

The Workers of Northeast Chubut (Patagonia, Argentina): A Study of the Contextual Features that Shaped the Formation of a Working-Class Fraction

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I. Topic, Problems and Sources

This article deals with the formation of one fraction of the Argentine working class in northeast Chubut (a province located in central Patagonia) during the 1970s and 1980s in the context of an industrialization project subsidized by the central government which aimed at peopling and developing Patagonia. In the Chubut region there are three cities: Trelew, Puerto Madryn and Rawson, which were formed as part of a model known as *polos de desarrollo* [development poles], a program promoted by the government for industries that settled south of the 42nd parallel. Chubut had, until then, a non-existent industrial sector: the only important economic activities were trade, limited agricultural activity and extensive sheep farming for wool production in its hinterland. For this reason, the working class was small compared to the south of the province (400km away), where there was an important oil industry.

Our starting hypothesis is that since the *polos de desarrollo* project was implemented, a new working class formed in the region as a result of the arrival of different groups of migrants coming from either other Argentine provinces, rural areas in Patagonia or neighboring countries. Following this hypothesis, we aim to understand how this class emerged and its main characteristics, paying special attention to the impact that this kind of subsidized industrialization had on the characteristics of this class and on its forms of resistance and organization.

The varied individuals that arrived at and settled in the region looking for a steady job started to form, through their organization and resistance, this

new working class. Having become a class, this group of workers found themselves in the context of full employment resulting from the frequent opening of factories, and enjoyed the concrete possibility of improving their living conditions.

Towards the mid-1980s, labour unions in the subsidized industrial projects were powerful organizations, capable of bargaining wages and intervening in the political life of these cities. However, these unions were not capable of categorically opposing the termination of benefits for the region, or the factory closings and layoffs that started towards the end of the 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s.

I have previously studied the process this working class went through from the hegemonic imposition of neoliberalism in the 1990s until 2005 when the socio-economic structure collapsed.¹ I observed that workers framed their struggle in the traditions and experiences gained during the period of growth in 1970s and 1980s.²

This article analyses the formation of this working class in the context of a subsidized industrialization process. My intention is to understand how this working class was formed, the nature of its first actions, how it organized itself, and the state it was in throughout the changes that began in the 1980s and continued through the 1990s. I believe that the regions where the subsidized industrialization projects were implemented may be understood as “social laboratories” to analyze the workers’ organizational processes and the way in which these processes varied in different contexts.

A key source of information for this project is a newspaper archive I have constructed through systematic recording of articles from the region for a 30-year period. I have also consulted government archives such as the provincial historical archive, the historical archive of the provincial

¹ PÉREZ ÁLVAREZ, Gonzalo. “Cambios en la estructura económica social y conflictos sociales en el noreste del Chubut 1990-2005”. Doctoral Thesis. La Plata, FHACE, UNLP, 2010.

² I use this concept of class in the sense proposed by E. P. Thompson where he states that “Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms”. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1966, pp. 9-10. I also make use of Hernán Camarero’s analysis, “Las concepciones de E. P. Thompson acerca de las clases sociales y la conciencia de clase en la historia”. *Espacios de crítica y producción*. FFyL-UBA, N° 40, Bs. As., mayo 2009, pp. 136-142.

legislature, and archives of the region's town halls. Aside from these sources, oral testimonies have also been paramount in my research. Written sources, controlled by political powers, tend to hide central aspects of the conflicts. Working exclusively with written sources would have led me to visualize just one part of this process. Such written sources do not reveal much about many forms of – necessarily underground – resistance. Neither do they cover the development process of organizations nor the emergence of working-class activists, their transformations and debates.

The emphasis on the deeds of individuals that built opposition to union leaderships and developed left-wing activism aims to recover the stories of those who are hidden by official history. This does not imply underestimating the role of the union leadership, such as its negotiating strategy,³ but understanding that the rank-and-file does not appear in conventional sources. For this reason, the process of recording oral sources focused on recovering missing information, balancing the contributions made by the different subjects involved in social relations. I particularly focus on recovering the contributions made by subordinate subjects, usually rendered invisible by traditional sources.

2. Subsidized Industrialization and the “New” Working Class

The *polos de desarrollo* policy was thought of as the creation of industrial centers that would radiate ‘progress’ towards nearby regions. In Argentina, Patagonia was the locus of this policy, and the Armed Forces, its main promoters. In the province of Chubut, industrial development programs were concentrated in the northeast where most of the job positions created by the provincial government were located.

In 1971, an industrial park was created in Trelew and by 1973, the Chubut textile industry ranked second place at a national level in several branches of this sector. It is estimated that there were 29 working plants in 1970,⁴ and by 1974, 43 different textile companies employing 4,300 workers.⁵

³ I believe it is possible to observe in social struggles as a whole, different goals, according to the different subjects involved. The distinction between forms of action, forms of organization, consciousness and spontaneity help us grasp a general understanding of the process. I call that sense ‘strategy’. See INIGO CARRERA, Nicolás. *La estrategia de la clase obrera 1936*. Bs. As.: PIMSA–La Rosa Blindada, 2000.

⁴ ALTIMIR, Oscar. *Análisis de la economía del Chubut y de sus perspectivas de desarrollo*. Rawson, Chubut: Asesoría de Desarrollo, 1970.

⁵ BECCARIA, Luís (dir.) *El caso de la industria textil en Chubut*. Bs. As.: BANADE, 1983.

Moreover, in 1971 the ALUAR company (Aluminio Argentino SA) was granted the project of building a primary aluminum plant, which was installed in Puerto Madryn. In both cases, most of the investment was made by the state, leading to a significant transfer of public funds to private companies.

ALUAR was an important company with concentrated capital and high technology, whereas the textile park was formed by small and medium-sized companies with low capital investment, little technology and highly dependent on intensive labor. For this reason, the development of ALUAR would have its peculiarities: it is the only industrial plant from the *polos de desarrollo* model that continues to grow up to the present. Its monopolistic nature in Argentina (and, at the global level, oligopolistic) as a primary aluminum producer gives it the power to control prices and enjoy a privileged relationship with the state.⁶

Industrial development and job creation triggered the arrival of migrants to the region, which had a significant impact on the scarce urban population centres. Most of these migrants came from rural areas and were descendants of Patagonian indigenous peoples. Yet some people migrated from other Argentine provinces and neighboring countries as well. In the cities, rapid changes transformed social life in every aspect. For example, gender relations changed: the textile companies hired female workers, thus modifying the traditional role women had played in the province.

The development of these subsidized industries created a pressing need to attract people to the region to work in the new factories and associated activities that began to emerge. I consider that this important immigration constituted a group of workers which gradually, through different actions, became a working class that did not have strong bonds with the experiences and traditions of the groups of workers that already lived in the region. This does not imply that until then there had not been a history of conflicts or of workers' organizations;⁷ rather, it means that the emergent working class seemed to have forged no historical bonds with this older experience.

⁶ For further analysis on ALUAR, see ROUGIER, Marcelo. *Estado y empresarios de la industria del aluminio en la Argentina. El caso Aluar*. Bs. As.: Editorial UNQ, 2011 e PÉREZ ÁLVAREZ, Gonzalo. "Paternalismo, experiencia obrera y desarrollo del régimen de gran industria: la historia de ALUAR". *Revista Mundos do Trabalho*, vol. 3, n. 6, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brasil. julho-dezembro de 2011, pp. 130-150.

⁷ In fact, a colleague and I discovered conflicts at the beginning of the twentieth century. Consult GATICA and PÉREZ ÁLVAREZ. "No solamente pasaba el viento: sindicatos, huelgas, boicots, cortes de vías y lucha política en los primeros pasos del movimiento

The formation of new workers' groups triggered by new economic activities in a certain region has been the subject of study of several authors in different contexts which I will draw on. To study Patagonia, it is very important to analyze the literature on the development of the working class in southern Chubut at the beginning of the twentieth century related to the surge in the oil industry. In this context, there was a similar situation as in the 1970s: migrants from different backgrounds formed a heterogeneous working class with diverse experiences, which nevertheless, through the conflicts it underwent, was able to form a common class identity.

Research by Susana Torres,⁸ Daniel Cabral Marques,⁹ Gabriel Carrizo¹⁰ and Edda Crespo¹¹ has broadened our interpretations, forcing us to rethink some of our starting assumptions. Other authors who have either covered subsequent periods or worked on a long-term perspective and whose research has followed the same lines of analysis and interpretation have also contributed to my analysis such as Susana Vidoz, Gabriel Carrizo,¹² Ester

obrero en el noreste del Chubut (1917-1922)". In: BUCCIARELLI, Arias Mario (dir.) *Diez territorios Nacionales y catorce provincias, Argentina, 1860-1955*. Bs. As.: Edit. Prometeo, 2013. pp. 187-214.

⁸ See, among others, TORRES, Susana. "Huelgas petroleras en Patagonia: Inmigrantes europeos, clase y etnicidad (1917-1933)". *Actas V Jornadas sobre Colectividades*, IDES, Buenos Aires, 26 y 27 de Octubre de 1995. The author analyses in depth the relationship between class and ethnic background, aiming to find the connections between individual migrants and the formation of the working class. In these connections, the groups of each national or ethnic background play a major role.

⁹ CABRAL MARQUES, Daniel. "Hacia una relectura de las identidades y las configuraciones sociales en la historia petrolera de la ciudad de Comodoro Rivadavia y de la Cuenca del Golfo San Jorge". *Actas IV Jornadas de Historia Social de la Patagonia* Santa Rosa, 19 y 20 de mayo de 2011. In this and another publication, Cabral Marques analyses the specific problem of how a nationalist, social control policy in the oil industry implemented by the central government had an significant impact on the making and the characteristics of the working class of the region. The relationship between his starting questions and our own is evident, although they belong to different time periods. I will return to these issues later.

¹⁰ CARRIZO, Gabriel. "Trabajadores, salesianos y administradores. La disputa por el tiempo libre en las comunidades obreras de Comodoro Rivadavia durante las primeras décadas del siglo XX". *Actas de las I Jornadas de Historia Social de la Patagonia y II Jornadas de Historia de los Trabajadores de la Patagonia*, Neuquén, 26 y 27 de abril de 2007.

¹¹ CRESPO, Edda Lía. "De Germinal a Florentino Ameghino. Memoria, política y asociacionismo en Comodoro Rivadavia (1919-1923)". *Entrepasados*, Año X, N° 20/21, 2001.

¹² VIDOZ, Susana Laura. "Conflictos laborales y articulación política en el Territorio Nacional de Chubut (1930-1943)". *Actas VIII Congreso Nacional de Ciencia Política – S.A.A.P.* Universidad del Salvador; Buenos Aires, 7-9 de Noviembre de 2007; VIDOZ, Susana and CARRIZO, Gabriel. "El Yrigoyenismo y las identidades políticas territorianas en Chubut y Neuquen". *Actas Segundas Jornadas de Historia de la Patagonia, Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia*, 2, 3 y 4 de Noviembre de 2006.

Ceballos,¹³ Susana Torres and Graciela Ciselli,¹⁴ Edda Crespo and Daniel Cabral Marques,¹⁵ among others.

Without any intention to develop a thorough survey of the literature, I also mention other works that analyze the formation and transformation of the working class in other Patagonian regions, especially the province of Neuquén. The already well-known publications of Enrique Masés et al.¹⁶ have shown, through a long-term study, how the Neuquén working class was formed, and how it was modified and transformed through different projects implemented by central or local governments. Several works by Fernando Aiziczon¹⁷ are also relevant to my analysis. Finally, the research of Rodolfo Porrini Beracochea is also important. He has explored the formation of a new working class in Uruguay in the 1940s triggered by the development of an import substitution-oriented industrialization.¹⁸

Regarding the relationship between migrant groups and the formation of a new working class, I also use other contributions that analyze, in different frameworks and with different starting hypotheses, the influence of migration in the formation of class identity. The works by Trpin¹⁹ and

¹³ CEBALLOS, Ester. “El 1° de mayo en Comodoro Rivadavia durante el período 1901 – 1945”. *Actas X Jornadas Interescuelas de Historia*, Rosario, 20 al 23 de Septiembre de 2005.

¹⁴ TORRES, Susana and CISELLI, Graciela. “La Gobernación Militar de Comodoro Rivadavia 1944 – 1955. Problemáticas y fuentes”. *Actas VIII Jornadas Interescuelas de Historia*. Universidad Nacional de Salta. 2001.

¹⁵ CABRAL MARQUES, Daniel and CRESPO, Edda. “Entre el petróleo y el carbón: Empresas estatales, trabajadores e identidades sociolaborales en la Patagonia Austral (1907-1976)”. In: BANDIERI, Blanco y Varela (dir.), *Hecho en Patagonia. La historia en perspectiva regional*. Neuquén: Educo, 2006.

¹⁶ See MASÉS, Enrique et al. *El Mundo del trabajo: Neuquen (1884-1930)*. Neuquén: Universidad Nacional del Comahue; 1994; MASÉS, Enrique y otros. *El Mundo del Trabajo en Neuquén (1930-1970)*. Neuquén: Universidad Nacional del Comahue, 1998. MASÉS, Enrique and GALUCCI, Lisandro. (edit.) *Historia de los trabajadores en la Patagonia*. Neuquén: Educo, UNCo, 2007.

¹⁷ Particularly AIZICZON, Fernando. “Construyendo tradiciones en tiempos de transición: activistas en las luchas de los obreros de la construcción de Neuquén a fines de los años ’80”. *Actas del Primer Congreso Nacional Sobre Protesta Social, Acción Colectiva y Movimientos Sociales*, Marzo de 2009 where he analyses the manner in which workers of different background formed traditions in common in Neuquén in the 1980s.

¹⁸ PORRINI BERACOCHEA, Rodolfo. “Experiencia e identidad de la nueva clase obrera uruguaya: la huelga frigorífica (montevideana) de enero de 1943”. *História UNISINOS*. Sao Leopoldo, n.6, julio-diciembre 2002, pp.63-96; PORRINI BERACOCHEA, Rodolfo. *La nueva clase trabajadora uruguaya (1940-1950)*. Serie “Tesis de Maestría” de la Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, Montevideo, 2005.

¹⁹ TRPIN, Verónica. “Trabajadores migrantes: entre la clase y la etnicidad. Potencialidad de sus usos en la investigación socioantropológica”. *Actas ASET 7° Congreso Nacional de Estudios del Trabajo*, Agosto 2005; TRPIN, Verónica. “Migrantes chilenos que trabajan en

Perren²⁰ demonstrate how migration gradually modified the working class in Nuequén and Alto Valle del Río Negro. Mónica Gatica,²¹ on the other hand, shows the crucial influence of Chilean migration in the formation of a new working class in northeastern Chubut.

3. An Emergent Working Class

The development of subsidized industrialization triggered the arrival of workers to satisfy the increasing demand for labor power. The companies worked on promoting the arrival of these migrants. The most important factory in Patagonia, ALUAR, selected most of its initial personnel from rural workers. The company promised them housing, facilitated their move to Puerto Madryn and offered them well-paid jobs, thus ensuring the “fidelity” of these workers, who in general had no experience in unions or politics.

This is explained by one of our interviewees, Fernando:

ALUAR has always been characterized by hiring people from the countryside. At the beginning of the 1970s, when the company started, it didn't recruit skilled workers from Buenos Aires; it recruited people from the provinces: La Pampa, Mendoza... people with no union experience.²²

Another interviewee, Héctor, noted:

...the average laborer was from the country, most of them with no factory experience whatsoever, unlike those who had a special skill like an electrician or a mechanic, who did have experience from other factories. And to me, ALUAR—and this is something we always talk about—was looking for an inexperienced worker, so that they could mould them as they pleased. Those with a special skill, with some experience, were more reluctant, more prone to offer some resistance. Then we also gradually adapted to the circumstances and began to see

las chacras: la etnicidad ante una nueva ruralidad”. In: MASÉS, Enrique and GALUCCI, Lisandro. (edit.) *Historia de los trabajadores en la Patagonia*. Op.Cit.

²⁰ PERREN, Joaquín. “Hacer la América en la Patagonia. Los migrantes bajo la lupa de la comparación (Neuquén: 1980-1991)”. In: *Ibid.*

²¹ GATICA, Mónica. “¿Exilio, migración, destierro? Los trabajadores chilenos que se asentaron en el NE de Chubut a partir de septiembre de 1973; Memorias, historias e implicancias”. Tesis doctoral. FHACE. UNLP, La Plata, 2011.

²² Fernando, interview, 2 May 2008. He is a technical union member who arrived in the mid-1980s from La Plata with no prior political experience.

how things really work. Here some very important internal committees of delegates were formed...²³

Here we can see a significant difference between the working-class component and the way it was formed by the company: the personnel needed for unskilled tasks were selected from workers with no factory experience and, in many cases, with no urban life experience. Broadly speaking, these subjects knew little about unions or politics compared to those hired for more technically-skilled jobs. The latter did bring with them forms of resistance and organization which would be the base for the first internal workers' committees in the workplace.

In the case of the textile park, there was no homogeneous behavior given the presence of different companies. A significant fraction of the working class was constituted by migrants that generally did not have factory or urban life experience, something more common among workers in low-technology enterprises, who were not required to have a significant prior knowledge of the tasks to be performed. This happened in the context of an emergent working class, characterized by its heterogeneity, as Daniel points out: "Broadly speaking we had this idea that in the industrial park most people came from smallholdings and therefore had no proletarian tradition. But actually, taking a closer look, there were people from everywhere".²⁴

The "idea" Daniel refers to represents the views of his political party, the MAS (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*), which had sent him to the region to work in the industrial park in order to promote political activity. But as he points out, the reality was much more heterogeneous. The group with the rural background was just one of part of the whole workers' group. His own story is an example of this. He was from Buenos Aires and inexperienced in factory life since he had only worked in stores before: "I was 27 and had never worked in a factory. I was a political activist and came to work in whatever job I could get, but all my life I'd been a seller (...) I'd never worked in a factory so for me it was a whole new experience". One of his anecdotes illustrates the complexity of this workers' group:

...the first gathering for an *asado* [typical Argentine food] was around December 20, before the holidays. I was sitting next to

²³ Héctor, interview, 9 May 2008. He was part of a list —the "Rafael Uribe"— that opposed the leadership in UOM (*Unión Obrera Metalúrgica*, metal workers' union). He was a rural worker with no union experience and no political participation beyond the union.

²⁴ Daniel, interview, 4 April 2012 at a university in Trelew. He was a MAS member, an important Trotskyist party in Argentina in the 1980s. He arrived at the region at the beginning of that decade and was involved in politics in the industrial park.

the factory watchman, who was an indigenous descendant. Then, after the third wine, the guy stood up and started to sing a *lamento* [sad indigenous song]. I was deeply touched... When he finished, I stood up and hugged him, and told him, ‘So we start getting to know each other, Ancamil, you should know: the Argentine historical figure I despise the most is General Roca.’ Then another worker jumped in, ‘if it wasn’t for Roca, you wouldn’t be eating an *asado* in Patagonia’.

The contrast between the various stories and experiences is apparent. This heterogeneity was also visible in the different ideological positions. The matrix of the state project of occupying Patagonia was part of the process. This view, in our opinion held by most members of this young working class, was based on a supposed community of interests between workers and employers, whose aim was to assure the development of Patagonia. Such a view was strengthened by the idea that there was a need to maintain social peace, so as not to risk the industrial promotion program on which the emergent industrialization of the region depended. This view was very powerful because it was based on concrete elements. Subsidized industrialization depended on state funds, which the government began to cancel at the beginning of the 1980s. Workers were aware of this problem, and in many cases they developed their resistance strategy by allying with the bourgeoisie that had economic interests in the region and was in power. Such an alliance was aimed at “defending the region”, demanding to keep the benefits for the businessmen that invested in Patagonia.

Such a position was mentioned in several interviews. Miguel tells us: “...somehow I think we were – one way or another – coaxed to defend the interests of the employers. Whenever we raised our voices to demand industrial promotion we were defending the employers and not us”.²⁵ Daniel remembers one of the few occasions where his proposal did not get enough votes in an assembly in the factory where he worked:

...the management said that industrial promotion had been cancelled. Then there was an assembly, where we decided that a group of workmates should go fight by our employers’ side for industrial promotion (...) We always said that workers should never support the employers, but well, we lost.

²⁵ Miguel, interview, Touring Club café in Trelew, 6 June 2007. He was an important figure in the opposition slate in AOT (*Asociación Obrera Textil*, textile factory workers’ union) and a PI (*Partido Intransigente*, a moderate-left party) activist.

I consider that the characteristics of this process influenced the kind of confrontation and organization these workers developed. The identification of their interests with their employers, the alliances with these employers and the shared discourse on the need to stimulate Patagonian development were key elements of this history. I do not claim that these characteristics existed only in this region nor that there were no other regions with similar structural characteristics (such as in the province of Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost of Argentina²⁶) where resistance processes with different dynamics occurred. However, I think that it has been demonstrated that one of the goals of the *polos de desarrollo* projects —i.e. forming workers' groups with lower levels of conflict²⁷ than the levels of conflict in traditional factories— was successfully reached, at least partially, in this region of study. Neither does this mean that there were no struggles and conflicts. However these events had particular characteristics, which we need to take into account to understand the dynamics of the emergent working class and the type of confrontation that arose in this subsidized industrialization context.

4. First Years and the Dictatorship

This workers' group, structurally formed in the first half of the 1970s, began to make their first demands in a highly repressive context, forming as a class. These were not major conflicts: most of them were economic conflicts regarding working conditions and reducing daily working hours that the employers had imposed. I present here some features of the forms of resistance developed during the dictatorship. In these years, public demonstrations were obviously rare although if we analyze the situation against the grain we may find different forms of resistance. It is in this process of almost invisible resistance that we may observe some events that question the dominant discourse of social peace and the idea that the workers always followed their employers' lead.

The most evident of these initiatives was the refusal to work overtime. This behavior was expressed by the textile workers and those at ALUAR. The demand for better working conditions was made through this mechanism,

²⁶ See GRIGERA, Juan. "Promoción industrial en Argentina: el caso de Tierra del Fuego (1970-2007)". *Actas XIII Jornadas Interescuelas de Historia*, Catamarca, 2011.

²⁷ Particularly compared to what happened in the industrial centers in the country. See SCHVARZER. *Promoción industrial en Argentina. Características, evolución y resultados*. Bs. As.: CISEA, 1986. His hypothesis is that these projects aimed to obstruct industrial development in traditional industrial areas in order to alleviate existing frictions.

which made workers feel safe since it was not against the legislation in force. However, it was a demand that went against the “customs” of the region where, in the context of a developing industrialization, it was necessary to make intensive use of the still-scarce labor force available.

Gerardo related this ALUAR policy and the way the company dealt with the demand:

...in 1979, during the dictatorship, we had a conflict because we refused to work extra hours and demanded more personnel. So we were forced to go on strike. It wasn't actually a strike, we just refused to work overtime, but the company legally demanded us to go back to our routine. Then one of the senior managers —a former Fate²⁸ manager—came down, and in that meeting he subtly told us, ‘Don't you know this company is run by the Armed Forces?’²⁹

Héctor also remembered similar situations:

In a strike attempt, they came with guns looking for some workers from specific sectors, and they were taken away, this was during the dictatorship. We were at a demonstration in front of the aluminum plant – I remember it rained or drizzled – and two or three workmates were arrested, things like that happened... Times were tough.³⁰

The refusal to work extra hours was also the form of resistance in the textile park of Trelew during the dictatorship. As René explained:

...I started working in one of the most important factories in the park, and we worked many extra hours. This was at the beginning of 1977, we were already under the dictatorship and we weren't getting any pay raises. So, how could we handle this? The company was so used to us working overtime, 'cause we were in such great need (...) Our workmates had to be convinced that this wasn't a strike —'cause it wasn't actually (...) and there was always the unconfirmed, terrifying rumor, you know? There was a rumor that some guy and his entire

²⁸ Most of the share capital of ALUAR was the property of the Madaness family, also owners of FATE, the most important tire factory in the country.

²⁹ Gerardo, interview, 2 May 2008. He moved to Puerto Madryn in 1977 and had some knowledge of union activities since he had been a representative in Buenos Aires.

³⁰ In these testimonies, it is clear that the Armed Forces played a key role in ALUAR, a strategically important company in this industry.

family had been kicked out of the factory, left in the frontier, and beaten by the *pacos*.³¹

Furthermore, it was a demand related to these workers' possibility to enjoy life. As Miguel pointed out:

You were forced to work 12 hours. I got there in July... Imagine July in Trelew! You entered at 6 in the morning, and got out at 6 in the evening; you could do nothing else, you couldn't even see the sun.³² We even worked on Saturdays. My first confrontation with the company – without being a union representative, or anything – was because of the 8 hours thing.

Because of the repression, union actions were always within legal boundaries. However, it is evident that the region's young working class did put into practice several forms of protest during the dictatorship. When we make these forms visible, we can analyze the class characteristics and process of class formation in more depth. We consider it an open debate whether or not the working class was defeated during the dictatorship.³³ There is evidence to argue that it was not. In the region, there was no working-class tradition that the dictatorship may have aimed at destroying. However, the relationship between this young, local working class and the national working class forces us to reflect more in depth on, for example, how the ideas of terror and persecution helped contain and repress working-class protests as is demonstrated in the workers' testimonies.

5. 1983-1985: Before the Storm

During the dictatorship, workers began to acquire a collective experience. These workers arrived at the region in the context of subsidized industrialization, forming internal committees in some textile factories and at ALUAR. These experiences of self-organization generated an accumulation of power that first became manifest after the return to constitutional government. These workers had already acquired a common experience, constituted by their shared interests which, at least in part,

³¹ René Pérez, interview, Elvio Ángel Bel athenaeum in Trelew, 4 July 2009. René is Chilean like many workers of the region. The term 'pacos' refers to Chilean militarized police.

³² In the region under study, the sun sets at 6 pm in the winter.

³³ To reflect on this, I recommend GHIGLIANI, Pablo. "La noción de derrota en la historia reciente del movimiento obrero argentino". *V Jornadas de Sociología de la UNLP*. La Plata. 2008.

clashed with other subjects' interests. Yet this new working-class experience was strongly influenced by the production relations in which they were immersed, relations that pushed them into a collaboration policy with the employers in order to maintain the program of state-subsidized industrialization.

However, influence did not imply capitulation. Although there was a tendency towards collaboration, there was also an intention to forge some independent working-class politics. Both strategies were in opposition after the return to democracy, a time when this group of workers was already constituted as a class, with an ambivalent awareness.³⁴

The end of the dictatorship opened up new possibilities for this emergent class; restrictions were removed and they dared to set and advance new objectives. Fear began to dissipate. This is mentioned in Daniel's testimony about an assembly at the beginning of 1984, when the factory internal committee was formed:

...we were at the door when the foreman, the factory engineer and the manager came out to intimidate us, to prevent the assembly from happening. I said we must hold the assembly, workmates, we mustn't be afraid, we live in a democracy, blah-blah-blah. We gathered and held the assembly (...) and there we formed the internal committee...

³⁴ I follow Gramsci's ideas in *Note sul Machiavelli sulla politica e sullo stato moderno*. He holds that social group awareness is the result of the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness and organization achieved through the process of struggle and in the context of the relationship between objective forces. Gramsci considers that collective political awareness can reach different levels: the first and most elemental is the economic-corporative, the second is the awareness of the interest solidarity in the entire social group, but still at a merely economic level, and the third is when the group can see beyond corporative interests and develop political awareness. This ambivalence oscillates between the first and the second level; that is, between the defense of the small group (their interests being equal to their respective employers) and the defense of the larger social group, awareness that demands an independent strategy in the class, although not necessarily revolutionary. In fact, the third awareness level —political awareness— was not observed in my research. When this type of awareness is reached, the existing objective forces relations are deeply transformed. I also make use of Cabral Marques's analysis of the oil region in southern Chubut: "Frequently, this conception involved a low level of conflict in industrial relations, expressed in the graphic expression of the common people the "big family". Within the system of relationships that this notion expressed, the individual appeared to be contained by strong networks of sociability that tended to relativize the fringes of rupture between different groups and within labor hierarchies, strengthening the bonds of belonging. Nevertheless, at the root of this supposed harmony, fault lines still existed and resistance was expressed in various forms, but in fact it did not jeopardize the basic conditions for the reproduction of the model." See CABRAL MARQUES, Daniel. "Hacia una relectura de las identidades y las configuraciones sociales en la historia petrolera de la ciudad de Comodoro Rivadavia y de la Cuenca del Golfo San Jorge *Op. Cit.* 2011, p. 15.

This situation is mentioned in Rene's testimony as well:

...we had gathered, but still didn't go out to the streets, or make ourselves noticeable. There was a lot of fear, there was no democracy (...) so we read the constitution to our workmates, we read them the "14 bis" Article of the Constitution, the right to strike, so that they had the knowledge to justify their actions. That evening at 6, the factory was occupied.

The key role of the activists with more political knowledge was evident here. They explained to the rest the new possibilities opened up by the constitutional government. In these activists we can see the connections with the experiences and traditions acquired at a national level, which still in general were not absorbed by the workers of the region.

In both the AOT and UOM unions, regional voting lists to replace the union leaders were postulated. In AOT, the aim was to confront the leadership of the days of the dictatorship, and in UOM a list was postulated as an alternative to the leadership represented by Lorenzo Miguel³⁵ at a national level. These two union electoral histories were very similar: in the 1985 election the pluralist candidates with a platform of resistance won, but were replaced by the previous leadership in the next election. In AOT, the textile factory group *1° de Mayo* (May 1) was formed, winning the 1985 election. In this group different political sectors converged: Peronist groups (which headed the list) together with militants from left-wing parties such as PI, PC, MAS and PO.³⁶ A similar process took place in UOM. Sectors from Peronist currents together with left-wing groups (especially from the PC and the PSA³⁷) defeated the traditional leaders.

These were processes of important social mobilization, but ultimately there were no profound changes in the unions' characteristics. Although during the first years there were changes towards greater internal democracy and more presence in the streets, the new leaderships gradually moved away from that path.

In AOT, the new regional leaders gradually adapted to the national leadership, leaving aside the search for an alternative union model. The resistance strategy – which seemed to have won them the elections – was replaced by a negotiating attitude when it came to concrete union actions.

³⁵ An historic figure of Argentine unionism and a Peronist party member with a classical negotiating approach.

³⁶ *Partido Obrero* [Workers' Party], of Trotskyist orientation.

³⁷ *Partido Socialista Auténtico*, a moderate left party.

During the interviews the workers emphasized the importance of the pressure from the union national structure, through the cutting of funding, for example, when the regional union adopted a formal position against the policy of restricting grievances to the institutional level.

These changes meant, for textile workers, the dissolution of the *1° de Mayo* group, forming other groups affiliated with the different parties with some political weight in the textile park factories. One of the most dynamic groups was *Celeste y Blanca* run by the internal committee of the Modecraft factory.³⁸

Wining the regional elections in UOM did not entail becoming an alternative union project either. The regional leadership could not develop a working-class strategy different from that of the national union structure. The centralized structure impeded economic autonomy because the regional organization could not manage its own funds, and initiatives to seek autonomy were unsuccessful.

In the following union elections this group also dissolved, thus making it possible for the group aligned with the national leadership to win. In our opinion – regardless of organizational or formal issues – the greatest limitation they encountered in the attempts to build an alternative unionism was the level of awareness shown by rank-and-file members, of whom the leaderships (even the most combative ones) were an expression. They could not override the limitations of the corporate perspective of the demands for state industrialization subsidies which made it impossible to carry out an alternative project that supported and gave long-term perspectives to other kind of strategies.

6. 1987-1988: the Storm broke

When the elections that modified the union leaderships took place, labour unrest increased in the region because the national government had begun to reduce tax cuts for the factories in Patagonia. This had a strong impact on the industrial park in Trelew where factory closures and layoffs began to be more frequent.

³⁸ PÉREZ ÁLVAREZ. “Lucha y memoria obrera en el noreste del Chubut. Una aproximación desde la fábrica Modecraft 1990-1991”. *Historia Antropología y Fuentes Orales*. N.41, Barcelona, 2009, pp. 25-48.

At the beginning of 1987, the textile factory Gebco filed for bankruptcy, resulting in the occupation of the factory by the workers. This process ended in defeat that would be remembered in the conflicts of the 1990s. Juan recalls: “The first important factory occupation was that of Gebco. My dad worked there. They occupied the factory, but the managers were already gone and had taken all the money with them...”³⁹ After an occupation of more than 40 days, the union leadership announced that they “had gotten 80% of the compensation from the employers” and expressed their disagreement with “those who want to use this political struggle for sectarian, divisive goals”.⁴⁰ In spite of the tone of the announcement, it is clear that the factory closures could not be prevented, and the total payment of the compensations required by law was never obtained. Moreover, union leaders attacked those who proposed an alternative strategy to organize the struggle. Greater friction did not necessarily mean greater awareness or greater progress for those who proposed an independent strategy.

During these years some conflicts with teachers and provincial employees gained relevance. Both ATE⁴¹ and Atech⁴² went on strike for several months in 1986 and 1987. The provincial government of Atilio Viglione⁴³ suffered a deep crisis. At the national level, some measures were taken, such as the reduction of oil royalties⁴⁴ or the cancellation of industrial subsidies to set up new projects, which defunded Chubut’s budget, aggravating the recession.

The workers of the region found themselves in a new social context. They were dealing with unprecedented forces and it seemed difficult to confront them with the old tools their experience had given them. Their history of struggles consisted of demands for better working conditions and salary increases, but they lacked the tools to figure out how to act in a situation where the companies did not need their work force. It was not about fighting

³⁹ Juan, interview, 6 June 2007. He was a Peronist Party member and a textile worker. Presently he is an activist in the unemployed workers organization, *Aníbal Verón*.

⁴⁰ *Diario Jornada*, 29 April 1987, Trelew, Chubut, p.8. The leadership was responding to left-wing union groups, which had questioned the lack of reaction.

⁴¹ *Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado*, an association of provincial state workers in public administration, health, education, etc.

⁴² *Asociación de Trabajadores de la Educación de Chubut*, representing provincial public school teachers.

⁴³ A UCR (*Unión Cívica Radical*) party politician who won the 1983 provincial elections and was at the end of his term of office.

⁴⁴ Chubut has one of the most important oil fields in Argentina and a significant part of its budget depended on oil royalties paid by the central government to extract this resource. When the province stopped receiving this money, it did not have enough funds to pay the state workers’ salaries.

for improvements in the project of the ruling-class sectors of power; they needed to confront the new project imposed on them.

An alternative to the project from above was necessary, and for that, a corporate perspective was insufficient. The strategy of most workers restricted the struggle to demands within small circles of workers in which the collapse of the *polos de desarrollo* model seemed to match their interests with that of their employers. The only possibility to keep their jobs seemed to be supporting the owners of “their” factories to make profits. The solution seemed clear: there was no alternative but to defend their employers’ interests so as to keep their employment.

Furthermore, they found themselves in a situation where they could no longer trust their historical tools of organization and struggle. The biggest failure of the many unsuccessful attempts at building a new type of union was not being able to modify the political role those organizations played. In the region, the unions were incapable of creating bonds between different fractions of the working class. This became clear with the lack of reaction to the factory closures and massive layoffs. Almost all unions restricted their demands to asking for compensation, that is, for the factory owners to observe the law.

The situation of the state workers was somewhat different. During the 1987 conflicts, unions were growing stronger in the dispute with the weakened government. In 1988 there was an important change: when Peronists took office in the provincial government, some Atech union leaders were offered executive positions in the provincial government (the same would happen in 1989 in ATE).

7. 1989 to 1990: the shipwreck

The end of the 1980s was a historic turning point with 1989 in particular a breakpoint at a national level. Hyperinflation, riots and looting,⁴⁵ the fall of Alfonsín’s government and Menem taking office generated the conditions for the hegemonic period of neoliberalism.⁴⁶ In the region, the decline of the *polos de desarrollo* project accelerated: there were massive layoffs in the textile sector and in other activities. It was evident that there was a crisis in the industrial park and in the rest of the small and medium-sized companies.

⁴⁵ See IÑIGO CARRERA, Nicolás y otros. “La revuelta. Argentina 1989/90”. *PIMSA DT N° 4*, Bs. As, 1995.

⁴⁶ See BONNET, Alberto. *La hegemonía menemista*. Bs. As.: Prometeo, 2008.

In the construction industry, the collapse was steeper due to the decrease in investment and development of new projects.

The increase in extreme poverty revealed changes in the social situation. The Social Services Secretary of Trelew reported that in 1989 two thousand families were living in extreme poverty.⁴⁷ These were the families of many of the workers fired in previous years.

This year was also a turning point for unions. The power several left-wing groups had gained in the first conflicts of 1989 became evident: they won several AOT assemblies defeating the union leaders that tried to avoid confrontations, and positing again two opposing strategies. However, these were circumstantial victories that could not go beyond the short-lived instances of collective participation. Then the attack from the management and the union leadership intensified. At the same time, it became evident that the opposition groups were having difficulties in building a union political project as an alternative to the project of the leadership of the main private workers' unions of the region.

The defeat of the strategy for building an independent organization of the working class – a defeat that was suffered gradually over a few years – now seemed final. Juan pondered the growing “individualism”:

The struggles decreased in those years, because of fear... Many people had lost their jobs. So the other tried to protect theirs, they could see how the people who had been fired were doing, those from closed factories, it was pretty tough. People became individualistic, ‘I protect my job, I have children, have to bring food to the table’.

Miguel, among others, was fired despite being a factory delegate, something that was illegal until then and would have been stopped by the unions. This attack against the unions, and the mild reaction to it, made defeat more important: “When this happened many union activists, the emerging ones, were through. The worst part started when all the intermediate union members were swept out of many of the factories”.

For state workers the situation was not that different anymore. The integration of some of their leaders into the Peronist provincial government in 1988 had weakened them, changing the unions' profile and producing

⁴⁷ *Diario Jornada*, 5 August 1989, Trelew, Chubut, p.16. Estimating an average of 4 people per family, this meant more than 10% of the population of Trelew which in 1991 had 79,340 inhabitants.

deep internal fissures which for many years would not be overcome. In 1989 an event took place that, in my opinion, was very important for this model of union transformation: the Atech congress expelled the *Alternativa Docente* (Alternative Teachers) group, which was aligned with MAS, for having criticized the agreements that the union leadership had signed with the government. This was a key moment, for it was prior to similar events that happened years later in the private workers' unions (in 1991 in the textile sector⁴⁸ and in 1994 in UOM⁴⁹).

At the end of 1989, the state workers' confrontation level increased and it was manifested in the streets; they protested against the economic adjustments in the province. At the end of the year, there was a strike announcement from the state workers for wage arrears and against threats of future layoffs. This laid the groundwork for the conflict that erupted in 1990, the lengthy state workers' strikes, known as the *Chubutazo*, that ended with the governor's resignation.⁵⁰

8. Final comments

In this article, I have aimed to deepen our understanding of what has been characterized as the formation of a working class in the context of a subsidized industrialization project. Workers of different backgrounds migrated to the Patagonia region in northeast Chubut, attracted by growing employment opportunities, stable jobs, and the possibility of owning a house. In this context, a new working class was formed, in part by the small groups of workers from the region. I also attempted to analyze how the new working class created bonds with previous working-class experiences and traditions.

This group of workers gradually formed a class through a subterranean process of struggle and organization in the 1970s. During the dictatorship, this group of workers took several actions to fight as a class against their respective employers in order to improve their living conditions. After the end of the dictatorship, this class did not seem to have emerged from a

⁴⁸ PÉREZ ÁLVAREZ. "Con hilos rotos vamos tejiendo otra historia" Lucha y experiencia obrera en el parque textil de Trelew". *Sociohistórica Cuadernos del Cish*. n.27, Revista de la FHACE de La Plata, 2011, pp. 13-39.

⁴⁹ PÉREZ ÁLVAREZ. "Paternalismo, experiencia obrera y desarrollo del régimen de gran industria: la historia de ALUAR". *Op.Cit.*, pp. 130-150.

⁵⁰ PÉREZ ÁLVAREZ. "Organizaciones y propuestas políticas en el conflicto social del noreste de Chubut 1990-1991". *Actas IV Jornadas Latinoamericanas Hacer La Historia*, La Pampa, en CD. 2006.