“All the people who are fighting are struggling for social change. We do not believe in the capitalist neoliberal system anymore.”
Against Domestication
Jacques Cammatte’s critique of capital’s tendency towards the total subsumption of human life.

‘Anti-Capitalism’ as Ideology…and as Movement?
From the 2001 issue of the excellent annual communist journal from Britain, Aufheben, a critique of the anti-summit movement.

Behind the Twenty-First Century Intifada
Also from the 2001 issue of Aufheben a look at the proletarian elements of the Palestinian revolt in opposition to the usual presentation of it as a purely nationalist, state-building affair.

Globalisation: Origins-History-Analysis-Resistance
An article from the 1999 issue of British eco-anarchist/communist journal Do Or Die.

Global War for the World Order
Four articles from the German group Wildcat analysing the “War on Terror”.

Mutinies: A Historical Reader
A collection of articles on mutinies against the Vietnam, Bosnia and Kosovo wars.

Outside and Against the Unions
A communist critique of trade unions focusing on the 1984-5 miners strike in Britain from British group Wildcat.

Pirate Utopias: Under the Banner of King Death
Aaargh maties, pirate struggles against early capitalism described in this article from issue 8 of Do Or Die.

Society of the Spectacle
The classic 1967 critique of spectacular capitalism by Guy Debord of The Situationist International.

The Neoliberal Wars
Articles on the wars in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Chechnya and Afghanistan as well as a theoretical discussion of how neo-liberalism leads to civil war.

The Myth of Passivity
Class struggles against neoliberalism in New Zealand in the 1990s.

When Insurrections Die
Gilles Dauve’s article about the failure of the post-World War One revolutionary wave, from Russia in 1917 to Spain in 1936, focusing on how proletarian revolt was diverted into mere anti-fascism.

Whither the World
Co-author of the classic Eclipse and Re-emergence of the communist Movement Gilles Dauve and Karl Nesic discuss the current malaise of both capital and proletariat in this piece from early 2002.
INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet was produced to make available information about the massive working class revolts in Argentina in 2001-2. These struggles were probably the most important action of the global proletariat in recent years. In time what happened in Argentina will come to be seen as an event of similar importance to May 1968 in France when 10 million workers went on wildcat strike for three weeks.

Sadly since these articles were written the situation in Argentina has been stabilised in favour of capital. In April 2003, just before the Argentine presidential election the iconic worker-controlled Brukman textile factory in Buenos Aires was violently evicted by the police. In the presidential election eighty percent of those eligible cast valid votes up from a mere sixty percent in the previous election in 2001. This probably represents something of a resigned return to acceptance of the old world after the failure of the insurgent movements to advance in their creation of a new one.

The two main components of the 2001-2 movements have been demobilised in different ways. Most of the “middle-class” depositors who lost their savings have been reimbursed. The radical wing of the unemployed movement faced state repression while the rest has been reduced to administering the miserly dole with recipients not paid unless they attend the now tokenistic road blockades. The employed members of the working class for the most part never joined the revolts preferring to keep their heads down and not risk their jobs.

In 2005 unemployment is nearly 20% and underemployment 15%. Average wages are less than the official poverty line and inflation is expected to be 20% over 2005. In response to this poverty new workplace movements have emerged demanding and sometimes winning a six-hour day in order to increase employment, a minimum wage and freedom for political prisoners. However this is a far cry from the insurrection of December 2001.

South America as a whole has been in turmoil for the past five years with the overthrow of the Bolivian government in June 2005 by peasant and proletarian revolt showing that the continent is not yet safe for investment. An important next step for insurgents in South America would be the breaking of the isolation of struggles within national borders.

“Picket and Pot-banger Together’: Class Re-Composition in Argentina?” first appeared in the 2002 issue of the excellent annual British communist magazine Aufheben and seems to have been completed in late September 2002. Aufheben have a website at www.geocities.com/aufheben2

“Report from Argentina” was written by an anonymous communist from Britain, in December 2002.

“A Conversation with MTD Solano” is an interview with piqueteros from Buenos Aires by the Argentine Marxist group Colectivo Situaciones.

“Clausewitz on the Pampas: An Argentine Snapshot as Latin America Moves Leftward” is American communist Loren Goldner’s account of his visit to Argentina in February 2006. Goldner has a website with many of his interesting articles at: http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldnet/

This pamphlet was first published by Treason Press in December 2003. The introduction was rewritten in July 2005 and this edition with the Goldner article added was done in October 2006.
5. In the course of this conversation, my interlocutor reminded me that some of the strangest Trotskyist groups in the history of the movement have come out of Argentina, such as the Posadistas (now defunct). The Posadistas called on the “workers’ states” to carry out a unilateral nuclear strike against the capitalist West to free the Third World from imperialism. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, some Posadistas were arrested by the Cuban government on their way to attack the U.S. base at Guantanamo, while calling on the Castro regime to fire the Soviet missiles. A sketch of the history of Argentine Trotskyism can be found in Robert Alexander’s book *International Trotskyism*, pp. 32-52.

6. Similarly, the impressive level of the bookstores must be mentioned. There are 5000 bookstores in Buenos Aires, dozens of them of real quality. I can think of only two or three bookstores in New York City that come close to rivalling them. The “new arrivals” tables were filled with books arising from the current debate about the political developments of the past 40 years.

7. As one sign of this revival, ca. 80 books have been published about Mariategui in different languages in the past 15 years. His key ideas are presented in *Siete Ensayos de Interpretacion de la Realidad Peruana*. I feel no great affinity with Mariategui’s ideas about an “Incan communism”; and I do not blame him because the Peruvian Maoist guerrilla group Shining Path took their name from his writings. Nonetheless, in the coming years, I think we will be hearing more about Mariategui and the problem of theorizing the historic experience of the Andean peoples in capitalism.

8. A key study of the decline of Argentine anarchism is Fernando Lopez Trujillo, *Vidas en rojo y negro* (2005). Lopez Trujillo told me he became interested in the topic when researching the Peronism of the 1950s; a Peronist union bureaucrat had mentioned casually that he and many of his colleagues had been anarchists in the 1930s. This stimulated Lopez Trujillo’s curiosity about what he discovered to be the large-scale absorption of anarchists by Peronism, similar to the absorption of many anti-statist currents from the pre-1914 by Communist Parties (France) and even fascism (Italy). Lopez Trujillo finds contemporary anarchists theoretically sterile and largely incapable of posing these delicate historical questions.

9. It’s over when it’s over. We got into a cab to go to Ezeiza airport to leave. I began making small talk with the cabbie. Gradually the conversation shifted to Argentine politics. He was about 50 years old. He had been a left Peronist activist in the early 1970s, but opposed to armed struggle. He talked about the regimentation of life under the repressive governments prior to Peron’s return. By 1973, he was a university engineering student. He had been present at the June 1973 Ezeiza massacre. He was elected to some kind of student office as a Peronist. Around that time the university administration appointed an unknown outsider to head the student government, and in short order eight of the cabbie’s left Peronist friends were disappeared by the AAA para-military group that had been central at Ezeiza. He had continued to meet informally with close friends after the 1976 coup, and in about 1978 had decided to retreat to private life and raise a family. Politics made driving a cab the main alternative. He carefully distinguished between Peronist “justicialismo” and socialism. He proceeded to lay out an analysis of the 1980s “lost decade”, not just for Argentina, but for Latin America as a whole. He described the “return to democracy” (under IMF tutelage) throughout the continent in that period, followed by the current leftist swing associated with Lula, Kirchner, Evo Morales, Chavez, in Uruguay and Chile and, quite possibly in a few weeks with the radical populist candidate in Peru. Never got such a political tableau from a cabbie in the U.S.
as De La Rúa fled the Casa Rosada by helicopter, with music, champagne and bonbons looted from nearby shops. The banks burned in the centre of Buenos Aires on the 19th and 20th, an expression of anger at the corralito; the bank freezes affected not only the middle classes but also many workers with small savings and those who depended on cash by working in the black economy. The demos, riots and lootings took place throughout Buenos Aires province and in more than twelve cities around the country. Barricades were erected in some areas of the capital and massive riots ensued. Many joined the weekly vigils of the mothers of the disappeared in the Plaza de Mayo; some tried to storm the Casa Rosada; the Ministry of the Economy was set alight; and people besieged the home of the hated minister of finance, Cavallo. In Córdoba, the second city, site of Argentina’s declining car industry, the breakdown of negotiations over the payment of wages between municipal workers and the council led to an occupation of the council offices, where a popular assembly was held. Thrown out by the police, they tried to burn the building down and build barricades in the street, helped by workers from various factories that had just gone on strike. As in Buenos Aires, lootings occurred involving different sectors of workers and the unemployed. A new slogan against the political class resounded in the streets all over the country, one taken up and much-debated ever since: “Que se vayan todos”4 (Out with them all).

The new mood appeared to be summed up in a statement by one of the piqueteros involved in the MTD Solano (Movement of Unemployed Workers): “We heard rumours of deaths (from repression) but we knew we were participating in something historical and you could feel the solidarity there. We weren’t piqueteros or middle class; we all felt the sensation of being “one”5. But this provokes the question: What was the nature of this feeling of “being one”? A problematic class-solidarity in which the proletariat were in danger of losing sight of their class needs by joining with other classes affected by the Argentinian crisis? The present article seeks to answer this fundamental question of the composition – or re-composition – of the movements which have been threatening the social order in Argentina over the last 12 months.

In order to gain an understanding of the nature of the current struggles, we need first to place them in their historical context, beginning with Argentina’s ‘golden era’, when the economy revolved around the agro-export business. The rise of Peronism heralded a new ‘settlement’ with the working class which helps explain some of the peculiarities of the present-day struggles. In this context, we trace the origins and outline the trajectories of the different sections making up today’s movement: the unemployed and piqueteros, the situation in the factories, and the impoverished middle classes and the neighbourhood assemblies. While there appears to be a generalized ‘rejection of politics’, there remains the question of how all these aspects fit together – do the various struggles in Argentina constitute a proletarian attack against capital? Is the ‘rejection of politics’ a radical advance for the movement, or an expression of sectional fragmentation? We suggest that the ‘neo-liberal’ attack has resulted in a massification of the class in which the middle classes are being absorbed into the proletariat. This is happening in specific conditions of a country on the periphery of capital, where an immediately social mobilization around the neighbourhood is possible.

1. The contradictions of the ‘golden era’ of the agro-export business6

As thousands of Argentinians loot stores for food and goods while grain and meat is shipped away to the western markets, the ‘iron’ laws of the economy are exposed as reified expressions of the class war. Indeed, the whole history of modern Argentina, of its changes in economic strategies and its various crises, is the history of the Argentinian bourgeoisie’s battle to reimpose, again and again, capital’s control on a fierce, riotous proletariat.

In 1914, Argentina’s economy was based on agricultural exports, mainly of grain and beef. The Argentinian bourgeoisie was composed of landowners, who had control of large latifundias, and export businessmen, and confronted a huge number of discontented agricultural workers whose pay and conditions were appalling but whose dispersion in a large backward countryside was a great obstacle in their attempts to organize. In the rural region of Patagonia the meat processing, service and transport workforce and ever-larger numbers left out of the workforce entirely. We can learn from the radical piqueteros, as well as the pitfalls presented by the co-opted piqueteros, for the struggles of the future, in Latin America and everywhere else.8

Notes
1. The definitive work on the history of Peronism, in a new edition taking the story up to the past few years, is apparently Alejandro Horowicz’s Los Cuatro Peronismos, 2nd edition 2004.
2. See Hudson’s website (http://www.michael-hudson.com/) for “An Insider Spills the Beans on Offshore Banking Centers”; also, closely related, his article on privatization in Chile.
3. The entire story of Monte Chingolo is told in the book of the same name by Gustavo Plis-Sterenberg, who participated in the attack and who, thirty years later, reconstructed the event through painstaking interviews with other participants. According to the editor of Lucha Armada, it is one of the best books on the mindset of the period.
4. Among Guillen’s 30-odd books are El capitalismo soviético: última etapa del imperialismo (1980), Philosophy of the urban guerilla; the revolutionary writings of Abraham Guillén (1973) and Socialismo
war, which implies two sides, is inappropriate, and that what occurred was a wholesale slaughter of the left. Others say the term is indeed appropriate, insofar as the left was in fact carrying out military actions, some of them successful.

One little-known theoretician and activist in this whirlwind was the anarcho-Marxist theoretician and strategist Abraham Guillén (1913-1993) (whose life and work is analyzed in an article in Lucha Armada #4). Guillén was born in Spain and became an anarchist, fighting with the anarchist battalions in the civil war. He was captured and imprisoned with hundreds of thousands of other combatants on the Republican side, escaping from prison and making his way to Argentina in 1945. His anarchist roots remained with him to the end of his life, but his military experience drew him into the orbit of the “armed struggle” elements (who were anything but anarchists) in the 1960s and 1970s. He was an incredibly prolific writer, authoring more than 30 books and leaving many unpublished manuscripts. As indicated earlier, he influenced both the Montoneros and the Tupamaros but is still largely unknown. A number of his books have been translated into English. He broke, as indicated above, with the Cuban leadership because of his orientation to the urban working class (his book on urban guerrilla warfare was translated into English and was known in the U.S. New Left of the 1960s). Other books have been translated into English by anarchists attracted to his focus on self-management. Having not been able to see any of this work to date, it is hard for me to make an assessment, but he stands out from typical Third Worldist theoreticians of guerrilla warfare by his emphasis on the central role of the working class and his vision of a “self-managed” society. (Donald Hodges, a leftist Latin America scholar, has published a collection of Guillén’s writings in English.)

Argentina is hardly exempt from the worldwide skepticism about vanguardism of recent decades, part of the reassessment of the unquestioned vanguardism of the 1960s and 1970s. With the return to bourgeois democracy and legal oppositional activity in 1983, a Trotskyist movement called MAS had carved out a serious mini-mass base, and had elected several deputies to parliament, but more recently had faded away. One member of a small neo-Leninist current “Firemen for Socialism” (Fogoneros por el Socialismo, firemen as in the firemen of a locomotive) exemplifies this new questioning, working with the radical piquetero groups as well as with his own group and a trade-union current of the same tendency. This group is concerned with the meaning of the vanguard organization in the era of the proliferation of vanguard groups. They point out that Lenin’s Bolshevik Party was in its time an innovation that had no rivals, and easily trumped all opposition in 1917 and the years immediately thereafter. Today, on the contrary, there are 40 vanguard groups all applying the same methodology that “the truth is us”. In this group’s view, the mass assemblies of 2001-2002 had been fatally demoralized by the struggles of these vanguards to assume leadership of the movement, and they are attempting to conceive of a form of party organization in which certain differences could be bracketed in the interests of the movement as a whole. They argue that vanguard groups large and small (beginning with the Bolsheviks themselves) had shown a tendency to fall apart after the death or departure of the one figure who was key to maintaining its internal equilibrium, and he felt this pointed to a fatal flaw in the received idea of the vanguard. They offer no solutions, merely questions. They would like to see the 40 self-appointed vanguards fuse into a broader organization of the three or four real tendencies they contain. Another manifestation of the intense politicization of life in Argentina is also illustrated by the Club Socialista, with a mailing list of roughly 500 middle-class and middle-aged intellectuals of the older generation. They appear to be overwhelmingly of the moderate left, and mainly have been militants in their 20s, and no longer politically active. They are worthy of mention primarily because, over twenty years of existence, they have managed to meet once a week nine months of the year, with every fourth meeting devoted to an analysis of the current political situation, and the rest to presentations by individuals of their current projects or discussion of a book. Between 50 and 100 people attend the average meeting, and larger numbers turn out for particularly interesting topics or visiting international super-stars. I mention this because I can hardly imagine such a formation existing in any large city where workers of the small towns of Rio Gallegos and Puerto Deseado were already developing organizations based on small federations. Patagonia’s largest union organization, the Sociedad Obrera de Rio Gallegos, was centred in the small capital Rio Gallegos and had been active since 1911.

While Argentina’s rural hinterland was left underdeveloped, the agro-business trade had necessitated the development of some subsidiary industries and services, such as meat-processing plants, cargo transport, railways, docks, triggering the expansion of a few coastal cities and a growing urban proletariat. The urban workers could organize more easily and by 1914 they were already a combative force and a challenge to the status quo.

The urbanization of the coast, functional to the export-oriented economy, involved the growth of an urban middle class and petit bourgeoisie composed of shopkeepers, petty businessmen, professionals, and civil sailors. The development of the urban middle classes and the threat of the proletariat gradually started undermining the power of the agrarian oligarchy. By 1911, the conservative government had to concede to the struggles of the middle classes and the petit bourgeoisie and extended the electoral franchise to include the middle classes and to the bulk of the working class with the law Sáenz Peña (1912). In 1916, Hipólito Yrigoyen, candidate for the Radical Party, which represented the middle classes, was elected President of Argentina. Yrigoyen’s populist government would combine repression with attempts to recuperate urban and rural working class struggles.

The dominant agrarian and mercantile bourgeoisie had little interest in promoting industrial production or the development of the countryside. However, the viability of Argentina’s agrarian export economy depended on the ability of the Argentinian exporters to realize profits by selling on the world market. The vulnerability of this economy, and of the class settlement which it expressed, was exposed by the First World War. Causing disruption to international trade, the war stirred up in Argentina a wave of strikes and insurrections which seriously threatened the bourgeois order. This was the beginning of the end of the era of an economy which was golden only to the extent of the Argentinian agrarian oligarchy’s pockets. As we will see later, the world crisis of 1929 was to give it the final blow.

Already before the First World War, Argentina’s extensive but backward agriculture had begun to reach the limits of cultivable lands, and a change in economic strategy would sooner or later appear necessary to the bourgeoisie. However, with the First World War, the demand for agricultural export goods from the belligerent countries temporarily increased, pushing prices up and rewarding the agro-businessmen with huge profits. But, at the same time, the war caused a shortage in the import of raw material and capital goods, and led to a crisis in many industrial sectors. As unemployment rose and pay and working conditions worsened, waves of strikes affected transport and urban service sectors, as well as the mostly British or foreign, meat processing plants, in the towns along the coast.

Meanwhile, there was also a change in the representation of the working class. By 1914 the largest union federation in Argentina was the Confederación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA), which in its fifth congress in 1905 had adopted an anarcho-communist position. In September 1914 the syndicalist Sociedad Obrera de Rio Gallegos (FORA) dissolved themselves to join FORA. The syndicalists opposed FORA’s anarcho-communist position and their entry to the federation was conditioned by a promise from the anarchist unions to discuss the problem of common objectives and principles in the forthcoming ninth congress of FORA. During this congress, in 1915, FORA’s revolutionary positions were discarded in favour of a position of neutrality towards different political currents within the labour movement – this included the Socialist Party and other parliamentary and moderate currents, but, as we will see, it also gave freedom to the union leaders of FORA to accept any compromise with whoever was in power. They argued that the struggles of these vanguards to assume leadership of the movement, and they are attempting to conceive of a form of party organization in which certain differences could be bracketed in the interests of the movement as a whole. They argue that vanguard groups large and small (beginning with the Bolsheviks themselves) had shown a tendency to fall apart after the death or departure of the one figure who was key to maintaining its internal equilibrium, and he felt this pointed to a fatal flaw in the received idea of the vanguard. They offer no solutions, merely questions. They would like to see the 40 self-appointed vanguards fuse into a broader organization of the three or four real tendencies they contain.

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syndicalist FORA was then known as the ‘FORA of the ninth congress’ (FORA IX).

With his election in 1916, the Radical President Yrigoyen sought a conciliatory approach with the working class and started a ‘special relationship’ with the unions of FORA IX. The Radical government took steps towards introducing labour reforms and intervened in industrial disputes through a representative of the President (the governor), sometimes on the side of the workers. On the other hand, Yrigoyen’s government severely repressed strikes when no political gain or conciliatory agreements could be obtained or when important interests of capital were at stake.

FORA IX found it difficult to bridle the proletariat into submission and compromise. After 1918 news of the Russian Revolution added to the material conditions of crisis by encouraging the Argentinian proletariat towards an uncompromising confrontation with the system. It was the revolutionary FORA V which took the lead of the new offensive. In January 1919 a major insurrection, which would be known as the Tragic Week, exploded in Buenos Aires, provoked by the death of workers during armed confrontations between the police and strikers in the occupied metallurgical plant Pedro Vasena & Hijos. FORA V called for a general strike and on the 9th of January a march of 200,000 people led by about a hundred armed workers turned into a victorious battle with the police, while looters raided the city. FORA IX was obliged to join FORA V in calling a general strike for the 10th, whilst at the same time opening negotiations with the government. The struggle continued for the next four days and strikes paralysed the city, while FORA IX, who were able to negotiate and obtain petty concessions limited to the dispute within Vasena, tried to discourage the workers from carrying on and appealed for a return to work – but in vain. The insurrection was not really about one isolated dispute in an isolated factory, but about the general discontent shared by everyone, and the workers felt strong enough to prosecute the strikes while FORA V was pushing for the extension of the strikes to the revolution. Only the intervention of the army was able to reimpose social peace.

After the end of the First World War, a fall of international wool and meat prices affected the rural region of Patagonia. Unemployment and the general worsening of the conditions of rural workers caused by the crisis encouraged the Sociedad Obrera de Rio Gallegos, affiliated to FORA IX, to call for a regional strike of ports and hotels in July 1920. The repressive response of the State triggered an escalation of the struggle, which extended among the rural workers in the hinterland. Armed nuclei composed of rural workers raided the countryside, spreading terror among the landowners and the bosses, recruiting, and propagating the struggle from hacienda to hacienda. Presidential appeals for reconciliation to the ‘guerrillas-and-peaceful’ workers were answered with armed defiance both in the coastal towns and in the countryside, and scabs sent from Buenos Aires were shot at by the workers of Rio Gallegos. Patagonia did not want a compromise, they wanted to go further: “This is not a working-class movement” said the governor Correo Falcon “but something much worse”. The strike ceased first in the capital Rio Gallegos and later in the countryside in front of a total lack of support from the central FORA IX and of the promises of generous concessions by the new governor, Varela, who presented himself as a defender of workers’ rights and was able to obtain an agreement with the rural workers. The promises were not met; but another attempt to organize strikes and armed struggles in 1921 was murderously repressed by the governor Varela. The upsurge was over, to the relief not only of the Argentinian bourgeoisie but also of the English and the German bourgeoisies, who had appealed to the Argentinian chancery to protect their property in Patagonia.

Between 1919 and 1929 Argentina’s economy recovered, real wages rose, unemployment decreased. This gave the government the economic basis for a renewed compromise with the working class. New laws to regulate the labour market were introduced (e.g. a legislation which made payment in cash obligatory came in 1925, the restriction of the working day to 8 hours, except for rural and domestic workers, came in 1929). The working class were demobilized and most of the unions merged to form the reformist confederation Central General de Trabajadores (CGT, 1930). Only FORA V and a few communist unions stayed out.

determined to exorcise the specter of Peron and Peronism. Mention of Peron’s name in public was banned, and an overall ideological regimentation was set in motion. As a result, from about 1957 onward, a Peronist underground resistance, both in the working and middle classes, began to burgeon. This Peronism had, as indicated earlier, the widest ideological gamut. Like all the rest of Latin America, the Argentine left was electrified by the Cuban Revolution and as early as 1960 leftists were travelling to Cuba for military training.

The Montoneros were a curious grouping, which initially included elements coming from the Catholic right. One of their leaders, Firmenich, has been accused of having been a double agent, a theory that seems widely rejected. No one questions, however, that after the defeat of the Montoneros, Firmenich had in fact gone into exile and had established ties to dubious right-wing elements. The Montoneros, like the later PRT-ERP and some smaller armed struggle groups, drew on a mainly middle-class base. Some currents adapted the Castro-Guevara “foco” strategy to urban-working-class areas, and did succeed in establishing a sympathetic working-class periphery, as evidenced in the aftermath of the spectacular (and disastrous) Monte Chingolo action in 1973 (cf. below).

The new face of Argentine repression became evident in 1972, when a number of armed struggle militants escaped from the prison in Trelew, were recaptured, and never seen again, something which up to that point was unprecedented. A far more dramatic escalation took place at Ezeiza airport (Buenos Aires’ main airport) on June 20, 1973, the day Peron returned from exile in Franco’s Spain. (The Montoneros had been urging him to move to Cuba to begin armed struggle operations from there.) From Madrid, Peron skilfully presented himself as all things to all people. On the left, he had designated his lieutenant, a far-left “Marxist-Peronist” named John Wilson Cooke, to be his political heir, but Cooke died in 1968. Peron met with the Montoneros and gave them the impression of sympathy with their movement and actions.

The left wing of Peronism surged in the last years before Peron’s return (as part of the early 1970s radicalization in the “southern cone”, including Chile and Uruguay, both of which also ended in military dictatorship), and two million people turned out to meet him at the airport, with the left Peronists and Montoneros having the highest hopes. Instead, the right-wing Peronists and the AAA, a paramilitary death squad, opened fire on the left-wing Peronists and killed 200 people. From that point on, a left-Peronist myth developed that Peron was surrounded by evil people (echoing the old Russian peasant myth of “if the czar only knew” about the cruelty and brutality of the landlord class) keeping him from the left-wing Peronist constituency that he truly favored. Some people even believe this entourage interfered with his medical treatment in the year before he died in 1974. All in all, it was estimated that the left-wing guerrillas killed perhaps 2,000 people in their entire existence (in attacks on police stations and armories for weapons) compared to the 30,000 leftists killed by the AAA and later by the military. A very powerful mural of the Ezeiza massacre, about 75 feet long and 6 feet high, has just been unveiled at the main museum of modern art in Buenos Aires.

Leftist armed struggle in Argentina had its last stand with the PRT-ERP raid on Monte Chingolo, an armory in Buenos Aires. The goal of the raid was the seizure of arms for the organization’s rural foco. Hundreds of militants actually managed to penetrate the armory where, due to the work of an informant, the army was...
norm for arrested militants, prostitutes or homeless people. The police in Argentina, as in many places, merely regulate criminality and prostitution for their own benefit, arresting mainly people who defy their regulatory role and payoff system. Drugs, and particularly crack, are a growing problem and part of this picture. The piqueteros were frank in acknowledging lumpenization of the long-term unemployed as a serious problem for organizing. Significant outlying areas of greater Buenos Aires, while not yet reaching the surreal levels portrayed in the Brazilian film *City of God*, are characterized by high levels of criminality.

Roving pickets can be threatened by bureaucracy much like factory pickets, as shown in the emergence of a piquetero bureaucracy, which initially sounds like as much an oxymoron as a libertarian or situationist or autonomist bureaucracy. In such a phenomenon one sees an important dimension of the Peronist management of society. Peron’s government had long ago established grassroots surveillance by a system of *manzanares*, literally a blockwatch network of Peronist ward heelers who dispensed favors and fingered troublemakers. After 2001 (and even earlier), under the pressure of the movement that had begun in Salta, the government developed a “plan social” or welfare system that today provides a meager monthly allowance of 150 pesos ($50 at the current exchange rate) to families of the unemployed. It is essentially identical to the WEP program in New York City, where welfare recipients do work, e.g. in the parks and subways, formerly performed by union labor. In both the U.S. and Argentine cases, many people are recycled into doing their own former jobs for a welfare check. The plan social compels the unemployed to do menial work in exchange for this pittance. They give a grassroots footing to the Peronist state by the disbursement of money and jobs, essentially updating the old *manzanares* system. The piquetero bureaucracy grew directly out of this arrangement. They are today state civil servants, often people who had nothing to do with the piquetero movement in its heyday.

**Clausewitz for Street Fighters and Irregular Warfare**

Radical piquetero strategy and tactics are only the latest manifestation of a rich engagement, by the Argentine radical left, with the military dimension of class struggle and revolution. Two earlier instances were the working-class street-fighting tactics in the 1969 Cordoba uprising (Cordoba being a highly-industrialized city with significant foreign investment in industry), known as the *Cordobazo* and the more problematic armed struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, carried out by the Montoneros, the Uruguayan Tupamaros, and the PRT-ERP (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores and the Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo) which had some sprinkling of Trotskyism but which had evolved to left Peronism.

One current development of interest is a shifting of historical memory about that period, which still strongly colors Argentina, and the Argentine left. 30,000 leftists were disappeared in the repression that extended from ca. 1972 to 1983 (with the fall of the military dictatorship). These disappeared virtually amount to a gaping hole in the succession of political generations, because in addition to those killed, many other people left and never returned. Half or more of the disappeared were working-class militants who, unlike the middle-class elements making up the base of the armed struggle groups, did not have the means and contacts enabling them to leave the country. In political and cultural and intellectual life, the devastated ranks of the 1960s and 1970s generation stands out starkly. The repression in Argentina overshadowed that of Pinochet’s Chile.

Today, a journal entitled *Lucha Armada* (Armed Struggle) has come out in four issues attempting to explore this legacy critically, both in terms of armed struggle’s impact at the time as well as on the present. Each issue (in a limited run of 2000) has sold out quickly, and bookstores are also full of books on the subject. Such is the unhealed scar being probed by *Lucha Armada* that, according to its chief editor, it is difficult to get people to write for it, for a variety of reasons ranging from a belief that “we were right, anyway” to an unwillingness to undertake a painful assessment of the past.

The basic story of armed struggle was as follows. From 1955, with the ouster of Peron by a military coup until his return in 1973, Argentina was ruled by a series of military and civilian governments

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2. Import-substitution production and Peronism

The fall of world trade that followed the end of the First World War prompted some within the Argentinean bourgeoisie to disengage with the world markets and look towards industrialization based on import substitution. However, a concerted attempt at national industrialization required a break with the established class settlement. The emerging industrial bourgeoisie, in whose interests it was to really push for this new economic policy, was in fact weak and squeezed between the agro-trade oligarchy on the one hand, entrenched in their conservative free-trade oriented interests, and a militant and restless working class on the other. It was only with the economic crisis that followed Wall Street crash in 1929, which saw a collapse in world trade, that it became possible to break the existing class settlement and pursue a policy of import substitution led industrialization. Even then the Argentinean industrial bourgeoisie was too weak and the army had to step in.

The army overthrew the Radical government in 1930, installing a military presidency. In order to regulate overproduction caused by the international crisis, the military government placed agricultural trade under State control, against the entrenched interests of the agrarian and mercantile bourgeoisie. The monopoly of the agro-trade profits allowed the State to channel capital into the development of a modern army, and a State apparatus which favoured industrial development; and (above all later with Perón) to channel profits into productive and industrial development.

At the same time the military government acted against the working class so as to increase the profitability of industrial capital. As soon as it took power, the new governments started repressions of both militant and conciliatory unions. Despite the fact that the moderate CGT did not even condemn their politics, including themselves “politically neutral”, the new government took repressive steps against the unions. The industrial bourgeoisie regained the ground previously lost to the working class. The labour laws conceded after the insurrection of 1919 were repealed; regulations were neglected by the bosses with the approval of state authorities and during the next ten years the average wage decreased. In the same period industrial production expanded and overtook agricultural production. This was accompanied by a recomposition of the Argentinean working class: made redundant by the economic restructuring, masses of rural workers moved to the urban areas and provided the labour force for the new industries.

However, unable to find a stable form to mediate class conflict and to integrate the working class with some form of corporative compromise, the military government found itself caught between the interests of the old ruling oligarchy and rising popular discontent, and they were obliged to progressively concede power to bourgeois politicians.

In June 1943, during the Second World War, in the face of a bourgeoisie split by conflicting interests, the army, led by Generals Rawson and Ramirez, took power a second time in order to ensure Argentina maintained a neutral position in the Second World War. There was an ideological motive in the coup, since the right-wing army was inclined to maintain a friendly relationship with the fascist side and many among them, Perón included, openly expressed their admiration of Mussolini. In fact the military was looking at fascism and corporatism as an answer to growing working class militancy. In 1942 the number of working days lost to strikes in Argentina was three times higher than in the past two years.

Indeed, in 1943, the new Labour and Social Security Secretary, Juan Domingo Perón, started a coherent economic and political policy based on the introduction of protective tariffs to support national accumulation and industrial development and on a corporatist compromise with the industrial working class. By 1944 he had become Vice President of Argentina. His popularity with the working class became so high that when the army tried to remove him from his post and send him into internalexile in 1945, a wave of grass-root struggles spread through the country obtained his return. In 1946, he was elected President with the support of the urban working class. In 1946 Perón initiated an industrialization plan, based on the income from the State monopoly of the agro-export, which would be reinvested in new industries through State-owned banks.

The introduction of protectionism and the State control of industrial development provided the
material means to integrate the working class through economic concessions. And at the same time the real improvement in working class conditions, particularly higher wages, was functional to the expansion of Argentina’s internal market, and to the development of the import substitution economy. Indeed, the ideology of Peronism, based on the idea of a State ‘above all particular class interests’, was an ideology that the Radical government of Yrigoyen (and General Urriburu, with his corporatist commitment) had tried to propose in vain because it was challenged both by the old oligarchy and the working class, and as a result was contradicted by its actual economic policies. Only with the Peronist compromise was this nationalistic ‘third way’ grounded in the actual role taken by the State in the control of the economy. And by allowing for a real change in the conditions of the working class it was able to secure the material basis for its credibility.

The gains of the working class were to some extent comparable to those of workers in European social-democratic states. A bureaucratic union apparatus would represent the workers and guarantee their ‘interests’ within a system of collective bargaining with the state as interlocutor (the unions received the status of persona juridica in 1945); The centralization of wage negotiations became a feature of most trades (already in 1945 there were 142 collective bargains signed at the National Department of Labour for Buenos Aires and 279 for the rest of the country). Legislation which benefitted the workers was passed, including a steady rise of wages, the introduction of an extra month bonus at Christmas (the Aguinaldo, suspended only in August 2001), the implementation of health and safety regulations, free health care and new guarantees for rural workers.

These ‘generous’ concessions were offered in exchange for the workers’ submission to the State and the social order. For Perón the good worker had to go ‘de casa al trabajo y del trabajo a casa’: from home to work and from work to home - and give up class struggle. Perón’s nationalistic ideology condemned communism and capitalism as ‘foreign’ and spurious ideologies, in the name of the ‘third way’ of justice and welfare provided by the Argentinian State. The Peronist party was called ‘Justicialist’. The other side of this ‘third way’ was of course military repression, which was turned against those unions and militants who opposed the regime (the socialist splinter of the CGT union federation was suspended).

Instead, the more moderate unions were encouraged and integrated into the State structure. The unions’ complicity with the corporatist state and their moderation was guaranteed in concrete by a redefinition of their role within the system of wealth distribution. The unions were in fact put in charge of benefit provision and they would run the health service and even holiday resorts for the workers. This control of resources was an element of the material basis for its credibility.

The immediate background to the 2001 crisis had been the collapse of the 1:1 peso-dollar exchange rate, which had been a lynchpin of the previous decade’s “expansion” and which permitted wealthy Argentines to move considerable funds abroad, engage in luxury consumption and travel widely in the fast lane. Many such people established dollar accounts abroad (the dollars being acquired at the 1:1 rate) and after the brutal devaluation of 67%, repatriated those dollars into pesos at 3:1. Michael Hudson has also pointed out how billions of IMF loans to Argentina (and other “free market” economies under IMF tutelage) had found their way into private Swiss and offshore bank accounts within weeks of disbursement, thereby contributing to nothing but the country’s external indebtedness. In Argentina, one sees “financial arbitrage capitalism”, a nominally impressive expansion built on the devastation of the real economy, in its most savage form, but it is only the extreme of a worldwide trend visible almost everywhere. Up until shortly before the crash, Argentine-style “dollarization” had been widely promoted as a model for Latin America.)

Also significant in 2001-2002 was the temporary support of the middle classes for the piqueteros, cheering them on and providing them with food and water as they surged into downtown Buenos Aires from the outlying suburbs, in contrast to the present, where the middle classes have relegated the piqueteros back into the classes dangereuses.

The developing piquetero strategy of moving the picket line into a social space broader than the specific workplace continues to this day, and is used to highlight struggles and sometimes win concessions in everything from health care (supposedly a universal right but in fact a bureaucratic nightmare for most working and poor people) to conditions in prisons to outing police torturers past and present. The latter is a very interesting and apparently effective method of making “historical memory” more than a literary exercise. Militants track former and current torturers to their homes and, in actions called escraches, plaster the walls of their immediate neighborhoods with exposes of what they have done and are doing. The Argentine army, if not the police, is apparently still widely discredited from both the dictatorship and from the debacle of the Malvinas war, which was launched in 1982 a few days after the biggest demonstration of strikers since the military seized power in 1976. One clear indication of the cosmetic quality of the shift to Kirchner’s left populism is that police and prison treatment of workers and poor people has barely changed from the pre-2001 period, with torture and brutality being the
community kitchens during episodes of strikes. But above all thisolleas popularesinsurrections. One tradition which has reoccurred from pre-Peronist times up until today is theorganization ofThis tradition of solidarity in the neighbourhood and at street level, whichof this weakness; the failure of the Peronist 'welfare system' to fragment and individualize the workingclass (as was achieved instead by the western welfare state) was the other side of this same coin.

Workers' cultural associations, popular libraries and anarchist schools proliferated

Argentina at the peak of the working-class base of Peronism had a rate of unionization of over 90%, while the situation in the U.S. was extremely different. In the Argentine case, the large industrial plants were nationalized, and the unions were the agents of this process. The organization of unions was seen as a way to control the working class and to prevent strikes. This was achieved through a system of clientelist relationships which guaranteed political and financial autonomy to the electoral base. Peronist local organizations were left totally or almost totally free from any political control on their activities. They would support their politicians at electoral times, receiving in exchange financial help and jobs. This encouraged identification with, and support for, Peronism, since such support actually meant welfare, state-guaranteed rights against the employers, and also space for militant actions and self-organization.

It is worth noticing that the Peronist structure of power, by giving a limited autonomy to its electoral base, encouraged and reproduced a traditional practice of self-help and solidarity at neighbourhood level. This tradition was rooted in the life of the pre-1920s

The piequetero movement has its origins in the 1920s. It was a protest movement by workers against the high cost of living and poor working conditions. The movement gained strength in the 1930s, and it was led by union leaders who were opposed to the military government of Juan Perón. The movement was characterized by its use of direct action tactics, such as strikes and demonstrations. The piequetero movement was seen as a way to resist the military government and to demand better working conditions for workers.
3. The end of the import-substitution economy

By the end of the 1940s, import-substitution-led industrialization was reaching its limits. Concessions for the working class and its institutionalized strength restricted the rate of exploitation and hindered profits. The State apparatus necessary to Peronist patronage, with its army of white collar workers employed in the unions, hospitals, schools, etc., was a growing burden on the realization of surplus value at national level. Argentina’s archaic agricultural trade, whose profits still constituted the main source of finance for the State, and which were challenged by competition from more advanced western countries, began to impose increasingly pressing limits on the Peronist system. As a consequence, inflation began to rise and real wages declined. A mounting petty bourgeois, middle-class and bourgeois opposition to Peronism emerged, politically articulated by the Catholic Church and by increasingly nervous associations of industry bosses.

It was increasingly apparent that Peronist power could survive only by changing the terms of its ‘compromise’: In order to deal with the increasing State deficit, Perón had to seek foreign investments, and in order to contain inflation had to discipline the working class. Already by 1948, the government responded to strikes with repression more frequently than by making concessions. In 1953 Perón had to abandon his commitment to his flagship policy of protectionism: causing outrage in public opinion, he allowed the USA to invest in a new steel plant, and started negotiations with the California-based Standard Oil Company for the exploitation of oil sources in Patagonia. All this weakened both the ideological and the material basis of the Peronist class compromise.

In fact a change at international level in the post-war settlement presented Argentina with the opportunity to shift towards export-led industrialization. The Bretton Woods agreement, together with multilateral agreements promoting free trade, established the dollar as world currency and stimulated a sustained recovery in world trade. Argentina’s bourgeoisie could now in principle take advantage of an opening up of foreign markets, particularly in the USA and in Europe, to sell the products it could now manufacture. The governments which succeeded Perón’s would make increasing efforts towards liberalization. But there was a fundamental problem confronting the attempts to pursue export-led growth. The industry developed under the Peronist compromise was backward and inefficient by world standards. Argentinian industry needed massive investment to be able to compete on the world market, and this could only come from abroad. But Western banks were not prepared to make the large scale and long term investments in Argentina necessary to modernize its plant and machinery while the post-war boom was generating high profits in the Western countries.

However, the need to attract foreign investment and to discipline the working class into better standards of efficiency, faster work pace, higher intensity of work, meant that the bourgeoisie had to get rid of Perón and attack the privileges of a ‘spoiled’ working class. In September 1955 a military coup replaced Perón, populistically playing also on the disappointment of the public opinion about the deals with Standard Oil. The aim of the new military government was first of all to redefine the balance of power between workers and employers, workers, since, according to the employers’ federation of the metalurgical industry, workplaces were “like an army in which the troops give the orders and not the generals”. In the years following the coup, anti-labour laws were passed; the base structures of the Peronist unions, the comisiones internas, were subjected to State intervention or forced into clandestinity. In 1958 the Radical government led by Frondizi implemented a series of privatizations and rationalizations, to patch up the State finances and encourage foreign investment. After 1958 production was restructured sometimes with the introduction of new technology; but often the effort of increasing productivity just meant imposing a faster work pace and discipline on the workers.

There was a strong grass-root workers’ response to the new economic measures. Between 1955 and 1959 about four million working days were lost every year to strikes. In 1959 the days lost to strikes soared to ten million. The workers did not hesitate to consider occupations, sabotage and the use of explosives. Despite this resistance, the bourgeoisie recovered ground. Wage concessions were related to productivity; piece-work was introduced; speed-ups were imposed. It was a period of defeat for the
made by the different assemblies. We begin to see what we may be able to achieve as the proposals are presented. We never talk about the specific location that we intend to block at the assembly, for security reasons. We choose the method but not the details.

In the assemblies we determine the roles and the zones. For example, we determine which of the compañeros will take care of food, security and any injuries. That is to say, the different zones coordinate particular activities and then there is someone who is elected to serve as a nexus for all these zones. In contrast, other organizations have leaders who decide who does security; yet the location of the blockade and, therefore, the security zone itself – in our experience it is security that decides where a blockade will occur – remains unclear to the leaders. There are many different kinds of organization.

It seems as if security and the political criteria of the blockade always respond to the internal needs of the organization, rather than to the political conjuncture or to any possible external support.

Yes, but these internal necessities entail much more than our “economic needs.” For example, we blockaded because of the events at Mosconi; those events implicated our identity, because if a compañero is affected in Mosconi, well, that also concerns us, even if it is something that does not seem to affect us directly in Solano.

Likewise, we blockaded the Pueyrredon Bridge because the compañeros at La Matanza were under the threat of repression; we said to the government, “to repress over there, you’ll have to also repress over here.” We saw that they were beating our brothers (despite D’Elia and Alderete), so we had to come out to fight for them. Keep in mind, though, we do not build toward the conjuncture. We are not interested in elections, whether people should vote or not.

Another example: when Patricia Bullrich organized an offensive, we said, “we have to come out because they want to cut our plans, they don’t want to renew them.” It was an attempt to put a stop to our organization. What we never do is to come out when a super-structural power tries to convene us, when an organization with a pre-determined political agenda tries to mobilize us; we analyze and decide upon a situation according to our own agenda.

We don’t want to foreclose anyone’s space; we don’t want to be a vanguard. We build because there is a reality that needs to be transformed, and we organize and join-up with those that are changing their situation. We are not interested in going to La Matanza to harangue and agitate, just in order to gain space. We don’t conceive politics in that manner. Yes, we believe that the base needs to be organized, but it is up to the compañeros at La Matanza to organize their own area. We want to coordinate our movement with those that are building theirs, but we don’t dispute them any political space.

It can’t be said, as others claim, that we are just a “base” movement. We do have a political project. In fact, we do know how to read the current political conjuncture, but our project occurs at the neighborhood level, with the people. Our analysis is more comprehensive, precisely, because we work in this manner. They can’t reproach us for lacking a strategy and a guiding political structure; that’s a lie. The movement itself is a political tool; all of us, all the compañeros in the movement, constitute this tool and we all work on the analysis. When we are asked what our political project is, we explain that it is this: politics from below, a comprehensive politics from below. Our goal is the complete formation of the person, in every possible sense. Everything counts, everything is important.

We don’t believe that we need a national front, one that encompasses the entire country, in order to succeed. I don’t believe that there will be an alliance or a front that will take power; there will be many fronts.

**Editor’s Notes**

1. President of Argentina from 1990 to 1999.
2. See *Aufheben* “Picket and Pot-banger…” in this pamphlet.
3. In June 2000, a riot in the town of General Mosconi left 2 people dead and led to a country-wide response with 300 road-blocks.
longer generous, became a reason for resentment on the part of the working class. That the union was part of the bourgeois system was indeed apparent in the fact that the union bureaucrats were even owners of industries and businesses.\textsuperscript{20} The movement of el casismo which started in 1970 with the rank- and-file strikes in the Fiat factory in Córdoba expressed this resentment. The unions of STRAC and SIMAC were seized by the workers, who imposed rank-and-file leaders (mainly Maoist or independent Peronists), against the resistance of the union bureaucrats and of the State. A new insurrection in Córdoba, called the Viborazo, exploded in 1971 precisely around the new rank-and-file movements and in particular around a struggle in the FIAT car factory.

This hot climate, which also included raids by Peronist and Trotskyist terrorist groups (‘guerrillas’), could not be defeated with the army or with the help of right-wing paramilitary groups. The return of Perón, who could still be seen by many as ‘above the parties’, was then accepted by the bourgeoisie: the Peronist Cámara was elected in March 1973, and Perón was president later the same year. During this period strikes broke out everywhere in the country, with occupations, clashes with the police and raids on bosses’ homes. ‘Guerrilla’ actions also multiplied.

While allowing a rise in wages, and making an attempt to control import prices, Perón carried on a policy in the three years of his presidency which was systematically and mercilessly repressive; he criticized Cámara for his ‘excessive concessions’ to the workers. A redundancy law allowed the State to get rid of militant employees and a new ‘Law of Professional Associations’ allowed the trade union leaders to overthrow decisions made by the committees and increased the bureaucrats’ control over the shop floor. Isabelita Perón came to power after her husband’s death, and prosecuted his repressive policy. The repression had the consequence of isolating and radicalizing small vanguard groups – armed ‘guerrilla’ groups, in particular the Montoneros, got stronger and their kidnappings and murders of trade union bureaucrats and other members of the bourgeoisie earned general public support and sympathy.\textsuperscript{21}

4. Petrodollars and the restructuring of the working class\textsuperscript{22}

The quadrupling of the price of oil in 1973 precipitated a severe financial crisis in Argentina. The sharp rise in the price of oil triggered an inflationary spiral that soon led to hyper-inflation. At the same time the Central Bank sank deeper into the red. Yet this oil crisis not only brought the dangers of debt and hyper-inflation, it also offered the Argentinian bourgeoisie new opportunities. The oil price rise of 1973 led to a huge increase in the revenues of the oil producing States. Unable to spend or invest more than a small fraction of these revenues at home, the oil producing States deposited their ‘petro-dollars’ in Western banks. As a result Western bankers found themselves awash with money-capital to invest. Faced with rising working class militancy and declining profits in Western Europe and the USA in the 1970s, the Western banks were prepared to channel a large part of their petro-dollar funds into the more developed parts of the periphery of the world economy, such as Latin America. As a consequence, the oil crisis gave Argentina’s economy the opportunity to present itself as a profitable place for the Western banks to invest their petrodollars. Foreign investments could then ideally be used to modernize Argentina’s industry and economic infrastructure so that it could compete in the world market. But such a strategy required a further concerted attack on the working class to guarantee the potential profitability of investments in Argentina.

Similar calculations were made in neighbouring Chile, when in 1973 a military coup d’État\textsuperscript{23} opened their doors to the ‘monetarist’ of the new bourgeois economists, educated in the ‘Chicago school’ of Milton Friedman. The prescription of the American ‘monetarist’ economists was to fight inflation by cutting state spending and privatize state enterprises; and abolish protectionist policies and subsidies for state industries, forcing the ‘inefficient’ industries to close down in the face of international competition. In 1974 the average Chilean wage fell by one half and unemployment exploded, while the welfare system, which was based on the profits of the national industries, collapsed. At the same time massive military repression hit Chilean workers and their organization s. In a word, the restructuring devised by the Chicago School was a class counterattack, whose rationale was founded in the imposition elections.

I have heard some piquetero compañeros complain that they felt “useless,” “forgotten,” “left behind,” in their everyday lives, yet, at the blockades they feel different; “empowered,” they feel that “they have a choice.”

It’s true; it’s a liberated zone, the only place where the cop won’t treat you like trash. There, the cop says to you, “pardon me, we come to negotiate.” That same policeman would beat you to death if he saw you alone on the street.

It’s true that you feel yourself to be in control of an area during a blockade, but I believe that the compañeros are aware that organizing empowers them; that it is not only the blockade, but the organization that makes you strong. For example, today the compañeros are putting up signs on the street, they put up MTD signs, with an small arrow, indicating how to get to the shelter. These are the strong signs of an emerging counter-power.

People say that some of the compañeros have a purely pragmatic relationship with the movement; that they only come to get the plan. How does this actually work out in the piquetes?

The majority of the compañeros that join the movement – more than eighty percent – start out only because they have concrete necessities. They need something to eat, they don’t have groceries, they don’t have work; they have nothing. At first they come for the plans, but once there is a real process, things change, they begin to feel the excitement and the need to get organized. But yes, some compañeros only go because the assembly voted that those failing to attend the blockade don’t get a plan.

Some say that taking to the streets is a way of saying “no” to a model, “no” to a system. I think that this can be understood in two different ways: in the first we speculate that the model failed and that you represent the moment when the victims stand forth, like with “Fariello,” whose “people” never step out of their role as the witnesses of misery: those that are “left-out,” those that beg, the impoverished, the forgotten. But, there is another way to see the issue, one where the model did not fail, where exclusion simply does not exist because there is no place of inclusion, where exploitation is merely a desirable variable in the system. Things being as they are, we feel that the stance taken by most of the people that participate in the piquetes is not that of the victims, rather, they present a very clear subjective desire to work and think actively.

We don’t want to be included. At least, I know that I don’t want to be exploited ever again, to have Fortabat or Macri as bosses again, that’s for sure. I have not struggled just to return to exploitation. I believe, personally, and I believe that many compañeros share this belief in regards to themselves, that I am not made to be included, but this is something else altogether.

One of the things that we know with certainty is, precisely, what we don’t want; getting organized makes this clear. To discover where we want to go, what it is that we are building, that is what is make clear. To discover where we want to go, what it is that we are building, that is what is make clear. To discover where we want to go, what it is that we are building, that is what is make clear. To discover where we want to go, what it is that we are building, that is what is make clear. To discover where we want to go, what it is that we are building, that is what is make clear. To discover where we want to go, what it is that we are building, that is what is make clear.
We understand that what makes you different from other organizations of the unemployed is that you organize workshops, projects, task groups, that you have a burgeoning collective life: how does this difference manifest itself in the conception of the piquetes?

I have been to other piquetes and our organization is different to theirs, our security criteria are different, and our compañeros have a different notion of discipline. It would be very surprising to catch one of our compañeros drinking at one of our piquetes; that someone is asked to leave because he is a security risk. There have been a lot of changes in the neighborhoods, in the lives of our compañeros, because you have to keep in mind that these were compañeros who, a year ago, would take 30 pesos in bribes for their vote, who were forced to steal in order to survive.

Our common development, our formation, holds all of this together. That’s its bedrock. Nobody imposes a drinking ban, or stops a compañero from drinking; we talk about these things at the assemblies. Basically, the coordinators don’t get to decide whether drinking is forbidden or not, rather, we look for a consensus; we discuss the reasons why it might not be prudent. That’s the great difference; it’s not because you happen to wear a hood, or carry the biggest stick.

When did you get the first plans, the ones that helped you to organize?

In 1997, as soon as we started marching onto the Municipal Hall, we got 50 plans. We didn’t do any blockades then, we marched to the Department of Labor. So, we got our first plans through our actions on the Municipal Hall. We achieved autonomy in the handling of the plans after two blockades.

This idea, to transform this relationship with the State: was this a conscious decision at the time?

Yes, and this is what made us different to other organizations, now there are many organizations that are beginning to do the same thing. The problem, basically, was that the municipality would put pressure on the compañeros to keep them from organizing. 120 workers got work under the State’s plan; only 5 or 6 of them are still part of the MTD. We soon realized that it made no sense to promote a project that would extend the process we wanted to redress.

We have discussed the heterogeneity of the piquetero movement on several occasions. How do you explain this heterogeneity?

Our difference to that of other movements is becoming increasingly apparent, that is, above all, because many others still work in the classical way: they say, “we seize power from above and then we change things;” while we say, “from below, without any desire to seize power, we struggle.” Those other organizations see themselves as political actors and they have revolutionary strategies; we see ourselves, like the Subcomandante Marcos says, as rebels seeking social change. For example, they say that what we call popular education deforms people rather than informing them. They don’t make any attempt to tie popular education to political education, on the contrary. We were below, at the bottom, and we don’t want to rise, we want to stay there, we will always be rebels. We are at the bottom and we don’t want to come up. We have a lot of compañeros that stand out, but none that aspire to lead. We all lead, all of the time.

In any case, these differences won’t let us lose sight of the fact that we have to organize, that we have to coordinate and articulate, that it is necessary to go on discussing things and coming to agreements, struggling together. We are not saying that we know the truth and the others don’t. We know that we build things differently; but these differences can be coordinated, just as long as we keep raising the call for social change, for dignity, and that we don’t take advantage of people, say, by using them to win of the ‘hard laws’ of international competition.

In 1976, using the justification of the need to fight the ‘guerrillas’, the army took power in Argentina in a coup. The concept of ‘guerrilla’ was extended to that of ‘industrial guerrilla’ to launch a massive attack against workers’ organization s. Indeed it was clear to the military that the main obstacle to restructuring was the proletariat. A wave of arrests and murders of militant workers and union leaders was carried out with the collaboration of paramilitary groups. A period of terror started. Militant workers would be sacked or resign for fear of arrest, torture and death, with a total of 30,000 dead or ‘disappeared’. Laws were passed to attack the militancy of the rank-and-file (reduction of the number of shop stewards to half; limitations to the access to the role of shop steward in the unions, the obligation of a pre-approved agenda at union meetings).

The CGT was dissolved by the military regime, and legislation was passed to ‘democratize’ the unions. The right of collective bargaining was restricted to weaken the power and legitimacy of the unions. Their control on welfare and resources was withdrawn. The interest of the military to ‘democratize’ the unions was one with the attempt to break down their power based on patronage, and in the same time to make the workers look at the State as individuals for their benefits rather than seeking to belong to a group. But this attack on the unions had contradictory consequences. First, by losing the concrete basis for their power over people, the unions would cease to be an efficient form of social control of the proletariat. And, second, losing their privileges, which were the reason of their complicity with the government, many union leaders did not have any choice but to be drawn into the struggle and radicalized their position in an attempt at maintaining control of the situation.

However, this restructuring and liberalization of the economy had to be gradual, because of the backwardness of Argentina’s industries in terms of technology and organization of work, which was the other side of the coin of the strength of a working class which had not allowed capitalism completely to follow its laws of free competition. Indeed when the State spoke about efficiency, it was the strength of the working class that was under discussion. The industries doomed by the neoliberal policies would be precisely those where the workers were stronger and had been able to gain and maintain high wages and comfortable working conditions. The restructuring meant dismantling those industrial sectors which, not uncoincidentally, were the strongholds of workers’ militancy. The industries which would survive had to be competitive to face foreign competition, and the workers had to be efficient to face the pressure of a rising unemployment – this meant imposing labour discipline and speed ups on the workers, the reposition of capital’s control on labour. The introduction of wage differentials was a way of encouraging efficiency and competitiveness in the workers, and at the same time a way of trying to break class solidarity in the workplace.

As in Chile, while productivity increased, wages were halved in the first year of the coup. Unemployment rose and the gap between rich and poor increased. In the years following the coup a third of Argentina’s industrial capacity was closed down in the face of foreign competition. A large part of the redundant workforce was absorbed by self-employment in the tertiary sector, but in 1981 the government was obliged to create 500,000 jobs. The government’s inability to provide this employment contributed to a split in the middle class support for the state. Many union leaders did not have any choice but to be drawn into the struggle and radicalize their position in an attempt at maintaining control of the situation.

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recession in the developed economies, which caused a widespread debt crisis (Mexico defaulted in 1982). Facing workers’ resistance to their best efforts towards ‘efficiency’, and facing falling demand for its exports in the West, Argentina’s economy confronted a growing balance of trade deficit and a mounting foreign debt to finance it. Foreign debt rocketed from about $8bn in the mid-seventies to $45bn in the mid-eighties. Unrest spread, as far as the army and even in the police, which came out on strike for wages in 1982. The government, seeking a desperate way to regain their support, invaded the British colony of the Falklands/Malvinas to inflame Argentinian nationalistic hearts and obtain the support of left-wing workers’ organization s (which they obtained, in the name of the leftist ideology of ‘anti-imperialism’!). Unfortunately for them, they lost the war.

5. Democracy

For the middle classes the fact that there was a problem in Argentina was undeniable. But this was not seen to be due to capitalism, but to moral issues which were superimposed on it — like the brutality of the military regime. Furthermore the crisis was not seen as a question of class struggle, but as the problem of the corrupt ‘trade union barons’ who were asking too much. In fact, this perception became the bourgeoisie’s pretext for its need to carry on and intensify its attack against a working class reluctant to be sacked and sacrificed at the altar of the new monetarist and neo-liberal policies — as was expressed in the Radical Alfonsín’s electoral pledge to ‘clip the wings of the trade union barons’, and to deal with the problem of ‘uncontrolled union demands’. Alfonsín triumphantly won the elections in 1983 with the support of the middle classes and the petit bourgeoisie but soon faced the problems of recession and inflation by prosecuting the neoliberal policies of his predecessors. In 1987 the Radical government restricted wages to fight inflation and introduced a second currency, the austral, a move which did not solve the inflationary crisis. Between 1983 and 1989 the wages of State employees were substantially reduced, while discontent and strikes grew. Unable to stop inflation, Alfonsín resigned in 1990.

In the same year the Peronist Menem was elected as president of Argentina in the midst of the economic crisis, with the electoral promise to stabilize the economy, devalue the peso, increase wages, and provide ‘social justice’ (words which appealed to the memory of the old Peronist times). On the other hand, he assured the USA of his commitment to neo-liberal policies: With this commitment, the magic word ‘justice’, key word of the old Peronist class compromise, was deprived of any chance of a concrete backup.

In fact there was no choice for Menem. During the 1990s the International Monetary Fund intervened in Argentina in order to bail the country out of the debts that it had been piling up since the dismantling of the import-substitution economy. The enormous loans that were conceded to Argentina were conditional on the adoption of concrete steps (‘Structural Adjustment Programmes’) whose stated aim was to guarantee the influx of foreign capital to enable Argentina to pay back its international creditors. In order to make Argentina attractive to investors, the IMF recommended the stabilization of the Argentinian currency with respect to the dollar, a rise in interest rates and continuation of the process of privatization of state companies (water, gas, airports...) — together with further cuts in State spending. Whatever the Peronist promises might have meant to the electors, Menem had to be subservient to the IMF’s requirements. Under Menem the austral, which was then worth one ten-thousandth of a peso, was suppressed, and a different monetary strategy was taken. In 1991, the government passed the ‘Convertible Law’, which fixed the ratio between peso and dollar to 1:1. New laws on state reform sanctioned more deregulation of the economy, the privatization of gas, water, telecommunications and the postal service. The government also removed all restrictions on the transfer of foreign capital in or out of the country.

Menem dealt with economic ‘inefficiency’ with a reformulation of labour laws, which allowed the extension of the working day to 12 hours with no overtime paid, the possibility for employers to postpone weekend and rest days at will, deprived women and young people of labour rights (e.g. protection against dismissal), took away the right to paid days off and to strike and gave the employers

A CONVERSATION WITH MTD SOLANO

The “Piquetes”

I think that the piquetes blasted away our sense of helplessness, but in a new way. We shook the country out of the lethargic dream that Menem1 and his politics were selling, like a bolt of bright new light. Together with many other struggles, we woke the country from the sweet dreams of post-modernity. They branded us with a name – the Piqueteros – but for us the pique became the only way in which we could talk with the rest of the country, our way of telling them that there were other methods of struggle, other ways to fire-up our lives with dignity.

How did this idea arise? How did you get organized?

The piquetes began in the interior, in Cutralco, Tartagal, Mosconi, Santiago del Estero, and they spread throughout the country, blocking the trade routes that fed the most important cities. Once that had started, people started to take the piquetes seriously as a way of fighting, even here, in Buenos Aires, but there were tremendous arguments over the plans; over whether it was correct to ask for the work plans2 or not. Some said that we were only up to reformist self-help schemes. Instead of getting embroiled in that argument, we decided to put it into practice. At that point our organizing had only reached the level of church groups, but we were always talking about a greater struggle. We were always talking about taking over the Municipality, raising the stakes, and then there was the first road blockade. The first was somewhat improvised, and some of our compañeros were arrested. But, little by little, it started to come into evidence that a new way of fighting had been developed.

The most important thing, however, was that our numbers started to grow; we started to build productive workshops, to enable people, to teach what we were learning, all of these things that are so much more important than the blockades. The blockades are only the most visible element, and so it seems that they are all there is to see, but the struggle is really what we had been doing before. In reality, we only started the blockades once we had already gotten organized.

Yet the press still insists in disparaging us, talking about unemployed hoodlums, masked criminals, entirely marginal people, bums. . .

It’s important to make it clear that from the beginning all of the left, including the progressives, accused us of beggging, self-help, reformism, and did not see what the central demands of the organization entail: work, dignity, social change. It was obvious that many things went beyond the plans; even if many organizations did not, because once they had gotten the plans they would call it quits.

The piquetes have changed a lot. At first, in the first blockades, we kept our faces hidden, and others started, people started to take the piquetes seriously as a way of fighting, even here, in Buenos Aires, we didn’t reveal them because we did not want to frighten people. It was a process; we suffered escalating repression and we started to cover our faces, so that we could not be identified. We only used violence as self-defense. We did not start to throw sticks and stones in order to attack, but to defend ourselves. It is also essential to point out that the piquetes and the plans are just another factor in our struggle; they are not fundamental.

The plans are the reality that allows us to organize ourselves. Clearly, we can’t take control over a factory. We are very different from other kinds of organizations, groups that do very real work, because we cannot use the neighborhood organizations as an “excuse” that leads to other goals.

There were some hard moments in the first blockades, but things changed after Mosconi. From then on the consciousness of our compañeros changed. At first we had to insist that everything going to be alright, we had to struggle to keep our compañeros from being frightened, and more often than not we had to keep our sticks and our slingshots hidden. We had strong disagreements on whether to keep our faces covered or not. It took time for people to understand that we needed some kind of self-defense, that the security compañeros could not show their faces to the militias. In the blockades that we did with the congress of La Matanza, the people of the CTA would demand that we remove our hoods. We took that to the assembly, and the assembly decided that we might as well abandon the
When I first arrived, I couldn’t really tell the difference between the dozen or so banners and flags of various Leninist groups, and the flags and banners saying “Libertarian Socialism.” I’ve seen their paper once, and read a few things from A-infos⁴ from them—so far nothing to indicate an orientation away from boring anachronism and coat-tailing Trotskyists. However, I will pursue them in the upcoming days in the hope that they won’t fit the terrible stereotype of irrelevant sectarianism.

Finally, I will plug Indymedia in Argentina as being a good group, playing a useful role in the struggles here. While Indymedia in most places is still in the gutter, it seems that the Argentina IMC⁵ is actually of use to people trying to exchange information in various different movements. The open nature means that there is a fair amount of Leninist propaganda, but the fact that there is a diversity of Leninist propaganda helps it escape from being the organ to one particular group. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of people working on the project (taking the photos, writing the articles, keeping the spaces together) are simply interested in furthering struggles like the unemployed movements, popular assemblies, and factory occupations. Another plus are the two Indymedia offices, both inside former banks that are now controlled by neighborhood assemblies.

I don’t really have much more to say. I would consider the 19-20th anniversary actions to be a great failure; with the left being able to prevent any sort of violent class action (through use of organizational control and widespread discouraging of violence). However, there are still many excellent things going on here, and many useful lessons to be learned from the class struggle in Argentina.

Editor’s Notes

1. To commemorate the uprising on the 19-20 December 2001.
2. Particularly odious Trotskyist groups.
3. Largely French based revolutionary group that existed from 1957-1972 who appear to be a significant influence on this author.
4. “A multi-lingual news service by, for and about anarchists”, www.ainfos.ca

When the proletariat discovers its historic mission on the streets of Salta the right to define job descriptions to allow for introduction of multiple tasks. This practice heavily restricted those collective negotiations which still survived and rendered the workers more atomized and weaker in their bargaining with the employers. Industries, above all textiles, were allowed to relocate from the coastal towns to inland, where there was a ‘more tranquil labour environment’, and where labour regulations were less restrictive, with the conscious intent of making the country more attractive for investment.

Under this neo-Peronist government the exposure of Argentina to international competition was speeded up. In 1990 the government signed bilateral agreements (the Act of Buenos Aires) with Brazil that aimed to establish a new trade bloc modelled on the European Union. The following year Uruguay and Paraguay joined this agreement with the treaty of Asuncion which established the Mercado Comun del Cono Sur (MERCOSUR). Under these agreements it was decided to establish a custom union between the four countries by January 1995. All tariff barriers were to be dismantled between the four countries exposing Argentina’s industry to the full competition of Brazil.⁶ However, Menem’s policy of a highly restrictive monetary policy to counter inflation meant that capital was unavailable for the medium and small companies to prepare themselves for liberalization. The weakest industries were closing while capitals were concentrated into large Transnational Corporations and domestic ‘Great Economic Groups’.

By 1993 Menem’s neo-liberal policies had begun to bear fruit. This dismantling of financial regulations, along with tough anti-labour laws, wholesale privatization and the pegging of the peso to the dollar, had transformed Argentina into an enticing prospect for foreign investors. With diminished investment opportunities due to the recession in the USA and Europe, international capital flooded into Argentina, preying on the national services, land, natural resources (oil) sold off by the government. The government of Argentina was duly praised by the IMF and the USA.

In contrast to the period under Alfonsín, in which the incomes of all but the very rich failed to keep pace with hyper-inflation, Menem’s rule was a time of relative prosperity for the majority of the Argentinian population. With the stabilization of the peso the middle class no longer had to fear inflation eating into their savings and financial deregulation opened up opportunities for profitable investment for even small or moderate savers. For the part of the working class which was still in secure jobs, wages began to rise faster than prices.

However, a large part of the wave of foreign capital encouraged by Menem’s neoliberal policies did not go into productive investments. Foreign capital was more interested in buying up industries if they could quickly make profits by running them more efficiently - i.e. by sacking half the work force and making the other half work harder and more flexibly - rather than in building new factories and equipping them with up to date machinery. As a consequence, the inflow of foreign capital tended to increase, rather than decrease, unemployment at the same time as depressing wages for those at the bottom of the labour market. Between 1991 and 1999 both unemployment and underemployment more than doubled according to official figures.

As a result, the burst in economic prosperity of the early to mid 1990s was far from being evenly spread. Those amongst the Argentinian bourgeoisie and middle classes who were in a position to become local agents for international capital – bankers, lawyers, consultants, accounts, managers and politicians – were able to make a fortune. At the same time those who lost their jobs through downsizing and public spending cuts found themselves swelling the ranks of the poor. Inequality rose sharply between the richest and the poorest. In 1990 the richest ten per cent of the population had an income fifteen times that of the poorest tenth of the population.

When many of its more militant sections ‘downsized’, the bulk of the Argentinian working class faced the prospect of steadily rising wages if they kept their heads down or the poverty of unemployment if they did not. As a consequence, militancy declined in the workplace and, as we shall see, the site of struggles shifted to the poor and the unemployed.
Yet this burst of prosperity under Menem was to be short lived. The flood of international capital into Argentina had allowed Menem to adopt more expansionary monetary and fiscal policies. Although a large part of the money pumped into the economy by higher public spending or through tax cuts would end up being spent on imports, thereby increasing the demand for dollars, this would be offset by foreign investors wanting to sell dollars for pesos in order to invest in Argentina. Such expansionary fiscal and monetary policies then gave a further boost to Argentina’s economic prosperity which in turn attracted foreign investors anxious not to miss out on the profits to be made from this ‘newly emerging market economy’. However, in the mid-1990s the dollar began to rise against the other main world currencies dragging the peso up with it. As a consequence, Argentina’s exports lost their competitiveness leading to a strong deterioration in its balance of trade.

The rise in the dollar had caused similar problems for the ‘newly emerging market economies’ in Asia and in 1997-8 led to financial crises in Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Korea. After the crisis reached Russia in 1999 fears spread that next in line would be Argentina. As a result the financial flows into Argentina went sharply into reverse as foreign investors sought to get their money out of the country before the peso collapsed. The IMF stepped in with a $40bn loan to defend the peso and settle the nerves of international financiers. But in return the IMF insisted on major cuts in public spending, further privatization and more liberalization. As a consequence, Argentina went into recession. The ‘virtuous circle’ of high levels of foreign investment, expansionary policies leading to economic growth and more foreign investment went into reverse.

The IMF-inspired austerity measures deepened the recession, discouraging foreign investment that then led to the IMF demanding even more austerity measures before it would roll over its loans. Tension increased between the Argentinian government, increasingly unable and unwilling to make further cuts to appease the IMF, and the IMF, increasingly reluctant to bail out recalcitrant governments.

In 1999 the Radical de la Rúa became President, after Menem was involved in a corruption scandal. In his electoral campaign, de la Rúa promised ‘order and honesty’ in Argentina’s political affairs. However, the scandals which were going on discouraged investors and undermined Argentina’s economic credibility. By November 2001, with the government unable to impose further cuts without causing public outcry and fearing that the IMF would carry out its threat of not renewing its loans, (leading to the collapse of the peso), the well-off started converting their credits from peso to dollars or other reliable currencies and withdrawing money from the banks. In order to prevent a collapse of the banking system, de la Rúa imposed the corralito, restrictions on the money that could be withdrawn from the banks ($1,000/month).

The middle classes, who had supported the policies of successive governments since the 1970s, and who had prospered quietly during the 1990s, were now hit with the full brunt of the crisis, losing not only their savings but often also their jobs. Swathes of the Argentinian middle class were proletarianized almost overnight! Driven in to the street, the middle class now joined the protests of the working class. Who had prospered quietly during the 1990s, were now hit with the full brunt of the crisis, losing not only their savings but often also their jobs. Swathes of the Argentinian middle class were proletarianized almost overnight! Driven in to the street, the middle class now joined the protests of the working class.

6. The Piqueteros

The new forms of organisation which emerged drew some of their very strength from the drastic nature of this ‘neo-liberal’ restructuring. Whilst the economic experts were accusing Argentina’s political class of implementing the changes too slowly, the bourgeoisie in fact created a new problem for itself by having implemented them too quickly. When a large number of closures and redundancies hit almost overnight, the workers laid off en masse found themselves with common needs in a new situation where their social ties and continuing links of solidarity could be turned into new form of organisation. The mass worker becomes the mass unemployed worker. The first visible expression of these proletarians found themselves with common needs in a new situation where the workers laid off en masse.

The Piqueteros

The uprisings from a radical anti-capitalist standpoint. However, as far as I can tell they are quite ambiguous in regards to an overall analysis, and seem to have little historical analysis.

Politically oriented groups seem to be lagging quite behind. One group, the Situationist Collective (tracing back to the Italian autonomia, not the Situationist International) has put out a few books about the uprising from a radical anti-capitalist standpoint. However, as far as I can tell they are quite ambiguous in regards to an overall analysis, and seem to have little historical analysis.

Anarchist groups here seem to be in a quagmire. I must admit that I haven’t had time (or too much interest) in pursuing the various anarchist sects. As far as I know, the anarchist scene here is divided between punks and anarcho-historians on one hand, and organizationally minded anarcho-communists like the OSL (Organization of Libertarian Socialism). While the former seems entirely irrelevant (okay, maybe the punks spray paint circle A’s on the walls), the OSL seems to be the only anarchist presence at demonstrations and marches.
REPORT FROM A VISITOR TO ARGENTINA

I fully believe that the uprising of last year was one of the most significant proletarian offensives in recent history. The uprising last year was clearly a mass movement, against capital and the state. Popular assemblies and workers control of factories are widespread phenomena; and in the case of the latter, increasing in number.

It cannot be disputed that every person in Argentina was affected in a serious way by the uprising, and the consequent emergence of popular revolutionary organizations throughout the country. Neighborhood assemblies in and around Buenos Aires easily number more than one hundred. Thousands of workers across the country are controlling the means of production. In some of the poorest areas, especially in the North, the unemployed organizations hold power that rivals that of the state.

The weakness of capital can be observed in many ways here. The bourgeois press is forced to dedicate large sections of its newspapers and airtime to focus on various problems and actions of the proletariat.

It is clear that the repressive arm of capital (the state) is widely hated, and significantly impotent to enforce the law. For example, a demonstration (explained to me as very calm comparatively) of a few hundred on 19 December 2002 ran amok in the financial district, defacing and blocking banks for several hours, attacking police vehicles, setting fires, hurling dozens of paintbombs at the stock exchange, and delaying traffic – all without any response from the police.

Buenos Aires is covered in anti-establishment graffiti. Almost every major plaza has been scrawled with messages against politicians and the rich. It seems like the government has given up on cleaning it.

However, despite all these promising signs of conditions ripe for communist revolution, I believe such a thing is far off. The key problem being the lack of coherent class consciousness on the part of Argentine proletarians.

Capital here is undoubtedly still on the defensive, and still taking serious losses a year after the initial uprising. It is commonly believed that if the state were to make serious moves towards regaining lost ground, through utilizing 70’s-style tactics, a civil war would erupt.

However, while carefully shrouded, the ruling class here still wields the superior weapon which keeps the proletariat here under a false consciousness – most clearly described as the diffuse spectacle.

The diffuse nature of the Argentine spectacle is comprised of many components to keep proletarians confused and impotent. Shadows of their former selves, traditional Western spectacular activities such as television, soccer, and superfluous consumption still seem to play a significant role in life here.

However, more important is that with the economic collapse and popular uprising, the spectacular power of the left-wing of capital has seen a great increase.

The membership and base support for the dozens of left political parties or mass organizations (like front groups, but not exactly the same thing) has increased by a large margin in the past years. Even for the majority of society here, which is not tied to any specific vile ideology, the left is now in a much closer to the capital when they reached La Matanza, in Greater Buenos Aires. This sprawling industrial suburb, with a population of two million, had been badly affected by unemployment. Here piqueteros numbers grew substantially to 4,000-6,000 people. This new area of piquetero activity was also important because piquetero actions could now strangle the capital by blocking its major arteries, all within easy reach. We should also mention at this point events in Tartagal and Mosconi, both towns were occupied and held for a few days from the police in winter 1999/spring 2000, by forces including piqueteros. After the death of a demonstrator in November 2000, Tartagal was again rocked by riots – government buildings were set alight and cops taken hostage!

Typically, a piquetero highway blockage would have demands such as the withdrawal of police, the repudiation of state repression, the release of jailed comrades, unemployment benefits, food, health facilities, and demands for both ‘genuine’ jobs and Planes Trabajor or Work Plans – the later being effectively small unemployment subsidies. Even for those with families, and paid in ‘Lecops’, a national parallel currency or ‘bond’.

From then on riots occurred throughout the country. However, the growing number and worsening situation of unemployed workers deprived of their means of survival necessitated more concerted action.

Whilst the tactic had been used from about 1993 onwards, the co-ordinated piquetero movement was born in Cutral C6 and Plaza Huinicul, two towns of Patagonia created around the State oil company, Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales. It was privatised by Menem in 1994-5, and as a result 80% of its workers were suddenly laid off. Privatisation means more efficiency: whilst in the past it was the only major oil company in the world to report losses, due to the high wages and benefits conceded to its workers, after privatisation its profits rocketed while the living standard of the populations of the oil towns declined. By 1996 the two towns had an unemployment rate of 37.7%. The first riots exploded in June 1996 when the local government failed to reach an agreement with a Canadian corporation to set up a fertiliser plant in the area. The rioters were placated by promises made by the authorities. In March 1997, a teachers’ strike against layoffs and wage reductions evolved into the first of the now famous road blockages. When the police attacked the blockade, the towns of Cutral C6 and Plaza Huinicul mobilised in support. The popular assembly set up to negotiate with the authorities demanded jobs, tax moratoria and investments in the oil company. They decided to demobilise when some promises were made, including the creation of 500, (badly paid) jobs. The moderation of the assembly was due to the fact that people could see no good, in the situation, in an escalation of the protest. By the same token, the intervention in the assembly by local politicians was accepted.

The piqueteros’ tactic of blocking roads was soon being taken up in other towns. It was used in Jujuy and Salta the following year, provinces in the north of the country. In Jujuy on May 7th 1997, piqueteros blockaded the Horacio Guzmán Bridge, Argentina’s main link to Bolivia. Over the following four days, protests and blockades spread through the province, amongst both employed and unemployed. The movement was attacked by troops, (tear gas and rubber bullets were used), but provincial officials eventually capitulated and promised to create 12,500 jobs and increase welfare. The spread of piqueteros tactics and their forms of organisation moved first through the provinces, but then came closer to the capital when they reached La Matanza, in Greater Buenos Aires. This sprawling industrial suburb, with a population of two million, had been badly affected by unemployment. Here piquetero numbers grew substantially to 4,000-6,000 people. This new area of piquetero activity was also important because piquetero actions could now strangle the capital by blocking its major arteries, all within easy reach. We should also mention at this point events in Tartagal and Mosconi, both towns were occupied and held for a few days from the police in winter 1999/spring 2000, by forces including piqueteros. After the death of a demonstrator in November 2000, Tartagal was again rocked by riots – government buildings were set alight and cops taken hostage!

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The state would give out these work plans to defuse situations. Over the years, piquetero actions for Work Plans have often met with success. The subsidies are given to heads of families – say, 100 out of 800 piqueteros – rather than forming the basis of a universally-shared benefit, miniscule though it would be. Work Plans are normally intended to be taken in exchange for light public works, like municipal gardening or the upkeep of roads. They amount to a pittance, representing in their value about an eighth of the material needs of a family of four. Echanges ete Movements however, also mention ‘organised looting’ by piqueteros in 1999, and an escalation of violent, direct appropriation of goods in 2000-1, especially around the December events of 2001. Goods vehicles trapped in pickets were looted, warehouses and supermarkets attacked in a concerted way, and anger expressed in attacks on government buildings. Already in June 2000, a violent riot in General Mosconi which left 2 dead, led to a country-wide response with 300 road-blocks.
We must not forget these more violent and direct expressions of piquetero organisation, some of which may be more hidden.30

Small groups of piqueteros, organising locally in their neighbourhoods in the first instance (eg MTD Lanús – MTD stands for Movement of Unemployed Workers), are often affiliated to a larger ‘Coordinator’ group, which is in turn affiliated to one of the four major piquetero confederations. These are the CCC (Class Combative Current) group and the FTV (Federation for Land and Housing),31 the Bloque Piquetero, and the Coordinadora Anibal Verón, which once formed part of the Bloque Piquetero but which has increasingly distanced itself from it, insisting on its total independence from parties and unions.

The FTV has a large membership and wide support in La Matanza, in the west of Buenos Aires province. It also includes groups under the banner ‘Barrios de Pie’ – neighbourhoods on their feet. The CCC is the (relatively autonomous) organised piquetero union arm of the (Maoist) Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR).32 It too has a strong base in La Matanza, and also in the northern provinces of Argentina. The Bloque Piquetero gathers together dozens of piquetero groups including the Polo Obrero, (linked to leftist parties such as the Trotskyist Partido Obrero – Workers’ Party), and a handful of other leftist groups.33

The CCC and FTV-CTA group are considered the most reformist elements of the piquetero movement, with a tendency to negotiate with the government. Divisions within the movement over this led to the suspension of the third National Assembly of piqueteros planned for December 2001. A report from the Coordinadora Anibal Verón describes Anibal Verón’s eight-hour picket of seven bridges and access routes to Buenos Aires city on the 21st November 2001, contrasting it with another action, by the FTV group, which had started a few days before. The FTV piquete had in fact allowed transport to circulate on one side of the street from 5am to 10am and again from 5pm to 9pm, so as not to cause too much disruption in La Matanza. But, as they say, “While in La Matanza the third day of roadblocks ‘with alternative routes… passed without a responsible… the firmness and organization of each of our bridge-blocks meant that, in spite of public declarations by the Ministry of Work that they would not receive the unemployed because we were ‘blocking roads’, in a few hours the same Ministry was sat in front of us at a negotiating table, publicly ratifying the commitment we sought.”34

The statement goes on to criticise the FTV piquete: “That which is generated by a road-block – born as a tool of the unemployed with which they can interrupt the movement of goods via national highways, to generate economic problems which, from a position of insurrection, forces the government to make concessions to the demonstrators – in the hands of these sectors ends up being a blocking … of the pavement, by the side of the road, while transport freely circulates!”

Importantly, Anibal Verón, (and perhaps other piquetero groups), eschew mediation, literally refusing to meet the state on its own terrain, forcing government negotiators to come to the pickets. This helps to ensure that negotiations over limited aims take place on the piqueteros’ terrain politically. ‘Work Plans’ and the rest are given out to families, rather than individuals, everyone can take part in the negotiations, the work plans are given out in a transparent manner, and everyone can decide on when to clear the road etc.35 Limited aims, which from the outside look to be merely within the reformist dynamic of capital, are achieved with an understanding of the needs of proletarian struggles (such as refusal of mediation), which point to the importance of the process of struggle – social recomposition against the atomisation of capitalist social relations – as the real subversive current.

Groups like Anibal Verón criticise the CTA and CCC piquetero groupings for sending delegations to put their case to both government and employers (for example in January 2002 CCC-organised piqueteros sent delegates to the oil company YPF-Repsol to demand 40,000 “genuine jobs”, and that working hours should be shared between those working and those who may be sacked; and another delegation was received by the Casa Rosada to demand Work Plans and food and the release of political prisoners). More generally, we can also see the incursions of the official unions into the piqueteros movement as just an attempt at recuperation, or as an opportunity for cross-sector solidarity, maybe partly initiated

37. A bourgeoisie in the periphery of capital which makes its money by hanging around with western capitalist interests, taking a cut from the deals made to exploit the country’s resources, and therefore having no interest in national development.

38. “El bloque piquetero marchó en La Plata”, from the weekly newspaper Argentina Arde, No.8 April 11 2002, p.3.


41. Asamblea Parque Lezarnah Sub, 5.2.02.

42. Letter from Raúl Godoy, General Secretary of the Union of Ceramist Workers and Employees of Neuquén (SOECN), Neuquén, Argentina, November 16 2001, published on Indymedia.


44. Echanges, p.45.

45. Email to Aufheben, 9.9.02.

46. p.6 Mouvement Communiste ‘Letter’ #1, Feb 2002.

47. After the devaluation of the peso, average middle class incomes amounted to just 75% of former working class salaries. The income of bank employees in the capital has fallen by 60% from US$1081 to US$432 a month, without allowing for the rapidly rising prices of everything.


49. See pages pp.26-32.

50. ibid, p.13.


55. Echanges, p.33.


58. The debate was also connected to the problems in many neighbourhood assemblies that the participation of left party activists were causing – although in the first cacerolazos and demonstrations organised by the assemblies, party banner were so frowned upon as to be absent, over time, more and more party banners began to appear

59. One of the big splits occurred over proposals for Mayday demonstrations. One proposal was to join the mass demo, the other being for a separate, mass meeting at the obelisk. Partido Obrero and MST militants actually ... attending that day abstained from voting over the issue. At the following interbarrial of the 28th April, the assembly of

60. p.33.

61. Asamblea Parque Lezarna Sur, 5.2.02.

62. Letter from Raúl Godoy, General Secretary of the Union of Ceramist Workers and Employees of Neuquén (SOECN), Neuquén, Argentina, November 16 2001, published on Indymedia.


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69. See pages pp.26-32.

70. ibid, p.13.


24. After the Second World War the USA had emerged as the unrivalled economic super-power. Since the US could out-compete all its potential competitors in all the most important industries it was in the interests of American capital to promote free trade and liberalisation. However although the USA sought to promote the free movement of capital and commodities, and endeavoured to break up the old European empires and their associated special trading relationships, such policies were always tempered by the need to contain the Eastern Bloc. As a result the USA was prepared to tolerate allied countries imposing policies of national development, even though such policies may have inhibited the profitability of US capital, insofar as such policies prevented the spread of ‘Communism’. With the fall of the USSR such a constraint on the USA’s insistence on liberalization was lifted.

25. Between 1991 and 1998 the trade between the four countries making up MERCOSUR quadrupled. However, with the crisis of 1998-9, which saw Brazil devalue the Real by 40%, MERCOSUR began to unravel. Between 1999 and 2001 the trade between the four countries fell. As Argentina’s trade deficit continued to rise, exacerbated by a further 30% devaluation of the Real, it was agreed to temporarily suspend the MERCOSUR customs union in March 2001.

26. The role of the IMF in this desperate situation, again, was primarily that of defending the interests of the creditors. One of the main policies imposed by the IMF on the developing countries was that of financial liberalization, the removal of restrictions on the movement of capital in and out of the countries. In the latest hectic years, when it was clear that the peso would collapse, financial companies (for example Citibank) and individual creditors rushed to take dollars out of the country. In order to stop this movement, Argentina’s authorities employed a ‘Law of Economic Subversion’, previously designed to track financial movements related to terrorism; but the IMF put pressure on the government to cancel this law.


28. Since devaluation from one to one with the dollar, the peso has fallen to around 3.6 to the dollar, but ‘bonds’, or parallel currencies are more and more replacing the peso – the peso is becoming scarce – with around 6 billion Lecops in circulation.


31. Which is part of the Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA, Argentine Workers Central), a large union confederation.

32. “Movilización popular. silencio sindical.”

33. These are: Movimiento Sin Trabajo Teresa Vive, linked to the Trotskyist MST (Movement of Socialist Workers); the MJIP (Independent Movement of Pensioners and Retired people) – ex CCC and now with links to various Trotskyist parties; the MTL (Territorial Liberation Movement), a small group linked to the Communist Party; Agrupación Tendencia Clasista 29 de Mayo (29th May Clasist Tendency Grouping), of the Liberation Party.


36. “Origen y evolución de los ‘piqueteros’”, Julio Burdman.

by the base, which could eventually break free from its present limits. The bureaucracy may well have a need to increase its membership and leverage on the class by recruiting piqueteros under the banner of coordination and organisation, but piqueteros have their own reasons to understand the need for this coordination, one which, in a generalised proletarian offensive, could contradict the mediation of unions.

In February 2002 Duhald, perhaps trying to regain some of the ground lost to mediating channels, declared that there would be a universal dole of 150 Lecops per family (piqueteros have demanded 380 – both at pickets and in the assemblies). The contemptuous response to this measly benefit was clear in the two huge piquetero mobilisations of May 2002 when hundreds of roads were blocked. The governments’ inability to implement a meaningful, universal level of unemployment benefit and its insistence on Work Plans has caused it endless problems. During De La Rúa’s presidency, the Ministry of Social Development removed the administration of Work Plans from the local authorities in favour of their distribution by NGOs, partly to curb municipal clientelism in the province of Buenos Aires, and to limit the growth of small piquetero groups in the city. The policy backfired when unemployed organisations created their own NGOs to administer the plans and to set up their own social projects using the funds from them. This was a factor in the growth of the large and increasingly powerful coordinations of groups of unemployed activists in the poorest neighbourhoods, which form one aspect of the assemblies movement that we will discuss later.

Today, many of the grassroots MTDs (Unemployed Workers Movements) such as the MTD Solano, part of the Coordinadora Aníbal Verón, are making use of the work plans to set up projects in their own barrios, such as bakeries, metal and wood workshops, schools and vegetable plots, as well as running workshops to discuss political questions. The projects are staffed by piqueteros in receipt of work plans (direct to their bank accounts) who put the four hours a day they are supposed to do in exchange for the money...
this issue. The problem is maybe precisely there – ‘autonomy’. There is a tendency for this class experience to become merely the management of survival under capitalism, tied loosely into the system through aid, charity and clientelism, but understanding itself to be autonomous from capitalist social relations. Identifying capital narrowly with international capitalism, (multinationals, financial institutions, the US and EU bourgeoisie) and the comprador bourgeoisie which manage their operations within the country, ‘grassroots’ experience may be ‘naturalised’, seen as a given ‘thing’. Capitalism is not seen as a social relation which includes all social interaction including those within the barrio, but a rapacious, exploitative class outside the barrio. To put it another way, the relationship of exploitation within self-exploitation is externalised. If the class can externalise this relationship it will always end up preserving capitalism, in preserving its life and rebelling against the ‘capitalist class’.

Another important feature of the piquetero movement is the fact that it has become a node of struggle for different sectors of the class. People in work, especially those whose jobs are threatened, have participated extensively in piquetero actions, (as we noted, the first pickets were initiated by teachers). This is a critical point to keep in mind if we want to evaluate the long-term possibilities of the Argentinean movement. Although the work plans meted out to the unemployed may sometimes lower the wages of other workers, more importantly maybe different sectors of the class are recognising their needs in each other’s struggles. The bourgeoisie is finding it very difficult to decompose the class into antagonistic sectors fighting over jobs. The reserve army of labour is not performing its designated duty! As an example of this solidarity, on the 4th of April 2002 a Bloque Piquetero march, in the coastal town of La Plata, passed by the provincial government building before heading for the Family Office, to offer its support to state workers on strike there. Protestimg at cuts in overtime, wages and other benefits, the workers had taken over various buildings and were in permanent assembly. When the piqueteros arrived, the gendarmería were inside and the assembly had been suspended. But when the workers saw the size of the crowd which had come to support them, they shouted at the gendarmería to leave and continued with their assembly. Piqueteros have also defended the occupied factories from eviction, pushing back police attacks on numerous occasions, as have members of local assemblies and other neighbours.

Although in the early years of the movement the state and the bourgeoisie press could manipulate broad middle class opinion against what was painted as a dangerous, lumpen-proletarian threat, the increased immiseration of the middle classes has narrowed the gap between the two sectors. The new possibility of this situation was evident in the practical solidarity of the events of December 2001on the streets. It emerged in the days following the national cacerolazo of the 25th of January, that the police had blocked Pueyrredon Bridge, the gateway to Buenos Aires, to stop hundreds of piqueteros crossing to join the cacerolazo in the Plaza de Mayo. Furthermore, on the 28th of January 2002, a march of piqueteros from La Matanza to the Plaza de Mayo was greeted and given food by the neighbourhood assemblies who accompanied them the rest of the way. The slogan ‘Piquete y cacerola, la lucha es una sola’ (Picket and ‘pot-banger’, the struggle is the same’) was heard that day and soon became popular. In February 2002, after the announcement of the abandonment of the dollar-peso parity, a piquetero march coming into Buenos Aires from the poor suburbs, was again greeted by the ‘middle classes’ of the centre of Buenos Aires with food and drinks. It was of course understood that the inflation that would result from the devaluation, (together with the effect on savings), would affect everyone. Whether these expressions of solidarity can be further concretised remains to be seen.

In order to discredit the piqueteros in public opinion and possibly to prepare the terrain for repression, the State has attempted to smear the movement. In March, in a calculatlingly menacing tone, Duhalde stated: “in the piqueteros movement we believe that there is a part of authentic protest which is becoming smaller...and another part financed by extremist groups. We have been told that the finances [for the piqueteros in Salta, north of Argentina] may come from the FARC of Colombia, or in other words, from narco-trafficking.” It is important to note that a US military base is planned for the area of Salta that Duhalde is referring to; the same place where, last year, US marines carried out joint US marines carried out joint

16. Individualism is one-sided ideological viewpoint within capitalist social relations, where social interaction among producers takes the form of the social relationship of their commodities on the market. The viewpoint of our society as a civil society based on free individuals is of course ideological, being one-sided, because it hides the fact that the real personal freedom and happiness of the producers is denied by the alienation and exploitation inherent in wage labour and in market relationships. Obviously the other side of the same ideology is the integration of the fragmented individuals within the system through identification with abstract communities, centred around unifying issues such as nationalism, the bourgeois party, etc. The fact that individualism and collectivism are contradictory may tempt us to oppose the first by appealing to the second one or vice versa. But this approach would fail to grasp the problem dialectically and see the common root of both ideological standpoints in the concrete bourgeois relationships within capitalism. Only with the concrete challenge to commodity relations in the practice of class struggle both individualism (the denial of real happiness and freedom) and abstract collectivism (the denial of real collective management of our lives) will lose their compensatory attractions and their reason for being.

17. Sources for this section: Munck op.cit. pp.127-228.
18. Ronaldo Munck, op.cit. p.150.
19. As accounted by Ronaldo Munck, op.cit. p. 158.
20. Movimiento Communiste gives us a list of names of union bureaucrats and their businesses in the 70s. Some of them are: Marcelino Mansilla, general secretary of UOCRA of Mar de Plata, who owned night-clubs, a textile factory and a restaurant. The brothers Elorza, secretaries of the union of hoteliers, had a restaurant. Triacca, bureaucrat in the plastics union, owned a pig farm and a transport company. Lorenzo Miguel, secretary of UOM, was co-director of another transport company. Armando March, secretary of the union of the commercial employees was a director of a ‘union’ bank. Regilio Coria, leader of UOCRA, co-owned the building materials factory FUCON and had a huge farm in Paraguay...
weapons of the revolution. The army comes in with a new social settlement. If it can’t, it may not be able to guarantee the loyalty of its soldiers. The problem with the restructuring is that it attacks unproductive capital and the state – in other words, sectors like the army; the Argentinian army is now much reduced in size. One officer was quoted as not being certain enough of the loyalty of his troops to consider an intervention. We must remember at this point that Argentinians feel that the events of the 19th of December – the most generalized and spontaneous mobilization – was a repudiation of this very possibility, burying once and for all the fear and silence of the years of the dictatorship in this huge collective affirmation.

Unable to impose the policies deemed necessary for the resolution of the crisis, the Argentinian bourgeoisie face an implacable international capital organized through the IMF. The crisis in Argentina has demonstrated the limits of the neo-liberal policies imposed through the IMF over the past two decades. By making a few rich while impoverishing ever greater numbers, these policies have undermined the social conditions necessary for economic and political stability. Neo-liberal policies are pushing more and more countries in the periphery into the same predicament, particularly in South America. However, with the world economy entering into recession, the IMF cannot afford to back down. If the Argentinian bourgeoisie is let off the hook then Brazil, Turkey, Nigeria and many others will be next. It will be the end of neo-liberalism. However, if Argentina explodes in a revolution – one which could be contagious given the rise in struggles in Latin America – America may have to intervene. But, given that the fact that America is having to defend the neo-liberal order in the Middle East at the moment, will it be stretched by its over-commitment on the world stage?

Notes
1. The piqueteros being the movement based around the unemployed people using roads blockading pickets as their tactic of struggle.
2. For details on the piqueteros see later
3. For one account of the uprising, and other reports and information, see SchNews issue #350, online at http://schnews.org.uk/archive/news35.htm
4. The slogan is still regularly heard on the streets of the cities; rarely chanted it is almost always sung, over and over – “Ohhh, que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo, que se vayan todos…”, (“out with them all every single one of them”).
6. The strength of the proletariat was an important element for the power balance of the ruling class. In fact Ronaldo Munck (op.cit. p.57) stresses the importance of the general strike of 1910 for this political change, which happened two years later.
7. Notice that the decision of bending towards the moderate socialists did not make FORA admittedly ‘socialist’. In fact, due to radically divergent questions of principles, the socialist unions were united in a different federation, the UGT (*Union General de Trabajadores*, founded in 1906), and did not join FORA. All the moderate unions joined together only in 1930 to form the CGT, as we will see later. 
8. As quoted by Munck (op.cit. p.67).
9. It is worth saying that the struggles of 1919-20 in Patagonia involved also Chilean Patagonia, where for example the Chilean workers were able to seize the town of Puerto Natale for more than a year. The efforts of FORA V to link the workers in struggle across the boundary were boycotted by FORA IX.

exercises with Argentinean troops. This rhetoric also serves to separate the ‘good’ piqueteros from the ‘bad’. The looting panic whipped up by the media following the December events (when rumours, intended to keep people off the city centre streets, flew around the poor Buenos Aires suburbs that ‘looters’ were attacking people’s home and were on their way; fires were lit on many residential street corners and people prepared to defend their blocks against attacks which never came) was another attempt by the state to split the piqueteros from the ‘middle classes’. As we have seen from the links formed in January, the attempt failed.

On the 30th May, the piqueteros blocked 1,000 highways, bridges and roads throughout Argentina, as well as railway lines. Their mass mobilisation was accompanied on the same day by strike action by airport workers that brought Ezeiza, Buenos Aires’ airport, to a standstill. President Duhalde indicated his impatience with piquetero tactics, saying that road-blockings could be tolerated no longer. In light of this, it is clear that the police attack on the piquetero action of the 26th of June, in Avellaneda, that left two young piqueteros, Dario Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki, dead and some 40 injured, were not simply the work of ‘maverick cops’. Importantly, thousands immediately descended on the Plaza De Mayo in response to the murders, growing to some 50 000 people two days later. The alert response to state repression reduces the options for the bourgeoisie.

7. The factories
Whilst the most striking and original feature of the Argentinian movement is the piqueteros, our interest in this highly organised and radical movement, based on disrupting the sphere of circulation of capital, should not blind us to the question of what the class as a whole in Argentina is doing. The aspects of radical practice in the movement which go so far as heralding new social relations should not make us forget to look at the totality. The question that has come up in recent months for observers of the events is – what are the workers in the sphere of production doing? It is a fact that the radical organisations in the factories which we have discussed above in the context of the struggles of the 1970s, were severely repressed during the years of the military regime. Almost all the authors we have come across who spoke of the situation in Argentina today complain of a lack of militancy in the workplace. The complaint is that the unions are completely tied into the system, and so are cowardly and given to manipulating workers in tokenistic strikes, demos or days of action in order to both safely channel worker discontent and to increase their bureaucratic power. The reasons given for this situation in the workplace range from the somewhat vague contention that the workers are simply sold into the official union structures (this, understandably, from a member of the independent motoqueros base union), to the belief that the workers in work are just too scared to lose their jobs; whilst

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We have mentioned the frequency of general strikes in recent years. Although union led and of course limited by the unions’ own agenda, we must not assume that the workers simply march in step behind their mediators. We note that railway workers have been on strike more than once over the last year, and in September 2002 the transport workers of Metrovia mobilised to demand a reduction of their working day to six hours, a concession they held until only a few years ago. There are also numerous, ‘hidden’ strikes in small factories over closures, non-payment of wages etc.

We must not forget the instances of common piquetero struggles by (mostly) state workers and the unemployed in the provinces from the mid-90s onwards. Workers in state industries threatened with privatisation have also used road blockaging tactics on numerous occasions, for example at Cutral-Co and Plaza Huincul, when the petrol company YPF was sold to Repsol. 36.8% of all road pickets between December 1993 and December 1999 were made by waged workers! The struggles of the state workers have been a major feature of the Argentinian movement and are still very much a live issue. It is a question intimately involved with state clientelism. As we have already noted, with the expansion of the state, the clientelist structure Peron tried to incorporate into his Justicialist settlement was partly achieved with the expansion of ‘phoney’ jobs in the central state and local administration. More recently, Menem, no doubt to placate the IMF which was making business with the central state and so complaining about its spending, sacked 110 000 federal state workers (as well as 107 000 provincial state workers). He also transferred 200 000 teachers from the federal budget to local government budgets. In Buenos Aires province for example (where Duhalde was governor), the number of state workers rises substantially from 280 000 in 1991 to 400 000 in 1999, no doubt soaking up the 110 000 workers sacked from the central state in Buenos Aires. The need for the Peronist governors (and at one remove, the Peronist president) to keep their huge electoral clientele is the reason for these machinations. This reluctance to attack state jobs decisively show how deep the Peronist class settlement was rooted, even in the ultra-liberal Menem years. As we have seen however, the attack did start in the late 90s, but is still contentious – recent negotiations with the IMF have revolted around the issue of the provincial budgets, the IMF asking for 60% cuts. One would think that more massive redundancies might ensue, but the game is not so simple for the bourgeoisie, with an insurrectionary movement in near permanent mobilisation. Duhalde’s administration is squeezed between the IMF and the movements – during a bout of negotiation with the IMF, one government negotiator complained that the IMF didn’t understand that the administration is constrained by the fact that there are at least 30 actions a day in Argentina!

Most workers may now be keeping their heads down at work but what has emerged is that many of them are involved through the neighbourhood assemblies. They take part simply as neighbours and also report on the workplace organising that does go on. For example, at one neighbourhood assembly meeting,11 a worker from the nearby Buquebus ferry service across the River Plate to Uruguay, described the actions that were being taken against redundancies and asked for support, to the assembly’s great approval, as did another who worked at the Clarin newspaper. Many other workers take part in the cacerolazos as well, a form of protest usually associated with the ‘middle class’. It is vital to keep these things in mind. Workers not actively in struggle at work may be in touch with the needs and actions of other sectors in struggle through neighbourhood organisations. Furthermore they take part in decision making, in demos and other organisations, as neighbours in concert with other neighbours, through these organisations. The positive thing in this is that a directly social dimension of struggle is available to many workers, one which looks beyond their specific, sectoral interests in particular industries. But the limitation may be that workers separate their everyday needs (which they see as belonging to their experience as neighbours), from their role as producers of surplus value at work. The later would have to be socialised too, and this understanding turned practically against capitalistic social relations, to really paralyse the system.

The other form of worker organisation to discuss is the much publicised factory occupations. We must not forget that these occupations, and the startling expressions of solidarity that they have engendered, are few, but at the same time they do come out of a material situation now nearly universal which has been one of the central dynamics of struggles in Argentina.

It is important not to be blind to the particularities of Peronism when we enumerate its similarities with European fascism (integration of class through trade union into corporatist system, nationalism etc.). Capitalism on the periphery could not complete the post-war integration into state-led capitalism in the same way as in Europe. Some level of class autonomy, of community co-operation survived where, from their daily experiences in meeting their needs, people recognized that it was as acting as a class for itself that produced results. Here, for example, we see the impact of the semi-autonomous base of Peronism, with its blurred edges (blurred precisely because it shades into un-institutionalised immediate community organization), which eventually became troublesome for Peron and was also an intractable problem for the dictatorship which followed (and which actually demanded Peron’s return). Later we see Peronist base organizations re-asserting themselves by default under Menem as an unofficial sector which would cushion the effects of reform. At this point, these networks actually assisted in dismantling the very clientelist network that connected them to the state and under the period of industrial development were in a sense the guarantee of their survival. The loose associations now in place around piquetero groups and assemblies have a less mediated relationship to the state than they had with Peronist clientelism. In attacking clientelist waste in the state, De La Rua, for example, attempts to outflank the Peronist clientelist channels in local government by giving out ‘work plans’ to the unemployed through NGOs. Now these have effectively merged with piquetero organizing. This means that the informal channels of co-operation and neighbourhood provision are now freed of clientelist mediation and its distortions. Autonomous groups like Aníbal Veron can work collectively in a way impossible before. They face a weak state directly and try to get what money they can out of it, disrupting the accumulation of capital without recuperating counterweights.

However, we must be careful not to fetishize the high points of the Argentinian movement to the detriment of a more sober, wider perspective. Although the struggles have involved hundreds of thousands of people, there are millions who are not involved. How are we to consider this ‘silent majority’? No doubt many of them are sympathetic with much of the mobilizations, and may be involved, at one remove; some may have fallen into despair and the atomization of a war of all against all of survival on the streets; whilst others, maybe partly as a reaction to the threat they feel from this group, are fearful of the chaos that surrounds them. On the one hand, it’s the inertia of this silent majority which is the ultimate limit of the movement; but, on the other, their indecision is a block to the bourgeoisie resolving the crisis in their favour.

One way of looking at the development of the current situation in Argentina is to consider the events that led up to the calling of elections. There were two huge, country-wide piquetero days of action in May, with hundreds of roads blocked. Duhalde, trying to convince the IMF that he could keep his piquetero bloc, tried to outflank the piquetero blockages by promising the unemployed a job guarantee. The police attacked a piquetero action on the outskirts of Buenos Aires with live ammunition, injuring 30 and killing two. But the response was immediate, the Plaza de Mayo filled up in protest; 50 000 were there by the third day. Duhalde had no credibility in general and could not impose the violent will of the state because of the alertness of the mobilization. He then called the elections. This might be a dubious strategy for the bourgeoisie, as it might put the seal on the rejection of politics that has been such a strong feature of the movements, expressed as a massive abstention rate and/or spoilt vote. According to a poll in Pagina 12 newspaper, 71% of people thought that, whoever wins the elections, little or nothing would change.

If these democratic channels fail, the apparently obvious option for the bourgeoisie is the return of military dictatorship and terror. However, terror is never so simple as it might appear. Protestant are not always the mere victims of it. The army in a country like Argentina was one of the essential lynchpins of the state development programmes which now belong to the past. Soldiers are closer to the working class than the cops; they have to be convinced that they are fighting for the people, not simply coerced into killing, otherwise the weapons put in their hands could suddenly turn into the
information. Once outed judges, politicians, businessmen are then insulted, jostled, and sometimes attacked around their homes, to and from work etc. These attacks are also reported to happen spontaneously, on the hoof, when someone is recognised by chance in the street. Even members of the media have been targeted, the much-disliked Canal 13 TV station coming in for a lot of stick in particular. Whilst this could be an expression of a standard middle class rejection of a comprador bourgeoisie, the fact that the media is also being attacked is testament to the marginalisation of the middle classes. These actions may also be part of a generalised hatred of the representatives of capital which expresses itself spontaneously.

Another feature of the Argentinian situation associated with the assemblies and the ‘middle class’ is the barter clubs. As the Wildcat comrade commented, ‘there are a huge number of people participating, but I don’t see it as a movement’, instead as a method of survival, as a way of getting things that people are now able to buy. But the rules are the same as in the wider capitalist economy: whoever has money can make a profit and can make others do something for him. For example, there are people who go to the supermarket to buy goods to take to the trueque, and exchange for other things or services that are worth more than they paid. And anyone who has no money or goods has no choice but to offer services, or in other words: sell their labour power – a well known model… I have even heard that capitalist frauds have reached the clubes del trueque, that there are forgeries of the credits which are the currency. And in the relation between people, there is little difference from the capitalist model. Each person appears as an individual to sell/exchange their things or services. We can compare this form of relation based on survival needs to the more interesting actions of assemblies and piqueteros described above which organise survival in a way which relies on collectivity and solidarity. The barter clubs are a largely ‘middle class’ phenomenon, but the quote above also suggests the subtle stratifications within the ‘middle class’ – with some impoverished and trying to converge their stock of belongings into cash to survive, and others maybe on the skids but being able to turn a profit because of greater liquidity. As a corrective to this view, Echanges feel we must keep in mind that this form of exchange may also take a more spontaneous, un-commodified form as the neighbourly exchange of needs based practically on skill, time etc without these necessarily being measured and equalised. A – “would you look after my kids tomorrow if I fix your sink on Tuesday” – can be proposed spontaneously and goes on the one hand towards creating social links between neighbours, but on the other will have a tendency to formalise. In a situation like Argentina there is going to be both the pressure on this sort of relation to formalise and to de-formalise. It might be difficult to trace a dividing line between the two practices.

Conclusion

The events of last December hit the headlines across the world. What struck the bourgeois press were the mass protests which resulted from the banking restrictions that threatened the wholesale impoverishment of the Argentinian middle class. However, as we have seen, there is more to the Argentinian movement than the hanging of pots and pans. We have shown how there has been a long tradition of working class struggles based on self-organization, of which the present piqueteros actions are a recent example. Also, at the current moment in Argentinian history, the material conditions of the middle classes have shifted downwards, and this forms the basis for solidarity with proletarian movements based on shared experiences.

As we have seen, the movements in Argentina must be understood in the context of the effects of ‘neo-liberal’ restructuring in a country on the periphery of capital, where social ties in proletarian areas still form the basis of the organization of life. Whilst in the west, ‘neo-liberal’ policies led to the decomposition of the organized working class and a slide towards the ‘war of all against all’, in the periphery a different trend is noticeable. Neo-liberal policies, in attacking working class standards of living and its official form of organization and representation within capital, also halt the incomplete process of subsumption of labour to capital, a process which was intrinsically involved with the state and national development programmes. We have sketched the specific features of Peronist integration for the Argentinian proletariat, hence their radical potential and their maybe inflated fame.

The most widely reported factory occupations are those of Zanon ceramics factory in the province of Neuquén, and Buenos Aires’ Brukman textiles. The Zanon occupation started when the 400 workers were threatened with losing their jobs as the bosses of the factory stopped paying them and effectively started winding down the business. The workers responded by occupying the factory, setting it in motion using the materials still inside. Within two days they had produced enough ceramics to pay all their wages for a month. They sell their products at 60% of their previous price through a network of young supporters who take them from door to door. Organised through their trade union, SOECN, with no support from the national ceramic-workers’ union FOCRA (part of the CGT), the workers have refused the owners’ attempts to negotiate the fate of the factory. They have totally rejected the ridiculous terms of a possible return of the bosses – wage-cuts, laying off 360 of the 400 workers. Instead they demand “the immediate opening of the plant under workers’ control, with no redundancies and no wage cuts, and with full payment of all outstanding salaries. If the bosses refuse to do this we will demand the nationalisation of the factory under workers’ control, as part of a scheme to provide public works to build houses, schools and hospitals, all which are much needed in our province. In this way, we can help provide an answer to the problem of unemployment by creating real jobs.” They propose to share the jobs amongst as many unemployed as possible. In the 2002 National Assembly of Piqueteros, a motion was passed that abandoned factories, or those that made many redundant, should be expropriated from the owners and self-managed by the workers. This has also been voted for on numerous occasions at the Interbarrial, the weekly general assembly of the neighbourhood assemblies. Zanon workers have, from the start, forged fruitful links with other groups and won great respect for their resistance and level of activism. In the first month of their occupation, October 2001, they joined piqueteros and other groups to blockade bridges and highways in Neuquén, and they have visited Buenos Aires and other cities to take part in assemblies and demonstrations. In return, as we have already noted, they have been successfully assisted by piqueteros and others in attempted evictions. The Brukman workers decided to occupy on the 18th of December 2001 after a collapse in wages in the autumn months, (they were being paid in ‘vouchers’ of dubious value), and general contempt from the bosses. One 28 year old worker died after they refused to pay for vital medicines. They had not originally planned to set the plant in motion, but when an order of textiles became due in January, they decided to sell it to pay their wages. They have since taken responsibility for the plant – paying bills, fixing a boiler, and reorganised the factory floor to save on energy costs. “We maintain our struggle not through stubbornness but through principles and logic. The owners have demonstrated that they are incapable of running this factory – all they know is how to exploit us, steal our money and invest in non-existent companies. If we could get the company on its feet, why couldn’t they?…Brukman has a total debt of 8 million dollars, and its major creditor is the State, with more than 2.5 million owed to the National Bank. So the demand we make is that the company be municipalized…under workers’ control.” Like Zanon, as we have seen, they are not waiting for the state’s endorsement, but are de-commodified. It might be difficult to trace a dividing line between the two practices.

In La Matanza, the closed Panificadora Cinco bakery was occupied by its workers with the support of the whole neighbourhood and put back to work to provide bread at reduced prices for the locals. There also, the piqueteros defended the occupation against a police intervention. The workers’ own statements and some of the information above point to the limits of self-management. Their belief that they can run the firm better than the bosses may originally come from their antagonistic relationship to the capitalist imposition of work on the shop floor. Running it better may mean making it easier for the workers to work there, contradicting the valorisation needs of the bosses. The fixing of the boiler may be one such example – workers may experience this both as an
everyday nuisance as well as recognising its need in the smooth running of the factory, whilst the bosses for their part want to cut costs. The boss is then both a problem because he doesn’t recognise the workers needs, but at the same time, he is seen as a sort of philistine of production, who ignores the qualitative aspects of production. As the workers occupy their work place and put it into motion under their own control however, this once antagonist relationship based on their immediate and intimate experience of the production process becomes a necessary identification with the business in itself – paying bills etc.

At this point the understanding of exploitation fixes narrowly on the incompetence of their particular bosses, as the workers, now in charge, need to prove to themselves and others that there’s a better way of doing things. In other words, it is forgotten that the bosses are themselves constrained by capitalism to fuck their workers over. And when the workers forget this, they gloss over their own link, as ‘self-managers’, to this constraining social relation. Isolated in this situation where an inward looking, voluntaristic mindset is required, the burden of exploitation may end up being doubly hard, and splits may emerge, with the most committed and militant driving the others and effectively becoming the new capitalist bosses as they try to make the (once collective) project work. Or the hard won collective control of the production process may not be relinquished resulting in the workers not having the necessary capitalist discipline required to make their enterprise survive in the unforgiving capitalist market. One way or another, the law of value will re-impose itself on the activity of the workers.

We must be careful not to simply dismiss these occupations however. These struggles are a process which form part of an extensive class mobilisation. Some of their radical tendencies, such as the proposal to produce for local need, (Brukman proposed to cover the textile requirements of public hospitals, Panificadora Cinco provision of bread) - even if they do not prove possible or ultimately stay within the frame of exchange relations – move to concretise the demand that immediate needs be met, facing up to the mediation of exchange value. This is the social possibility of struggles, which can challenge the fetishism of commodities. This process of collectivisation of proletarian needs is produced through a heightened level of communication on the ground in Argentina. These workers are experiencing every day the solidarity of other proletarians in different sectors, and so materially feel the need and possibility to reciprocate. Their reformist demands such as nationalisation could, in a more generalised class offensive, be subverted by these very social links. The everyday experience of decision making and power on the shop floor is another important aspect of their experience. Whether the Argentinian movement can or will extend enough to give them the opportunity to realise the radical moments of their struggles is a different matter. For its part, as we have seen, the state seems to be aware of the radical potential of the occupations, using force to try and retake the factories on a number of occasions.

There are said to be 100 companies involving some 10 000 workers under some form of worker’s control in Argentina. Brukman and Zanon, along with the Clinica Junin of Córdoba, form the small, politicised wing, presenting themselves as an independent movement concerned with much more than just putting their factories back into production. Brukman, for example, continues to be a focal point for struggles, being a site for assemblies, workshops, exhibitions and organising. It is difficult to get a clear picture from the scant information we have available, but in general the others seem to have a different political orientation, calling themselves ‘co-operatives’, and constitute themselves in official structures involving state and unions. The two structures regrouping these companies are the MNER (National Movement of Recuperated Companies) comprising 3600 workers, and FENCOOTER(National Federation of Co-Operatives and Re-Converted Companies) with 1447 workers. In ‘co-operatives’ such as Gheco SA., a producer of ingredients for frozen desserts, or the developers Chilavert, the workers set up co-ops to restart production after the companies began bankruptcy proceedings. On the 12th September, the Buenos Aires legislature voted unanimously to permit the ‘recuperation’ by law of these two factories - the deal is that the government of Buenos Aires will pay the rent of the building for two years, while the equipment is ceded to the workers. After two years, the co-ops will apparently have first refusal on buying the plant. Brukman workers differentiate themselves from this settlement, proposal had been voted through at the fifth Interbarrial to march around the National Congress on the 13th of February – “when the assembly members reached Congress, they saw that a stage had been put up, from which leaders of the CTA were already speaking.” They were later vilified for this manoeuvring at the Interbarrial. Because of suspicion or outright rejection from the assemblies, the leftist parties have gravitated to the Interbarrial in an attempt to bring their influence to bear on proceedings. This has led to a reaction from the assemblies and wearying debates about representation and process. The weekly Interbarrial is supposed to be a coordination of autonomous assemblies, not a decision making body in its own right. It soon became clear to the assemblies however, that large numbers of militants and others, (cops and state agents have been mentioned too59), came to the Interbarrial to vote on issues proposed in the assemblies without being delegated. A debate on representation began, in which concerned asambleistas pushed for a one assembly, one vote system with revocable and rotating delegates. There were protests from leftist militants who feared they were being outflanked, knowing they would have little chance of becoming assembly representatives.60 Many boycotted the debate, and a growing frustration and disillusionment with the Interbarrial, because of these problems, was reflected in a sharp fall in attendance, with some assemblies opting to liaise with others on a more informal basis.

However, limiting the Interbarrial to coordination only could in itself constrain the possibilities of the movement and, in any case, is difficult to keep in practice. To fall back on assembly ‘autonomy’ and the repudiation of collective decisions to protect the movement from outside incursion could be formalised into the atomisation and isolation of (direct) democracy. Collective discussion and concerted action is needed for particular events and is essential for the long-term prospects of the assemblies – especially in the case of state repression.61 The ‘moment of truth’ of Leninist politics is to recognise this need, and that is why they ‘lie in ambush’ at the Interbarrial to influence events.60 A PO member told the newspaper Página 12, “If the assemblies limit themselves to running organic allotments and other neighbourhood questions, that for us is a step backwards.”61 Apart from testifying to the condescending attitude of the Trotskyst groups, this warning has some sense to it. What he cannot see is the relationship between neighbourhood questions and a wider struggle. He doesn’t recognise that the ‘political’ is the activity of the class, organic allotments and all. The revolution can only be the process of struggle of the autocomovimientos, the ‘self convened’, (as the asambleistas call themselves). It is also too easy to blame the stagnation of the assemblies movement on the leftists – these problems may arise when the movement as a whole doesn’t know where to go and has lost the initiative.

The assemblies are also involved in the organisation of escraches, a practice inherited from the aftermath of the dictatorship. Escraches, meaning an ‘outing’ or ‘exposure’ in Argentinian slang, were after the dictatorship. However, limiting the Interbarrial to coordination only could in itself constrain the possibilities of the movement and, in any case, is difficult to keep in practice. To fall back on assembly ‘autonomy’ and the repudiation of collective decisions to protect the movement from outside incursion could be formalised into the atomisation and isolation of (direct) democracy. Collective discussion and concerted action is needed for particular events and is essential for the long-term prospects of the assemblies – especially in the case of state repression.61 The ‘moment of truth’ of Leninist politics is to recognise this need, and that is why they ‘lie in ambush’ at the Interbarrial to influence events.60 A PO member told the newspaper Página 12, “If the assemblies limit themselves to running organic allotments and other neighbourhood questions, that for us is a step backwards.”61 Apart from testifying to the condescending attitude of the Trotskyst groups, this warning has some sense to it. What he cannot see is the relationship between neighbourhood questions and a wider struggle. He doesn’t recognise that the ‘political’ is the activity of the class, organic allotments and all. The revolution can only be the process of struggle of the autocomovimientos, the ‘self convened’, (as the asambleistas call themselves). It is also too easy to blame the stagnation of the assemblies movement on the leftists – these problems may arise when the movement as a whole doesn’t know where to go and has lost the initiative.

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However, some members of the original escrache group, H.L.I. D.S., have expressed reservations about the new informal ‘escrache’ practices, which target present members of the bourgeoisie. In this more generalised phenomenon, instances of corruption and other misdeeds of particular individuals are published on the net, in the streets, and even on a TV programme, with addresses and other necessary
Belgrano-Núñez, a prosperous barrio of Buenos Aires, had joined with other local assemblies in April 2002 to assist the stricken local hospital, whose workers had informed them that drugs were being withheld by pharmaceutical companies, leading to price increases of 300% and 400%. The hospital workers and asambleístas produced a list of the drugs most sorely needed, and went en masse to the laboratories of Novartis, a pharmaceutical company, to demand the drugs. Within days, Novartis was forced to provide 25,000 doses of 1,129 different medicines.53 In September 2002, the assembly of Flores in Buenos Aires occupied a clinic that had been disused for 6 years with the aim of opening it to workers from occupied factories who have been cut out of union managed health provision, and also for the use of the neighbours. The assemblies have moved also in the winter to occupy disused buildings to use for meetings and organising. The assembly of Parque Lezama Sur, occupying a disused bank building to which they invite piqueteros and other groups, describe this initiative encouragingly as “not about simply replacing the state in the functions in which it has absented itself [health, education], neither is it about simple humanitarianism, nor nostalgic actions destined to uphold the old national-state promises of integration and progress. Instead it is about taking responsibility/control of our actual conditions...proposing the establishment of social links where capitalism acts as a force of separation, of sadness and the formation of isolated individuals.”54

As we have seen, there is a growing tendency within assemblies such as these to fill the gaps where the state has become unable or unwilling to act. As is clear from the health issue, the assemblies move, according to the urgency of their need, from discussing the national debt and making demands of the state to taking direct action. Assemblies have also been attacked by plain-clothes police and other armed gangs. Members have been followed, threatened and beaten. Goons gathered together by municipal Peronist leaders have attacked assemblies, such as the assembly of Merlo in Buenos Aires. These attacks are a seal of approval of the radical political significance of the assemblies which its members presumably cannot ignore.

Another issue we should consider is the ever present and contested attempts by leftist groups to bring their politics to bear on the assemblies. Initial press coverage of the Argentinian movement was full of reports of participants rejecting leftist organisations from assemblies and demos. At first glance this may of course look like a radical rejection of politics, but more needs to be said and understood. The obvious thing to say is that if the assemblies were largely ‘middle class’, then the rejection of leftist politics could be seen as a rejection on the basis of middle class experience of class politics in general, in favour of a politics based of citizenry etc. On the other hand, as we have discussed, the ‘middle class’ cannot really afford this sort of politics any more, and their initial knee-jerk reaction against class politics, could well have quite naturally mutated into a more radical rejection based on their immediate needs and the autonomous forms of struggles they have developed to meet them. If a ‘middle class’ assembly is trying to organise school meals and stealing electricity and saving neighbours from eviction for non payment of rent, and discovering new forms of social cooperation in the process, the intrusion of leftists with their programmes and insistence on leadership would naturally be unwelcome! As one asambleísta put it – “the assemblies belong to us, not to militants who look upon us with contempt and try to impose on us an experience that we do not need.”55

Again we must advise caution in attempts at interpretation because of the opaqueness of this complex situation. We are not easily going to be able to know the class composition and histories of the different assemblies, and so examples of leftist involvement when they come up are going to be difficult to interpret. More generally, we must warn against generalising from isolated examples. Some assemblies will be successfully controlled by this or that leftist party; the general trend, however, has been for the rejection of Trotskyist and other groups, although some attempts to manipulate assemblies, by Trotskyist groups such as the Partido Obrero and MAS (Argentinian Socialist Movement), have resulted in the collapse of assemblies. Overtures by mainstream politicians have so far been rejected. And a transparent attempt by the CTA union confederation to co-opt the assemblies movement earlier this year ended in failure. A and show an awareness of the pitfalls of self-management. As on of them stated: “we don’t want to set up a cooperative...where we would have to submit ourselves to 11 people who would boss everyone else around.”44

A comrade from the German group Wildcat recently visited one of these co-operatives: “I visited an occupied metallurgical factory, La Baskonia, in La Matanza. There we met an advisor from the CGT. We soon realised that they’d opted for the legal route, for founding a cooperative before setting the factory to work. They are not interested in joining together with the other factories in struggle, nor in workers’ control, nor even in nationalisation. ‘It’s a Peronist occupation’, commented my comrades. Another example is IMPA, an aluminium factory which has been functioning in the form of a co-op for some time. The good thing is that they lend out one of the factory floors for solidarity parties – a fantastic place for parties! – but I never saw the workers from IMPA at any demonstrations or assemblies.”45 The last we have heard of the occupied factories at the time of writing is that Zanon and Brukman called a meeting on the 7th of September which attracted around 500 people, including leftist parties, where it was agreed to set up a national strike fund. On the same day at La Baskonia, the MNER also called a meeting attracting the same sort of numbers, but amongst the workers attending were members of Congress, senators and the vice-president of the cabinet.

8. The ‘middle classes’ and the neighbourhood assemblies

The French group Mouvement Communiste warn of the dangers of the alliance between the proletariat and the middle classes in Argentina: “History shows the exploited have little to expect from these sectors of society, always ready, in the last instance, to save their own skins by aligning themselves with the dominant class to the detriment of the working class.”46 Time will tell if this turns out, again, to be the case. But this view ignores the rapid and drastic proletarianisation of the majority of the middle classes.47

Of course, the warnings of Mouvement Communiste have a basis in reality, which proletarians involved in struggle recognise. Working class cynicism about the new ‘middle class’ movements in Argentina – “they’re only on the streets now because their pockets have been touched” – neatly testify to this truth while simultaneously confirming the reality of the middle class’ changed situation. Some proletarians are reluctant to tie their fate too closely to that of the middle class assemblies movement for fear that they will eventually be betrayed. Considering the state’s near bankruptcy however, it is difficult to see how it will have the means to buy off the middle class. Even a patched up settlement involving new IMF money can only be a short-term solution for the bourgeoisie.

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of the popular assemblies.

It is often stated that the neighbourhood assemblies – one of the forms associated with middle class organisation in Argentina - are so heterogeneous that it is almost impossible to study them. The fact that there seem to be neighbourhood assemblies in all areas of Buenos Aires involving proletarians in different situations as well can lead to lazy affirmations of diversity and openness for post modernist ideologues intent on shedding class as a social category. *Echanges et Movement*, dispel some of the fog by distinguishing between two broad tendencies of neighbourhood assemblies.49 One as a phenomenon coming from a long tradition of neighbourhood organisation in working class areas and shanty towns, merging with the assemblies of the *piqueteros* in the new situation of mass unemployment of the 90s; and the other as a result of the sudden and more recent impoverishment of the middle classes. In recent months of course, with different sectors recognising each other’s needs in struggles, these two tendencies may have increasingly coordinated their actions and demands, (and certainly have talked to each other at the Interbarrial), further complicating the situation. But if the ‘middle class’ assemblies are dismissed, it is usually by identifying them with the merely middle class problem of the *corralito*, (in Argentina certainly, they are not understood in this limited way any longer). This identification is then useful to denounce the so-called middle class struggle and their supposed hegemony in the movement. Although it is true that these assemblies were formed around the time of the implementation of the bank freezes and that this problem mobilises a part of their energies, it is a mistake to limit them to this.

Twenty assemblies sprang up in Buenos Aires in the two weeks following the 19th and 20th, and there are now estimated to be 140 across the country, with some 8,000 regular participants. It’s sometimes said or assumed that the first *cacerolazo*, on the 19th of December, was a protest about the *corralito*. Certainly there was widespread anger and despair over what many suspected was the permanent disappearance of their life savings. But it was De La Rúa’s announcement of the state of emergency which mobilised people in an immediate, spontaneous reaction. Whilst of course the ‘middle class’ experience of the *corralito* was one of the reasons for their presence on the streets on the 19th, the radical meaning of the events that ensued is that everyone was on the streets refusing with disgust the state of emergency, (and the memories of dictatorship that it awoke), and in that could recognise each other as subjects in struggle, ultimately on the basis of a real, material rapprochement in their experience of exploitation. After that day, in the many *cacerolazos* that followed, placards saying anything about the lost savings were in a tiny minority. By the same token then, it would be wrong to characterise the assemblies as populated solely by disgruntled savers, who, presumably, would turn their back on the movement once their savings were returned to them. The problem of bank freezes takes up a relatively small part of the discussions of the assemblies and the Interbarrial. Though their appearance was sudden, the assemblies did not materialise out of a vacuum, but out of a developing situation of material impoverishment and the attendant disillusionment with politics, (in the general elections of October 2001, 22% of the (compulsory) ballot was blank or spoiled, whilst 26% of voters stayed at home). At the beginning it seems, the new assemblies, based on their middle class constituency, (apart from passing numerous resolutions on political subjects such as the national debt), were concentrating on organising new *cacerolazos*, the ‘symbolic’ form of protest associated with the middle classes. The *cacerolazos* had a life of their own anyway, attracting many more people than regularly attended the assemblies. They took place every Friday in the weeks after the 19th and 20th, and there are now estimated to be 140 across the country, with some 8,000 regular participants. It’s sometimes said or assumed that the first *cacerolazo*, on the 19th of December, was a protest about the *corralito*. Certainly there was widespread anger and despair over what many suspected was the permanent disappearance of their life savings. But it was De La Rúa’s announcement of the state of emergency which mobilised people in an immediate, spontaneous reaction. Whilst of course the ‘middle class’ experience of the *corralito* was one of the reasons for their presence on the streets on the 19th, the radical meaning of the events that ensued is that everyone was on the streets refusing with disgust the state of emergency, (and the memories of dictatorship that it awoke), and in that could recognise each other as subjects in struggle, ultimately on the basis of a real, material rapprochement in their experience of exploitation. After that day, in the many *cacerolazos* that followed, placards saying anything about the lost savings were in a tiny minority. By the same token then, it would be wrong to characterise the assemblies as populated solely by disgruntled savers, who, presumably, would turn their back on the movement once their savings were returned to them. The problem of bank freezes takes up a relatively small part of the discussions of the assemblies and the Interbarrial. Though their appearance was sudden, the assemblies did not materialise out of a vacuum, but out of a developing situation of material impoverishment and the attendant disillusionment with politics, (in the general elections of October 2001, 22% of the (compulsory) ballot was blank or spoiled, whilst 26% of voters stayed at home). At the beginning it seems, the new assemblies, based on their middle class constituency, (apart from passing numerous resolutions on political subjects such as the national debt), were concentrating on organising new *cacerolazos*, the ‘symbolic’ form of protest associated with the middle classes. The *cacerolazos* had a life of their own anyway, attracting many more people than regularly attended the assemblies. They took place every Friday in the weeks after the 19th, in almost ritual fashion.

Violence was a feature of savers’ actions from the 19th onwards. Since then, savers’ protests inside banks have also been attacked by the police. This does not, of course, suffice as proof of the revolutionary intent of the middle classes. We must note some of the statements that accompany middle class *cacerolos* protests – “we are the middle class, we send our children to school, we pay our taxes, and now we have been robbed.”, “we never break the law, we are not criminals”, “without savers no credit, without credit no production – without production, no nation.” These slogans display classic middle class subjectivity of course – the implicitly anti-working class, self-righteous sense of betrayal of those that ordinarily play by the rules and do well by them, which is also a general identification with a *properly functioning* system of capitalist wealth production. But we are almost tempted to say ‘so what?’ The subjectivity of the newly proletarianised middle classes is going to lag behind their practice in a situation of impoverishment. It is not what this or that skint ‘middle class’ individual thinks about his situation at a particular moment which is important, but what they will be forced to do as a *proletarianised* class. Not all of them will be completely skint – and the slogans quoted above may sometimes come from the less badly off parts of the middle class – but it looks like their lot can only worsen and a large proportion of these people are having to come to terms with a situation where their traditional demands for a renewal of the political system, based on moans about corruption and the failure of mediators, is failing to meet their immediate needs.

Neither should we assume that the savers involved in actions against the *corralito* are only ‘middle class’, as it has also affected workers with relatively small saving, pensioners, and indirectly but very tangibly, as we have already noted, workers dependent on the black economy. Indeed, *Echanges* claim that the unofficial sector makes up 50% of the real economy.50 On the 15th May 2002, an elderly couple in their eighties who had got a court order to force their bank, Banco de la Nación, to release their life savings, found that the bank still refused, claiming that the law had changed since the order was signed. The couple, living on a pension of 150 pesos a month (£30), decided to remain in the bank until they got their money (US $38,600), and sat themselves in the window, refusing to leave. As night fell, two local assemblies arrived to support them, joining the crowd that had already gathered, until there were around three hundred people, banging pots and chanting “Give them their money back!” Having entered the bank that morning, the exhausted couple finally left at 9pm, with the bank’s promise of half their money the next day.51 This example, we feel, ably demonstrates the possibilities of different needs, in a situation of class mobilisation, to be immediately recognised by others and their meaning transformed in this socialisation process.

Leaving aside the *cacerolazos* and *corralito* protests, what is perhaps more important is that, like the *piqueteros*, the assemblies are being pushed by immediate, everyday needs to develop radical practices which come into confrontation with the essence of capitalist social relations – the commodity form – all the while developing debates on the national debt and petitioning the state on certain issues. Many assemblies have set up communal soup kitchens, organised collective, self-reduction actions to reduce food prices; organised to defend impoverished tenants from evictions and set up groups (sometimes with workers from utility companies) to illegally re-connect people cut off for non-payment of bills to public water and electricity supplies. Assemblies have also negotiated with (or rather pressured) utilities companies for reductions in prices. There is strong support within assemblies for local facilities and schools in crisis – some school canteens, unable to function for lack of funds, are being run by assemblies. This is already an impressive list of steps of direct appropriation of use values by people for whom ‘paying for things’ – exchange value – *must become a ridiculous notion*, if they are to meet their human needs.

The other important mobilisation has been around the problems of health provision - hospitals and clinics being in absolute crisis due to the collapse of PAMI, the state medical service. In response to price inflation and shortages of drugs, (many drugs were withdrawn from the shelves at the start of the crisis in order to allocate the most urgent ones and shortages), unions of workers from private hospitals, doctors, nurses and cleaners have been demanding that the government meet their immediate needs. A start was made on this on the 15th May 2002 when doctors who work at the Hospital Italiano, the biggest and most prestigious hospital in Buenos Aires, walked out and went to the Ministry of Health to protest about the lack of funds and poor wages. This example, we feel, ably demonstrates the possibilities of different situations as well can lead to lazy affirmations of diversity and openness for post modernist ideologues intent on shedding class as a social category.

**Echanges et Movement**