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# Labour process and decision-making in factories under workers' self-management: empirical evidence from Argentina

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the process of workers' self-management brought about by a wave of factory occupations, which has taken place in Argentina in the last few years, with the support of preliminary evidence from qualitative fieldwork conducted in four factories. The aim of the paper is to explore the dynamics of the decision-making and the re-organisation of the labour process in the light of the constraints imposed on self-management by market mediations. The act of occupying a factory, gives room to workers' control of the labour process and to a more democratic, collective decision-making. But workers' need to compete in the market reduces the sphere of collective decision, leading to centralisation of power and divisions between directive and productive workers, hampering the possibility for workers to enrich their job and avoid self-exploitation.

**Keywords:** Argentina, decision-making process, factories occupations, workers' self-management, work re-organisation

## **Introduction**

The turn of the century found Argentina in a state of economic and political turmoil. On the one side, the economic downturn experienced by the country between 1998 and 2002, by leaving hundreds of companies in a situation of bankruptcy and thousands of wage-workers facing the prospect of unemployment, threatened the livelihoods of the subaltern classes as a whole. On the other side, the combination of instability in the political alignments and divisions in the ruling elite with a process of popular mobilisation, led to the social upheaval that brought down the Government in December 2001. In this context, thousands of workers gradually began to take control of the machinery, buildings and installations of the factories in crisis or abandoned by their owners, and re-started the production as a mean to guarantee their survival. The occupations were thus originated as a defensive action against job losses in the midst of massive unemployment (Martínez & Vocos 2002).

A recent official survey has identified 161 factories, mainly concentrated in the Great Buenos Aires, with a workforce of 7135 (Ministerio de Trabajo 2005), but sources differ in this respect (Palomino 2005; Fajn 2003). More than a quarter are metallurgical companies followed by food processing, meat packing and printing companies. Yet, it is possible to find cases in activities like health and educational services, supermarkets and hotels. According to Rebón (2004a), the ideal-typical case would be an approximately 40 years old small or medium factory, which used to employ at its peak between 45 and 100 workers and downsized its structure over the last two decades expelling around two-thirds of its workforce. In the

main, they were the victims of the market oriented reforms, which opened the economy to international competition. Factors like lack of financial support, technological backwardness and changes in the structure of costs, among others, contribute to explain why these particular companies failed to adapt to the new competitive environment (Briner & Cusmano 2003).

After the occupation, workers had to face not only organisational and productive but also political and legal challenges to start up the production under self-management. In this sense, a critical aspect has been the legal framework. In the beginning the debate oscillated around forming co-operatives or demanding the nationalisation of the factories under workers' control, but with this latter solution ruled out by authorities', the constitution of traditional co-operatives remained the only viable way to legally operate in the market.

However, these new co-operatives differ in principle from well-established and traditional ones in several aspects. One obvious and crucial point is their birthmark: they are the outcome of the occupation of a private property. This meant, in the majority of cases, the existence of bitter struggles and conflicts, frequently including the use of police repression (or its threat) to evict workers from the premises and restore the former property. Because of this history of struggle and resistance, in these companies a radical co-operative ethos predominate, in which the central role attributed to the assembly in the decision-making process, the elimination of supervisory posts, the values attributed to self-management and the equal distribution of income are paramount.

Considering the range of the theoretical and practical issues involved, it comes at no surprise that the process of factory occupations has called the attention of a wide range of political activists, journalists and scholars in Argentina. Academic research has mainly revolved around four approaches used, often, in combination.

First, sociologically informed studies that describe the main innovative features of the factory occupations and the context in which these have occurred (Fajn 2003; Rebón 2004a, 2004b). Second, studies that show interest for the features adopted by the labour process and the decision-making within these companies (Deledicque et al. 2004; Deledicque & Moser 2005; Fajn & Rebón 2005; Fernández Alvarez 2003, 2005; Ghibaudi 2004). Third, studies that focus on the occupations from the perspective of the social movement and collective action frameworks (Davolos & Perelman 2004; Palomino 2005), stressing their contribution to

building new social values, new organisational forms and new modes of mobilisation. Finally, studies which explore the impact of the process of occupations and self-management on workers' subjectivity (Antón & Rebón 2005; Davolos & Perelman 2004; Deledicque et al. 2004).

These trends of research have made important contributions to a better understanding of the phenomenon. All of them, in turn, stress the radical agenda arising from workers' practical needs over the process of occupations. However, it is the premise of this paper that they do not pay enough attention to the extent to which the market logic itself has limited the range of the radical changes pursued by workers after the occupations. Thus, this paper aims at providing empirical evidence of this dimension. Its starting point is that the study of changes in the labour process and decision-making should take into account the full circuit of capital (Kelly 1985, Lebowitz 2003). This perspective, emphasising the dynamics existing between the changes in the sphere of production and the constraints emanating from the sphere of circulation, is crucial to any assessment on the future of workers' self-management.

The paper begins by presenting the theoretical and methodological framework of the research. After that, on the basis of four case studies, the main section of the paper will be devoted to provide evidence of the limits and contradictions imposed by market dynamics on workers' radical agenda in the realm of production. On the basis of this evidence, the concluding section, addressing the main theoretical questions, will sum up the findings of the research.

## **Theoretical issues**

The issue of workers' self-management has a long pedigree in social thought as it involves crucial and complex questions on alternative social systems of production. In this sense, it has always been central to a wide range of studies and debates: from the analysis of historical episodes of factory occupations (Gramsci 1970) to the politics of workers' control (Hyman 1974, Tomlinson 1980, Wajcman 1983), from the institutions of workers' councils (van der Linden 2004) to the fate of the Yugoslav self-managing market socialism (Lebowitz 2006). Yet, it is the debate focused on the emancipatory potential of the co-operative movement in the field of production (Egan 1990), as it has been developed within the Marxist tradition, which comprises the most appropriate theoretical discussions for the purpose of this paper.

Can workers' co-operatives be the vehicle for radical and democratic change or their emancipatory potential is destined to degenerate due to the logic of market competition?

Marx saw in workers' cooperatives a progressive resolution of the antagonistic nature of the supervision of the labour process under capitalism as management becomes "a function of labour instead of capital" (Egan 1990: 71). For him, the workers' cooperative "was a practical demonstration that capital was not necessary as a mediator in social production" (Lebowitz 2003: 89), and then, that wage-labour was just a transitory and historical social form. Yet, Marx often underlined the limits that workers' cooperatives encounter within the capitalist system since these "naturally reproduce, and must reproduce everywhere in their actual organization all the shortcomings of the prevailing system" (Marx 1967: 440).

Bernstein's opinion on workers' cooperatives was somehow ambiguous. On the one side, he was critical of industrial cooperatives. For him, these were associations for sale and exchange, which had a tendency towards exclusiveness and oligarchy opposed to the interests of the community (Bernstein 1899). Additionally, market competition would either distort their internal democratic content or condemn these experiences to failure. On the contrary, the associations of purchasers, the cooperatives stores, by striving for keeping down prices and the profit rate, in practice, would pursue the aims of the community as a whole, contributing to safeguard industrial cooperatives from market competition. Then, the combination of both types of associations was deemed to be for Bernstein a suitable instrument for gradual social change.

Luxemburg was to react angrily against this reformist programme. She would underline the hybrid character of workers' cooperatives - as cooperatives "can be described as small units of socialised production within capitalist exchange" (Luxemburg 1900); and besides, no consumer cooperative, *a la* Bernstein, would encourage the development of workers' associations in the most important branches of production. Since cooperatives were "totally incapable of transforming the *capitalist mode of production*" (Luxemburg 1900), she stressed that the only way to survive within capitalism keeping a democratic content was "by removing themselves artificially from the influence of the laws of free competition" (Luxemburg 1900), precisely, the role to be fulfilled by purchaser associations in Bernstein's model.

Since then, most Marxist writers tended to adopt an utter negative attitude towards workers' cooperatives. Mandel's writings are perhaps the most extreme and well-known examples of this development. In his view, there is no real or meaningful self-management insofar it is limited to single companies operating within the market. Thus, revolutionary strategies built upon factory occupations and self-management are considered utopian dreams, which ultimately deny the role played by the State in securing domination under capitalism (Mandel 1970, 1974).

By contrast, some recent attempts have stressed the radical and democratic potential of workers' cooperatives, and the chance that given certain conditions, this content could survive against the market odds. For instance, Egan (1990) has argued that the relationship between workers' cooperatives and capitalist markets is mediated by the balance of class forces. Insofar as "the cooperative sector is grounded in a context of radical working-class self-organization, it acquires the material strength and cooperative consciousness necessary for survival in a hostile environment" (Egan 1990: 82). In turn, applying the Gramscian notion of war of position, Baldacchino (1990: 475) has argued for an active strategy directed towards "diluting or counteracting the sources of degeneration" of the democratic content of self-management based on counter-institutional support for workers' cooperatives. In short, both authors recognise the limitations that even the most radical experiences of self-management have to tolerate in a capitalist market, while acknowledging "the positive qualitative developments which such organizations reflect" (Egan 1990: 76) and the likelihood of reinforcing them through an appropriate strategy.

Overall, these debates show that analyses of workers' self-management must not isolate theoretically the sphere of production from the relationships that workers establish in the sphere of circulation to buy inputs, sell the products and reproduce themselves and their families.

This is something rather neglected in the current literature on workers' occupations in Argentina as scholars, while often acknowledging the existence of market limitations, have however preferred to explain the changes occurred in the factories by focusing on agency rather than structural factors. Instead, the key insight of this paper, is that "just as capital is the mediator for wage-labour, separating the worker from her labour-power as property, from her labour as activity and from the product of her labour – so also is capital the mediator between wage-labourers in each moment of the circuit of capital" (Lebowitz 2003: 88). So, self-managed factories achieve the replacement of capital as a mediator



between the worker and her labour-power, which otherwise should be sold as a commodity, and also both in the direction and supervision of production, and in the ownership of the products of labour. Yet, self-managed workers cannot get rid of the mediation of capital in the sphere of circulation as owner of other means of production and articles of consumption, that is, when buying inputs and selling outputs, and when workers individually engage in their own reproduction.

This theoretical background sets the basis of our research. Empirical data will thus be used to test how market competition constrains workers' democratic achievements both in terms of decision-making and work re-structuring, while acknowledging like Egan (1990) and Baldacchino (1990) that this does not necessarily mean that workers' experiences of self-management are to entirely succumb to the logic of market.

## **Methodology**

This paper's fieldwork, part of an on-going research project on workers' self-management in Argentina, has been conducted in 4 factories in the Province of Buenos Aires during the months of January and February 2006. The paper's preliminary findings are based on the data collected in the first part of the project, while work was in progress on 6 more factories.

Cases have been selected by using criteria of diversification, so to gather information on both work re-organisation and the decision-making process from factories with different production processes (construction, printing, show makers, paper production). Both in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observation have been used.

Participant observation oscillates from full participation (typically represented by getting a working role in the organisation) to less engaged external observation (note taking, informal chats, and observation of different phases of production, workers' assemblies and informal gatherings). In our case this latter set of techniques was preferred considering the aim, scope and context of the research.

Participant observation has been important to check the veracity of interviewees' descriptions through data triangulation, and thus, to understand how concretely work is (re) organised and decisions are taken.

Not always workers on the line - due to their dependency on the speed of production, were able to talk extendedly. Thus although we have tried to select the interviews by a criteria of diversification, in the factories studied, two third of the 12 people formally interviewed occupied representative/administrative positions. Their knowledge of the labour process may have not exactly matched with the reality. However the cross checks of field notes and interviews did not apparently show substantial differences in terms of labour process's description, as the majority of those in the administration had a past as production workers. By the contrary, attendance at assembly proved to be very useful in terms of getting a detailed description of issues discussed and to assess how discretionary was the power of leaders/workers' delegate.

Considering the aim of the paper, fieldwork questions have been formulated around the following two clusters.

As for the decision-making process, we have been looking at issues of democracy and participation in the assembly, at the issues discussed in these meetings, at the relations between this latter and the directive council, at the role of leaders, and at the existence of informal channels of communication and decision-making.

As for the labour process, we have been investigating the relation between production and direction work, the distribution of tasks within the collective of workers, the rhythms of production, the distribution of income, the coordination of production, the opportunity for personal development, and how discipline and control are enforced.

### **The case studies**

This research is based on workers' experiences of self-management in 4 factories located in the Great Buenos Aires: Unión Papelera Platense (UPP, paper production), Gráfica Patricios (Patricios, printing), Cooperativa Unidos por el Calzado (CUC, shoes makers), Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores (UST, construction). The factories employ respectively 55, 30, 110 and 65 workers. In each case, the number of workers was almost doubled since the productive activity restarted. Technological backwardness, old machines and precarious installations characterise all the factories, with the partial exception of Patricios.

The factories adopted the status of a cooperative as the legal property form. Each cooperative has its own statute book that establishes some basic rules and regulate rights and duties of the

members. The general assembly and a directive council are the organs that formally take decisions.

In the first three cases the occupation followed the bankruptcy or the deep economic crisis of the company, a situation in which workers were the first victims with wage credits for thousand of pesos and unpaid employers' social security contributions. The struggle to defend the occupation, reinforced the internal cohesion and created the conditions for the establishments of solidarity links with the community and workers from other occupied factories.

All these cooperatives are taking advantage of the recovery of the economy and the internal market expansion after the devaluation of the national currency, with the sole exception of CUC that is experiencing the difficulties involved in the start-up of the productive activities.

### **Radical changes in the context of market competition: empirical evidence**

There is a tangible tension emerging from workers' own accounts and the observation of self-management. Workers defend their own power over the organisation of production and the decision-making process by proudly stressing their freedom from direct/supervisory control, the existence of equalitarian relations and the benefits of democratic participation. At the same time, they are compelled to take pragmatic decisions in the everyday market life of the co-operative that implicitly limit and compromise the extent of the radical changes introduced. Under the pressure of guaranteeing their own survival workers subvert the power relations, which underpin the capitalist employment relationship. However, it is only as the process of self-management developed that workers became conscious of the radical character of the changes introduced. But, how far are they conscious of market constraints? Are they aware of this but accepting the compromise? In any case, what are the consequences for self-management?

Thus, consequent with the research objectives and the theoretical concerns previously raised, this section aims to provide concrete examples on how market competition interferes and limits the extent of the changes introduced by workers after the occupations, both in relation to the decision-making process and the re-organisation of work. The adoption of this focus should help to evaluate the prospects of self-management in the co-operatives under study.

## **a) Who decides what?**

Regarding the decision-making process, the factories studied do not differ consistently from similar experiences analysed by other scholars (Deledicque et al. 2004; Fajn 2003; Fernández Alvarez 2003).

The assembly is considered as the main organ for decisions and the place where each worker can freely express his/her opinion. The directive council, elected by the assembly, is in charge of the daily administration, commercial responsibilities, legal representation and executive tasks.

According to the data collected through direct observation, an assembly normally addresses the list of priorities prepared by the directive council and suggestions from individuals or groups of workers. A standard meeting may include information and decision-taking about: technical problems related to the production line, investments in new machines or maintenance, market perspectives, relationships with clients, income distribution, the development of new products, legal matters, the recruitment of new workers, extension of the working day and holidays, participation in demonstrations and solidarity events, and so forth. General assemblies are held regularly during the year with a minimum fixed in the statute book of each factory and with more frequency depending on the urgency of debating issues considered of fundamental importance. Factories differ greatly, however, in this respect.

While the UST and CUC hold meetings frequently, the UPP and Patricios organise just a few over the year. Whether this variability seems to express, in part, differences in the commitment of their respective directive councils with workers' participation, it manifests structural pressures. Objective factors, like the features of the labour process and market pressures, condition the existence of formal or informal organs for workers' participation and democracy. For instance, according to the workers, longer working days – up to twelve hours – and the requirements of continuous production line are among the factors which conspire against more frequent meetings in the UPP. Direct observation confirmed that in order to gather all workers, machines must be completely stopped there. In the case of Patricios, while production can be interrupted without much compromise for the quality of the targeted outputs, the rhythms and timing of production remain strictly dependant on delivery deadlines fixed by clients' changing demands. This condition makes difficult the coordination between different shifts and thus, certain regularity for mass meetings. Nevertheless, this

deficiency seems somehow corrected by an efficient system of representation in the directive council, composed of delegates from each section. By the contrary, in the case of CUC, working time on a single shift, workers' physical proximity and delivery deadlines slightly more flexible, give room for a certain frequency of both formal and informal meetings.

Despite these differences, it is important to mention that, in all the cases, workers have always guaranteed, by statute, the possibility to force the directive councils to call for a mass meeting, provided that, at least, a minimum number of them formulate a common request. Hence, legal instruments for a "democracy from below" are always provided and this may certainly be considered one of the pillars, albeit formal, of self-management that workers do not seem willing to compromise. However, if the existence of formal or informal organs for workers' participation and democracy certainly helps to develop better communication, this does not necessarily imply horizontality in the decision-making process.

Crucial to evaluate the extent of horizontality in decision-making is the dynamic of the relationship between workers' and directive council prerogatives. In this regards, a constant tension seems always to be present between the need to collectively share information and decision-making, and the need to centralise the same process in the hands of a restricted number of workers.

As it was paternalistically stated by a member of CUC's directive council, when stressing the need for a degree of autonomy in the 'executive decisions':

*'In my opinion it is important that a directive council keeps its own space for decision I have workmates in the directive council that cannot take a decision if the workmates in the assembly have not decided. And I say: this does not work. Because the directive council has to take a decision, the workmates need to believe in a leader, somebody that can tell them what is correct'.*

Despite this tension, the search for consensus and wide participation is central in all the factories and workers, at both coordinating and productive levels, are explicitly committed to it. Even in those cases, Patricios and the UPP for instance, where the calls for the general assembly are less frequent, informal channels of communications and feedback from the shop-floor do exist. In the following quotation, the person responsible for marketing in Patricios gives an example of the steps that constitute the process of informal communication and decision:

*'Once I get a new client, I then need to manage this internally, I need to organise meetings with people of all the sections, to explain to them what we are asked to produce, in what quantity, in which quality, and once all this has been explained check that it is really implemented... We do not have supervisors, bosses, nothing, so it is more like that specific functions are delegated, I know who is the responsible for a certain operation, let's say that I know who are the leaders'.*

Yet, the building-process of democratic consensus is often constrained by the pressures arising from the mediation of capital in the sphere of circulation. The markets where these companies need to insert themselves do not require consensus but immediate decisions. There are always "practical" reasons that influence the possibility to adopt decisions collectively and interrupt regular exchanges of information in the plants: the necessity to maintain a constant flux of production, the due date for the delivery of new products, a quick answer to catch a new business opportunity.

As stated by an interviewee:

*'We have lost some opportunities for our slowness to convince people, because sometimes you need to convince your workmates, they cannot see the business...'* (CUC, directive council).

This last point, that decisions need to be taken in relation to business, is particularly important as it establishes an *a priori* agenda interfering on the democratic decision-making process.

The experience of self-management in a market economy forces the workers to take on commercial tasks: they have to become sellers of their production, find new markets, maintain commercial relationships with suppliers and customers, advertise their products, deal with banks, keep the books of the firm, and so forth. As white collar workers' did not participate in the occupations, workers have had to cope somehow with these multiple commercial issues.

In all the cases under study, these tasks are carried out by two or three workers together with members of the directive council. Indeed, this division between workers in charge of commercial/administrative tasks and those dedicated to production tends to be preserved and reinforced by obstacles to job rotation related to skill specialisation. Thus, material conditions promote the development of a special layer of workers that because immersed in clerical and commercial work functional to the market, show a greater disposition to adopt a commercial pragmatism.

In this sense, the case of the re-organisation of the administrative and commercial function reinforces the main argument of the paper. An objective factor, the need to sell in the market and to deal with customers, imposes the creation of a specific function and material pressures towards delegation and skill specialisation. Then, for those performing this function, the necessity to be market responsive becomes the primary concern. Thus a subjective attitude, the adoption of a commercial pragmatism, imposed by an objective factor is subsequently re-produced in the discourse dominating in the workplace, re-creating the conditions for the supremacy of market logic. In turn, because of the urgency of the realisation of commodities, given the vulnerable situation of these factories, workers in the administration tend to increase their power in relation to those in production.

The detachment between those who perform manual activities and those who commit to organising, planning and marketing manifests culturally, through apathy, lack of participation and dismissive attitudes among the workforce towards others' responsibilities.

In particular, despite their relative dependence on those in charge of the administration and commercialisation, there are prejudices among manual workers against clerical work; thus, they tend to dodge administrative and commercial tasks reinforcing the division. Besides, manual workers usually dismiss those performing these functions. On the contrary, those who carry out administrative and commercial work complain about these attitudes:

*'Many of those who are in production think "people who are there at the administrative section are just sitting about" but it is not like this, you have to answer the phone, to fill forms and send paper... I used to think the same, I always comment on this with the workmates, and they laugh, but now I recognise how difficult it is' (CUC, administration, former production worker).*

Yet, this tendency to delegate the administrative and commercial activities to a small group of workers and, consequently, reduce the sphere of active participation does not, however, mean a passive acceptance. Workers have a real power to ask information, demand the organisation of meetings, and decide collectively. Thus, while the division between those inside and outside the directive council, which overlaps with the division between those performing manual and those performing administrative/commercial tasks, recreates the conditions for the development of a particular type of an "us" and "them" culture, though far from the reproduction of the same relations existing before the occupations.

All these contradictions emanate from the features of workers' cooperative property. On the one hand, there are material conditions, which reduce the opportunities for workers' participation, and hence, encourage apathy and the transfer of the collective responsibility to leaders and directive council members. On the other hand, the new production relations enjoyed by self-managed workers along with their concrete interests in the well being of the company they now truly own, make them contest those with prerogatives to take certain decisions on behalf of the collective worker.

The problems raised in this section should let us present in more realistic terms the processes of decision-making and the degree of horizontality reached by the self-managed workers of the factories under study (Fajn and Rebon 2005; Fernández Álvarez 2003). However, the dynamic of the relationships between assemblies and directive councils, the differences between leaders and lay workers, the inherent ambiguities in the workers' passage from dependency to self-management, do also tell us of the democratically enriching process experienced by workers in the self-managed factories.

## **b) The labour process under workers' self-management**

In the attempt to establish a causal connection between changes in the labour process under workers' self-management and market competition, two main areas of analysis were identified: on the one side, technology and the division of labour and the other side, the elimination of supervisory posts and forms of discipline enforcement. As for the decision-making process, changes in the labour process do tell us of both market influence and workers' defence of those self-management achievements already considered as irreversible.

### *b.1.) Technology and the division of labour*

The technical division of labour within the four productive unities under study has remained untouched and this confirms what has also been shown by other studies (Fajn & Rebón 2005; Fernández Álvarez 2003; Deledicque & Moser 2005; Deledicque et al. 2004). Moreover, the possibility of a restructuring of the labour process does not even appear to be among the explicit objectives of workers.

Some studies (Antón & Rebón 2005; Fajn 2003; Fajn & Rebón 2005; Fernández Álvarez 2003, 2005; Rebón 2004a, 2004b) seem to have found in this fact an index of an undeveloped political



consciousness. Hence, they explain the absence of changes in the labour process as a variable ultimately dependent on workers' subjectivity. However, these accounts remain one-sided insofar as they do not incorporate the structural determinants underlying this situation.

Technology is the first factor conditioning workers' ability to introduce changes in the labour process. This is so, mainly, when workers are appendices of an automatic and continuous process of production dictated by an integrated system of machines, as in the case of the UPP.

When in the production line labour is performed by the combined use of simple machines, whose operation depends on skilled workers, and by automatic machines, some minor changes seem to have occurred (for instance, in Patricios unification of sections and task design in CUC). This, in particular, may be noted in the case of skilled workers operating simple machines. In the case of the UST, by contrast, the activity comprises a variety of autonomous tasks, which depended on workers' ability to manage simple tools, and therefore, the labour process there is a diffuse result of multiple isolated actions. In any case, the important thing to note is that in all cases the technical division of labour shows no substantial differences with the previous mode of organising production.

In the co-operatives under study, the level of technology is often older than that of the leading companies in their respective product markets. The lack of initial capital, workers' repayment of the company's debts and the uncertainties associated with the legal situations of the co-operatives, do not provide sufficient financial resources for technological improvements and machines updates. In this context, workers should compensate this disadvantage by different means, which often entail savings arising from the elimination of managerial posts, but may also include work intensification as in the cases of UPP and Patricios, particularly during the start-up of the factory, but also beyond the founding period. Thus, market competition constrains workers' choices as there is hardly any room for these companies to essay changes in the face of a hostile environment.

While the technical division of labour appears as an improbable area for innovation, job rotation might have been considered to compensate the former, so alleviating workers from routines and repetitive tasks. However, none of the productive unities have adopted job rotation, in accordance with similar findings reported by scholars researching other experiences – with the remarkable

exceptions of FASINPAT/Zanon (ceramics), and to a lesser degree, Brukman (textile) (Aiziczon 2006; Fernández Alvarez 2005).

However, it is worthwhile to note that interviewees say that learning new tasks would be useful to upgrade their skills and allow the replacement of fellow workers in case of necessity. Anecdotes of workers who have developed a better knowledge of different phases of the production process and learned new tasks abounded, as well as cases of production workers willing to get involved in administrative tasks, but often as the result of individual initiatives. Moreover, multi-tasking has been observed in different phases of production (workers attending the neighbour's section of the machine for short periods, CUC/Patricios/UPP; or workers helping each others in the packing of the final product for a timely delivery, Patricios).

In the case of the UPP, for instance, workers stress the existence of concrete barriers to implement a job rotation policy also due to the pressures arising from market competition. According to them, the latter restrict their chances to spend time in learning new tasks, for the operation of the machines requires not only specific technical knowledge but also practical experience to deal with daily minor inconveniences presented by out-of-date technology. Hence, workers recognise that job rotation would be valuable but not possible for the time being. Furthermore, and although findings were not conclusive, another source of resistance to job rotation seems to arise from skilled workers, who usually occupy a prominent role in the cooperatives under study. Typical of this is the case of CUC, where those with craft-knowledge are scarce, and therefore, enjoy a particular status. In this sense, the labour market proves to be another conditioning factor. The average wage of skilled workers is usually higher than the average income in the self-managed factories. Thus, the cooperatives should either pay for skilled workers in the labour market or secure them certain non-monetary benefits.

Yet, our argument would be misleading if the identification of the continuity as regards the materiality of the labour process and task design, leads us to downplay the extent of the changes brought about by workers' self-management, in particular, with reference to the nature of the coordination of the labour process. While it is possible to identify key tasks and locations in the production process, the predominant feature is the de-centralisation of the decision-making as regards technical matters. In each case, workers communicate through formal and informal channels all along the process of production. Cooperation seems to be the leading motive. This is not to mean that there are no conflicts and

problems both within and between working groups. Indeed, there are, and the absence of job rotation as a policy contributes to increase the opportunities for workers to identify themselves with smaller groupings. Still, it has been observed in the majority of cases that cooperation prevails in most occasions (this for instance in the case of machines maintenance and identifying/solving problems in the chain of production).

*b.2.) Factories without bosses and also without discipline?*

As epitomised by the acronym of one of the most known cases of occupied factory, FASINPAT (factory without bosses), self-managed factories main characteristic is the elimination of managerial and supervisory posts, and hence, of the former system of control. As a consequence of this, the relaxation of discipline is noticeable in these factories. In the absence of vertical disciplinary apparatus, individual responsibility is the value advocated by interviewees to ensure a smooth process of production:

*'the potential of this factory will be expressed if everybody understands that everybody has to behave in the proper way in the moment of production so as to transform raw materials into finished outputs'* (CUC, directive council).

In addition to this, the role of individual responsibility is also to ensure the quality of the intermediate and final products.

*'There is no quality control, each person does his/her own quality control and the person who receives the shoe, has to send the shoe back if it is discovered that has not been manufactured in the proper way'* (CUC, production).

*'The quality is checked through all the production process and each person has a responsibility for his/her own work but also looks at the others'* (Patricios, production).

However, the ideal of shared responsibility, conflicts sometimes against the reality of individual conduct, which deviates from the collective norms. This has pushed, even the most radical experiences like the UST, to adopt internal rule books:

*'We had to introduce an internal code of rules otherwise there are cases of people coming at a quarter past eight, and it does not work in this way. We should not need to have an internal code of rules if all do what they are supposed to do, we all have the same responsibility, but at the end we need this book because there are*

*workmates that do not do what they are supposed to do' (UST, directive council).*

In fact, the former system was always replaced by rule books discussed and agreed by workers in mass assemblies. Mainly, the rule books were thought to deal with absenteeism, negatives to find an accommodation to customary tasks and paces of work, and severe cases of misbehaviour (from robbery to fights between workers). Yet, money incentives, were maintained, or reintroduced when absenteeism threatened to become a problem. In the case of UST, for instance, the problem of unjustified absenteeism was debated by the collective of workers in the assembly and it was considered as an index of lack of individual consciousness. In the main, however, the problem was framed within a perspective, which stresses the links between individual effort and material reward:

*'We need to understand that each kilo produced means money for the cooperative, money not for the owner but to be distributed among all of us' (UPP, production).*

An evident consequence of the relaxation of the disciplinary system of control has been in all the factories the tendency to slow the pace of work. The dark side of this relaxation is that findings have shown that to achieve the needed output and match market demand, workers work longer hours when necessary. In the UPP, where machines cannot be stopped, the working day is 12 hours long so as to cover both shifts without employing more people. Although from observation these workers do not seem stressed or running against the clock and are often involved in moments of social interaction, young workers, recently integrated in the co-operative, in particular, are not happy of the long shifts which generate constant argument of debate. In Patricios, weekends are often working days and the use of overtime is practically compulsory, because newspaper and magazine printing is dependent on delivery deadlines fixed by the client. By the contrary, workers at CUC do not resign themselves to stay more than the regular 8 hours. As a consequence, there is an ongoing argument between those who think this is necessary to match products market demands and those who do not. In the cases of Patricios and UPP, however longer shifts are compensated by more comfortable production rhythms. Besides, in every case, no matter how many hours they are forced to work to remain competitive in the market, workers argue that the atmosphere of the workplace has been radically transformed by the elimination of supervisors and bosses. What workers seem to value most is their current freedom to move around the factory, to have longer rest-hours, and to communicate with each other without the risk of being punished.

As clearly stated by a worker:

*'Before I could not go to the printing machines section without a specific reason, and the boss of the section used to tell me "you cannot stay here, you need to go to your section". It was the same the other way round, when people from the printing section used to come here. Thus in this way they could maintain the division between different sections and also, because of a lack of communication, they created false rivalries' (Patricios, production).*

In summary, it is possible to argue that the substitution of the former managerial authority with collective self-discipline/peers pressure is a process that still needs substantial developments. The substitution of the former managerial authority with another, albeit collective, form of authority is not a direct equation. With the disappearance of supervisors, the personification of capitalist authority also disappears. Yet, it is the authority of market competition the one that now directly, without any intermediaries, imposes on workers the respect of delivery times, product quality, and competitive prices. Thus the market itself may be seen as the fundamental regulator of workers' discipline, and this in the forms of both collective sanctions, like with rules books and peer reviewed quality standards, and individual rewards.

Here again, as previously in relation to both decision-making and the labour process, cooperatives face the same problem that has dominated critical thinking on the co-operative movement for decades: capital is expelled from the sphere of production just to be re-encountered in the sphere of circulation.

## **Conclusions**

Following a long established tradition of critical thinking on the emancipatory potential of co-operative work, in our empirical analysis we have attempted to provide tangible evidence of the multiple limitations that market competition, and other related structural factors, imposes on workers' experiences of self-management.

The occupation of the factories and their functioning under workers' self-management produces a series of changes/adaptations in the sphere of production. The absence of the capitalist, of hierarchy, of intermediate managerial layers and forms of direct control, expel the despotic rationality of capital from the sphere of production and open a new space for workers' intervention. This tends to be directed to the establishment of a more democratic, egalitarian and

participatory decision-making process at all levels, emphasised by the central role assigned to the general assembly and epitomised by the redistribution of the generated income in equal parts.

Once the collective of workers is confronted with the market, those spaces of autonomy and control gained by workers after the expulsion of capital from the sphere of production, tend to be reduced. The need to take decisions quickly, to search for new clients, to decide about strategic investments, and, in short, to fully engage with other enterprises in the sphere of circulation, has immediate consequences on both the decision-making process and the organisation of work.

As for the first aspect, we can see a tendency to reduce the space for collective decision and consequently a separation between productive and directive workers. As for the second aspect, the lack of initial capital, the obsolescence of the machines and the pressure of competition hinder the possibility for workers to learn new jobs and rotate, to avoid self-exploitation, or to reduce the intensity and the length of the working day.

These findings, while in line with previous theoretical work on the subject, clearly show that any attempt to evaluate the perspective of self-management and generalise from particular experiences need to consider the existence of structural factors. Subjective and cultural explanations may have an important role insofar as these are consistently grounded in a vision of the capitalist system as dominating both the sphere of production and circulation.

This ontological stance is fundamental to grasp the complex dynamics underlying workers' experiences of self-management. In the Argentinean cases, workers reacted to structural conditions leading to their starvation by spontaneously occupying the plants and revolutionising the former system of control and decision. This is probably the most important insight coming from these experiences as it shows how structural factors created the conditions for a workplace based class action. But in an inverse process, as we have shown, the market is limiting these changes forcing workers to compromise.

Can workers resist the pressure of capitalist market forces? Certainly the whole process of occupation and the start-up of self-managed production empowered and gave self-confidence to each worker and there are aspects of self-management on which workers are not ready to compromise. But this question needs to be answered by looking outside the workplace, a dimension for further research beyond the scope of this paper.

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