

The re-emergence of workplace based organisation as the new expression of conflict in Argentina

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Introduction

Since the turn of the century, labour conflict in Argentina has taken on a wide and diverse range of forms and expressions influenced by economic cycles and changing political conditions. In the context of economic stagnation and unemployment surrounding the 2001 crisis, workers' demands were framed within wider patterns of social mobilization which saw less significance attached to union-led mobilization. This was the time of road occupations by the initiative of the unemployed to demand productive employment, and of the factories occupations - the so-called 'recovered factories' - by which workers defended their jobs and reinvented it under workers' control. Both processes gained worldwide resonance and have been analysed widely in the international literature (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, Bryer 2010, Dinerstein 2002, 2008, Grigera 2006). However, since the economic recovery of 2003 the return to more traditional labour conflicts and the revitalisation of unions together with the increase of collective bargaining have taken place. This renewed strength of Argentinean unions has been explained by a combination of economic, political and institutional variables, *inter alia*, economic and employment growth, which resulted in a steady reduction of unemployment rates (Kosacoff 2010), government emphasis in employment generation and collective bargaining (Palomino and Trajtemberg 2006), and the role given to central unions confederations in tripartite bodies (Etchemendy and Collier 2007).

This context has produced fertile soil for the re-emergence of the democratic and initiative aspects of unionism which, on the one hand, have given room to grassroots mobilisations and direct actions that empowered workers at the workplace and, on the other hand, has favoured a renewal of strategies and leaderships, framing these within a more leftist discourse. Although these can hardly be considered as new phenomena in Argentinean union history, their relevance goes beyond an assertion of pure novelty. These bottom-up initiatives, even if proportionally few, have nonetheless represented through their emphasis on participation and democracy a qualitative step forward with respect to traditional union representation and methods of struggle. In turn, this has re-instilled in Argentina a debate on union democracy and forms of workers' representation while at the same time expressing in everyday demands the most radical opposition to neo-liberalism. In this sense, the renewed visibility of workplace-based organisations, the so-called *comisiones internas* (shop floor commissions), a distinctive trait in the structure of labour unionism in Argentina and historically one of the sources of workers' power (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2011, Basualdo 2009, Lenguita and Varela 2011), can be seen as an important and promising novelty and development in the field of workers' struggle.

A detailed analysis of some of the emblematic cases and of the practices adopted by workers, while contributing to discussions about new forms and expressions of conflict and to existing debates on unions renewal more in general (Fairbrother 2000, Hyman 2004, Phelan 2007, Gall 2009), also offers the opportunity to engage with debates on i) unions' nature as both *movements* and *institutions* (Cohen 2006), ii) the never ending democracy versus bureaucracy debate (Darlington and Upchurch 2012, Belkin and Ghigliani 2010, Hyman 1975,

1979, Martínez Lucio 2012, Norris and Zeitlin 1995), and iii) the role of leadership, particularly leftwing, and workplace collective action (Beynon 1984, Cohen 2011, Darlington 1994, 2002, 2006, Fantasia 1988, Gall 2003).

Using these theoretical debates as a background, after a section giving a brief description of key cases, this chapter is structured around three main areas of analysis in which it focuses upon the following a) the main determinants in the recurrence of these 'movement type' union, b) the continuing tensions existing between grassroots initiatives aspiration to democracy and participation and the need to adopt institutionalising practices in their everyday functioning, and c) the role of leaders in framing collective action and the tension existing between this role and internal democracy.

Methodology

The empirical material on which this chapter is structured draws from different sources. It is based on an ongoing investigation on the issue of trade union democracy in the Buenos Aires' underground (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2010) and previous research on workers' grass-root collective action in FATE and Mafissa (Schneider and Ghigliani 2010). The recent cases of workplace conflict and organization occurred in Argentina have achieved public relevance, being the object of several case study research, national newspapers, Left party press, union publications and workers' testimonies. These materials have been very useful in the analysis of the overall cases.

The methodological approach used is clearly inscribed in the field of qualitative studies, which are known to best capture the dynamics of social processes in the workplaces. In addition, we believe that the variety of primary and secondary sources used in the chapter allows for a balanced and widespread picture of the events analysed.

Grassroots organising and organisations

There have been over the last years a number of leading key cases in which grassroots initiatives ended up challenging both employers and established union leaderships through democratic narratives and practices. Indeed all these processes of mobilization have been characterized by a discourse based on principles of workers' democracy in organising (emphasis on the centrality of the assemblies in decision-making, regular elections of workers' representatives, leaders' accountability) and the actual implementation of practices of direct democracy.

Undoubtedly, the most salient and successful case has been that of Buenos Aires' underground workers, who put workers' democracy at the centre of a conscious strategy used in strengthening shop-floor organising. Since 2000, when winning the shop-floor structure of workers' representation against the official union representatives, the underground's workers increased their wages, obtained a 6-hour working day, stopped outsourcing and improved terms and conditions of employment through intensive campaigning combining industrial and direct action with periods of relative peace and negotiations. Simultaneously, the growing conflicts between the shop-steward structures and the *Unión Tranviarios Automotor* (UTA), the legal union organising the activity, led in 2009 to a split and the creation of a new union, the *Asociación Gremial de Trabajadores de Subte y Premetro* (AGTSyP) (Arias *et. al.* 2011, Atzeni and

Ghigliani 2010, Bouvet 2008, Ventrici 2009). This conflict was perhaps the most important event in the opening of a public discussion about the established model of union organization backed by the Argentinean labour laws.

There have been other democratic and grassroots organising initiatives, challenging employers and, occasionally, established union leaderships. In the textile firm, Mafissa, located in the Gran La Plata region, in the midst of the politicized environment following the 2001 popular upheaval, a tiny group of workers began gradually and clandestinely to discuss the need of re-organising the *comisión interna*, as the official union, the *Asociación de Obreros Textiles* (AOT), did not take action against falling wages and deteriorating terms and conditions. During 2005, through participatory democratic methods and narratives, activists organized numerous mass meetings to discuss their salaries and working conditions. By the end of the year, a decision was taken to demand a 40% increase. In the face of the difficulties to organise a strike in a company well-known for its anti-union attitude, workers blocked the factory's doors. Management reacted by dismissing 40 workers, with the conflict further escalating when workers occupied factory premises. Between 2005 and 2008, the *comisión interna* confronted management tactics through grassroots mobilization and increasingly bitter conflicts (including a lock-out, a factory occupation and police repression) that led to workers being finally defeated (Ghigliani and Schneider 2010).

In FATE, an important tyre factory in the north of the Buenos Aires's province, grassroots organising was sparked by the conflictive collective bargaining round of 2006 in the rubber industry, whose focus was not just on wage increases but also on different terms and conditions between old and new workers and on the introduction of a productivity agreement linked to a shared profit scheme. This broad focus opened different fronts in the conflict with the company. In this context, a initiative led by leftist activists, advocating mass-meetings and direct actions, gained in 2007 the majority in the election of the *comisión interna*. This left victory in the FATE plant derived from intra-union conflicts and realignments at both the union local and national level. Soon after FATE's *comisión interna* elections, activists from FATE together with other left workers' representatives from Pirelli and Bridgestone-Firestone won control of the union branch of San Fernando and obtained more than 40 % of ballots in the national election of the *Sindicato Único de Trabajadores del Neumático de Argentina* (SUTNA). Since then, however, this experience has undergone an uneven process of development, which ended up in electoral divisions (Ghigliani and Schneider 2010, Varela 2008, 2009). In the multinational food corporation, Kraft-Terrabusi, a conflict in 2009 witnessed a similar process of grassroots organizing led by left activists, although in this case, it had its roots in the 1990s and often was in conflict with union national leadership. It was only after 2001, this bottom-up building started to deepen and become more radical. The cause of the conflict was the dismissal of 158 workers, most of them activists, including five members of the *comisión interna* and the majority of the representatives of the *Cuerpo de Delegados* (shopfloor delegates assembly), neither of which was recognized by the company or by the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria de la Alimentación* (STIA). As a consequence, workers went on strike and occupied Kraft's premises for 37 days, before being violently evicted by police. However, because of a judicial decision, Kraft had to recognise delegates and to reinstall the laid off workers (Varela and Lotito 2009). At Praxair, an anti-union US multinational chemical firm, and after a long process of self-organisation, workers mounted a *comisión interna* which undertook a bitter conflict in order to get

company recognition, and then several others to improve wages and conditions. By contrast with the aforementioned cases, this *comisión interna* established a collaborative relationship with the official union, *Sindicato del Personal de Industrias Químicas y Petroquímicas* (SPIQyP) (Arecco et. al. 2009).

These sorts of grassroots organising have also been taking place among precarious workers, though usually with less success. Young workers from call centres attempted to organize grassroots structures through clandestine methods and networking on the web. Despite some initial advances, the ferocity of their employers' anti-union practices along with structural factors thwarted the attempts (Abal Medina 2011). An important process of workers' self-organisation occurred in the casinos of Buenos Aires, producing a highly politicized conflict where they faced a yellow union, the employers and political authorities, and were finally defeated. This experience was led by new, young activists and leftist party members (Belkin 2010). In a supermarket of the giant chain, Walmart, employees organized a *comisión interna* appealing to grassroots democratic narratives and practices. This organisation has a complicated relationship with the *Federación de Empleados de Comercio* (FEC) for the difficulties of maintaining high levels of grassroots participation limited its development, forcing the *comisión interna* to look for external support. This led to criticism from some workers. But this case should be still be seen as a successful one given Walmart's anti-union (Abal Medina and Crivelli 2011). The most successful grassroots organisation of precarious workers is perhaps that of *motoqueros* (motorbike messengers). These workers became famous during the 2001 popular upheaval when they confronted police, helped the injured and supplied logistics to demonstrators in the midst of bloody repression. The following years, the *Sindicato Independiente de Mensajeros y Cadetes* (SIMeCa), advocating grassroots democracy and resorting to direct action developed in size and implantation. In 2005, the union joined the *Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina* (CTA), and although it turned its attention to negotiations and launched a process of institutionalization which ended with its recognition by the public authorities, it did not eschew direct action (Barattini and Pascual 2011).

These examples also displayed forms and methods of collective struggle which exist as alternatives to the traditional union-led strike. Especially during early clandestine phases, workers often made use of walkouts, sabotage and work-to-rule to gain visibility *vis-a-vis* the employer and the official unions. When companies escalated conflicts by laying off activists in retaliation, workers resorted to workplace occupations and roadblocks. The use of these methods has partly reflected widespread worker dissatisfaction and partly, over the course of time, the adoption of means to consciously construct an alternative, more representative and democratic organisation when led by members and activists from far left parties. At the same time, with the official union keeping to a negotiating role and its *de facto* monopoly in the call to a full scale strike, these methods have often represented the most direct and viable way available to workers' collective in the workplace. In the predominant use of direct action, similarity exists between cases with and without union representation. Where successful, these cases brought about improvements in wages and terms and conditions of employment and targeted outsourced labour through workers' mobilization and democratic narratives and practices. In this sense, grassroots experiences stand out as a form of workers' more radical response to neo-liberal flexibility of work. However, their emergence and further consolidation is open to questions, tensions and contradictions, some of these, the chapter will now address.

Explaining the resilience of grassroots mobilisation

From the perspective opened up by the union revitalisation debate, it has been argued the renewed strength of the Argentinean union initiative has its basis in the persistence of traditional institutional practices and channels of representation and conflict negotiation (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 2008, Etchemendy and Collier 2007). However, much difficulty remains in explaining the cases in which labour conflict and workers representation have been led by workplace based organisations 'rooted in the class needs and demands of the rank and file' (Cohen 2006: 4). According to Cotarelo (2007), one third of the total labour conflicts between 2003 and 2007 were launched by alternative union leaderships based within workplaces structures. One way of looking at this revitalisation of union-as-initiatives is to look at 'episodes of rank and file resurgence as impelled by economic necessity rather than idealistic aspiration' (Cohen 2006: 2). From a structural standpoint, it is the capitalist nature of the employment relation and the labour process that continuously creates contradictions and conflict between employers' interest in profitability and workers' satisfaction of needs. Moreover, these contradictions do not just directly affect workers' wages but also their working conditions and overall attitude toward work. The workplace is undoubtedly the site in which these contradictions affecting the daily conditions of people emerge. Thus, economic motivations and working conditions are certainly at the roots of *unions-as-movement*, but are not sufficient to explain this. Why has in the cases we are analysing workers' non-conformity with their conditions led them to coalesce around establishing new and more effective form of representation rather than to trust the established ones? Why have these new forms been inspired by grassroots democratic methods and principles and why have these been considered as the ones powerful enough to undertake open confrontation with employers?

The emerging unionism-as-initiative collectives tended to clash against the 'formal, bureaucratically structured 'representative' counterpart' (Cohen 2006: 4) which exemplify the logic of the union-as-institution. But there were also cases where grassroots initiatives did not clash against existing union structures as a result of filling a vacuum of organs of representation and empowering workers in the face of unfavorable power relations. In this context, democratic decision-making and discussions were seen as a way of involving the grassroots to build commitment and solidarity as the tool leading to activity and unity in the daily struggle on the shop floor. In this sense, unionism-as-initiative can be seen as the natural process in the collectivization of interests, that is, as an empirical manifestation of class divisions in the workplace. Thus, in all the cases grassroots initiatives born out of economic necessity consolidated their organization in the struggles by engaging with democracy as a practice and as a narrative. However, the existence of contextual variables - such as employer action, union policy and external socio-economic conditions - and the interplay of these with the role of left agency and leaderships, affect the success of these developments and the concrete way through which workers pursue democracy as a constitutive element in the structure of grassroots organizations. In this context, clandestine activity was compelled for fear of company or official union retaliation and was paradigmatic of the way in which actual democracy was progressively built up. At the same time, while the role of left leaderships has been important to firmly install democratic practices, the political mandate of left political parties has, at times, become dominant, compromising the sustainability of grassroots organizing (see below).

Left-wing leadership and collective action

Recently, the problematic of left agency has been re-addressed. Darlington (2002, 2006), drawing upon insights from classical Marxism, ethnographic studies of workplace dynamics and mobilization theory, has re-examined the agitator's theory as a means of analyzing workplace leadership and left agency. His overall conclusion is that the role of leadership by union militants and left-wing activists is a crucial variable to understanding collective workplace mobilization. This is so because as Darlington (2006: 493) summarises, this kind of leadership 'can stimulate awareness of grievances and of the potential for collective action for redress, they can spread a belief in the desirability and feasibility of strike action, they can take the lead in proposing or initiating such action, and they can provide cohesion to a general discontent by generalizing from workers' specific economic grievances to broader, even political concerns'. While recognising the significance of left agency at the workplace, Cohen (2011) has proffered a more critical view, underlining the paradox of workplace radicalism whereby lack of fusion between the aim to politicise struggles and the economistic content of shop-floor issues is characteristic of much left agency. For Cohen, propagandistic and moralistic campaigns of left activists (*contra* initiative building from below) and the prioritisation of party-related demands and programmes over the promotion of working-class self activity served to distance left-agency from the working class. This debate is important for analysing the aforementioned grassroots initiatives. Indeed, writers on Argentina have underlined the role played by leftist activists and party members, highlighting how this involvement has not been free of tensions and contradictions.

A salient feature of the stratum of activists is that most of them were young (i.e., 25-35 years old). This is most obvious in call-centres, supermarkets and SIMECa, where most workers are in their twenties. But this has also been predominantly the case in FATE, Kraft, Mafissa, Praxair and underground transport. The youngest among them began work after 2002 without previous union experience, the only exception possibly being some participation in community activities. By contrast, the older workers who entered the labour market during 1990s have, in a period of retreat, experienced contact with, and even participated in, union activities and party politics. The political background of their activism is diverse. Many are members of left parties, especially Trotskyist ones like the *Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas* (PTS), *Partido Obrero* (PO) and *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS). They have played an organising and leading role in some of the grassroots initiatives, particularly, in industry. Maoist activists from the *Partido Revolucionario Comunista* (PCR) have headed the Kraft *comisión interna* since mid-1990s and have an influence at Mafissa. A handful of activist from *Socialismo Libertario* (SL) were also influential in the advocacy of grassroots politics and democracy in FATE. Others are former Trotskyist activists, who left their organizations over differences regarding union politics and practices. A handful of these played a crucial role in the Buenos Aires underground but also in Praxair. However, the majority are grassroots workers without previous party or union experiences that adopted combative and adversarial stances. In certain settings, like call-centres, and to a lesser extent SIMECa, politicized former and current students were also involved in activating their fellow workers. They had sometimes already been members of Trotskyist parties or sympathizers of autonomist groupings, which gained some ground in the universities during the rebellion of December 2001.

Nonetheless, the effective collective leadership of these grassroots initiatives has often been the outcome of a combination of activists with different backgrounds. Except in Kraft and FATE, where established *comisiones internas* were already in place, the initial tiny group of activists had to work clandestinely in setting themselves up in order to avoid employer retaliation. This complicated the relationship with fellow workers and posed serious challenges to the ability to mobilise. In these processes, these collective leaderships appealed to democratic narratives and practices to spur organisation and mobilization. This had a political meaning, that is, to confront at the same time, employers but also the top-down decision-making mechanisms of traditional union leaderships or as Cohen puts it, the logics of union as institutions. But these processes emerged in different contexts, which determined important aspects of the opportunity structure for organized action.

In union-free workplaces with strong anti-union policies, emerging leaders spent much of their time collecting data on existing collective agreements information, sharing information about workers' rights and laws and overall doing very basic ideological propaganda towards union organising. This activity empowered workers and led to conflicts with employers, individual dismissals of activists as well as union involvement. In call-centres, *Federación de Obreros y Empleados Telefónicos de la República Argentina* (FOETRA) initially supported the struggle but once the grassroots initiative was defeated, activists strongly criticised the union and the union, in turn, did not attempt to reorganize the remaining workers. In Walmart, the FEC maintained a conflictual relationship with elected workers, who were critical of the union. In Praxair, instead, the *comisión interna* established a working relationship with the chemical union and shop-stewards integrated into union representative structures. In this case, the emerging leadership maintained a conscious policy towards involving the union in defence of their demands. Union support was crucial when having to confront the dismissal of one of its most significant activists. In Mafissa, the AOT was seen by workers as pro-employer and since the 1993 strike defeat, the *comisión interna* became a formal and powerless body. The AOT did not seek to re-organize the workplace. In this context, five activists begun discussing with fellow workers the need for self-organisation to raise their wages and improve health and working conditions. In 2005, after almost four years of working underground, the emerging leadership called mass meetings to discuss wages and the incorporation of contract workers. This organising process led to the recognition of the *comisión interna*. However, after a long and hard conflict, the employer defeated this grassroots initiative through repression and dismissals.

The situation in FATE and Kraft was different. In both places, well-established *comisiones internas* existed with competition for gaining election to them. Left activists had been active in both factories for some time. In the case of Kraft, Maoist militants had headed the workplace structure of representation since 1993. In 2004, an alliance between the Maoists, *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* (CCC), which also organized and influenced unemployed organizations (*piqueteros*) and the Trotskyist PTS, won at several important workplaces in the nearby industrial areas, including Kraft, PepsiCo and Cadbury-Stani, obtaining some 20% in the election for the Food union's general secretary. The distinctive feature of this was the success of left agency in mobilizing workers through a grassroots democratic narrative and practices of direct democracy through mass meetings and direct action tactics. Finally, the Buenos Aires underground presents a different dynamic, although with the same combination of mass meetings and direct action pushed through by new leaders. In this case, three

different groupings of activists, initially through clandestine methods as a result of conniving between the UTA and private operator Metrovías, gradually developed a workplace structure of shop-stewards, which first replaced union official representatives, and then, in the face of a direct confrontation with the union, led to an organizational split and the creation of a new union. This case was the most striking of all and a model for others because of workers' ability to engage in innovation in tactics and discourses and to drastically improve wages and the terms and conditions of employment.

Therefore, leftist leaderships - fulfilling the role ascribed by Darlington - were at the centre of constructing grievances by identifying demands and workers' rights, blaming employers for the grievances, promoting internal group cohesion, opposing the top-down and pro-employer outlook of many unions by using grassroots democratic narratives and practices and by building in this manner material conditions for collective action from below. However, Cohen's observations highlighted limits and contradictions. Leadership cohesion was often fragile. At Kraft and FATE there were divisions along political lines during or after industrial conflicts and in the face of competition from established unions. Sometimes, this undermined rank-and-file support, as in FATE, where the traditional leadership won back the union election with more than 50% support. Elsewhere settings, a homogeneous leadership with an agreed singular perspective of pursuing a hard-line approach almost entirely based on promoting industrial action contributed to alienating grassroots support. At Mafissa, this tactical orientation led to isolation and defeat in the face of the employer's offensive (and where there were also different views on deal with the employer's repression). The influence of electoral politics and party lines has often created obstacles to developing grassroots support, generating frustration and disillusionment. In call-centres and Walmart, for instance and despite significant gains, grassroots backing has been limited, bringing about defeat and disorganisation in the former and the establishment of a *comisión interna* that depends heavily on just a handful of activists in the latter.

Once again, the leadership built by activists on the Buenos Aires underground stands out for its complexity and dynamics. Different ideas and practices about the meaning of democracy compete within the workplace structure of representation. In the main, three groups with different and sometimes opposing visions exist, namely, grassroots fundamentalists, activists belonging to Trotskyites parties and a group of radical independent activists. While the first two defend - for different reasons - mass meetings in the decision-making process as a matter of principle, the independent activists, which has the greater leading role, has a more flexible and quite pragmatic understanding of union democracy. The different understandings amongst activists reflected different views about the role of workers' delegates. For those advocating mass meetings as the cornerstone of the decision-making within the union, delegates should be just the voice of the assembly as they consider there is a high risk of bureaucratization in any decision-making by delegates without membership consultation. By contrast, the independent activists believed workers' delegates' lack of a clear plan of action signalled of weakness in front of their fellow workers in the assemblies and, thus, advocated for a relative autonomy of the delegates from. They argued delegates must take on collective responsibility and, in some occasions, decide on behalf of workers. This practice usually went together with later consultation by which workers could reject their decisions.

Democracy as a principle and as a practice

A common theme running through all the workplace initiatives was democracy because it was regarded as the most fundamental principle guiding and inspiring the practical aspects of workers' decision-making and regulating the accountability of elected leaders to their members. This aspiration to more democratic forms of collective organisation is rooted in the history and structure of labour unionism in Argentina. On the one hand, the law - following workers struggle during the 1930s and 1940s to gain recognition of workplace structures - now provides recognition to workers' *comisiones internas* and protection to workers' delegates exercising a union function (*fuero sindical*). On the other hand, the vertical nature of labour unionism in Argentina - in which workers are legally represented by only one union per sector - means workplace structures are often at risk of being subordinated to centralised decision-making in national unions. This simultaneously both empowers and dis-empowers independent organising in the workplace so that workers' demand for more democracy and accountability within unions, and the accompanying anti-bureaucratic struggles against union officialdom, has been a recurrent issue within the history of the Argentinean labour.

The issue of democracy within unions, and its limits and possibilities, has frequently been at the centre of analysis of work, particularly from a Marxist perspective. Its centrality, and more generally a focus upon the logic of processes regulating unions' internal practices, has been approached from different standpoints. One concerns relations between democracy and collective action/identity. Due to the diversity of interests amongst workers as a result of the structuring of the labour/capital relations and of workers' subordination within it, formal and informal processes of democracy are considered essential to the redefinition of workers' individual interests in collective terms (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980, Norris and Zeitlin 1995). Democratic practices develop consciousness, solidarity and militancy (Levesque *et al.* 2005, Levi *et al.* 2009) and consolidate the union and legitimate delegates (Peetz and Pocock 2009). A second places democracy within broader debates about the very nature of unions, their functions, purpose, political role and identity. Thus, it is asked whether democracy is achievable within unions under capitalism. Debates on these aspects within Marxist have alternated between pessimism and optimism (Hyman 1971). Thus, unions are organisations with internal contradictions, due to their role as mediator between workers and capitalists, and growing as institutions within a system of industrial relations, they develop bureaucratic apparatus of experts in negotiation, legislation and mediation which for individual and functional reasons become detached from the needs of workers. But Hyman's early work (1971, 1975, 1979) has been important to move beyond simplistic view that bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of unions and their leaderships are inevitable processes and the distinction and differentiation of interests between bureaucracy and rank-and-file (see also Darlington and Upchurch 2012). By contrast, rather than static relations, these features are seen as processes, resulting from different factors, affecting organisations at different level and as the outcomes of tensions emerging from having to sustain dignified work in a context of powerlessness as Martinez Lucio (2012: 42) expressed it. Shifting product and labour markets in which unions try to gain dignified work and the shifting balance of power between capital and labour in the workplace and society require an analysis of democracy and bureaucracy (themselves built on contradiction and tension).

The focus on these and how material, ideological and institutional factors act on their production is fundamental for evaluating the limits and possibilities of democracy within the new grassroots workers organisations considered in this chapter (Belkin and Ghigliani 2010). Progressive consolidation of grassroots democracy is not the immediate priority of workers but it gradually emerges as the most natural and direct way to enlarge the base of support for collective actions and organisation building initially led by small group of activists. Thus, on the Buenos Aires underground, initially required clandestine activity did not provide space to discuss strategies and actions in an open and inclusive way with all the workers but later participation in the delegate elections in 1998 and 2000 extended the possibility of more direct participation. However, it was against company flexibility plans in 2001 that the formal and procedural kind of democracy gained in the previous representative elections was transformed into a powerful tool able to mobilise workers in action. This time, workers' delegates expanded democracy far beyond representative elections, actively organizing small assemblies on the underground's different sector/lines through open weekly assemblies of the workers' delegates and monthly meetings in the union premises. This success translated into strengthened solidarity which in turn expressed itself in new democratic advances through which an institutional consolidation of the new workers' representation was gained. A similar process of progressive consolidation of grassroots democracy and of the assembly as the centre of decision making was observed at Praxair. Starting in 2003, well-attended assemblies within the factory became a daily routine, effectively installing democracy as a habitual practice. Before discussions were limited to an initially restricted group of workers who used to meet secretly in the factory's changing room. Resentment against the company and the ensuing confrontation following the laying off of a delegate and the attempts to delegitimize the elected *comisión interna* opened up the room for wider discussion and offer the original small group of activists a way to extend democracy far beyond the limits of formal procedures and elections.

The employer's attitude toward the emerging forms of representation has been particularly important at Mafissa. Here, militants adopted a very gradual approach to organizing in recognition of the company's anti-union policy, a sycophantic official union and a fragmented workforce comprising workers different shifts and partly composed of precarious and outsourced workers. Worsening salary levels and labour conditions compelled workers into a more direct confrontation with the company through the mobilization and the organization of grassroots workers. They elected new delegates independently of the *comisión interna* but the employer refused to recognize them or negotiate, using layoffs to retaliate to which workers responded with roadblocks and occupations. These actions were initially successful as the employer retreated and they opened up a period of intense debate and discussion within the factory that further enlarged the number of workers involved, contributed to strengthen grassroots democracy through the assembly method and allowed the activists to call and gain the election of a new *comisión interna*. However, continued violent confrontation with the company and the politicization of Mafissa's workers struggle, though speeding up and formally extending the assembly method, did not facilitated the rooting of democracy. The epilogue was that Mafissa laid off hundred workers and the last activists occupying the factory were evicted by police in 2007.

This outcome invites further reflection about the most effective methods to embed make grassroots democracy not just a principle but a lived practice.

Assemblies are almost unanimously considered as the primary method through which democracy is achieved. Indeed, historically workers have adopted this method to collectively defend their interests. Yet, there are factors that contribute to reducing the democratic nature of the assembly. First, adverse circumstances such as company and official union opposition have represented material obstacles to developing assemblies, thereby restricting the number of participants, the issues discussed and allowing activists to dominate over silent majorities. Second, consolidation of grassroots initiatives *comisión interna* imposes an enlargement of democratic consent for the new representation and for the leaders of it but it can also bring with it frictions between the collective of workers represented in the assembly and the *comisión interna*. Praxair's workers' delegates acknowledge this problem in a publication they wrote about their experience by arguing that consolidation required not delegates to discuss how to relate the *comisión interna* to the whole workforce (Areco *et al.* 2009: 143). They saw delegates' subordination and accountability to the assembly as the answer to the problem. Constituting delegates as executors of the assembly, however, does not seem credible solution, not just because of the necessity to sometimes organize clandestinely but also because contingent strategies might need to be adopted during conflict and negotiations by a small, though representative, group of workers. The case of the underground workers, while often cited as a key example of the fullest and most inclusive form of union democracy over a ten year period, is a good example of how democracy in principle does not always correspond to democracy in practice. Thus, the main episodes of these workers' struggle reveals that in many situations decisions were taken by workers' delegates which sometimes pre-empted the will of the majority because wider consultation was impossible, would have prevented action or would have lost the element of surprise. This reality of imperfect grassroots democracy in struggle rests upon recognition that perfect democracy is often beyond reach within the dynamics of class struggle and the power relations in which they operate. Thus, the emerging leadership on the underground tended to differentiate between construction of conditions for the fullest grassroots involvement through democratic assemblies and *assembly-ism* which makes the means a shibboleth.

While this pragmatic approach has the merit of highlighting the constraints upon grassroots democracy and how emphasis on *assembly-ism* can be sometimes counterproductive, the risk associated with the relative autonomy of delegates from the grassroots leading to a growing detachment should not be underestimated. Indeed, if there are material constraints to democracy, it is equally true centralization of decision-making in the hand of a restricted, though elected, number of workers brings forth the possibility of increasing functional bureaucracy. The recent transformation of the underground *comisión interna* into an independent union, legally recognized to negotiate and represent the workers of the sector, and the continuation of the historical group of activists into the new union structure, has been the cornerstone of the ongoing institutionalization of workers representation here. While countervailing factors - strong internal opposition and debate, substantial power of the assemblies and the existence of informal channel of communication exist - the danger of the reinforcement of the logic of the union-as-institution as against those of unions-as-movements does exist. Yet, the dynamics towards institutionalization can not be fully understood if analysis remains at the level of union organization. Rather, the logic of Argentinean industrial relations and the role within it of labour law, and concomitantly, of the state, remain explanatory variables. Workers without recognition are legally limited to exercise power in collective bargaining. The

state imposes institutionalization upon worker initiatives. SIMECa, for example, passed through this process - initially a grassroots initiative, which rested almost exclusively on mass-meetings and direct action, in order to negotiate and close agreements with employers and abide by labour law formed a legal union.

Conclusion

All these grassroots initiatives recounted in this chapter have shared some basic features. Activists and delegates involved were part of a new generation of workers without previous participation in union activity and often with few experiences of work. Many of them had experiences of leftwing political parties and grew up in the context of popular protests and working classes mobilizations that characterised Argentina at the beginning of the 2000s. This was the cauldron in which these future grassroots leaderships grew up. The role played by left parties members in building organisation and consciousness cannot be considered in isolation from the developments outside the workplace in radical, popular social consciousness. A key aspirational aspect of this emerging consciousness was found in the practical activity of establishing grassroots democratic decision-making processes within workplaces and by the accompanying rejection of bureaucratic practices associated with the existing unions and their leaderships. This led, in turn, in many cases to the emergence of violent conflicts, with workers using direct action in opposition to employer and established union officialdom, resulting in some cases in the creation of new unions or the complete renewal of existing structures. While these features can explain why grassroots organisations have re-emerged at this particular juncture in Argentinean history, it remains more difficult to assess the future of the most successful of these experiences. This partly relates to a series of on external factors (company's attitude, role of official unions, economic and product market context, industrial relations system, role of the state) and partly to the way in which the grassroots initiatives are aware of the challenges that therein arise and how they respond to them.

Contradictions and tensions exist in many aspects of the internal life of the grassroots initiatives and their organisations. Although the discourse of grassroots democracy remains pivotal, in the practice the dynamics of the employment relationship and the Argentinean system of industrial relations regularly challenge the widespread use of democratic decision-making and compel the institutionalisation of collective forms of representation. Efficient organisation to defend workers' interests in this context necessarily requires delegation. But the unresolved challenge is to combine democracy with efficiency. In many cases, grassroots initiatives and organisations have been forged in the context of a double struggle, namely, an economic struggle to defend rights, improve working conditions and demand for salary increases and a struggle for autonomy and independence involving gaining recognition from employers and consolidating organisation. While the dynamics of collective bargaining for wage increases help maintain shop floor level participation, a separation of roles and personnel consequent upon formal recognition and operating within the institutional arena potentially de-activate many from participating in the internal life of their organisation. This, in turn, could lead to a centralisation of decision-making and the monopolisation of leadership, once again representing a challenge to democracy as a practice. Yet, historically, the resilience of grassroots organising with its emphasis on democracy and participation is a continuous reminder and expression of not just conflict in

workplaces but of working people's power in 'cracking', to borrow Holloway's (2010) phrase, the system of contention capitalism imposes upon society.

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