

RÉSUMÉ

Réformes structurelles et le mouvement ouvriers en Argentine

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Dans cet article, je vais analyser le processus d'élaboration de répliques aux réformes néo-libérales du mouvement ouvrier Argentin dans les années 1990, et les capacités de ce mouvement à influencer les alternatives présentement en configuration depuis la crise de la fin de 2001. Une des prémisses de base de mon argumentation est que loin d'être un acteur secondaire, le mouvement ouvrier a joué un rôle clef dans la constitution d'une opposition aux réformes néolibérales. Cet article va se concentrer plus particulièrement sur l'expérience du CTA (la Centrale des Travailleurs Argentins) durant les années 1990, ses liens avec le mouvement ouvrier argentin traditionnel, et avec d'autres mouvements de sans emplois. Je vais démontrer que le CTA n'a pas seulement été important qu'en tant qu'organisation de la classe ouvrière, mais également comme force politique tentant de donner une voix à ceux qui sont ont été marginalisés par le processus de restructuration en Argentine.

Structural Reforms and the Labour Movement in Argentina

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Introduction

Twenty five years of neoliberalism have radically transformed Argentina. The end of this process, particularly after the decade of the 1990s in which structural reforms acquired a new pace and dimension, was marked by a crisis that appeared to have weakened irreparably what once were the bases upon which a neo-liberal consensus was consolidated. The events of December 2001 stand indeed as the clearest indication of the scope of the crisis that neoliberalism produced in the country. Not only had the economy performed badly, but political decay, social polarization and an abysmal fall in living standards had resulted in a sense of impotence as well as anger among many Argentines at what appeared to be an almost unmanageable crisis.

Although there was an important element of spontaneity in the uprising that led to the resignation of the elected government of President Fernando De la Rúa (1999-2001), it is necessary to understand that moment as the culmination of a long process of gestation. It was among the organizations representing those most affected by restructuring—the unemployed, underemployed, and those with precarious jobs—that the questioning of neoliberal

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policies was the loudest. Their emergence was an indication of the growing prominence of new forms of organization within the labour movement. This was clearly the case with the broad range of organizations representing the unemployed, better known as the *piquetero* movement, and also — as I will argue more emphatically — with the emergence of important challenges from within the union movement itself. Indeed, as the once very powerful CGT (*Confederación General del Trabajo*—General Confederation of Labour) grappled to accommodate to the new realities neoliberalism imposed on it, new challenges emerged from within the labour movement itself. Emblematic of this process was the growing significance of the Central of Argentine Workers (*Central de Trabajadores Argentinos*-CTA). The CTA has been successful since its foundation in the early 1990s in giving expression to alternative forms of organization that better reflect the structural transformation of work faced by most Argentines. Moreover, as I will show, the CTA appears to be very well placed to play a prominent role in the configuration of a more progressive alternative to neoliberalism in Argentina in the years to come.

Pointing to the capacity of the CTA and other emergent segments of the working class to participate in the constitution of an alternative to neoliberalism does certainly not imply that their intervention is free from ambiguities. Nothing illustrates the dilemma faced by working class organizations better than their struggle to position themselves vis-à-vis the new government of Néstor Kirchner, elected president in 2003 following a period of considerable political uncertainty.

In this article, I will examine labour's responses to neoliberalism in Argentina in the 1990s and its capacity to influence the configuration of alternatives in the post-crisis period. The premise of the article is that, far from being a secondary actor, labour played and continues to play a key role in the construction of an opposition to neoliberal reforms. My discussion will focus on the particular experience of the CTA during the 1990s, and its relation to the traditional labour movement in Argentina and to other organizations of the unemployed. The CTA has not only been important as a working class organization but also as a political force striving to provide a voice for the numerous demands emerging from those marginalized through the process of restructuring. In both of these ways, the CTA has gained importance as an expres-

sion of the changes that took place in the 1990s within the labour movement. In addition, the CTA has presented with increasing coherence what it conceives to be the blueprint for a post-neoliberal alternative for Argentina.

In several respects, the conception of the alliances required to redirect the course of change followed over the last 25 years mirrors the earlier debate about Argentina's development. Conceptions of development in the country lent privileged expression to ideas that connected industrialization, a robust domestic market, high rates of employment, and the primary role of the state in the economy, with economic growth and improved standards of living. The demise of these principles was the direct consequence of the overwhelming victory of neoliberal ideas since the military coup of 1976. That year saw the end of a period of at least three decades in which industrialization pursued under the tutelary role of the state defined the space of the tenuous and increasingly unsustainable consensus that delimited social conflict in Argentina. Even if political struggle often centred on the direction that industrialization and state involvement should take, the basic premise of development since the 1940s — state-led industrialisation — was never questioned by either of the two segments that emerged in the aftermath of Peronism (1946-1955), namely, the populist alliance that Perón himself had brought into existence on the one hand, and the modernizing, 'developmentalist' alternative that opposed it on the other.

In this context, those who continued to relate economic decline and political instability in Argentina to the over-regulation of the economy, the suffocation of private initiative, and the inordinate power of unions found themselves repeatedly overpowered by the weight of the arguments in support of industrialization as a path to development. It is therefore not surprising that after 25 years of neoliberalism, the construction of alternatives to it also attempts to recover some of the discourse that previously influenced the development debate. In particular, the concern for issues related to redistribution, the primacy of the domestic market, the importance of industrialization, and the need to restructure the state's capacities to respond to these challenges have become key ingredients in the emerging debate concerning alternatives to Argentina's long decline. I will argue that the recovery of the debate about the purpose of and bases for development in

Argentina this time around signals a new stage in social and political conflict insofar as it represents a step beyond simply responding to the constant condition of acute crisis that has characterized the country over the last decades.

The main outcome of neoliberalism in Argentina has been the steady deterioration of the country's economy, its deindustrialization, mounting foreign debt, the drastic deterioration of working conditions, rising unemployment and underemployment levels and, with them, an unprecedented growth of poverty and inequality. Some of these tendencies were in evidence very early on in the process of neoliberal restructuring initiated by the military regime in 1976, but they reached their peak during the 1990s. In what follows, I will concentrate on the impact of neoliberalism on labour markets, without question one of the most severe manifestations of the destructiveness of neoliberalism in Argentina. Against this background I will consider the organizational and political vacuum the CTA and other organizations of the unemployed attempted to fill as traditional labour organizations connected to the Peronist party suffered a major setback during the 1990s. I will conclude with a discussion about the CTA's potential to influence the configuration of an anti-neoliberal alternative and the implications that such an alternative will have on workers in the future.

Workers in Neoliberal Argentina

The Convertibility Plan, establishing a fixed exchange rate between the domestic currency and the U.S. dollar since 1991, set the framework within which the last wave of structural reforms acquired their particular shape.² The process of economic restructuring produced a number of dislocations which remained unworkable within the extremely limited set of options neoliberalism made available. This was the case, in particular, with the

² The Convertibility Plan was conceived as an anti-inflationary program that became law in April 1991. It established a fixed exchange rate of US\$ 1 for 1 Argentine peso. The Central Bank was required to sell at that rate all the dollars demanded by the market and to take out of circulation the domestic currency received in the transactions. The law also established that the monetary base of the country could not be larger than the amount of international reserves in the Central Bank. Additionally, the law banned price and debt indexation and the practice, then quite widespread, of including an indexing clause in contracts.

transformation of labour markets. In fact, the performance of employment indicators provided an early warning about the high costs that stability under the conditions created by Convertibility would produce in the country. Thus, while the economy grew rapidly between 1991 and 1994, unemployment increased from 6 per cent to over 12 per cent. There are several factors accounting for this phenomenon, especially the low generation of employment for a given level of economic activity and the rise in the number of those seeking employment, particularly women.³ Both were related to the main strategies adopted by firms in order to adapt to the new conditions that economic restructuring under convertibility created and, when these strategies were not successful, to the disappearance of employment due to plant closures.

One key variable was currency appreciation, particularly as the decade progressed and that, in combination with trade liberalization, created a drastically different environment for the industrial sector. The vital element for the survival of firms under these new conditions was their ability to improve their efficiency in order to remain competitive in the market. It is important to emphasize that being competitive in this context implied facing imports that were artificially low in price. Those firms that were not successful quite simply could not survive the process. The result of both trends was an increase in labour productivity, which for the period 1991-1994 grew by 20 per cent in the industrial sector. The incorporation of new technology played a key role in rising productivity. After a decade in which investment had registered very low levels, the expectations generated by the new stability found through convertibility encouraged a significant change in this trend. However, the prevailing overvaluation of the peso in combination with the reduction of import tariffs on capital equipment, tended to favour the incorporation of capital intensive technology with low capacity for employment generation (Gastaldi, et al.: 87). But productivity increases were also the reflection of the introduction of new forms of labour organization and other changes, such as growing work intensity, that evidenced the incapacity of unions to defend working conditions and the rights guaranteed through labour legislation (Monza: 146).

³ For a discussion see in particular Beccaria (2001) and Monza (1995).

Interestingly, all sectors of the economy registered important productivity gains, not only those that faced increasing external competition. In some cases, these gains were partly the result of the incorporation of new technology, as was the case in the service sector. But the rapid growth of unemployment and the increasingly deteriorating conditions faced by workers also operated effectively as disciplining mechanisms throughout the economy. The sometimes drastic reduction in staff within the newly privatized sector and the concomitant rise in its productivity levels is a case in point (Beccaria and López: 40).

The other factor with a critical impact in the reconfiguration of labour markets was the inability of many firms to adjust to the new conditions created under trade liberalization, in many cases because they did not have access to the financing required to increase their efficiency. The most important consequence of firm failure was the destruction of a growing number of jobs, particularly within those sectors most affected by foreign competition. Small- and medium-sized enterprises were particularly hard-hit in the process, but firms of all sizes were affected by trade liberalization. That is, those firms financially incapable of adopting new technology or that were unsuccessful in introducing changes in the internal organization of labour to secure higher rates of productivity were simply eliminated from the market. Convertibility thus imposed a new pressure toward increasing the rate of exploitation of labour by imposing new limits to capital itself (Bonnet: 41). As the local currency continued to appreciate during the decade this tendency was intensified.

In short, while economic growth after 1991 resulted in some employment generation, economic restructuring — in particular with the characteristics it assumed under convertibility — tended overall to have the opposite effect. Rising unemployment during this period was also related to the growing number of people seeking employment, a fact that in the official version of the period manifested itself in the emergence of positive expectations on the part of sectors that had become marginalized by the earlier decline of the 1980s. More sober voices connected the growing demand for jobs to the increasing incidence of unemployment among household heads, a fact that forced other members of the family to participate in the labour market (Beccaria: 55-56). Be that as it may, by 1993 growing unemployment was closely

related to the lack of growth of employment. Moreover, most of the jobs created in this first phase between 1991 and 1994 were part-time; thus, underemployment became a key characteristic of the period (Beccaria: 55).

Beside the problem of growing unemployment and underemployment, workers in Argentina also faced the reality of declining wages after 1993. The positive impact of the Convertibility Plan on price levels and the growth of employment between 1991 and 1992 allowed wages and salaries to recover some of the losses inflicted during the period of high inflation between 1989 and 1991. However, the rate of growth of salaries and wages started to slow down in 1993 and became negative the following year (Beccaria and López: 42). While these negative trends were evident in a period of economic growth, they became even more accentuated with the economic downturn of 1995. In that year total employment fell by 4 per cent, unemployment reached 17.5 per cent and underemployment rose to 11.9 per cent. Under these circumstances, real salaries fell more than 6 per cent on average.

These changes created the conditions for another fundamental transformation: the continuous growth of precarious forms of employment, including those jobs which employ workers without any form of social security or formal contract (Beccaria: 60). I will return to this point later on, but here it seems important to note that workers were not only expelled from their jobs, but that their re-absorption into the labour market increasingly took the form of precarious employment. Thus, the case of Argentina clearly shows that the key issue for workers was not only the rise of unemployment (a problem obviously serious enough) but also the drastic transformation of working conditions for those with employment. This seems a particularly relevant observation to take into account in conceiving alternatives to the employment problems most Argentines faced then and that remain serious today. To put it briefly: reactivating the economy might reduce the incidence of unemployment but this by itself will not provide the means to overturn the instability and precariousness that those with a job confront and will continue to deal with as part of their daily reality.

The recession of 1995 gave way the following year to some economic reactivation. However, it took several months of accelerated economic growth after 1996 for this reactivation to be

reflected in a reduction of the rate of unemployment. But between mid-1996 and mid-1998, the rate of employment growth increased to its highest level since 1991: 5 per cent per year. The result was the reduction of the unemployment rate to 12.4 per cent in October of 1998. The transformation gave new political ammunition to the administration of then President Carlos Menem (1989-1999). After all, while economic growth under Convertibility until then had not been very promising in terms of employment, it could be argued at that time that the problems were probably more related to the difficulties of the transition to a new model of economic growth than to deficiencies intrinsic to the instruments used. However, there were some characteristics in the growth of employment during this period that clearly showed that such an argument was based on only a very partial reading of the situation. This is the case, for instance, with the growth of employment within the public sector. A sizeable portion of the jobs created in this sector can be accounted for in terms of the implementation of special employment programs which were then and have continued to be characterized by very low wages and low productivity, and are only offered on a temporary basis. Through these programs the government attempted to provide some relief to the serious crisis of unemployment, but they also became a key instrument for the extension and consolidation of state patronage.

In general, employment plans under this category — known previously as *Plan Trabajar* and now as *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogares* — offered temporary contracts with a duration of three to six months for community public works projects with very low remunerations (between \$100 and \$200 per month). According to one study, in 1997 these programmes were responsible for 80 per cent of the new employment in the public sector (Hidalgo: 134). In every respect, these programmes came to contribute to the general tendency toward growing precariousness and instability in labour conditions, and, one may add, toward accepting relief from complete exclusion from labour markets on similar bases. In short, they did not diminish the functional power of unemployment and job instability in the constitution of the flexible labour force that conditions in the 1990s had brought into being.

The other very significant pattern in this period of economic growth between mid-1996 and mid-1998 was the steady deterioration in the quality of jobs created. Most of the new employment

was characterized by its precarious and contingent nature. Only one-third of the overall increase in employment corresponded to jobs that satisfied all legal requirements in terms of employer contributions to social security and other benefits. As part of this trend, there was also a growing incidence of temporary employment under the provisions of the new labour legislation that had been introduced earlier in the decade (Employment Law of 1991). Nearly half of the private-sector employment growth in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, for example, can be explained by the expansion of limited-term positions (Beccaria: 63).

Salaries showed some sluggishness in overcoming the downward trend manifested during 1995. In fact, it took almost two years for salaries to register any sign of improvement. Nonetheless, salaries did not fully recover from the losses inflicted by the downturn of 1995. The evolution of salaries is certainly congruent with the growth of unemployment, underemployment, and precarious forms of employment. In general, it is logical to expect that under these conditions the capacity of workers and unions to protect salaries and working conditions came to be seriously imperilled. However, this limitation was further exacerbated in Argentina by the ambivalent role played by the main confederation of labour, the CGT, in responding to Menem's initiatives.⁴

As Argentina sank once again into recession after mid-1998, the small gains achieved in labour market conditions were eroded. Moreover, this recession was not only longer in duration — only in 2003 were there some signs of recovery — but also deeper in nature when compared to the downturn of 1995. Most social indicators worsened to unprecedented levels. Unemployment reached 18.3 per cent in October 2001,⁵ a very drastic increase from the 14.7 per cent registered for the same month of the previous year.

⁴ The incapacity of the organized labour movement to prevent some of the changes and the support it provided for others in exchange for the preservation of its corporatist privileges explained Menem's success in effecting this critical transformation of labour markets. However, the price the labour leadership connected to the Peronist party paid for its consent to Menem's policies toward the working class was high. The growth of new union alternatives in Argentina is probably the most evident manifestation of the weakening of the traditional leadership's position within the labour movement.

⁵ These figures correspond to the last census before the crisis in December of that year.

The increase in unemployment would have been even larger had it not been for a significant reduction in the number of those seeking employment (*Página 12*, 14/12/01: 6-7).

While the rate of employment had continued to grow during the first year of the recession, after 2000 almost all sectors of the economy experienced job losses. Losses were particularly serious in the construction sector, but retailing, manufacturing, banking, transport, and health were all affected by the same trend. Salaries continued to decline during the period, and the federal government's decision to reduce salaries and pensions by 13 per cent after July 2001 made the situation even worse.

This recessionary period served to perpetuate and deepen the trends that characterized the era of convertibility as a whole and that, as I have suggested, were not only limited to the rise of unemployment. Throughout the 1990s there was a steady increase in the prevalence of precarious jobs, fundamentally those which do not involve social security contributions, benefits granted by labour legislation such as vacation pay or, in some cases, a formal contract. For the area of Metropolitan Buenos Aires the number of jobs in this category represented 26.7 per cent of total salaried employment in 1990, 36 per cent in 1998 and by the year 2000 it had reached 40 per cent. Not only were workers in this category afflicted by lack of legal protection, but their salaries also showed a tendency to decline as a proportion of the average salaries for formal workers. While in 1974 the salaries of workers in precarious jobs was on average 80 per cent of that of workers with formal employment, in 1983 they had been reduced to 60 per cent, and in 2002 they reached only 47 per cent (Departamento de Investigaciones: 5). To this must be added the impact of unemployment and underemployment which, when combined, affected 34.6 per cent of the workforce in October 2001 (*Página 12* 14/12/01: 6-7). Most of the jobs lost during the Convertibility period, probably as many as two-thirds, corresponded to the reduction of employment in the manufacturing sector as industry continued to contract, representing only 17 per cent of the GDP in 1998, down from 28.2 per cent of the GDP in 1974 (ECLAC, pp. 94-5).

All these variables suffered a deterioration after the crisis of December 2001. By mid-2002, unemployment was calculated at 22 per cent and while some economic reactivation since 2003 (estimates put the figure of GDP growth for this year at around

8 per cent) has resulted in the creation of some new jobs, the unemployment figure continues to be in the upper teens (*Página 12* 20/12/03). However, growing inflation in 2002 and its persistence during 2003 have eroded the value of real wages. The combination of these variables explains why by 2003 more than half the population of Argentina was living under the poverty line. Along with the growth of poverty, changes in labour markets are also at the core of a worsening distribution of income, the other central transformation in Argentina during the neoliberal period. The income of the lower two deciles fell from 4.8 per cent of national income in 1990 to 3.7 per cent in 1998, while the income of the highest 20 per cent increased from 50.6 per cent to 54.5 per cent during the same period. Moreover, the concentration of income soared in particular for the top decile of the population: from 34.3 per cent to 37.6 per cent between 1990 and 1998 (World Bank: 60).

The explanations given for such a calamitous deterioration in employment and in working conditions deserve special consideration. It was proposed then, and it has remained one of the elements in explaining the failure of the Convertibility Plan, that the lack of flexibility in labour markets did not allow wages to adjust sufficiently in order to maintain competitiveness (Krueger 2002). In turn, these rigidities impacted negatively on production, and thus employment levels could not improve. Let me deal first with the issue of the alleged rigidities that, according to this argument, were related to the existing labour legislation. While it is true that the process of legislative reform was uneven during the 1990s, by 1996 President Menem had nonetheless successfully introduced a number of laws and executive decrees that radically changed social and labour rights in the country. While the last set of labour laws passed by Congress during the Menem administration reversed some of these reforms, this constituted a rather insignificant rollback. It is indeed difficult to argue that flexibility did not exist in a country where up to 40 per cent of the labour force worked without formal contracts or protection under the existing labour legislation. Moreover, while the negotiation of industry-wide collective agreements remained the official position, in practice unions agreed to negotiate at the plant level,⁶ accepting

⁶ In fact, by 1999, as much as 86.1 per cent of the total existing collective agreements were negotiated at the plant level (Salvia et al., n.d.: 135).

in many cases reductions in wages or the deterioration of working conditions in general.

The other point that needs addressing is the argument regarding the supposedly high cost of both salaries and wages and the indirect costs of labour that would have interfered with the competitive position of the country. The problem here was that salaries in Argentina were high in terms of their value in dollars, but real salaries showed an unambiguous tendency to decline. By the end of the decade real salaries were still 23 per cent below their 1986 level and 30 per cent below the level of 1980 (Mancebo: 187). In the context of a fixed exchange rate, sustained high interest rates and increasing prices for services provided by the privatized sector, wages and other labour costs became practically the main variables available to reduce production costs.⁷ Could even lower wages and less regulation have worked to palliate the problem of employment and underemployment? Once again, it is hard to imagine the scope of the adjustment that would have been required in order to compensate for the effects that restructuring under convertibility had on the productive structure of the country. Or to put it in somewhat different terms, it is hard to imagine the conditions under which this alternative adjustment would have been politically viable, save by a process of open and brutal repression. In short, it is difficult to sustain that the negative evolution of employment was the result of lack of flexibility in either wages or labour market regulations.

Ultimately, it was the level that social mobilization had reached in Argentina by the middle of 2001 that must be considered central in explaining the downfall of convertibility and the evaporation of alternatives for the De la Rúa government. Such mobilization is also crucial in explaining some of the growing differences that existed among various factions of capital. An examination of the process of resistance that convertibility elicited is thus essential to understand its limits and eventual collapse, and also to assess the options that the new phase in the struggle against neoliberalism opens in Argentina.

⁷ One important characteristic during this period was also the constant pressure exercised by employers to reduce payroll taxes, a demand they were successful in achieving.

Organizing Alternatives

While the aggressive stance against labour rights and traditional unionism adopted by Menem since the beginning of his mandate in 1989 prompted various oppositional responses from the CGT, ultimately Menem managed to gain critical support from a key faction within this labour confederation. However, if maintaining political communication with the government secured some protection, growing unemployment, underemployment, and the increasing incidence of contingent and precarious work dramatically limited the power of the CGT's member unions. More importantly, the CGT's obvious unwillingness to oppose the government in defence of historically significant workers' rights cost the confederation dearly in terms of its own legitimacy. It is important to mention, though, that the differences within the CGT were serious enough to produce a split between those sectors closer to the government and a faction determined to present some opposition to the official programme. The former, under the leadership of Adolfo Daer, became known as the 'official' CGT and the latter as the 'rebel' or 'dissident' CGT. The leader of the latter faction, Hugo Moyano, has managed to remain a powerful figure, and he is certainly much better positioned today than his CGT adversaries to regain some of the space lost during the 1990s.

The conditions that represented a crisis for the CGT presented themselves as a new opportunity for some sectors of the labour movement more connected to progressive and independent currents of unionism. These are precisely the sectors that, unsatisfied even with the formation of a dissident faction within the CGT, decided to split completely from the official CGT in 1992 in order to form the CTA. This new organization emerged first as a labour congress, bringing together powerful unions within the public sector, in particular the Association of Public Workers (ATE – *Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado*) and the Central of Education Workers (CTERA – *Confederación de Trabajadores de la Educación de la República Argentina*). During the 1990s, the CTA grew to encompass other unions in different sectors of the economy, but its most important area of expansion was found in sectors outside the traditional arena of union affiliation. The CTA demonstrated a particular capacity to attract within its rank-and-file a large number of unemployed workers, most of them through

their affiliation to the Federation of Land, Housing and Habitat (FTV - *Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat*).

Moreover, it was the institution of direct or individual forms of affiliation — as opposed to the traditional model based on the representation of constituted unions — that allowed the CTA to provide some channel of organization to these sectors (Patroni, 2004). As such, the CTA does constitute a very important innovation, at least in principle, in the conception of the role and form of unions in response to the weakening structural position of the working class and its increasing fragmentation. While one could point to a number of pitfalls in the constitution and actions of the CTA — I will return to some of these issues later on — it seems nonetheless important to recognize its ongoing attempt to overcome the profound divisions that exist today within the working class, particularly in terms of the growing disparities in working experiences.

From a pragmatic perspective, direct affiliation has also been a way of responding to the serious membership decline faced by most unions. This decline is due in part to rising unemployment, but the increasing incidence of precarious forms of employment has also implied a major drop in union membership, even in sectors with high overall levels of union activity. Direct affiliation to the CTA becomes a viable alternative for all those workers who, because of their position in the labour market, cannot be members of a traditional union. In fact, the CTA has been extremely successful in attracting a very wide range of workers, including the unemployed, underemployed, self-employed, retirees, and those employed in the formal sector. All CTA members, whether affiliated individually or through their unions, participate through individual and secret vote in the election of the Central's leadership.

Because of the capacity to organize workers within the informal economy and those working under precarious conditions, the CTA has also become important for the growing number of women who currently participate in the labour market, and who are particularly affected both by unemployment and by the growth of precarious forms of employment. The increasing participation of women within the CTA has prompted some important initiatives such as the fostering of a specific organization for women, and participating in broader national fora on women's issues. The flexibility in its structure and a very precise sense of what should

constitute new alternatives in labour organizing has also allowed the CTA to become one of the main poles of attraction for important new social experiments in Argentina. In particular, as numbers of workers have taken over several factories in an attempt to save their jobs, it has not been difficult for them to find in the CTA a source of political support and a union affiliation alternative (Palomino: 84).

The questioning of the viability of the CGT to confront neoliberal policies forms part of the CTA's original proposition regarding the need to work toward greater independence from political parties and the state. Accordingly, the CTA has maintained that political autonomy is essential in the construction of an alternative labour movement and, equally important, fundamental if this new movement is to have the capacity to generate critical responses to neoliberalism.

Two key points are related to this prescription. One is that the CGT, by being part of the same political establishment that sanctioned the consolidation of neoliberal reforms in Argentina, has also become part of the problem. In short, traditional unionism has not been able to escape from the crisis of representation and legitimacy that permeates other political institutions in the country. Secondly, this crisis of legitimacy is a fundamental component of the predicament that Argentina faces today; the resolution of the crisis must therefore involve the displacement of those institutions and actors that consented to policies responsible for the growth of inequality and poverty in the first place (CTA 2002a: 14). Thus, the construction of an alternative to the crisis in Argentina can only be built outside of traditional political institutions and actors. Raising this proposition has implied for the CTA the need to identify what political force could play this role, how such an option would be built and, fundamentally, what the CTA's role would be in it. I will return to this point later, but before doing so I will explore in some more detail the connection between the CTA, its branch more closely working with the unemployed (i.e. the FTV), and the *piquetero* movement.

Among the several federations which form the CTA, the most novel and prominent is the Federation of Land, Housing and Habitat (FTV). This Federation, organized on territorial lines, is the most heterogeneous, and brings together sectors generally outside traditional unions: landless peasants, First Nations, shanty-

town dwellers, tenant associations, and neighbourhood associations organizing around issues related to the cost and delivery of newly privatized public services and other problems in their communities. Unemployment was from the very origins of the Federation one of the most important common experiences of many of its members. As the decade progressed and as unemployment became an even more serious problem, the Federation became one of the central organizations in the growing movement of the unemployed in Argentina.

Along with many other organizations for the unemployed, the FTV has been an active participant in what has become known as the *piquetero* movement. As the structural conditions of the country changed dramatically during the 1990s, there was a growing focus on new forms of mobilization and on struggles that more closely reflected the reality of those who undertook them. To an important extent, the reality of unemployment and contingent employment meant that long-established forms of working class struggle, in particular strikes and general strikes, did not have their usual impact.⁸ Thus, forms of protest that were only marginal previously became extremely important during the 1990s in the expression of discontent toward government policies. In particular, the disruption of highways and bridges, land occupations, and demands for reduced public service tariffs, for unemployment insurance, and for employment and work programs have become fundamental experiences in the alternative labour movement.⁹

While unemployed and poor communities have been key actors in the roadblocks — largely because this is one of the few forms of protest available to them — formal workers and students have also been key participants. Moreover, many of the roadblocks have featured marches, involving a range of social sectors and

⁸ Nonetheless, it is important to remember that there were a large number of general strikes in Argentina during the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, these general strikes were quite effective in terms of their capacity to gain the support of large segments of workers.

⁹ During the late 1990s, there was an exponential increment in roadblocks, the sign of both the mounting economic crisis and rising levels of organization. In the first half of 2001 there were 71 roadblocks per month, a figure almost twice as high as the one registered for 2000, and three and a half times larger than in 1999. The scope of the increase can be better appreciated when it is considered that in 1998 there were only 4 roadblocks on average per month (*Página 12*, June 23, 2001).

political organizations, as well as general strikes. There has therefore been an important degree of integration among different forms of protest. The CTA represents, in this respect, a key force in the effort to bring together a range of demands from sectors affected in particular ways by the process of restructuring and to articulate them through various but coordinated forms of struggles and protest. This is a process which deserves attention with regard to the emergence of novel forms of working class resistance because it opens the possibility for a new interaction among unions and the unemployed in a way that challenges the notion of the decreasing importance of labour as a key social actor.

The CTA and the Rising Wave of Protest at the End of the 1990s

As mentioned above, while roadblocks have become a fundamental instrument in the struggle of the unemployed, this tactic has neither been their exclusive realm nor is it new in the repertoire of popular protest. These two elements — the diversity of actors involved in roadblocks and the continuity with previous forms of protest — hold a very significant role in understanding the elements that weigh in the configuration of new political identities in Argentina during the 1990s. There is a long history behind the use of *piquetes* in order to obstruct access to the workplace during strikes. It is then not surprising that if we trace the growing use of this form of protest during the 1990s, we find that the key actors in the earliest roadblocks were skilled workers in the interior provinces. Roadblocks became a fundamental part of mass protests, emerging in several of those areas hit very hard by the privatization of public enterprises, which until then had provided the main source of employment. In some cases, roadblocks also became central in organizing mass demonstrations against wage payment delays to public sector employees as provincial governments faced increasing fiscal problems. One of the best examples of this type of uprising is the community mobilization in General Mosconi, in the province of Salta in Northern Argentina. The main employer in the area had been the public company that once controlled the extraction and processing of petroleum in Argentina (YPF – *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales*).

The use of *piquetes*, however, increasingly acquired the characteristic of interfering with traffic, with the central objective of

bringing public attention to specific demands. Progressively too, *piquetes* became the most common form of protest in the poorer areas around Buenos Aires City and later in other urban centres critically affected by the growth of unemployment. There were then important changes in the nature of roadblocks, affecting not only the strategy used, but also the main actors participating in them and their incidence. Fundamentally, they have become disassociated with the workplace of those involved, quite clearly because for the majority of *piqueteros*, there is simply no workplace to speak of. And yet, as some analysts have pointed out, the description of the protest as *piquetes* draws an immediate link with working class struggles, thus also avoiding a definition of *piqueteros* as social actors connected exclusively with their position as unemployed (Cross, Lenguita and Wilkis: 73).

Piquetes have proved effective tools to articulate the urgent demands of those affected by unemployment, precarious employment, and the reduction of public services. Some of the main demands involve the implementation of work programs and their extension and renewal, the distribution of food assistance, and the reduction in public services fees. For most of the 1990s, this form of organization and protest did not have a major impact in putting forth alternatives to address the search for long-term solutions to unemployment. As such, an important characteristic of the roadblocks has been the need to re-stage the protests on a periodic basis, in order to reinforce ongoing demands. This certainly has constituted a major limitation on their continued effectiveness as an expression of popular protest.

Nonetheless, the growing presence and significance of organizations of *piqueteros* became one of the most important political events during the 1990s, as they gained not only momentum with their struggles but also legitimacy as political actors. However, this has not reduced the number of very concrete problems related to *piqueteros*' capacity to coordinate their struggles at the regional and national levels. There have been concerted efforts to overcome isolation, but divisions among organizations for the unemployed also run deep.¹⁰ Fractures in the movement

¹⁰ The differences among organizations for the unemployed are rooted in a number of variables. Sometimes it is possible to distinguish the connection to a political party or to the labour movement as being central in the definition of overall strategies

resulting from strategic differences, particularly regarding relations with the government, have actually been deepened under the new administration of President Kirchner. To be sure, the propensity and willingness to maintain open communication with the government has been a traditional line dividing these organizations (Epstein: 20-21). Closely related to this fact is the role played by these organizations in the distribution of work programmes, a function that not all of them see as unproblematic since it transforms them into intermediaries between the government and their constituents. However, as some of the organizations within the movement of the unemployed have tried to position themselves as the main interlocutors with the state — this is particularly the case with the FTV — the stakes have risen even higher. As a wide range of *piquetero* organizations faces increasing isolation from other political and social forces, the conflict within the movement also takes on a new, much more critical dimension.¹¹

Notwithstanding these differences and the current state of conflict within the *piquetero* movement, it is still important to point to the crucial role of all these organizations in configuring an essential space for the emergence of a common identity among their participants. In particular, they have provided a new social meaning to their experience of being ‘excluded,’ giving the movement a specific political potential. In this sense too, they have become central in breaking down the walls that very often obstruct the organization of the unemployed, by framing their plight within the public space (Cross y Cató: 92-93). Probably less clear is the capacity of these organizations to identify successfully

around issues of employment. Some organizations, though, are independent from political or union forces, as is the case with the *Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados Anibal Verón* (CTDAV). For an analysis of some of the main elements differentiating this organization from the CTA- FTV. See Dinerstein.

¹¹ Thus, for instance, Luis D’Elía — the leader of the FTV and also a member of the Buenos Aires Province Legislative Assembly — categorized as a serious mistake the use of ‘insurreccional’ forms of protest against a government that presents an alternative to neoliberal policies in Argentina (Fernández Moores, 2003a). Still, probably his most notorious statement in support of the current government came in response to the call voiced by several ‘hard-line’ *piquetero* organizations to occupy government buildings as part of the commemoration of the second anniversary of the December uprising. D’Elía promised to defend the government “with guns” (“*a los tiros*”) if necessary (Fernández Moores, 2003b).

the specific actors, institutions or forces against whom they direct their struggles (Pérez: 177). Part of the explanation for this deficit is the lack of a political alternative capable of providing further meaning to the condition of exclusion. While this gap remains one of the most serious obstacles for the overcoming of Argentina's crisis, the CTA as a union central was capable of contributing vitally to the bridging of its seriousness, particularly during the period leading to the December 2001 uprising.

One example of the kind of integration in struggles that attempted to inject with broader political objectives the protests around unemployment and poverty was the three weeks of mobilization organized during July and August 2001. The actions involved roadblocks and mass demonstrations in downtown Buenos Aires, public sector employee and teacher strikes, and other forms of community-based protests such as blackouts and *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests). Protests were organized around three main issues: freedom for those imprisoned for participating in roadblocks, guarantees against the reduction of employment programs, and the repeal of the adjustment program announced at the time by the De la Rúa government, the infamous 'zero deficit' program. Key among the participants were the organizations of the unemployed, particularly the representatives of districts like La Matanza,¹² the area where the two key leaders of the movement — Luis D'Elía of the FTV and Carlos Alderete of the Combative Class Current (CCC) — are based.¹³ Probably the most important outcome of these days of protest was the confirmation of the role of organizations of the unemployed as leaders in the opposition to the government's latest adjustment plan.

The CTA was also a potent force, mainly through its participation in the National Front against Poverty (FRENAPO), behind

¹² La Matanza is a municipality close to downtown Buenos Aires, the former site of important industries. The area is now home to 1.5 million inhabitants, 300,000 of whom live in 180 shantytowns and *asentamientos* (a term which refers to land taken through popular mobilizations and where housing is built by community cooperatives).

¹³ In areas like La Matanza, there are a number of shantytowns and other forms of precarious housing and communities where organizations such as the FTV have substituted quite effectively for the lack of any public service. The FTV and CCC organize cooperatives and work teams for the construction of housing, and run day care centres, schools, and popular kitchens. In this locality, these two forces representing the unemployed have worked together since 2000.

the organization of a nation-wide referendum around the creation of a national employment and training insurance programme (*seguro de empleo y formación*). This programme had been a key demand of the CTA for a few years, so its ability to mobilize a number of social forces behind it — in particular human rights organizations, student associations, unions, and other social actors — was an important sign of its increasing influence within a large sector of social and political organizations. The setting up of the referendum involved the creation of a large number of local councils and their articulation at the national level, including a national congress held in Buenos Aires. Thus, the campaign was instrumental in fostering the organization and coordination of a very broad spectrum of forces, including those already mentioned. The request for a public referendum did not gain official support, but an unofficial referendum was carried out nonetheless in December of 2001, with results that encouraged the organizers: while FRENAPPO had set its target at 2 million votes, approximately 3.1 million Argentines voted in the referendum. In many ways, these results can be read as an indicator of the very high levels of discontent and the obvious desire to express it that existed in Argentina at that time.

The potential political impact of the public campaign ended up being undermined by the events of late December 2001, which occurred only a few days after the national referendum, and which saw the unleashing of mass protests and the resignation of the national government. Nonetheless, these were momentous political events at the time, showing not only the CTA's capacity to mobilize large sectors of the population, but also to sketch the main components of an alternative to neoliberalism.

The CTA's prominent position has been somehow reduced of late, in the wake of the rapid political changes that followed. Part of the problem was the exponential growth in the number of new social actors outside of its sphere of influence, most noticeably neighbourhood assemblies. While originally there was an important degree of integration between their demands and struggles, the tendency has been for the distance between them to grow again. But part of the problem is also that the election of a new president and his performance so far have been extremely effective in raising expectations of change without open confrontation. Moreover, the new government has been quite open to dialogue

with the two factions into which the CGT is now divided — Kirchner's is after all, a Peronist government and the Confederation has been a historical ally — thereby increasing the pressure on the CTA to dispute that new space for negotiation by presenting itself as a 'reasonable' opposition.

Notwithstanding the obvious impact of very complex and fluid political conditions, the CTA's responses have also been tempered by some internal changes in the organization. In particular, the decision in December 2002 to build a political movement represents a new way of conceiving the role of a labour organization at this particular juncture in Argentina. In many ways this decision comes to conclude an internal debate that originated with the CTA itself around the question of whether the construction of alternatives for the working class should also be expressed as electoral options. While it is not difficult to establish a connection between the perceived crisis of traditional political forces in Argentina and the need to generate new political options, this transformation certainly also creates other points of tension. More specifically, there are a number of issues still not resolved within the CTA in terms of its capacity to generate unity among the struggles of different sectors of the working class. In moving toward taking on a new role as a political movement, the CTA has in fact made this problem a function of the broader dilemma of how to formulate alternatives that can respond to the multitude of new demands posed by mobilized sectors of the population. If the CTA, as a new alternative for union organizing, has certainly presented various labour sectors with an option to organize and to respond to the drastic deterioration of living and working conditions over the last 25 years, this does not translate automatically into its capacity to innovate as a political force.

Tentative Conclusions: a Post-neoliberal Argentina?

The high rates of approval enjoyed by Néstor Kirchner, no doubt the result of his apparent willingness to take on a number of the issues that were at the forefront of the dissatisfaction manifested by Argentines in December 2001, have changed the context and political cost of opposition. As with many other political forces in Argentina, the CTA has taken a cautious approach to the new administration, supporting some of its initiatives and maintaining a critical distance with respect to others.¹⁴ This is the case

with the debate over the derogation of the last labour law approved under the De la Rúa administration and the sanctioning of new legislation in the area. A draft bill was prepared by the end of 2003 with the participation of the three main labour associations (the two CGTs and the CTA) and some employers' associations, although the government promised originally to limit the consultation process only to labour representatives.

The CTA has been positively inclined toward the bill, although it has pointed to some serious shortcomings in its content. Thus, it has raised concerns about the lack of change in regulations that continue to normalize practices that undermine stable, fully protected employment.¹⁵ However, its most important criticism has been to argue that without profound changes in the current political-economic context, the new labour laws are doomed to be ineffective in mitigating the worst aspects of the current labour market. First, in the CTA's analysis, there is an urgent need to direct specific policies toward employment creation. In this sense, for the CTA the most important disciplinary element in the hands of capital is the persistent high rate of unemployment. For as long as this is not the focus of state policy, changing the law will not guarantee its effectiveness.

However, and secondly, the CTA has been correct in pointing out that economic growth and employment generation by themselves cannot address the problem of precariousness — the other key negative transformation of labour markets. In fact, an activation of the economy will only secure the consolidation of a labour regime geared toward the creation of fully protected employment if it is accompanied by legal guarantees for greater democracy within unions, in order to avoid persistent corruption. Thus, a fundamental struggle for the working class is ensuring that legal

¹⁴ On this particular issue, one can only speculate about the internal pressure that Luis D'Elía's uncompromising support for Kirchner might create within the CTA. Also, D'Elía's openly belligerent position vis-à-vis several organizations of the unemployed — some of which have close links to left-wing forces — might affect the scope for political alliances.

¹⁵ Some of the main points of contention are: 1) the continuation of legal norms that allow large companies to contract interns and apprentices under special regulations (some of the so-called '*contratos basura*'); 2) the avoidance of legal responsibility by the main enterprise toward workers in contractor firms; and 3) the ambiguous definition used for qualification in the special regime that allows small- and medium-sized enterprises to reduce their contributions to social security (CTA, 2004a).

provisions protect and extend the democratic functioning of its unions. Thirdly, and crucially, if these changes are to have a lasting impact in the quantity and quality of jobs generated in the economy, then government policy will also have to take aim at insuring a fairer distribution of income. I will explain this third point in more detail.

In addressing the problem of employment, the CTA attempts not only to respond to the devastating effects of neoliberalism on labour markets but also to establish a direct link between the setback suffered by workers and the crisis of development that afflicts the country as a whole. Redistribution can thus be understood as the central economic policy goal proposed by the CTA in its vision of sustainable and equitable development in Argentina.¹⁶ Following the CTA's analysis, a number of key variables in the economy are related to the way in which resources are appropriated by different sectors. In particular, the extremely unequal pattern of income and wealth distribution cemented over the last 25 years is at the core of the various imbalances and dislocations that characterized the economic experience of the country during this period. For instance, the pattern of income distribution favoured modes of consumption heavily dependent on imports. Moreover, the reduction in real income for a large proportion of Argentines meant the contraction of the domestic market and therefore the decline of national production. This, in turn, produced a steady reduction in levels of investment and, concomitantly, the unprecedented growth of unemployment. Equally importantly, the concentration of economic power in the hands of an increasingly small number of firms translated into growing political power, which allowed them to obtain privileged access to the state and the benefits that this implied. From this position, those privileged firms were able to secure the conditions that permitted them to obtain extremely high levels of profits, including those accruing from significant increases in the rate of exploitation of their workers. In short, to question the injustice inherent in the inequality that has been the most salient characteristic of the economic transformation of Argentina, particularly during the 1990s, implies bringing under scrutiny the whole productive structure that was built upon it. Following the same line of thought, an

¹⁶ This discussion is drawn from CTA, 2002b.

alternative to neoliberalism would include increasing controls to prevent capital flight, the implementation of a fair taxation system, the promotion of investment at the national level, the implementation of new forms of regulating foreign and monopolistic capital, and the reversal of the process of economic concentration.

The CTA has consistently identified this pattern of growth with the increasing destruction of the country's productive structure and the growing prominence of the financial sector in the economy (*valorización financiera*). To some extent, this characterization of change in Argentina during the last decade might obscure the momentous industrial restructuring that took place during the 1990s and that will affect the pattern under which reactivation and a longer-term process of economic growth takes shape (Bonnet, 2002). For example, according to the CTA, the alternative of fostering a program of economic change focused on the reactivation of the economy based on improving income redistribution would not include a 'national bourgeoisie.' This is so because one of the main consequences of restructuring has been the transnationalization of the economic elite, whose cycles of growth have become detached from the economic performance of the country. In other words, the sectors whose production still remains connected to the fortune of the domestic market are today the least dynamic and are incapable of affecting the conditions of accumulation (CTA, 2002b: 27-28). The question is, though, how would this transnationalized bourgeoisie be brought in line with a program of development based on the primacy of the domestic market, a more equal distribution of income, the extension of labour rights, and the democratization of labour relations?

The answer for the CTA lies, not surprisingly, in the other major component of its alternative: the deepening of democratic practices. It is the "...active participation and mobilization of popular sectors..." (CTA, 2002b: 30, my translation) which becomes the guarantee that a government could count on the political resources necessary to implement this plan. Because neoliberalism has marginalized or impoverished such a large proportion of the population, it has also created the conditions for massive support for an alternative to it. Here the question is not as much of method as it is of means: what will provide political content to mobilization so as to make it an effective tool in the extension of democracy? Ultimately, this is a long-term objective whose

achievement will require a profound transformation in the conception of politics.

In the meantime, the dangers for the working class remain quite concrete. The traditional labour leadership connected to the Peronist party has given clear indications about its own capacity for regeneration and influence within the government. Under these circumstances, it is also tempting for the CTA to try to secure a place of negotiation, all the more so if Kirchner continues to rally large levels of support among the population. Moreover, the very vocal support the president has elicited from a sizeable segment of the CTA under the leadership of D'Elía also complicates the process through which a coherent position vis-à-vis the government and its main plans can be determined. In this context, it will not always be easy for the CTA to strive for the achievement of the conditions that will increase the power of workers to struggle not only for the reduction in unemployment but also — and at least as important — to reverse the trends that have impacted so negatively on working conditions. Insofar as overcoming the worst of the economic crisis and sustaining the process of growth experienced since mid-2003 might become central components of a new consensus toward the building of a post-neoliberal Argentina, workers might be called upon to bear the costs of adjustment one more time. However, it should be clear by now that alternatives to neoliberalism do not necessarily and inevitably imply improvements for the working class. In this light, it appears that only the extension of progressive labour legislation, the democratization of union practices at all levels, and the acumen on the part of the CTA to maintain its autonomy from the government will provide workers in Argentina the tools to assure that their demands are addressed.

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