemployed workers' practices and the struggles of those who were still employed or belonged to other groups.

Methods, Sources, and Theoretical Notes

The archives of the region's three newspapers—*Jornada, El Chubut,* and *El Diario de Madryn*—proved essential for this project, in addition to oral sources. Written sources controlled by dominant groups obscure central aspects of conflicts; it was possible, however, to access these central aspects, working with a history against the grain, in Walter Benjamin's terms, making visible what was hidden in more traditional documents. The regional oral histories created for this project incorporate research by Pozzi (1998; 2008), Pozzi and Schneider (1994), and Gatica (2000; 2007).

The article takes up Antonio Gramsci's (1997) proposal of a "molecular" approach to analysis and adopts his emphasis on the development of different levels of collective political consciousness. The term "molecular" refers to the smallest unit of lived experience, taken from daily life. The goal is to place oneself as close as possible to the experience of subjects who make, live, and endure history. Gramsci maintains that the relationships of political forces create different social groups in accordance with the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organization that they have reached through struggle; this claim is especially relevant to the project at hand. He describes the levels of collective political consciousness as

follows: awareness of common interests of the group or economic sector to which one belongs, consciousness of solidarity of interests in the whole social group but still in economic terms, and political consciousness (1997: 57).

My understanding is that specific processes should be understood as expressions of the general, which is at the same time dialectically constituted of multiple particularities (Marx, 1997). This article seeks to comprehend the dynamic of events in this region in the general context of social processes. This does not mean that the particular simply "reflects" the general: it is, dialectically, a constituent part of that whole. This is visible in the dynamics of cycles of social conflict: at various points in Argentine history these struggles began not in the country's central regions but in formally "peripheral" spaces. Social conflict in Argentina cannot be understood without knowing what has occurred in small towns like Cutral Có, Plaza Huincul, Tartagal, or Ushuaia and analyzing them in the framework of the general process.

A Brief History

The province of Chubut includes the central part of Argentine Patagonia. The region studied here, the northeastern part of the province, consists of two departments or administrative divisions, Rawson and Biedma. The cities of Rawson and Trelew are located in Rawson and the city of Puerto Madryn and the Valdés Peninsula in Biedma. This area is one of the "development poles" [6] that were part of the nation-state's project in Patagonia from the 1960s to the 1980s.

To understand the basis of the national government's idea of creating industrial poles outside traditional cities, we must recognize the intention of the government (which

was for most of these years a dictatorship in the hands of the armed forces) to divide and thus weaken the labor movement. In this context, local union leadership tended to collaborate with the government and management, framing its collaboration in terms of the common discourse of a need to strengthen development in Patagonia (see Pérez Álvarez, 2010; Gatica, 2000). Beginning in 1960, the state made important contributions to industrialization in northeastern Chubut with investments and state credits for private companies. In 1971, the Trelew Industrial Park was created. From 1970 to 1985, the region experienced rapid growth (its population quadrupled), but population density remained relatively low. Returning to the question of linking the local and the general, this demographic characteristic must be kept in mind so as not to overestimate the scope of these regionally rooted processes; at the same time, the transformation during these years should not be overlooked. The population data make both points clear (Table 1). TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Spurred by state subsidies, the region became an important industrial center (although limited to textile and aluminum production), with good levels of productivity and a high rate of migration to the area. Many of the migrants came from the rural interior of the province and were descendents of indigenous groups who had abandoned their lands because of advancing latifundia and increasing family size prevented individuals from living on the small plots they had been allowed to retain (Troncoso, 2011).

Migrants from northern Argentina and from neighboring countries (especially Chile and Bolivia [see Gatica, 2010; Hughes and Owen, 2001]) also arrived in the region, drawn by the availability of well-paid work. The majority of these migrants took jobs in recently opened factories, and those who had some type of specialization took on high-level positions in private companies and the state apparatus. Also in 1971 the dictatorial

government headed by General Alejandro Lanusse awarded the company ALUAR (Aluminio Argentino S.A.) the right to set up a primary aluminum production company in Puerto Madryn. For as long as the textile industrial park in Trelew enjoyed the advantages of state industrial promotion, it created thousands of well-paid jobs. In the ALUAR plant, salaries were higher than the national average for the metalworking sector, and job stability seemed assured.[6]

Problems began to arise in the 1980s. As groups connected to neoliberal projects gained strength, there was increasing questioning of state industrial promotion (Pucciarelli, 2006). The first drop in industrial production came in 1985, and beginning in 1986–1987 the government stopped granting industrial promotion benefits to new business ventures in the region (Ibarra, 1997). Factory closings and temporary work suspensions became everyday occurrences, and the decline of the region's industry accelerated when in 1991 Asian textiles were allowed to enter the market. The workforce in the Trelew Industrial Park, which had grown from 4,200 workers in 1974 to some 5,500 in 1985 (6,500, counting temporary workers), now suffered a marked decline, reaching some 1,200 in 2002 (data from the Subsecretaría de Trabajo de Chubut). In 2003 the former development pole was one of the poorest urban areas in Patagonia. In the Rawson-Trelew area 51.8 percent of the population and 41.8 percent of households were below the poverty line (INDEC, 2003).

These workers, who in recent decades had grown accustomed to stable jobs and the possibility of slowly improving their living conditions, now faced a new social and personal reality.[7] The unions could not address, much less resolve, this problem. In particular, workers in the private sector continued to develop limited legal solutions without joining together with other groups of workers. While the state unions had a greater capacity to defend jobs, they were unable to consolidate a united front to address the changes they

were experiencing. From this position of weakness, people began to make various attempts to overcome the situation. At first, and in light of the silence from traditional organizations, there were individual responses: unemployment was experienced as one's own fault, and the only way to deal with the situation seemed to be to compete with other lower-class people. Slowly, collective processes emerged, and unemployment began to be seen as a social reality that could be confronted only by people coming together. Various groups formed and took up the traditions of protest and organization of the working class.[8]

The Emergence of Unemployed Workers' Groups, 1990–1996

In March 1990 an organization of unemployed workers held a protest against an increase in electricity rates. It was attacked by PJ supporters and several weeks later disbanded. Beginning in 1991 attacks by company owners on combative union representatives from the industrial park intensified, and the owners were joined by the majority of the union leadership. The most notorious example involved representatives from the textile factory Modecraft,[9] where the workers' organization was the most advanced in the regional labor movement (Pozzi and Schneider, 1994; Pérez Álvarez, 2009). This defeat of workers who were resisting the dismantling of the industrial park had an impact on later events in 1991 and 1992.[10] The workers had lost ground and were unable to generate a public response. They seemed isolated and divided; they did not inspire support for their demands from other groups and could not bring together the various groups of workers going through similar experiences.

By 1993, however, a rebellion was gradually getting under way. There were roadblocks organized by textile and fishing industry workers, but these roadblocks were simply a way to make their demands visible—a means to an end—rather than a form of

protest in and of itself as it would become later on. After a national march on the Plaza de Mayo on April 6, 1994, the government admitted that unemployment was a serious problem. Days later, in Trelew, unemployed workers met with government officials and union leaders. One group of jobless workers maintained that the officials should be kept out of the meeting because they were the political force behind the model that was harming the workers. In December 1994 the unemployed workers in the Programa Coparticipativo de Empleo (Coparticipative Employment Program)[11] mobilized in Trelew in an effort to keep the program in operation. They set up a camp on the city's central plaza and eventually achieved the passage of a new plan, including increased payments to unemployed workers according to the number of children they supported.

In April 1995 management practices intended to break up the worker organizations surfaced. The Windsor textile factory agreed to rehire 19 workers, but in exchange it demanded the resignation of two representatives of the Asociación Obrera Textil (Textile Workers' Association—AOT). An assembly supported the firing, making clear the effect of unemployment on workplace resistance. A number of more permanent, better-organized groups formed in 1996. In Madryn, the Comisión de Desocupados (Unemployed Workers' Committee) demonstrated on the city's central plaza, demanding jobs, food, natural gas, and subsidies. Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul entered the cycle of rebellion with roadblocks that marked the beginning of a new phase (Klachko, 2006).[12]

Roadblocks Open New Paths, 1997–2000

In 1997 unemployed workers from the three largest cities in Chubut organized roadblocks. This represented a change in the area's dynamic: for the first time, groups of unemployed workers blocked roads in order to take a position and defend it even though they

faced the threat of repression. Preventing the flow of goods was employed as a way of guaranteeing the demand for labor. This tool for struggle emerged in the context of the power that this movement was accumulating at the national level.

In Trelew a group called the Red de Vecinos Solidarios (Network of Neighbors in Solidarity) brought people together for an event on June 7. Here, workers adopted contrasting positions: some supported making their demands through institutional channels, while others insisted on taking the protest to the streets.[13] The latter left the event and blocked Highway 3.[14] No organization led the struggle (each participant negotiated with officials individually), but former textile and fishing industry representatives played important roles. The experience of these workers facilitated the organization of various unemployed groups. Among the piqueteros were the future leaders of the Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Desocupados (Independent Movement of Retired and Unemployed Workers—MIJD),[15] Evita,[16] Peñi Namún,[17] and the Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados "Aníbal Verón" (Aníbal Verón Coordinating Group of Unemployed Workers—CTD).[18] Also in June, a new Comisión de Desocupados y Subocupados (Unemployed and Underemployed Workers' Committee) was formed in Puerto Madryn. On August 15 this group blocked Highway 3, and this time there was leadership from outside the context of the event itself.

Throughout 1998, unemployed workers' groups continued to form in these cities. Many did not last longer than a month or two; when groups faced repression for the first time or found themselves in negotiations with the state, differences emerged among the workers, and divisions ultimately developed.[19] In spite of this, it is clear that these groups reproduced the traditions and experiences of the labor movement, to which many belonged and in which some, especially the leaders, had participated organically. The structure of these organizations had several consistent features. Groups had delegates representing a neighborhood, block, or project who met weekly to make operational decisions, and, at least

in the first stage of the process, the whole organization would meet in an assembly to determine fundamental strategies.

In 1998 and 1999, fishing industry workers organized pickets on roads and in ports protesting problems related to overfishing by foreign fleets. Autonomous, nonunion groups of workers began to lead actions that were not supported by the union leadership. Thus the new forms of struggle and organizational forms based on direct democracy were not limited to unemployed workers but extended to much of their class. In July 1999 a group of unemployed workers occupied Trelew's central plaza, bringing the city's unemployment problem into focus. The protest lasted until the end of the year, generating new adherents and an alliance with the middle sectors (students and some unions). In early 2000 the MIJD developed its organization in Trelew, marking a moment of change; this was the first of these groups to have national scope and stable leadership. Another group organized in Trelew was Nueva Comisión de Desocupados (New Unemployed Workers' Committee). The province's minister of the interior once described the committee's spokesperson as "the one who disguises himself as Robin Hood" (*Diario Jornada*, May 23, 2000); this so-called Robin Hood was one of the union delegates who had been fired from the Windsor textile factory in 1995.

A national strike on November 23–24, 2000, made it clear that worker mobilization had reached a new stage. On the first day, groups of unemployed workers (including the MIJD) alongside student groups (the Frente Universitario Independiente del Chubut [Chubut Independent University Student Front—FUICH][20] and the Corriente[21]) blocked Highway 3. By the following day the strike had made an impact across the country, and other subgroups within the labor movement—both employed and unemployed—had joined it. There were roadblocks, pickets outside companies, *ollas populares* (community kitchens), meetings, and mass marches in protest of the economic plan supported by Alianza,[22] a continuation of the

plan backed by Menem. This was the third national strike called in the less than 11 months of the new government.

At the Trelew event, the only speaker was the regional secretary general of the Confederación General del Trabajo (General Labor Confederation—CGT).[23] The other groups denounced their effective silencing and called for a roadblock in which participants would sing and chant. When the march began, several columns followed this suggestion. Besides the MIJD, the FUICH, and the Corriente, the Sindicato Trabajadores de Vialidad del Chubut (Road Transportation Workers Union—SITRAVICH [see Gatica, 2007], the Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado (Association of State Employees—ATE), and the Asociación de Personal del Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria (Personnel Association of the National Agricultural Technology Institute) also took part in the roadblock. This measure constituted a turning point in the process. From that moment on, these groups began to contest the movement's shift from the streets to more traditional union and political leadership. Participants in unemployed workers' movements had accumulated many years of experience in labor movement resistance. Emerging at a regional level, this social force developed throughout the country.

Crisis, Limits, and Possibilities, 2001–2002

The political climate in early 2001 presaged the events of the year's end. Mobilized workers blocked roads and highways, burned roofs, and challenged the state's repressive powers. Diverse protest movements united and assumed a strongly confrontational stance. Decision making by assembly and direct democracy were prominent in the region and indeed in nearly all of Argentina.

The events of December 2001 have been analyzed by a number of writers (see

Bonnet, 2002; Fradkin, 2002; Piva, 2006; Cominiello, 2007; Iñigo and Cotarelo, 2004 and 2005). Social conflict and institutional crisis began in December, when the national government decreed the so-called *corralito*, which prohibited withdrawals of personal savings and limited the availability of wages. The CGT called a national strike for December 13, and the following day supermarkets in Mendoza and Rosario were looted. These events continued throughout the week and extended across most of the country.

Crisis erupted on December 19 across Argentina, with massive looting and confrontations with repressive forces and in some cases among private citizens. The president, Fernando de la Rúa, made a final attempt to control the situation by declaring a state of siege, suspending constitutional guarantees and freedoms for 30 days. Thousands of people did not wait to hear the end of his speech and went out to protest against the state of siege, banging on pans and marching in the plazas of every city in Argentina. The most visible instance was that of Buenos Aires, where, after several hours of *caceroleos* (pot-banging protests) in neighborhoods, there was a massive march to the Plaza de Mayo. During the night, thousands of people occupied the country's central plaza demanding the ouster of the minister of the economy, Domingo Cavallo, and the president. In the Plaza de Mayo and the surrounding area, the street struggle lasted through the night into the next day. Finally, on December 20 de la Rúa resigned, and at 7:56 p.m. he left the Casa Rosada (the presidential residence) in a helicopter. This was a historic moment in the cycle of popular struggles in Argentina.

In Patagonia, this process was also accelerated: there was no looting, but there were constant protests. As in many cities, in Trelew on December 19 hundreds of people came together with pots and Argentine flags. On December 20 there were confrontations and attempts at looting, and the municipalities and several supermarkets distributed bags of food there and in Puerto Madryn. Repressive forces attacked here as well with tear gas and rubber

and lead bullets to defend the supermarkets from looting. Members of piquetero groups actively participated in these confrontations.

Constant mobilizations continued into early 2002. In March the majority of Trelew's piquetero groups blocked Highway 3 for six days. This roadblock occurred after weeks of mobilization and political dispute following the Eduardo Duhalde government's announcement of temporary employment plans under the Jefes y Jefas de Hogar (Household Heads) program. Participants included nationally prominent groups such as the MIJD, unorganized activists who were nonetheless influential (and who would later form the Agrupación "Víctor Choque" [Víctor Choque Group][24]), and groups known only locally such as Evita, Patria Libre, Menfa, Constitución, and Unión Popular.[25] There was also an importance contingent of students from the Centro de Humanidades de la Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia (Humanities Center of the National University of Patagonia), directed by the FUICH, and the Movimiento Independiente de Estudiantes de Ciencias Económicas (Independent Movement of Economics Students).[26] The picket received wide solidarity and was organized around an assembly as a common decision-making body. It took on national importance when a group of teachers opposing their union's leadership decided to join the roadblock at the beginning of the school year. This event was featured on the front pages of national newspapers, and at this point the provincial government decided to negotiate.

The complicated issue was the unemployed workers' refusal to work in government-imposed projects (especially in schools and public hospitals). They explained that they did not wish to become cheap labor for the state, a situation that could lead to confrontation with employed workers if their labor exerted wage-reducing pressures or if they served as a reserve force in labor conflicts. Instead they sought to articulate projects that responded to their own interests and constructive perspectives. Here we can see the seed of consciousness

as a group, for they had the whole collective's interests in mind and not their own particular interests. Eventually they received a response to their complaints, and teachers, state workers, unemployed workers, and students began to organize together.

On April 18, 2002, more than 2,000 people came together in the city of Rawson and took over the legislature building after overcoming the police line surrounding it. At this moment of confrontation with the police, some unions withdrew from the mobilization and denounced the unemployed workers as responsible for this turn of events. The protest then continued toward the government offices, where the police suppressed it. This marked a division among the most radical groups and those that sought a negotiated solution with the government.

At this point the piquetero groups became a social alternative that would represent the most combative sectors of the working class. Coordinating different groups was key in accomplishing this. The government's action served to rupture this unity by granting privileges in exchange for not participating in the mobilization. In June four of the groups blocked Highway 3 and the Unión Obrera de la Construcción de la República Argentina (Construction Workers' Union of the Argentine Republic) set up another roadblock a kilometer away. The government agreed to negotiate with the union but not with the piqueteros. In Buenos Aires on June 26, in what was called the Avellaneda massacre, a piquetero mobilization that included blocking all access points to the federal capital, Buenos Aires police killed the piqueteros Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kostequi.

Advances and Setbacks, 2003–2007

In late 2002 and 2003, unemployed workers continued to take action but without the conviction of early 2002. There were fewer alliances, and the workers were more internally

divided; demands were increasingly limited to efforts directed toward particular interests. Several organizations disappeared or were integrated into the institutional system. At the same time, the core of the Víctor Choque Group joined with others militants to form the CTD in Trelew. In 2003, the Corriente Clasista y Combativa (Classist Combative Current)[27] is formed only to divide months later and create the Peñi Namun.

The election to the presidency of the then-governor of Santa Cruz, Néstor Kirchner, a Patagonian, a PJ member, and the favored candidate of the incumbent President Duhalde, inspired significant support in Chubut. From this point forward, nearly all political activity was directed toward the provincial elections, in which the PJ triumphed. The PJ candidate, Mario Das Neves,[28] assumed the governorship with a discourse similar to the one that Kirchner was promoting at the national level, emphasizing a renewal of the state's active role in the economy and criticizing some aspects of the neoliberal project.

By 2003 economic improvement was evident, especially because of the devaluation, which had increased what Chubut earned for its exports. The price of oil rose, and textile production was once again competitive. Many piqueteros obtained stable jobs and left the organizations.[29] The government designated officials responsible for influencing and attempting to co-opt the leaders of each piquetero group.[30] In addition, groups that continued to mobilize were attacked, and this prevented them from accessing benefits and exercised "molecular" repression against certain members.[31]

In 2004 the piquetero groups still maintained a presence, but their capacity to stand for an alternative for other sectors of their class was fading. Their demands were increasingly directed to their own interests, and there was little interpretation of political change. In August 2004 the internal committee of the Trelew PJ forced the resignation of the mayor (who was also from the PJ but was not following party mandates), and a provincial government official took office as interim mayor. Groups mobilized, demanding that

agreements made with the previous mayor be honored. Immediately, a new mayoral campaign began for elections on November 14.

Groups mobilized on November 3 in front of the city hall. Once again, they demanded new plans and an increase in payments. On November 9 the conflict intensified. Given the lack of response, on November 9 the piqueteros blocked Highway 3 for 30 hours. On Friday, November 10, the unemployed workers took over the city hall for several hours. This measure had not been planned, and it occurred on the final day of the electoral campaign. Ultimately, the piquetero leaders and municipal officials agreed to meet with national authorities the following Monday. The PJ triumphed by a wide margin in the elections that Sunday, and with this the government modified its stance: the officials did not attend the meeting or send any response. The mobilization on that Monday was smaller than that of the previous Friday.

In March 2005 new marches were planned for unemployed workers grouped in the CTD, MIJD, Peñi Namún, and Evita, but division within the movement was evident. The CTD held a roadblock on Highway 3 in June, but none of the other groups participated. On June 30 the MIJD blocked the highway demanding the release from prison of its national leader, Raúl Castells. In July there was another roadblock with the same demand, with the CTD's participation. The following day the PJ began its campaign for legislative elections, and at the same time the MIJD and Evita blocked Highway 3. This roadblock also closed off alternative routes and was intended to last through the night. In the middle of the night repressive forces arrived and the groups decided to withdraw.

These isolated forms of protest facilitated the government's strategy of selectively co-opting and repressing those committed to social struggle and autonomy. Furthermore, the roadblocks no longer had the same forceful, disruptive effect. Because of their repeated use, they had lost their original meaning. The strategy of the picket had taken on a certain

"institutional" character. The government accepted roadblocks if they only lasted a few hours or if the piqueteros left other routes open for vehicles. Attempts to suppress them no longer generated the active solidarity that they had once inspired.

The differences among groups grew sharper: Peñi Namún appeared to be most closely aligned with the government and gradually withdrew from protests. The other groups sought to maintain the movement but with diverging perspectives. The CTD recognized that there was public support for the government and argued that protest measures should become less confrontational. Evita retained a confrontational discourse advanced by a very personalist leadership, alternating between activity and nonparticipation in accordance with its leader's decisions. The MIJD faced internal disagreements; some members advocated hard-line tactics while others were willing to negotiate with the government in violation of agreements made with other groups. While these groups tended to escalate confrontation, there was no political reflection on the course of events.

Next, the political conflict turned to the October 2005 elections. It was increasingly evident that, in the wake of the 2001 crisis, the legitimacy of the institutional system was being reconstructed as the main mechanism of regime change and political competition. At least formally, politics was now happening in government offices more than on the streets, highways, and plazas. Piquetero groups did not protest, although there were strikes and marches led by educators and state employees. The eventual victory of the PJ reduced the impetus for mobilization.

Protests continued without any kind of broader organizing framework. The government addressed piqueteros' demands when they were requests from individual members but not when they were part of a broader, collective process. For example, when piqueteros protested electricity bill or bus fare increases, members of the protesting group were granted exemptions. Demands became group-based, breaking the movement's unity and

restricting its former capacity to address other sectors. The most dynamic piquetero sectors rejoined the formal workforce in the recovering economy. The moment of heightened conflict seemed to have passed. However, between 2005 and 2007 a number of large strikes took up many of the elements established by the piqueteros in years past. Assembly-based decision making, a will to stand up to repression, and increasingly hard-line tactics (especially with pickets on highways and in ports) were observed in the fishermen's and teachers' strikes of 2005 and in the 2007 ALUAR strike (Pérez Álvarez, 2010).

Reconfiguring Control, 2007–2011

These last conflicts, now led by employed workers, did not represent a break from earlier phases of piquetero movements but instead showed the continuity in the process. The formation and development of piquetero movements, in turn, was clearly in line with earlier experiences of organizing employed workers. In both cases, if we were to focus on only one part of the process we might think that the experience had been for naught. However, these efforts were not a total loss: they were reprocessed in diverse and complex ways to be expressed in different organizational models and through new forms of struggle. This would not have been visible if the research had been restricted to traditional sources. The molecular approach made possible by oral sources opened the possibility of understanding that there are no absolute borders: the man who was once a union delegate was a piquetero leader yesterday and is a worker again, forming a union, constructing an autonomous model, or disputing union direction, today.

The year 2001 represented an enormous challenge for the working class: its potential for protest produced a rupture in the formerly dominant bloc, and its practical action kept the legitimacy of bourgeois institutionality in check. However, its potential had limits: there was

no capacity to formulate an alternative program. This was evident in the slogan proposed to bring the movement together, "*¡Que se vayan todos!*" (roughly, "Everyone go away!"), which expressed opposition to current governance but at the same time demonstrated the absence of an alternative proposal. The movement rejected what existed, but no one knew what should go in its place. This resembles what Gramsci calls "negative politics": rejection of the current situation without a proposal for overcoming it.

The limits of the constructed social force were established: the movement could oppose projects imposed upon it by dominant groups and even cause those projects to fail, but it had no power to constitute an alternative vision of society. The employed working class did not take on the role that would have been necessary in 2001. In part, piquetero movements substituted for them, but without the employed labor movement's participation the tasks at hand were too great. This became evident between 2004 and 2006 and even more so after 2007. The presidential succession of 2007 demonstrated that the legitimacy crisis of bourgeois institutionality was over. In the context of economic recovery, the majority of the workers opted to improve their personal situations. However, this process began with a new level of consciousness and experience. The events of December 2001 were not forgotten, as was expressed through the emergence of increasingly important groups of union opposition and through the continuity of protest strategies with elements of strong social confrontation.

The resurgence of labor movement groups that push for alternative forms of worker organization, forms that may reject the imposition of union leadership, marks a new era.[32] Another sign of this change is that even in the CGT leaders express an anti-neoliberal discourse: while *moyanismo*[33] would require a more extensive discussion, suffice it to say that its union model differs from the model advanced by the group of *los gordos* (the fat ones) who supported *menemismo* and its privatization program.[34]

These elements, which are in some cases contradictory or seem that way, come together in permanent confrontation and dispute. The lines of rupture and continuity and the limits and possibilities of this process suggest an open playing field where groups will continue to compete through Cristina Kirchner's second term, which began in 2011. Constant tensions with the CGT reflect this conflict in part, but more indicative are the continuity of the piquetero movement in many neighborhoods, the emergence of groups opposing bureaucratic unionism, and the construction of strategies for collaboration among these groups.

Experiences, Rupture, and Continuity

The experience of workers in northeastern Chubut had not forged the necessary tools to confront the new circumstances of the 1990s. Their history had not prepared them for an increase in poverty, massive unemployment, and layoffs. They did, however, have a rich tradition of union organization, and this experience allowed them to begin to recover in a process marked by ruptures and continuities. There was a break in 1990–1991, when some worker sectors tried to halt the dismantling of the industrial park through protest. Those who had been displaced from wage work and those who continued working in the factories saw their resistance[35] broken. During this period, the majority of jobless workers saw their unemployment as their own fault. Little by little, however, they began to organize. Groups of unemployed workers set up the first roadblocks in Chubut in 1997, and through these roadblocks they moved toward more systematic forms of organization in which assemblies and bodies of neighborhood delegates or coordinators played a central role.

This process did not come from nowhere, nor was it undertaken only by unemployed workers. Employed workers, too, evidenced a willingness to resist the advance of neoliberalism. Thus, employed workers reappropriated historic forms of organization and protest that had been first taken up by the unemployed workers: decision by assembly, direct democracy, and alliances between working-class groups and the petite bourgeoisie. This indicated, even if only in embryonic form, a rupture with neoliberal hegemony, and the movement's forms of protest revealed strong ties to the experience of worker resistance in the early 1990s. Laid-off workers turned their experience to organizing workers outside the factories. This labor experience nourished a social rebellion that would not have occurred without the organization of unemployed workers. Given that the majority of unions did not manage to confront the question of layoffs, these new organizational forms were necessary to disrupt an economic-corporate mind-set. But this rupture was never total: some signs of a possible break could be observed but only in the moments of intense conflict. They did not translate into a change in consciousness among broad groups. The formation of unemployed workers' groups questioned the traditional union model, which did not create space for the demands and needs of this group within the working class, but this did not lead to an alternative program. For a time these groups were an alternative in the streets, but they could not produce an alternative consciousness. They needed the participation of employed workers and other social groups.

In the final years, these piquetero groups, which had emerged questioning the corporatism of unions, repeated that experience. Their demands shifted toward improvements for unemployed workers only and from there to making demands only for their particular groups. The importance of assemblies diminished, personalist leaderships were consolidated, and forms of protest were increasingly institutionalized and lost their

disruptive character. After 2001, there was a noticeable increase in conflict and the emergence of new forms of consciousness that challenged perspectives limited to the common interests of a particular economic group. In Patagonia this process became especially visible during the unemployed workers' 2002 roadblocks and in the growing solidarity among diverse social groups in different conflicts in more recent years. However, as the cycle continued, this perspective did not become established as a viable, organized social alternative. In the context of a relatively favorable economic situation, the majority of the working class sought to improve their standard of living without questioning the fundamental elements of the current social order and continued to use essentially corporatist protest strategies.

The unemployed workers' movements in Argentina revealed the organization of one sector of the working class and that sector's potential and limits. Studying the events of the period 1990–2011 in Patagonia provides the basic elements for continued exploration of this issue and consideration of the lines of continuity and rupture in the historical experience of the Argentine working class in recent decades.

Notes

1. I draw the concept of "rebellion" from Engels (1974), who described forms of rebellion as ranging from basic actions that simply seek to guarantee survival (although they may contain elements of rebelliousness, like some types of crime) to the most systematic and conscious forms.

2. The Peronist party, the one with the greatest territorial presence in the country.

3. This party is second in terms of its territorial reach and the number of positions it holds, although in recent years it has lost strength.

4. For Rosanvallón (1995: 195), it was impossible for these individuals to mobilize and generate forms of social representation: "They do not constitute a social force that can be mobilized. . . . They do not have a common interest, strictly speaking. . . . They do not constitute a class that can have delegates or spokespeople. This is why there are no unions for the unemployed and why all attempts to transform, in one way or another, millions of unemployed people into a collective, organized force have always failed."

5. Demarcating forms of action, levels of consciousness, and the relationship between the conscious and the spontaneous in a social confrontation allows us to identify the general direction of the process, which I call a "strategy" (Iñigo Carrera, 2000).

6. About this job security Jaime A. (interview, November 7, 2006) said, "I remember a pamphlet we made in the late 1980s where we had to say, 'Look, we're talking about your job opportunities. This is not a joke.' Now, after time has passed, it seems laughable, but when we distributed the pamphlets we had to explain to the workers that we were not laughing, because when they saw that part about sources of work, they laughed in our

faces." Jaime was active in the Trotskyist Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism—MAS).

Another viewpoint comes from Miguel Z. (interview, Trelew, June 15, 2007): "There was no awareness of what could happen. The majority of people didn't believe it was possible that the [industrial] park could decline. Those who had work didn't think they could lose it; they thought that [this crisis] would soon pass. . . They never, never believed that what we were saying could happen, would happen." Miguel was a member of the textile group Celeste y Blanca (Blue and White, the colors of the Argentine flag), which opposed the union leadership.

7. This new reality represented a difficult rupture to process, and in many cases the results were tragic. The story that Jaime recounts demonstrates this: "There was a man named Paco who died recently of cirrhosis. When he learned of the layoff, we were in a car reading his layoff notice to him, and Don Paco says to us, 'No, it must be a mistake. How could they fire me if I've worked for 30 years and never missed a day?' He was always an exemplary worker. His son says to him, 'Dad, they fired you, after 30 years they fired you from your job.' 'No, son, it must be a mistake. How could they fire me? Let's go to the union.' And we accompanied him to the union, and no one was there. And Don Paco never came to terms with the fact that they had fired him; he didn't accept it. The next day, his wife told me that he got up to go to work, and she said to him, 'Where are you going if you don't have a job?' 'No, it must be a mistake,' said Don Paco. He never accepted it, and he never worked again. He became an alcoholic."

8. For a synthesis, consider my April 22, 2009, interview with Alfonso I., a former fishing industry worker of Chilean origin, who later became leader of Evita: "And when I saw that things were this way, I went to work in the garbage dump to collect metal, cardboard, because nothing could be won, and then I began to get into heavier stuff. . . . Everyone was

reading, and, I don't know, I was telling them that we had to get out and organize a group of unemployed workers, because in the meantime we and everybody else were starving to death."

9. One of the delegates who was fired from Modecraft was Miguel: "The most complicated part began when all of the middle-ranking union leaders were weeded out in all the factories, and it seems to me that there wasn't enough time to work, for the rest of the workers to have a better idea of where the enemy was."

10. Juan A.'s interview (Trelew, June 9, 2007) captures part of that situation: "The *compañeros* didn't want to protest anymore. Many factories were closing. In '95 half of the industrial park was still there, and they could see the danger of unemployment. We had *compañeros* who had worked with us who had ended up having to send their daughters out as prostitutes, all those things. . . . The process of protests collapsed in those years because of fear. People had gotten individualistic, 'I take care of my job, I have my kids, I have to feed my kids.' In other words, that's how they were thinking." Juan was a textile worker and was active in the PJ. Later he took part in founding several unemployed workers' organizations, including the CTD.

11. One of the first temporary work plans enacted by the provincial government after the crisis.

12. Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul are two small oil towns in the province of Neuquén in the northwestern part of Argentine Patagonia. The privatization of the state oil company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales caused a large increase in unemployment. The roadblocks in those towns marked the beginning of the piquetero movement. In fact, the name emerged from the first roadblock in Cutral Có in 1996, when it was used to refer to the front line against the repressive forces.

13. Alfonso explains part of the dispute during this event: "I grabbed the microphone, took it right out of their hands. The Peronist councilmen were there; I really told them off, all the Peronist fuckers there. So then I told everyone that we shouldn't betray each other—that was the most important thing, to be loyal to each other in the underclasses—and that they were betraying us, and then I proposed that we vote on a roadblock. 'Didn't we come here for that, *compañeros*?' 'Yes, a roadblock, a roadblock.'"

14. One of the most important highways in Argentina, connecting the principal cities on the Atlantic coast from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia.

15. This movement began as part of the Corriente Clasista y Combativa (Class-based Combative Movement) and later formed its own organization under the leadership of Raúl Castells.

16. Its name refers to Eva Perón, viewed by many workers as a symbol of struggles against injustice.

17. In the Mapuche (Mapudungun) language, this means "standing brother." Like other groups of unemployed workers in the region, this group is primarily composed of descendents of the indigenous groups of Patagonia. The unique aspect of this group is that they decided to take this identity reference as a central element.

18. An organization that emerged on a national level in 2000 as a coordinating body for diverse groups of unemployed workers. Aníbal Verón was one of the workers assassinated by repressive forces during a roadblock in Tartagal, Salta Province. In Trelew this group consolidated around 2002, with little relationship to the national leadership, especially with regard to its practice of daily struggle.

19. Juan tells us: "There was a time when I left the area, and I came back in '97. . . . Then I got together with some *compañeros* and we began to organize a group of unemployed workers. We were all scattered at that time. We came together, we wanted to form something,

and it fell apart 10,000 times, and we continued fighting to try to seriously organize something that could influence the government."

20. A university student group in Trelew that directs the Centro de Estudiantes de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (Humanities and Social Science Students' Center) of the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia. Its ideological alignment is leftist, but it is not officially affiliated with any political party.

21. The student wing of the Partido Comunista Revolucionario (Revolutionary Communist Party—PCR). Its orientation is Maoist.

22. Alianza (Alliance) was the name of the electoral union between the UCR and the Frente para un País Solidario (Front for a Country in Solidarity—FREPASO) established in 1997 to defeat the PJ in the 1999 presidential elections. It was highly heterogeneous, for FREPASO was made up of former PJ politicians critical of the neoliberal agenda and center-left groups. Its alliance with the most conservative sector of the UCR, symbolized by its presidential candidate Fernando de la Rúa, was rapidly overcome by tension when the new government maintained the economic model imposed by Carlos Menem. This tension continued when in March 2001 de la Rúa named Domingo Cavallo, the emblematic minister of the early years of Carlos Menem's presidency, minister of the economy.

23. The organization that includes the majority of unions in the country, with an almost totally PJ orientation. The other central group with some weight, although minor, is the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (Confederation of Workers of Argentina—CTA), which is especially important for public employees.

24. A group that would later become part of the CTD. Its name references the worker assassinated by the provincial police during 1995 protests in Ushuaia.

25. Menfa and Constitución are two neighborhoods in Trelew. Patria Libre and Unión Popular are connected to support base leaders of the PJ and the UCR, respectively.

26. A student group opposed to the leadership of the Centro de Estudiantes de Económicas at the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia, then in the hands of the PJ.

27. A regional union organization promoted as an intermediary tool by the PCR.

28. A former national deputy, provincial minister, and national customs director during the Eduardo Duhalde government and governor of Chubut from 2003 to 2011. He was aligned with the Néstor Kirchner government until 2008, when he began to prepare his own candidacy for the 2011 presidential elections. Ultimately, he was a vice presidential candidate on the ticket with Eduardo Duhalde, and they received a small percentage of the votes.

29. Juan tells us this and illustrates the connection between these groups of unemployed workers and the working class: "*Compañeros* and *compañeras* who worked in the factory, who joined the group of unemployed workers with us, who blocked roads alongside us, then got jobs and left. Many people who worked in the [industrial] park, the majority of unemployed workers, always had some connection to some industrial sector."

30. This practice was not limited to the institutional aspect. These officials tried to become (and in some cases, succeeded in becoming) "friends" of leaders and their families by giving them gifts, treating them to entertainment, organizing birthday celebrations, and extending invitations to barbecues. The relationship was very similar to that between the state apparatus and many union leaders.

31. By systematically detaining these members, initiating lawsuits against them, and/or making it impossible for them to obtain stable jobs in the region.

32. Many protests were now instigated by groups dissatisfied with union leadership: they organized in groups of delegates, internal committees, and assemblies that tried to contest leadership in these conflicts. Using a registry of labor protests from 2004 to 2007, Cotarelo (2007) observes that 34 percent were organized by alternative groups and groups opposed to the traditional leadership.

33. This term references the union member core surrounding the current secretary general of the CGT, Hugo Moyano. In the 1990s Moyano confronted several aspects of the neoliberal project, forming the Movimiento de Trabajadores Argentinos (Argentine Workers' Movement—MTA) in opposition to the CGT leadership. He proposed defending national industry and the domestic market. He was allied with Kirchernism until recently, when disputes with the government regarding union power and wage levels intensified.

34. "Menemism" refers to the group of political cadres and institutions that orchestrated policies during Carlos Menem's presidency (1989–1999). Menem transformed Argentine society in accordance with the neoliberal project. He was supported by the labor union constituency in the 1988 PJ primary election, and this group would later become one of his strategic support bases. The Menemist core, popularly called "the fat ones," supported privatization and the neoliberal program (see Bonnet, 2008).

35. This strategy emerged out of attacks from dominant groups, and it was aimed not at reforming aspects of the project but rather at resisting those attacks. In this case, "resistance" reflects the defensive situation of the working class. For a more developed explanation, see Pérez Álvarez (2010).

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Table 1

Chubut Populations, 1947–2010

Year	Total	Rawson	Biedma
1947	92,456	9,605	4,554
1960	142,412	17,155	6,189
1970	189,735	34,288	6,945
1980	236,116	67,991	21,689
1991	357,189	100,243	45,494
2001	413,237	115,829	58,677
2010	509,108	131,313	82,883

Source: National censuses.