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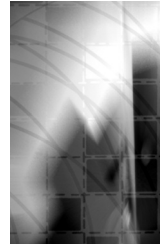
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Conflict and repression in an Argentinean car factory: a cycle of resistance from a worker's perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a worker's account of two factory occupations in Argentina. This reconstruction, rather than focusing on the role of specific agents, allows an unveiling of the dynamics through which the clash between the employer's drive for profitability and workers' interests in defence of their salaries developed. A cycle of conflict, resistance, repression and finally workers' subordination and acceptance of flexible employment conditions can be identified. Despite the tendency of the capitalist mode of production to produce divisions among workers in the workplace and society, the article highlights the importance of direct action, solidarity and democratic organising as workers' tools to react to and transform the system.

KEY WORDS

Argentina / direct action / repression / solidarity / workers' resistance

Introduction

The coming to power of Carlos Menem as President of Argentina in 1989 signalled the beginning of a decade-long implementation of a neo-liberal programme of economic reforms that, under the auspices and supervision of international financial institutions, deeply changed the structure of Argentina's employment and society. Privatisation of public companies in key economic sectors, the introduction of workplace and labour market flexibility, the decentralisation of collective bargaining, reforms to curb trade unions' financial and organisational power, and the implementation of new management practices by foreign multinationals in green-field investments were the most evident effects

of the new economic climate. However, these changes did not go uncontested. In order to defend its organisational and financial power, the central trade union confederation (CGT) finally accepted the introduction of flexibility and did not oppose the processes of privatisation. Despite previous announcements of massive redundancies, workers engaged in often very violent struggles at local levels, both within and outside the union channel, to defend their jobs and pay.

It is this context in which the following account of the cycle of resistance is embedded. With financial support from the Argentinean Government, a multinational car producer (FORPROF) decided to increase its investment in the country. It decided to build a new assembly plant in the city of Córdoba, where it already operated an engine plant, under the name of MECPROF. The company was involved in the introduction of flexible working and flexible salaries, essential to compete in the global market, and needed to harmonise working and salary conditions between the old and new plants. In the middle of September 1996 FORPROF formalised the passage of its MECPROF workers to FORPROF CARS. Workers at MECPROF were benefiting from a highly protective and well-remunerated collective agreement that dated back to the mid-1970s, a period of strong labour movement power in Argentina. Meanwhile workers employed by FORPROF CARS were under a new contract, signed in 1995, that contemporaneously introduced flexibility and reduced salaries by 50 percent. The transfer of MECPROF workers from their previous conditions to the new FORPROF conditions was the spark that unleashed a spontaneous mobilisation, transforming apparently quiescent workers into a group conscious of their strength and ready to defend their organisation and interests. The course of events, with the company actively repressing conflict and isolating activists, would show how short lived, yet socially enriching, this experience was for the workers involved.

In analysing workers' resistance, there are recurring problems and expectations that are both sociological and political. The organisation of production has a central role in each socio-economic system and thus the insights from studies of workplace resistance potentially transcend socio-ethnographical analysis.

From a sociological perspective, the historical manifestations of worker resistance continue to inform important debates. The first of these debates relates to the alternation between accommodation and resistance. The nature of the employment relationship is conflictive and generates a structural antagonism (Edwards, 1986) but workers' dependence on a salary to live forces them to accept capital domination. Whether workers are engaged in a constant power struggle to dispute the frontier of control (Hyman, 1975) or willingly participate and give consent to their own exploitation (Burawoy, 1979), this dynamic of accommodation and resistance is crucial in understanding the methods used to freeze and control conflict.

A second important debate concerns the analysis of the forms of workers' collective action and the explanatory social relations. Collective action may be based on injustice (Kelly, 1998) or rooted in the solidarity generated by the labour process (Atzeni, 2009) but the role of organisation and leadership in

building collective action remain fundamental in both 'top-down' and 'from below' perspectives of workers' mobilisation.

The first person narrative presented in this article relates to many of these issues, pointing to their contradictory nature. It reveals how workers may become identified with the success of their employer, how proud they can be of the quality of their work, how they can consciously consent to their own exploitation. It also discusses how this same identification and association obscures the reality of a system based on competition, distancing well paid and protected workers from the rest of the working population and creating the illusion of job stability.

The narrative expresses the moment in which the equilibrium between accommodation and resistance is broken and how workers' collective action first emerges, is consolidated and then is repressed. It articulates the forms of organising, workplace democracy, solidarity and the function of leaders. Finally the narrative highlights the deep sense of humanity that transpires from the workplace – an often forgotten issue in both sociological and economic analyses.

The interview was recorded in December 2002 at the *Biblioteca Popular Bella Vista*, in the city of Córdoba, Argentina, during the fieldwork for the author's doctoral dissertation. The interviewee, who during the conflict became one of the workers' elected representatives, had never previously participated in union activity within the plant and was not even a member of the union. He had been actively involved in a grass-roots movement that resisted the privatisation of the steel complex SOMISA in 1992. This activism informed his view of the consequences that the introduction of flexibility and the changes that the company was planning could have for workers' jobs and conditions of employment. While he is not a 'typical worker', such experiences and understanding of the context in which flexibility was introduced and of the possible workers' responses provide an insightful narrative of 'front-line' events.

The interview has been left almost untouched as the flow of the narration has a logical sequence. To ensure anonymity, the names of the persons and the company have been changed.

A worker narrative

'My name is Victor. I started working at FORPROF¹ in 1992, directly in production, in the crankshaft grinder line. We made products of a fairly good quality and the relation with the other colleagues was also good. Those that were starting to work for the company were happy to do it, it was a well paid job, five pesos for an hour when outside it was half that. We used to meet up with people, to share activities together, our relation with the company was based on a certain stability, it was a record moment for the automotive industry in Argentina and to satisfy the demand they needed workers to work extra hours, on night shifts, to keep high levels of productivity. Thus at that time there were no pressures from the company, they rather always respected the rules set in the contract. It was easy to move up the salary scale and to get paid for the hours worked doing a better paid job.

'There was stability, at least within the factory. But in the rest of the country the wave of flexibility and privatisation of public companies had already started and in a very violent way as with the case of SOMISA, a very big steel company privatised in the 1990. I was a worker at SOMISA and a shop-floor delegate opposed to the union bureaucracy. Later on they fired me and until today without any redundancy payment ... it was the epoch of Menem, of the big privatisation of public companies, telecom, oil, and in all these processes people were fired, lost their jobs, were forced into voluntary retirement. The situation in private industry was completely different, particularly in the automotive sector. At FORPROF we were enjoying summer but this wasn't the case for the workers in the steel industry. We were on an island and did not want to see what was happening around us.

'In the year before the factory occupation, the company set the target to reduce the quantity of faulty pieces, and to increase the overall product quality and workers' productivity. Consequently, they started to train us on basic machine maintenance to prevent work stoppages and improper functioning and they introduced quality control in the whole process. All this increases the productivity of the plant because if the level of faulty pieces is low it is clear that fewer pieces and less work will be lost in the production of each engine. Well, in just one year the company reached a level of productivity equal to those of similar factories in other parts of the world. But it also involved all workers in this process: people participated with great enthusiasm. I remember in my own line a colleague that proposed to reduce two operations done by two machines to one operation done by one machine.

'Workers had the expectation that with the Italians back in control of the company there could have been, as had happened 20 years ago, an increase in salaries, and wellbeing, and a social advancement, but they did not consider that these improvements had been the result of a deep historical struggle involving SITRAC/SITRAM.² And without considering that before the new context, there was no globalisation, no flexibility, and Taylorism as the model of production. Older workers used to say that the Italians were not going to be useless like the Argentineans ... there was really a big expectation. People were convinced that if the plant was doing well the company could have improved its performance in the global market and everybody could have benefited from this. Thus it was our responsibility to raise the level of quality because with this we could have secured our jobs, we could have become an irreplaceable part of the company. Well this way of thinking, all this expectation, has a lot to do with the factory occupation. Together with this the company tried to involve the workers' families, to include these in the big FORPROF family. It was not just production. There were birthday parties for all the kids, Christmas gifts, New Year's Eve parties, rucksacks, materials for school, FORPROF shirts and other gadgets – all ways the company tries to get into the workers' families. It was a total involvement, not just productive but also ideological. For me it was terrible because I could see what all this meant and I was feeling alone. I knew it was going to be a tremendous knock down for all of us, especially knowing that

flexibility was coming. I read and knew a bit about other experiences in other countries and had the previous experience with the struggle at SOMISA. There before privatisation they also started applying flexibility, teaching us how to change work practices ...

‘All this was before the factory occupation. Now why am I telling you all this? Because workers did not see that it was going to be a knock down. For an entire year, the union bureaucracy was always telling us that the situation for us was not going to change and questioning them could put your job at risk. You could see how the plant was expanding, we were going to move from an auto parts to an assembly cars maker, there were robots, new generation technology. The local population, not just the workers, had really great expectations.’

[Note from author – on a specific day that remained secret until the last moment, workers were called one by one into an office to sign the letter of resignation from MECPROF which also expressed acceptance of the new contract with FORPROF CARS.]

‘The majority signed the new contract, there was not much work around. Many people in their 50s accepted, they could not do a different job after a life in the factory and lived within a culture of work for life. People signed, with anger, with resignation, but signed. My plan was to sign, remain in the company and try to organise something. It is normal to talk with your colleagues at work and somehow I knew those that could have been approached. But I signed not because I was sure a factory occupation was coming. This was impossible, there was anger but no organisation. The day of signing up to the new contract the rebellious attitude was not to work, workers were thinking, it was terrible, we could just chat but had no idea of what to do. The company gave us the day free.

‘I was in the afternoon shift but the day after, which was also a pay day, I went early to the factory, partly to get my salary but mostly because I wanted to see what was going to happen. And what happened was a factory occupation ... In the morning shift two lines, in particular, started first to make noise, hitting the machines, using empty oil tins as drums, then they abandoned production and started to walk all along the plant. People followed and gathered spontaneously, without the activism forcing them to do it. This was the most interesting thing. The movement was so spontaneous that first people gathered in front of the factory gate and then shut the doors occupying the factory, with managers and guards inside. I got in together with many of those that were outside.

‘I have been in various processes of struggle, entirely controlled by the union bureaucracy. I have participated in assemblies and mobilisations, 30,000 of us went to Buenos Aires to protest against privatisation. Thus I know very well these situations, but I have never seen a mobilisation like that. First of all because it was completely based on workers’ self-determination, without any union officer, activist or organisation behind it. It was 100 percent democratic, everybody could talk, say whatever they wanted to say and be listened to by the rest. It was so strong, the unity, that it was the first factory occupation I saw without picket lines, these were not necessary. It has been the most democratic

experience of all my life involving a tremendous opposition to the union bureaucracy. Normally the bureaucracy scares and threatens us, but this time it was the opposite.

‘We elected a negotiating commission of nine men, the most representative, or rather, those who volunteered. There were many more with the right ability and they could have represented all of us without any problem, nothing would have changed. The commission could negotiate with the company just on the basis of what the assembly had decided, it could not negotiate about other issues. This was a big problem for the company, because if every decision had to pass through the assembly there could not be space for secret negotiations. Thus one of the conditions posed by the company to start negotiating was the autonomy of the commission in taking decisions. The assembly rejected all the conditions, but particularly that relating to the autonomy of the commission. I remember very well the intervention of a comrade from the assembly saying that we could have discussed about all the conditions apart from one: “It is the base that decides and the commission operates with a clear mandate from us”. This was an intervention that received one of the loudest cheers during the whole process.

‘After the conflict ended what we obtained was the emergence of our own organisation, we made some economic gains, but these were not so important. What was really important was the type of organisation that emerged after the conflict, based on independence and workers’ democracy. Many left-wing parties approached us suggesting that we should look for the support of this or that union but the reality was telling us that the process chosen by the comrades was that of an organisation of another type. All this meant a high level of activism with 50 to 60 of us in the role of shop-floor delegates in a new horizontal organisation where decisions were not taken just at the level of the shop-floor delegates’ meetings. We proposed, informed, discussed and then voted in the general assemblies.

‘We maintained this democratic process for three months with a semi-clandestine organisation, – the shop-floor delegates were elected secretly and their names were not made public. We were feeling very strong and proud of what we did and we started to hold meetings outside the factory in camps and other places in order to consolidate the organisation. In this, Ernesto was very important as a leader but others contributed, including myself. We voted for an independent union SITRAMF in a big assembly with people from FORPROF Brazil, from Uruguay, it was a plebiscite ... we started a new organisation far from the traditional union and with a class solidarity programme. We supported people living in the factory’s neighbourhood who were at risk of expropriation to enlarge the railway used by FORPROF because of ‘just in time’. All this represented a change for FORPROF workers, who became interested also in other people’s problems and not just in what was happening to them inside the plant. Together with this we developed relations with other factories in conflict, we went to support the occupation of Renault, we tried to organise an inter-factories shop-floor organisation, we walked from the factory to the city centre on a day of national strike. FORPROF workers were again protagonists and I think overall that we really made some important progress in the organisation, with the

plebiscite for the independent union as the most important achievement, and always with workers' support.

'But after that, the company started to provoke, with the aim of destroying us. One of our shop floor delegates was first disciplined and then fired. We reacted to this in a very strong way, occupying the factory in the month of January, which is when the company can resist without production going on. I did not agree with this decision. The occupation was born weak and many workers did not participate. Very few remained, about 600/700 and in this situation the only thing we could do was to double the conflict, blocking the road in front of the factory and we did not let any manager or foreman leave. We occupied the factory as never before. It was much more violent. But we finished with 11 and then 41 comrades fired.

'We were defeated, the company imposed its power, people started to fear losing their jobs, divisions emerged. The company remained very firm and replied to any action we took with more people fired. In this situation it was very difficult to maintain and invoke solidarity – what was the point if it just provoked new lay offs? There was a lot of frustration. It was very difficult to realise that we were defeated and we had to search for an alternative solution.

'Overall I think our conflict has been important as it represented a reference point, an example of struggle against the flexibility offensive, against the trade unions bureaucracy, against Menem and menemismo. The processes we have started are somehow continuing today, as with the case of the recovered factories. The role of the family, of our wives, of our kids in the conflict has been fundamental. The media always tried to underplay the importance of the conflict, we were constantly under attack. They went as far as treating our wives as prostitutes, saying that they could now enjoy parties, with all of us occupying the factory. The attempt to weaken our morale was constant.

'Solidarity has been fundamental and old workers particularly gave their support to resist all this. These were the workers that had given their life to the company and once very close to retirement had to rethink their entire working life. In the overall process that lasted one, one and a half years, everybody achieved a deeper consciousness, and this independently of the level of participation that each of us showed in the different moments of the struggle. That is why I think what happened in the first occupation did not happen by chance, it was not irrational. In the second occupation activism took a more leading role and broke the democratic linkages with the grassroots. This was a mistake. Very often what activism does is to collect the poison that is in each of us. With the second factory occupation we imposed a decision, we broke with democracy and this was a very big mistake.'

Concluding observation

The end of the conflict at FORPROF in 1997 coincided with the start of a major recession in Argentina that ultimately produced the social and political

turmoil of December 2001. While in these years of crisis unemployed workers led the resistance to the government's neo-liberal policies, formal sector worker reactions remained scattered and defensive in nature. However, the more favourable economic climate that started in 2003 has led to a renewal of workers' resistance in the formal sector, putting the regulation of industrial conflict back on the government's agenda. The promotion of collective bargaining, tripartite agreements and the support granted to the moderate and traditionally Peronist CGT have all contributed to contain labour protests within the boundaries of centralised control (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007). In this context, and in a historically rigid system of workers' representation, traditional trade union leaderships' decisional power has increased. However, recent developments in the food, transport and oil industries have triggered cases of rank-and-file direct action and resistance that, as with the case of FORPROF, have contested both the employer prerogative and trade union legitimacy of the status quo. While this form of collective action represents one of the possible alternatives for workers' resistance and is rooted in the history of the labour movement, the search for forms of organisation and political representation that could make effective this workplace power remains a fundamental condition for worker emancipation.

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Notes

- 1 Workers always refer to FORPROF, even if until September 1996 MECPROF, owned by FORPROF, was the formal employer.
- 2 These were the unions that from 1964 to 1972 represented workers in the FORPROF plants in Córdoba. In 1970–71, SITRAC and SITRAM were the most representative examples of *clasismo*, a short-lived but influential anti-bureaucratic, grass roots-based and class-oriented trade union movement.

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