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Workers' cooperatives in Argentina

The Self-administered Workers' Association

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This article examines the development of the Self-administered Workers' Association (Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Autogestionados – ANTA) within the Workers' Confederation of Argentina (Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina – CTA). ANTA is an organization that groups workers from different cooperatives, most of them originating in the post-2001 economic crisis in Argentina, when many small and medium-sized enterprises were rescued by their workers. It analyses how ANTA emerged as an organization within a trade union (CTA) and the dynamics of that relationship. This relationship is seen as one of the fundamental elements leading to the sustainability of the cooperatives. The article also examines the complexities of the relationship and the inadequacies in the development of the cooperative movement when associated with trade unions.

The cooperative movement represented in ANTA owes its singularity to its identity as a workers' organization that belongs to the trade union movement. Debates about the representation and participation of cooperatives within trade unions are not recent. The case analysed here renews these debates, since it deals not with cooperative workers affiliating to an already established union, but rather creating their own (ANTA) within the structure of a confederation (CTA). This decision is based both on identity (members are identified as "workers") and practice, since the cooperatives integrated into the CTA have received general support from workers' organizations that might otherwise not be interested in their struggles.

In comparison to this dynamic, we will briefly examine that of a different group of workers' cooperatives, created under the 2009 government-sponsored plan "Argentina Trabaja" (Argentina Works). The plan was created as a countercyclical measure to Argentina's negative economic development during 2009, in order to stimulate employment generation and demand. The overall goal of the plan was to subsidize the creation of workers' cooperatives (Ministry of Social Development, 2009) that would be in charge of developing different activities, mostly in the construction sector and the maintenance of public spaces.

The Argentina Trabaja cooperatives can be seen as an example of workers' cooperatives, without trade union involvement and heavily dependent on the State (politically and economically), which have not managed to establish themselves as autonomous entities.

In studying the relationship between ANTA and the CTA, and then in turn comparing the development of this workers' cooperative with that organized around the Argentina Trabaja plan, we aim to analyse both the potential and the limitations of workers' cooperatives, their capacity to associate with workers' movements and their complex relationship with the State. It is not the purpose of this article to reach a final view or to decide that the ANTA cooperatives are a complete success while the others are not, but rather to make a comparison that can contribute to the future development of this fundamental sector for workers' participation in the economy.

The article is divided into four sections. Section one outlines the history of ANTA and that of the CTA. Section two explores the relationship between the two organizations, incorporating a theoretical analysis of the relationship between trade unions and cooperatives. Section three introduces Argentina Trabaja and compares its development with that of ANTA. Section four provides final remarks and a concluding analysis.

CTA and ANTA: A challenge to traditional organization

One of the heaviest consequences of the implementation of strict neoliberal policies in Argentina during the 1990s was a process of deindustrialization, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Towards the end of that decade, factories were being emptied of workers, while unemployment levels were reaching historically high levels of above 25 per cent (Teubal, 2004). Three different groups of stakeholders responded to this socio-economic crisis: picket-line protesters *(piqueteros)*, workers who took over their factories and enterprises (also known as salvaged enterprises), and neighbourhood committees (Svampa, 2011). A common characteristic of these groups was that they were not represented in existing political and social organizations. The political parties had lost legitimacy, since both the two main parties (the Unión Cívical Radica – UCR, the radicals; and the Partido Justicialista – PJ, the Peronists) had been at the heart of the neoliberal strategy.

An exception to this "crisis of representation" was the CTA. This confederation emerged as an alternative to the dominant General Labour Confederation (CGT), which was seen as having made too many compromises with the neoliberal administration of Carlos Menem. The CTA was a product of the struggle against neoliberal policies (Etchemendy, 2005) and the search for a new kind of political and social organization in Argentina (Martucelli and Svampa, 1997). Historically, the main forces behind the CTA were the public-sector unions, especially teachers and state employees. The main contribution made by the CTA to the labour movement was that of reconsidering the concept of "who is a worker" (del Frade, 2004 and 2010; Rauber, 1999). The main premise was that, due to the process of deindustrialization and massive unemployment, the community itself and the shantytowns had become the new "factories" (ibid.), and that as a consequence the labour movement should organize those workers who were unemployed as well as those who had jobs. The launch of the CTA, together with other social movements that joined the initiative, therefore promoted a reorganization of labour.

By the late 1990s, the CTA had established itself as a mass organization with over a million members, bringing together unionized workers, the unemployed, youth, environmental movements and community organizations

(del Frade, 2004). It was an example of a labour organization that developed during the neoliberal period (Palomino, 2005). Once the process of enterprise takeovers began and workers were looking for a place to organize, the CTA was the only large organization that could integrate them into the larger struggle. The workers' cooperatives were initially associated as separate entities, but later on formed ANTA as a step forward in their organization (Ghirelli and Alvarez, 2009).

ANTA was formed in 2005 with the intention of creating a new union representing autonomous, or self-administered, workers. ANTA was not the first association of self-administered workers, for the enterprises that had been taken over had attempted from the start to organize in different groups (Rebón, 2005; Magnani, 2003; Lavaca Collective, 2007). The spectrum of such organizations has thus expanded since the beginning of the process (Ruggeri, 2011), mostly due to the different political strategies of support and action adopted by each organization.

ANTA is distinguished by two main characteristics: first, it defines itself as a trade union representing self-administered workers, regardless of whether they come from a salvaged enterprise or not; second, its creation has taken place in the context of a workers' organization, the CTA. Of the two, the decision to associate with the CTA as a member rather than a partner is the most significant. With few exceptions, involvement with the trade union movement was not well perceived in the context of management buyouts (Davalos and Perelman, 2003; Martí, 2006).[1]

Eight years after ANTA's inception, 100 workers' cooperatives in the country are members (Ghirelli and Alvarez, 2009), some of them salvaged enterprises and others organized as workers' cooperatives from the beginning. Most are enterprises that were taken over by workers during the 2001 socio-economic crisis. The cooperatives organized within ANTA share three fundamental elements: democratic management in the organization of work and production; common property, as in the rest of the cooperative movement (Albergucci et al., 2009) and their identity as "workers" rather than "partners in the enterprise" (Ghirelli and Alvarez, 2009). This last element is the main reason why they are part of the CTA.

A study undertaken by CTA's Space for Social Economy (Albergucci et al., 2009) and based on six case studies reveals that the cooperatives in ANTA have succeeded on several fronts. First, they pay higher average salaries than the minimum wage, sometimes twice as high. Second, they have all grown in size (measured by the number of workers participating) by an average of 321 per cent. Third, their development has not taken place in a

1. Among the exceptions there is the Metalworkers Union (Unión Obrera Metalúrgica – UOM) in the city of Quilmes, Buenos Aires Province. The UOM in Quilmes was very supportive of the workers in their takeover struggles, especially in those enterprises where they had representation. For further details see Davalos and Perelman, 2003.

vacuum, but rather in close relation with improvements in the communities in which they are organized, demonstrating the importance for the cooperative movement of being closely involved in the social context.

Overall, the experience of ANTA has been successful in providing for sources of decent employment in times of economic crisis, and has increased the capacity of workers to manage the organization of the production process

Cooperatives and unions

The relationship between trade unions and the cooperative movement has always been complex. In the case of the salvaged enterprises and the workers' cooperatives formed as a result, their relationship to the trade union movement has been relatively unexplored, with few exceptions (Davalos and Perelman, 2003; Martí, 2006; Dobrusin, 2012). The case considered here is a key example of a workers' cooperative engaging within a trade union. An important factor in the ANTA cooperatives is their identity as "workers" (Albergucci et al., 2009; Ghirelli and Alvarez, 2009; ANTA, 2007). This is not negligible, since not all cooperatives – even workers' cooperatives – are part of a trade union. In the case of many salvaged enterprises in Argentina, the unions were often a pillar of opposition to workers' occupation of factories (Dobrusin, 2012).

Another element is the support provided by the CTA to ANTA in the demands it makes of the State. Even though the cooperative movement has a symbolical importance, workers' cooperatives remain relatively marginal in Argentina; the demands of the sector are very specific, and without the support of a larger organization visibility is limited. The CTA has provided ANTA with a context and the necessary financial resources to mobilize and engage (Albergucci et al., 2009). In the case of those cooperatives that were created after an enterprise takeover by the workers, this cooperation has focused on the provision of legal advice and mobilization at the gates of the enterprise in defence of the workers inside. Furthermore, the CTA's press agency (ACTA) has made a significant contribution to promoting the work and services of the ANTA cooperatives. Moreover, the CTA has provided educational tools, mainly as a result of the creation within its organizational structure of the Space for Social Economy, which has been in charge of providing workshops and capacity-building tools to the ANTA cooperatives, as well as monitoring their development.

A significant element of the relationship is that ANTA was originally intended to be a trade union itself. While most of the other cooperative organizations were "movements" or "federations", ANTA defined itself as a union defending the rights of specific workers. The main policy adopted at its first congress in 2005 was to push for a new law on cooperative workers that would take self-administered workers into account, because such workers

have not been included in the legal framework so far. Such a measure would bring about a significant change, because it would allow workers' participating in the cooperatives to benefit from a statutory system of social security and health care, both of which are problematic today owing to the legal vacuum (Albergucci et al., 2009). The second policy proposed by ANTA was the creation of a fund for technological renewal, which would assist workers' cooperatives to update their machinery (Ghirelli and Alvarez, 2009).

The relationship with the CTA is not solely one-sided, however, since the CTA has also benefited from the integration of ANTA within its structure. As mentioned above, the workers' cooperatives are not large, either in size or overall impact on the economy, but they carry significant symbolic weight since they represent the capacity of workers to manage the production system by themselves. They allow workers to provide a concrete response to the economic crisis and to offer a practical solution to unemployment (Martí, 2006).

For the CTA, contributing to the struggle of this group of workers is a demonstration of its commitment to workers' empowerment. Furthermore, the CTA has historically invariably supported socialist principles (Rauber, 1999) and has firmly believed in the capacity of workers to manage their own affairs. It is the workers' cooperatives that are the most notable example of a situation created by the mass entry of workers' organizations into the management of production. ANTA's membership of CTA allows us to see the cooperative struggle as a continuation of the labour movement (Martí, 2006).

From bottom-up to top-down: The Argentina Trabaja plan

The workers' cooperatives described in the previous sections are an example of a workers' movement independent of the State, which has generally been opposed to them in the case of enterprise takeovers. In recent years, however, the Argentine Government has actively promoted the formation of workers' cooperatives, especially during the first impacts of the global economic crisis in 2009. As a countercyclical measure to the negative impacts of the crisis on employment and demand, the Government developed a plan known as "Argentina Trabaja" (Argentina Works). This is an atypical social assistance programme, since it involves a state subsidy for the creation of workers' cooperatives through the municipal governments and social organizations (Fernández, 2012). These cooperatives must be adapted to local circumstances and were initially organized in groups of 80–120 members, a number that was later reduced to no more than 30 members. The overall idea behind the programme is to "promote economic development and social inclusion, creating decent jobs based in the community and targeting local workers' organizations" (Ministry of Social Development, 2009).

The plan is an innovation in social assistance policy, since it does not give individual aid to unemployed workers while they search for a job, but rather provides the tools for the organization of those workers into cooperatives and furnishes opportunities, through the local governments, for those cooperatives to be employed. The argument of the Ministry of Social Development centres on the social and solidarity economy as a fundamental tool for promoting economic development and decent work (Fernández, 2012).

The plan has succeeded in organizing over 100,000 workers in over 6,000 cooperatives throughout the country, with an investment level of 5 billion pesos (just under a billion US dollars) per year (*La Nación,* 2013). One of the most ambitious social investment plans of recent times in Argentina, it has meant a paradigm shift in social assistance policy, from providing assistance to an individual (as in the worst moments of the 2001 crisis), to requiring that the recipient play an active part. The epicentre of the plan is the province of Buenos Aires, where poverty is most acute. The cooperatives work mostly on the provision of certain social services such as street cleaning.

Argentina Trabaja represents a new form of social policy where the main idea is not simply to assist workers in need, but also to provide them with the tools that will allow them to make a decent living in a sustainable manner. This is not the place to discuss the theoretical foundations of the policy; rather, we question here the way the plan is being put into practice and the nature of the "cooperatives" engaged. A relevant element of the critique concerns the concept of a workers' cooperative. According to certain specialists in the field, the Argentina Trabaja cooperatives are such in name only, since they are not independently organized and do not decide on their areas of employment (Lo Vuolo, 2010). Furthermore, the notion that the social economy is an "economy of the poor" is reinforced by the fact that very restrictive rules are applied on who can participate in the scheme. According to the Government, only those without formal employment, retirement plans, social assistance or any other form of state provision can take part (Ministry of Social Development, 2009). The paperwork requirements make the plan difficult to access for those at the lowest levels. What remains, then, is a targeted social policy that guarantees no new rights to participating workers, but rather ties them politically to the specific municipality for which the cooperative works (Lo Vuolo, 2010).

Another important criticism concerns the level of income of these cooperatives. The Government "subsidizes" the cooperatives with a contribution for each member of 1,200 pesos (about US$220) plus an additional 700 pesos for productivity and participation (Fernández, 2012). In the original design of the plan, this income was intended as a subsidy that would be supplemented by the earnings of the cooperatives outside of the government plans. However, the vast majority of the Argentina Trabaja cooperatives are not sustainable without the government funding, and the income paid to individual members is limited to that amount of 1,900 pesos (ibid.). The main

challenges, then, are that these cooperatives are not sustainable without the State organizing and funding them, and that the income levels provided fall below the national minimum wage. The various social organizations that have created the cooperatives participating in the scheme have asked for an increase in the subsidy levels because these workers have no other income.

Argentina Trabaja demonstrates that the cooperative movement needs to be independent of the State, and also financially viable without state funding. The idea of creating workers' cooperatives as a response to socio-economic hardship resulting from a combined financial and economic crisis certainly has merit. The challenge arises when after several years of implementation the cooperatives continue to rely on state funding, and in turn the State, especially at the municipal level, uses them for tasks that should be carried out by state agencies. The symbiotic relationship between the cooperatives and the State has meant, in practice, the emergence of informal labour at various state levels, whether local, provincial or national. In this context, the cooperatives grouped in ANTA gain credibility and relevance as a counter-case of worker-managed cooperatives that are sustainable without state funding and that enjoy the active support of the labour movement. In the following section this comparison is further analysed.

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Cooperatives in a time of economic crisis: What advantages for workers and the State?

The cooperative movement has proved to be a concrete and sustainable alternative for workers at times of crisis. In the southern hemisphere, the cooperative movement has demonstrated its ability to provide workers with the means of obtaining decent work and of contributing to economic development (Favreau, 2007). Two recent studies sponsored by the European Confederation of Workers' Cooperatives, Social Cooperatives and Social and Participative Enterprises (CECOP–CICOPA Europe) (Zevi et al., 2011; Roelants et al., 2012) have found that the cooperative movement has not only managed to survive the main effects of the crisis, but has also proven to be a feasible economic alternative to neoliberal policies. The cases analysed in this article also illustrate the capacity of the cooperative movement to respond to an economic crisis. Two different cases at two different points in Argentina's recent history have been presented. The first and most significant case is that of the ANTA cooperative trade union, formed mostly by enterprises that were reclaimed by their workers during the process of resisting economic neoliberalism and deindustrialization during the 1990s. The second case, the cooperatives formed by the government scheme Argentina Trabaja, is also a product of an economic crisis (the global crisis that begun in 2008), but it is not an independent response from the ground up, that is, by the workers themselves. Argentina Trabaja is a top-down plan promoting the creation of

workers' cooperatives and with large sums of state money invested in them. In both cases we are dealing with workers' cooperatives created as a response to a socio-economic crisis, but there is a two-fold difference between them: their relation to the trade union movement and their relation to the State. Both differences are controversial in the light of one of the main principles of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA): autonomy and independence (ICA, 2013).

In the Basque Country with its long-standing experience in Mondragon, the cooperative movement considers the autonomy of worker cooperatives to be essential to their development and sustainability (Sarasua and Udaondo, 2004). Further, the idea of self-management is understood as autonomous work within autonomous communities. According to this definition, the cooperative movement is considered to be almost completely autonomous, except in relation to the surrounding community. The case of ANTA and its participation in the CTA presents similarities to this concept, but also notable differences. ANTA agrees with the need to be autonomous, but mainly in relation to the State, not to other social movements (ANTA, 2007; Ghirelli and Alvarez, 2009). At the heart of the association of ANTA cooperatives is the definition of their members as "workers", demonstrating their firm belief in the necessity of their link to the labour movement of which they consider themselves an integral part. ANTA's participation in the CTA is both a tactical choice and a question of identity. It is tactical because it has provided ANTA with a larger platform to make the necessary demands in the name of its cooperatives. In this sense, ANTA cooperatives are not "independent" of the labour movement, nor are they independent of the communities in which they work. But they are indeed independent, even if only partially, of the State.

In comparison, the analysis of those cooperatives enrolled in Argentina Trabaja brings to the heart of the debate the role of the State in the development of the cooperative movement. In the case of Argentina, when ANTA was formed, the State – especially local administrations – was opposed to these workers' initiatives, considering them an attack on private property and seeing them as a potential challenge to the Peronist state administration (Levitsky, 2003; Dobrusin, 2012). The Argentina Trabaja cooperatives are the product of a government policy aiming to promote them as a solution to unemployment at a time of external crisis. Their dependence on the State is thus critical to their survival. As mentioned earlier in this article, the majority of the cooperatives engaged in this programme depend on the State for the financing of their projects, as well as for decisions regarding the area of intervention of each cooperative (it is the municipalities that generally define the work that needs to be done).

This very different relationship with the State also reinforces the union role in the case of ANTA. When most of the cooperatives were founded, including ANTA in 2005, Argentina's socio-economic situation

was catastrophic and government intervention in the economy was still not firmly established (Svampa, 2011). The need to incorporate larger actors in the process of enterprise takeovers and the promotion of cooperatives became a matter of survival for those organized in ANTA. The role of the CTA was fundamental in more than one way: it provided support, visibility and meeting places so that the cooperatives could examine the situation of the thousands of cooperative workers who, in response to the difficulties their companies found themselves in, had decided to take factory production into their own hands.

Argentina's experience in the first years of the twenty-first century concerning social movements and new forms of social organization demonstrates that the dependence of cooperatives on other movements was due mainly to the absence of the State or to the repressive stance it took where it did intervene (particularly concerning unemployment and enterprise takeovers). The actions taken by these organizations, as described in the case of ANTA, confirm both the aspects underlined by Vieta (2010) and the CECOP–CICOPA report (Roelants et al., 2012): they were resilient to the global financial crisis, providing a livelihood with decent jobs; and they also portrayed an alternative economic model, autonomous from the State and 'big money' but not independent of other workers' organizations. The Argentina Trabaja cooperatives are a partial contrast to ANTA since, although they certainly provided employment for more than 100,000 people who were unemployed at that time, they have not been able to provide a sustainable alternative that gives participating workers the means for a decent life in the medium term. Current salary levels, together with complete dependence on the State, do not bode well for workers, were the State to withdraw from the programme.

The cases presented in this article are a contribution to the debate on the role of unions in workers' organization during times of crisis, and on providing an alternative model of economic organization to the dominant capitalist system. The fundamental difference is that in ANTA, and in interaction with the labour movement and other social organizations, workers have created their own structures for the jobs on which their survival truly depends. The Argentina Trabaja cooperatives do not represent an autonomous movement initiated by workers, but rather demonstrate the problem for social organizations that are, as expressed by Favreau (2007, p. 54), "confined to managing poverty without attacking the structures, policies and mechanisms that generated that condition in the first place". The organization of movements that are capable of challenging those structures and administering themselves in the struggle against a socio-economic model that condemns workers to precariousness and marginalization is an indispensable step.

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