


From structural breakage to political reintegration of the working class: Relative surplus population layers in Argentina and their involvement in the piquetero movement

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the different layers of the relative surplus population in Argentina and the development of the Argentinian piquetero movement, which tried to establish an alliance between employed and unemployed workers. We highlight the potentialities and the limits of this initiative, especially regarding the organisation and integration of the different layers of the relative surplus population.

Keywords

Relative surplus population, Argentina, piquetero movement, home-work, unemployed organisations

Introduction

This article analyses the ways in which the structural breaks that affect the working class as a whole can be overcome by means of political action. The development of the Argentinian *piquetero* movement, which structured the protests of employed and

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unemployed workers, and even of the petite-bourgeois sectors, is a clear example of this. In our perspective, the Marxist notion of relative surplus population is more adequate than the mainstream theories of unemployment and informal work to explain the roots of the precariousness of labour and the growing numbers that make up the unemployed fractions of the working class. At the same time, it helps us to understand how individuals can go from one fraction of the working class to the other, breaking away with the dichotomous theories that describe the excluded and included sectors respectively as two isolated social poles without any link or connection. For the same reason, the Marxist approach presents clear advantages when studying the joint political action of employed and unemployed workers, as opposed to the aforementioned dichotomous visions, which are quite unlikely to explain this confluence.

All modes of production have eventually given rise to a relative surplus population (RSP). Under capitalism, the RSP is formed by all those workers not productively employed by capital. Productive labour is only that which represents socially necessary labour time. Thus, we find that the RSP is formed, on one hand, by proletarians who are not employed at all by capital, and on the other hand, by those who are employed but whose work does not correspond to the socially necessary labour time; or, in other words, whose work does not achieve the average productivity for their sector.

Other features of the RSP follow from this core definition. The employed portion of the RSP whose labour does not attain the average level of social productivity tends to have very low incomes, which usually keep their living conditions lower than average. Poverty follows from belonging to the RSP; but this does not imply that the whole portion of the population that can be classified as poor belongs to the RSP.

Changes in the labour processes and the extension and the deepening of the regime of large-scale industry tend to enlarge the numbers of the RSP. This intensifies existent ruptures within the working class. The concept of the RSP allows us to understand not only these fractures, but also the underlying unity these fractions maintain. The persistence of a common substrate derived from its members' condition as part of the working class is, precisely, the basis upon which this unity can be recomposed in the political terrain. The Argentine case illustrates the fact that this task, though difficult, is not impossible.

In this article, we analyse the concept of RSP and contrast it with other alternative conceptualisations. Second, we study the different fractions of RSP in present-day Argentina, and investigate the elements that, in each case, favour or hinder its political action. Finally, focusing on both the main achievements as well as the weaknesses of the process, we examine the way in which these different fractions built joint political action.

Relative surplus labour: The Marxist notion

Although Marx writes in the 19th century, the central elements of his conception of population are still valid. As a matter of fact, it is possible to verify today aspects that in Marx's time could only be perceived as tendencies not yet fully developed. Rather than focusing on the specific conditions of the 19th century, we are interested in the way Marx conceives surplus population within the framework of the capitalist relations of production.

Marx's criticism of Malthus is useful for questioning current theories influenced by the latter. Marx questions Malthus's approach in two essential points. First, he does not consider that a unique population law could act in any mode of production. Marx explains how the appropriation of the means of subsistence is mediated by the relations of production, and it is these that, in fact, determine the creation of a surplus population. Marx does not consider surplus population to be absolute, but relative to the specific mode of production that engendered it, and hence the term he uses: relative surplus population. Second, contrary to what Malthus states, Marx – in agreement with Ricardo – considers that it is not a scarcity of the means of subsistence that transforms an individual into part of the surplus population.

According to Marx, under capitalism, the RSP is determined by the lack of means of employment. The RSP is constituted by all the people capital cannot employ productively. By productive labour, Marx means that which is performed in virtue of socially necessary labour time (Marx 1991: 359). Thus the RSP is formed by unemployed and underemployed workers, and by all proletarians whose work is under the average productivity for their economic branch and therefore does not correspond with the socially necessary labour time. Given this definition, what processes tend to increase the RSP under capitalism? Under capitalism, socially necessary labour time in the production of each commodity is not static, but tends to be constantly reduced. This increase in labour productivity sheds labour power, and thus tends to increase the RSP. Increasing labour productivity is a result of two consecutive historical revolutions in labour organisation: first, the appearance of 'manufacture'; and second, the development of large-scale industry. Each of these phases implies a rise in the organic composition of capital. For this reason, the proportion of variable capital employed in relation to constant capital tends to decrease. Therefore, in the same proportion in which capitalist production develops, there is a tendency to increase the supernumerary labouring population, not because there is a diminution in the productive forces of social labour, but because these have increased.

There are, however, countervailing tendencies to this increase in the RSP. Extensive investment in producing a particular commodity – that is, investment which replicates the existing labour productivity – draws more labour power into production. In those cases, Marx considers that capital expels workers only in a virtual form. Moreover, investment in commodities with new use values and hence new final markets expands the productively employed population. This is especially the case because new commodities are often initially produced by labour-intensive (low organic composition) methods.

The formation of RSP is accelerated by the development of large-scale industry. This is the specifically capitalist mode of production wherein labour is constantly revolutionised by the accumulation of science and technique, and the productive process is objectified in a system of machinery. Once this point is reached, the centralisation of capital is spurred on. In different branches of production, it is the arrival of large-scale industry that generates a reduction in the socially necessary labour time, and thus tends to make ever-larger fractions of the working class supernumerary.

In order to understand RSP's functions, it is important to remember that exploitation should be understood as a relation among classes and not between individuals as such. Hence it is the entire bourgeoisie that establishes the exploitative relationship with the

working class as a whole. In order to make this relationship possible, it is necessary that a mass of surplus population should be formed within the working class. Capital requires RSP to ensure the availability of labour force in case of a sudden expansion in production. This abrupt economic development, characteristic of capitalism, makes necessary a RSP that is available and ready to be mobilised.

But the main function of the RSP is to discipline the employed workers. The existence of an important RSP, if not counteracted by joint action and solidarity between employed and unemployed organisations, limits the wage pretensions of employed workers and undermines their capacity to demand better labour conditions. The RSP adds to pressures to increase the intensity and length of the working day of the employed workers. This, in turn augments the RSP. Capital increases its supply of labour power more than its demand for workers: 'the over-work of the employed part of the working class swells the ranks of its reserve' and, at the same time, the pressure of the reserve forces the active sector to work harder (Marx 1982: 789).

When economic expansion begins to exhaust the RSP in the national economy, and in the face of increasing workers' demands, capital fosters the reconstitution of RSP by means of immigration and demographic policies. The same function is fulfilled by the search for technical innovation so as to replace workers and allow the reconstitution of RSP.

Finally, the RSP is the social base of exploitation of 'surplus capital'. Surplus capital is that which is unable to find investment avenues that reap the average rate of profit, and which accordingly has to accept a low rate of profit. One reason for this incapacity is that the rising organic composition of capital in many sectors increases the minimum necessary capital for the productive employment of labour power, thus excluding smaller capital (Marx 1991: 364-365). Some portion of surplus capital flows beyond the productive sphere, but some other portion survives at the cost of the wretched working conditions of the RSP. The low wages and the intensity and length of the workday make it possible to partially compensate for the low productivity of this production. Thus the development of RSP goes hand in hand with that of surplus capital.

This employment of fractions of RSP by surplus capital lowers the cost of the reproduction of RSP for the whole bourgeoisie, thus saving in social spending. It is usually for this reason that this form of exploitation is not opposed by capital. When shortage of labour force makes this form of employment no longer convenient for the bourgeoisie as a class, the latter attacks these modalities of work. By doing so, it aims, on the one hand, to free that labour force for its employment in other branches and, on the other hand, to eliminate the compensation mechanism that would allow the survival of small capital.

The concept of RSP, as we understand it, has been defined by different Marxist authors all over the world (Rosdolsky 1977; Shaikh 1980; Lynch 1994; Humpries: 1983; Roseberry 1997). However, it is not mere coincidence that in those regions in which unemployment and job precariousness are more pressing problems, such as Latin America, Africa, or Asia, this notion has been the object of debate and has inspired important empirical investigations (Young 1982; Arn 1995, 1996; Bryceson 1980; Li 2010). The 1970s saw the beginning of an important debate in Latin America, which transcended the region when Marxist intellectuals proposed the notion of 'marginal mass', defined as the portion of RSP which does not fulfil any specific function

for capital, not even as an industrial reserve army (Nun 2000). The notions of marginality and exclusion have their root in this debate. Some years later, a study of Africa funded by OIT-PREALC proposed a new category: that of the informal economy (Hart 1973). The theory of the informal sector starts off an epistemological position contrary to Marxism. While the notions of RSP and marginal mass are the result of a conception whose starting point is the study of the social reality conceived as a totality, the informal sector approach begins with the analysis of individual characteristics of the people and their jobs, highlighting aspects such as low qualifications and scarce capital, among others. Avoiding any systemic perspective, the latter came to the conclusion that the informal sector of the economy is independent from the modern capitalist economy, and that there does not exist any significant link between them.

After becoming hegemonic, the informal sector approach began to be questioned from a critical standpoint that brings back elements from the theory of marginality, stressing the links between the informal and formal sectors of the economy (Portes, Castells and Benton 1989). However, their care in making a sharp distinction between inclusion and exclusion patterns maintains and even strengthens the dichotomous vision towards the workers. Contrary to this, the classical concept of RSP allows us to comprehend the permanent passage of individuals from one sector of the working class to the other, and the impact of the formation of RSP on the pauperisation of the labour conditions of the workers as a whole. Finally, it should be noted that in the last decades, growing unemployment has renewed interest in studies of RSP beyond the regions in which they were always present. In this context, the recent contributions of Neilson and McIntyre open new and stimulating perspectives (Neilson 2009, 2011; Neilson and Stubbs 2011; McIntyre 2011; McIntyre and Nast 2011).

The layers of relative surplus population in Argentina

The RSP is not homogeneous. Its fragmentation has deep political consequences. For that reason, it is important to examine the different fractions that belong to the RSP. In this section, we analyse the three main forms of surplus population according to Marx: floating, latent, and stagnant. 'Floating RSP' refers to the drawing in of young people to formal capitalist production, their physical and mental exhaustion in the labour process, and their expulsion by the employer at an older age, when they become part of the RSP. 'Latent RSP' refers to the rural labourers who are expelled from production by capitalist accumulation in agriculture, and who then migrate to urban areas in search of work. 'Stagnant RSP' has two components: the unemployed available to capital which is seeking to expand; and workers employed at low productivity for the sector on low wages and precarious conditions who, like the unemployed, can be called on by normal-productivity formal capital.

It should be emphasised that these forms of RSP assume diverse faces in different regions and countries. We have studied them in Argentina and Latin America. We have complemented our research with bibliographical sources from other regions to introduce some comparisons, and to show that these patterns are not exclusive to Latin American

countries. However, this does not imply an extrapolation to other realities, each one of them worthy of a particular case study.

Floating surplus population

Floating surplus population owes its origins to the fact that, in its development, industry attracts and repels workers from different age groups. In this movement, surplus population appears in an ever-fluctuating form. With this regard, Marx calls attention to the fact that large-scale industry needs lots of young workers who, for the most part, are dispensed with when they reach old age. This is inherent to large-scale capital because it needs a far larger mass of young people than older people. Due to the rapid consumption of labour power, the older workers come to fill the ranks of RSP, or descend in status. The absolute growth of the labouring population must increase its numbers, even when its members are worn out by the capitalist labour process. A fast relay of generations of workers is therefore necessary. In a previous section, Marx had already commented on the problem of children who worked in the factories without being taught a line of work which would allow them to preserve their jobs once they grew up (Marx 1982, ch. 13: 618-619).

In Argentina, young people were a central component of the unemployed movement. They formed one of the most radicalised fractions, and on several occasions, in insurrectionary actions they were in charge of the support and defence of the barricades, as was the case in Cutral C6. Their presence was a decisive factor in the piquetero movement's decision to demand and win universal unemployment benefits, instead of only 'head of household' benefits. The universal benefit was a major improvement, because it extended the benefit to many young people who would have been otherwise excluded, even to those who had never had a job. Consequently, it helped in the unity process with the employed workers. As such, the unemployment universal subsidy limited competition between employed and unemployed workers (Oviedo 2001).

The latent overpopulation

The cradle of the second category of surplus population, the latent one, is found in the agricultural sector. As soon as capitalist production starts appropriating agriculture, the labouring population decreases in absolute numbers as capital accumulation increases in this sphere of production. Unlike in industry, this is never complemented by a larger number of workers being attracted to the sector (Engels 1987: 263). For this reason, a part of the rural population is always on the road to transforming itself into urban or manufacturing population. But its constant flux presupposes the existence of a permanently latent surplus population in the countryside. As a result, the rural worker tends to have only the minimum wage for the country, and one foot always sunk in misery.

For Marx, as for Engels, these workers already belong to RSP before they migrate, except that their condition as such is not openly manifested. Besides, rural latent RSP might be hidden in the form of tenants with plots of land which are too small to be productive (Marx 1982: 866-869; Engels 1987: 119). Marx points out that the impact of large-scale industry on agriculture, insofar as the conversion of workers into

supernumeraries is concerned, is more intense and less resisted than in other economic sectors. At the same time, it is more revolutionary because it transforms the peasant, the residual subject of feudal society, into a proletarian (Marx 1982: 637). The more depopulated the countryside becomes, the more RSP will be produced: the countryside always has too large a population for its average requirements, and too small a population for its seasonal demands (Marx 1982: 838-842).

It is possible to identify in the last four decades a tendency to a decline in the latent RSP in rural areas in relation to the RSP settled in urban spaces. The change in the ratio of agricultural to non-agricultural population is an indicator of this transformation: in 1970, the total world population was 3.7 billion, with 2.4 billion rural and 1.3 billion urban. By 2010, it was estimated that 3.3 billion people live in the rural world, with another 3.5 billion in urban communities (Borras 2009). A strong migration process is responsible for this.

In Argentina, the decrease of rural population is absolute: it fell from 4.8 million in 1980 to 3.8 million in 2001. In the last decades, in Argentina the mechanisation of rural production, such as in cotton (Iñigo Carrera 2008), or technical advances in already mechanised farming (Sartelli 2008; Sartelli and Kabat 2009), have drastically reduced the labour force necessary in rural work. In most cases, before migrating to the cities, and even when the workers still keep the property of their lands, family reproduction mainly depends on workers' income (usually temporary rural wage labour, pensions, or unemployment benefits) rather than on the agrarian production, be this for commercial or self-supply purposes. (Desalvo 2009; Iñigo Carrera 2009). Contrary to what happened in the first half of the 20th century, in the last decades rural migrants have not been absorbed into manufacturing labour, since industry was already expelling its labour force. In most cases, the rural migrants have maintained their belonging to the RSP, but under different forms. Many of these rural migrants, once established in the urban space, have enrolled in activities characteristic of the stagnant RSP.

In Latin America, a number of different organisations have tried to gather and organise these rural migrants and those workers who still maintain their rural residence. These organisations, such as MOCASE (the Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero) or the MST (Movement of Landless Rural Workers) among others, have grown considerably, and their action has been vital for the defence of the land of the different layers of rural workers. However, they do not care about the problems these same people have when they sell their labour power in the market. These peasant movements only organise their members as rural producers, forgetting that they are also migrant farm workers and thus retarding unionisation where this rural population is predominantly employed. Consequently, rural workers have to endure the worst working conditions (Desalvo 2009). The situation worsens in so far as these organisations propose a return to the farm to migrants who have already settled in the city, on the basis of cooperative projects. The deepening of the isolation of these workers from the remaining working class and the slowing down of their political integration can be described as the unintended consequences of these initiatives, despite their individual successes or purposes.

In Brazil, where there has not been a significant growth in the unemployed workers movement, the peasants' organisations have attracted an important portion of the labour population that lives in big cities. In fact, this is the predominant component of the

MST (de Souza 2009). On the contrary, in Argentina, where there is a strong unemployment movement, organisations with such characteristics have not had a preponderant role in the urban space.

One problem to be studied is that of whether a portion of public-sector employment can be considered a new kind of latent RSP. In some countries, public employment is an alternative to unemployment benefits. In Argentina, for example, municipal state employees in the poorest districts earn less than US\$200 a month, while the minimum wage (which only applies to private workers or national state employees) is more than US\$500. In some cases, the municipal state employees' wage is even lower than certain benefits for unemployed people. These municipal state employees develop very low productive activities, and could easily be replaced if some basic technology were incorporated. This shows that the public employee's payroll hides a latent RSP.

Besides, the jobs performed by many public employees are concerned with the reproduction and care of the RSP. That is clearly the case of workers working in the spheres of public health and education, and social services too. This daily contact with the different layers of the RSP – and with its living conditions – encourages solidarity and fosters collective action between these public workers and the RSP.

In the case of Argentina, public-sector employees took part in the action plan promoted by the unemployed workers organisations in the First and Second National Piquetero Assemblies, to counteract neoliberal 'adjustment'. In particular, teachers were present in the main protests led by the unemployed, and became involved in the organisations that struggled for the union of employed and unemployed labour. On the one hand, the same left-wing groups that directed most of the piquetero movement won elections in different sections of the teachers unions after 2001. On the other hand, the Confederation of Argentine Workers (CTA), which gathers together different public-sector unions, the teachers' union being just one of them, undertook the construction of its own unemployed workers organisation, the Federation of Land, Housing and Habitat (Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat, or FTV).

The stagnant surplus population

Stagnant RSP lives on public benefits, or in low productivity production. For the latter workers, wage levels, working and living conditions are substantially below the average. In the face of any economic expansion, these workers migrate to other activities. Thus the whole stagnant RSP constitutes a reserve army of labour for capital.

The part of the stagnant RSP that survives on social benefits constitutes 'consolidated pauperism', which for Marx, comprises the lowest level of the RSP. In the first place, there are people who are able to work, whose number grows with crisis and decreases in recovery; that is, they are cyclically absorbed and expelled. Secondly, Marx mentions widows, orphans and the children of poor parents who are enlisted in factory work at times of industrial booms. Lastly, people who with disabilities that affect their capacity to work also form part of this pauperism. In Argentina, those in consolidated pauperism have been the first within the RSP to organise. Evidence for this is in the fact that the organisation of the piquetero movement started in peripheral provinces, before that in the main urban and industrial centres. The unemployed movements began to

grow in the provinces in which the only alternative left to the RSP was social benefits. Their peripheral geographical position prevented them from gaining access even to informal jobs. One reason for the earlier political organisation of the unemployed is its reliance on state benefits. This contributed to a unification of their demands, better and more extensive political assistance, and to a clear identification of the political subject of their claims.

Contrary to this, income-earning members of the stagnant RSP do not have a single demand nor a unified target. The organisation of these workers is made more difficult by apparently autonomous modes of work, and an exploitative class that acts through intermediaries. It is therefore of great importance to study it in depth.

The income-earning activities taken up by the RSP depend on the economic structure of the country. For example, Bolivia still maintains an important part of the RSP in the agricultural sector (Figuroa 2005), though there are also cooperative activities which are partially subsidised by the state, especially in mining. In the case of Venezuela, the majority of RSP workers seem to be attached to peddling or informal fairs, and more recently in cooperative enterprises; whereas in Brazil and Argentina, cardboard or garbage collecting is more important. This latter activity is most important in countries such as Mexico, with major industrial activity which requires more packaging: in that country, the cardboard collectors are organised not only in cooperatives, but also in unions. We will analyse two representative sectors: cardboard collection and home work. Whereas the former is characterised by a high level of organisation and political activity, the latter remains one of least mobilised sectors of the working class.

Cardboard collection

Cardboard collecting did not turn into a massive activity until two conditions were met: the recycling process had to be mechanised, and there was a huge number of unemployed people available to pick paper in the streets for a minimum income. In Argentina, the first machines for this activity were introduced in the 1960s. But it was not until the 1990s that there was an army of unemployed people who could be recruited to do this job. It was then that the waste-paper firms invested systematically in equipment for cardboard recycling (Schvarzer 1993).

Many cardboard collectors were rural workers who had been made redundant as a result of rural mechanisation. That is the case, for example, in the Brazilian state of Paraná (Bosi 2007), and in Mexico City (Wamsler 2000). In Colombia, a cardboard collectors' union, the National Association of Recyclers of Colombia (Asociación Nacional de Recicladores de Colombia), has noted that the first people to carry out the activity were rural migrants to the cities in the 1970s. But nowadays, a growing proportion of these workers have never had a job other than cardboard collection, and for many of them, this is the only work even their parents have ever known (Villanova 2011). What twenty years ago might have been considered a transitional job is today becoming a lifetime occupation, passed down from one generation to the next. The same happens in Mexico: it has been estimated that 80 per cent of cardboard collectors who live in settlements near rubbish dumps were born there and have inherited their occupation from their parents (Castillo Berthier et al. 1987). This shows that these groups are consolidating

themselves as members of the stagnant RSP. Widespread work by children contributes to this generational consolidation.

In Brazil, a report by an environmental organisation calculated that there were between 500,000 and 800,000 recyclers in the country (various authors 2008). In Argentina, their number is estimated at 100,000. In Mexico, in 2004, between 25,000 and 30,000 collectors were working in landfills in the metropolitan area of Mexico City, to which must be added those who do the same task through the streets (dos Santos and Wehenpohl 2001). The working conditions in the three aforementioned countries are similar. In general, the cardboard collectors' working hours are from 10 to 11 hours, six days a week, with an average monthly income of between US\$130 and US\$170 (Villanova 2009). In all of these countries, cooperatives that bring together workers have developed, but they have not produced a substantive change in working conditions (Villanova 2011).

Cardboard collectors are often considered to be self-employed workers, but can be better understood as being out-sourced workers for the waste-paper companies. There are different modalities of work. The most common is piecework payment, in which the collectors are paid for each kilogram of paper picked in the streets. Usually, the firm does not deal directly with the collectors but with intermediaries (warehouse owners, truck owners that tour the city centre), or with picker cooperatives. There are many bonds that link the collectors to the intermediaries, and they in turn to the enterprises. It is not unusual for the waste-paper firms to finance intermediaries, helping them, for instance, to buy their trucks; and the intermediaries often lend the collectors the carriages they need to do their jobs (Villanova 2011). A survey carried out in a Brazilian city, Goiana, found that the storehouse owners who act as intermediaries let the collectors, who were homeless, sleep in their depots in which cardboard was stored (various 2006). The collector is then compelled to sell only to the intermediary providing these benefits, thus tending to lower the price. The work performed by the cardboard collectors is essential to the waste-paper firms. In Mexico, for example, 74 per cent of the raw material used in paper manufacture is recycled.¹

In the case of Argentina, organisation of the cardboard collectors was hampered by the existence of multiple labour modalities and by the presence of intermediaries. However, on several occasions, the cardboard collectors held rallies in front of employer associations, asking for a raise in the price paid per kilogram of collected paper (Villanova 2012). A unifying factor that made the organisation of these workers easier was the earlier struggle against the repression to which they were subject. The activity had been prohibited since the 1970s, with the police arresting those who carried it out and confiscating their carts. The struggle for the legalisation of cardboard collecting served as an element of centralisation and political organisation. Besides, the cardboard collectors who live in the outskirts of the city travel with their carts to the city by train, and this sharing of the same public transport was a common element among this scattered activity: the cardboard collectors could organise themselves according to the railway they used. In turn, they formed different subgroups according to the railway station at which they got on the trains, choosing their own delegates. Thanks to this organisation and different forms of protest, they obtained the provision of special train services and the lifting of legal restrictions to their activity (Villanova 2012).

Cardboards collectors' organisation became stronger in a constant struggle with the state. The workers involved contribute to the garbage recycling process on a daily basis, helping to reduce landfill waste disposal and therefore saving the government significant sums of money. With this argument, cardboard collectors have asked the government to pay them a monthly subsidy. This was achieved in Buenos Aires city in 2008; and today (2012), there is a movement demanding the widening of this benefit to cardboard collectors all over the country. The government of the province of Buenos Aires has promised to pay each cardboard collector for each ton of garbage recycled. These struggles have facilitated the relation of the cardboard collectors with other groups of the RSP that also received state benefits. In 2012, cardboard collectors organised common mobilisations with workers from recuperated (worker-seized) factories and with the unemployed to demand an increase in the subsidies that they all receive.

While in the 2002-2003 period, cardboard collectors were closer to anti-establishment organisations, today some appear to have been co-opted by the government, or to be closer to the reformist movements within the workers' movement; but it is also true that their organisation has grown in depth. In addition, these workers demand their rights as members of the working class. Some cardboard collector cooperatives have asked to become affiliated to Argentina's General Confederation of Labour (CGT), and they participated in the last strike called by that organisation in July 2012. On that date, some cooperatives did not carry out any collection or recycling of garbage.

Home-workers

In political terms, the situation of home-workers is quite the opposite of that of the cardboard collectors. The majority of the workers remain unorganised, and they have not become involved in the actions carried out by the workers' movement. This is striking since, as an activity, home-working is older and has longer traditions of struggle and unions that should represent it. In Argentina, home-workers took part in important strikes in the first half of the 20th century. This improved their working conditions and contributed to the decrease of this type of work in favour of direct employment in big factories. However, since the mid-1960s home-work has grown again and its working conditions worsened, and the workers have not been able to provide an organised answer. This may be due to both changes in the branches that contract home work, and the role played by the unions.

Where the production is limited to the local market, the higher productivity of the new equipment strengthened the seasonal character of the garment and shoe industries. In the shoe industry in the 1960s, new processes such as direct injection were introduced. In the garment industry, the changes were not so radical: at first there was merely an increase in the speed at which the machines operated. However, in the 1990s, certain activities were automated, and cloth marking, cutting and embroidery can now be done by means of computerised machines. As work became more discontinuous, it became more expensive for the enterprises to maintain permanent employees in the factory, and home work became more profitable again. This consideration is mentioned by the firms which decided to contract out parts of the production process to home-workers in the 1970s (Kabat 2010). It is also significant that the movement towards home-work occurs at the same time that the full employment stage in the country was coming to an end.

Since the 1970s, the world tendency towards the relocation of different phases of production has also created additional pressure for labour-cost reduction. Asia is home for the machining which demands intensive labour, while design and cutting are usually concentrated in central countries. Since Asian countries produce for export, they have relatively continuous production over the whole year. Contrary to Argentina, where seasonality is a problem, they do not need to resort to home-work (even if they occasionally do so: ILO 1995). Moreover, in Asia, low labour costs are assured by the recruitment of latent RSP from the countryside.² Even some traditional producers such as Spain, Italy and Latin American countries whose labour forces were previously considered low-priced find it difficult to compete with Asian producers, and thus have to resort to home-work in order to reduce labour costs. The employment of the rural population or migrant workers also contributes to the lowering of labour costs. Rural home-work can be found in Spain (Maaynar and Canales Martinez 1997), Turkey (ILO 1995) and Mexico (Arias 1988; Treviño Siller 1988). The immigrant workforce is an important component of home-workers in New Zealand, Europe and the USA (ILO 1995; Lipsig-Mummé 1983). The same happens in the Argentinian garment industry, which employs a large number of Bolivian workers, in Peru (Tomei 2000), and in Africa (ILO 1995).

In Argentina, the renaissance of home-work sits alongside the increase of non-registered home-work and the dismantling of state organisations in charge of the enforcement of home-worker labour laws. As a result, at the same time that home-work increases, the number of formally registered home-workers decreases. The union has acquiesced to this and, since the mid-1960s, has accepted that the salaries of home-workers should be negotiated separately from those of factory workers from the same branch. In 2005, the shoe workers' union even authorised individual salary agreements for home-workers, so that each worker had to face their employer on their own.

In the last decade in Argentina, there have been attempts to organise the most exploited workers of the sector, especially immigrants. However, they have focused more on civil rights issues, such as immigration law, than on labour ones. The association La Alameda, whose origin dates back to the neighbourhood assemblies, has reported on the working conditions of the garment industry workers, and has organised a movement that aims to take over the unions by removing the current bureaucratic and corrupted leaders. However, these efforts are still embryonic. The political movements that have led other fractions of the RSP have only recently set out to organise home-workers, and have so far achieved no results. This is due to the fact that they act without a clear understanding of the sector, thus failing to propose solutions that favour unity between factory operatives and home-workers. Consequently, home workers in the garment and shoe industry who have been formally incorporated to the workers' organisation have remained on the margins of the struggle in the last decade.

Advances towards the re-unification of labour in Argentina, 2001–2012

Marx stresses the importance of planned cooperation between employed and unemployed workers (Marx 1882: 793–794). However, joint action between employed and unemployed workers is not to be taken for granted; and whether they will compete with

each other or struggle together against capital is the question on which the course of the class struggle depends. In fact, this is the main political issue with which the working class must deal. The proletarianisation of different fractions of the petite bourgeoisie, many of which become part of the RSP, attenuates the problem of forming alliances with other classes. But it engenders a new challenge: that of going beyond the current fragmentation of the working class. The piquetero movement in Argentina and its major political form, the National Assemblies of employed and unemployed workers (ANT), show that, however difficult, this is not impossible.

The unemployed organisations were born in the mid-1990s as a consequence of the high unemployment rate and the economic recession. These organisations experienced a tremendous growth that allowed them to move from scattered and isolated actions, associated with movements only directed toward protest, to the development of national plans of struggle with a broader spectrum of demands. These demands ranged from the re-statisation of the private companies to objectives linked to a deeper transformation of society. The movement started in the poorest provinces in the far north and far south of the country, and later spread to the former industrial area of greater Buenos Aires.

Deprived of the use of the strike as a tool, the unemployed had to find different methods of struggle. The organisation of massive roadblocks and workers' pickets was the solution proposed by the various unemployment movements. The first roadblock organised by the unemployed took place in 1994 in Senillosa, in the province of Neuquén, and won a partial fulfilment of its demands. By 1995, the movement had spread to other parts of the country. In June 1996, the first insurrection took place in Cutral C6, also in Neuquén. Workers and 5,000 residents of the city blocked Route 22 for a week in protest against the reduction of unemployment benefits. When the police tried to evict them, the people pushed them back by organising barricades, and forced the government to negotiate. The unemployed obtained new social benefits and the reconnection of gas and electricity, which had been cut off.

A year later, the experience would be repeated, but this time it would embrace a greater part of the province. In the middle of a teachers' strike, the teachers, together with student and parent assemblies, blocked inter-provincial access bridges and roads. The police tried to prevent it, but their action provoked a popular uprising. The police attempted to repress this, and in the process murdered the young Teresa Rodríguez. The police were then confronted by 15,000 people, and forced to retreat. In Cutral C6 and Plaza Huinul, barricades were mounted. This time, the unemployed who had blocked the access roads demanded, as it would happen later in Salta, not only unemployment benefits or social plans but also genuine work, especially in the YPF (oil company) plant. They also linked their struggle with the contemporary teachers' strike, giving rise to an alliance that would be strengthened in the near future. Various fractions of the petite bourgeoisie also took part in the insurrection.

During the second half of the 1990s, new unemployed organisations emerged in the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Jujuy and Salta. The north of the country witnessed new insurrections similar to the one in Neuquén. Roadblocks proved to be an effective method of struggle, and they were soon adopted by various fractions of the working class, giving birth to the piquetero movement, which includes the most active fractions of the employed and unemployed working class. The piquetero movement has recovered

traditional methods of direct action, and has established alliances with fractions of the urban and rural petite bourgeoisie such as small agrarian producers, merchants and professionals.

Between 1998 and 1999, the movement ebbed as a result of expectations of a change in president. However, in 2000 and 2001 it re-emerged stronger than before in the face of the worsening of the economic crisis and disappointment with the new president, Fernando de la Rúa. In 2001, the National Piquetero Assembly (Asamblea Nacional Piquetera, ANP) was constituted, gathering thousands of delegates from all over the country. The ANP was formed in the first instance to coordinate unemployed workers' actions. Representatives from employed workers' organisations also participated, though this was not foreseen in the initial plans. The ANP was a key organisation in the 'Argentinazo', the insurrection that forced President de la Rúa to resign in December 2001, because it united the struggle against the government's austerity policies.

In July 2001, the National Congress, pushed by the government with the backing of the International Monetary Fund, voted for the 'zero deficits' law and fiscal 'adjustment'. The law stipulated a cut in public employees' wages and the pensions of the entire population. That month, the National Piquetero Assembly voted for a plan of struggle scheduled to last for three weeks against the austerity measures, which took place with numerous massive mobilisations and roadblocks throughout the country. These protests not only involved the unemployed, but also had the presence of the massive numbers of the employed working class in 67 per cent of the actions (Cominiello 2007). Moreover, various sectors of the petite bourgeoisie were also engaged. Thus, the social force – i.e. the political alliance – which was to become protagonists in the Argentinazo began to take shape. This confluence was reinforced in the second ANP in September 2001.

Confronted with the protests and widespread looting carried out by the most pauperised sectors of the working class, the president declared a state of siege. Sectors of the petite bourgeoisie later congregated in popular assemblies. The piquetero movement gathered more forces, and massive demonstrations continued. One of the slogans chanted in these mobilisations was '*piquete y cacerola, la lucha es una sola*' ('picket and potbanger, our struggle is the same'). This encapsulates the alliance between the piquetero movement and the fractions of the petite bourgeoisie that protested with the banging of pots and pans (*cacerolas*).

In this context, the movement of factory takeovers arose, developed by sectors that compose the RSP. At a high point in the class struggle, with companies going bankrupt, these workers had the chance to occupy and put the factories into operation under their own control. In most cases, these were firms that had recently ceased production or were going in that direction. Solidarity between the movement of the unemployed and sectors of the petite bourgeoisie through massive mobilisations and encampments was crucial in order for the workers of the occupied factories to be able to ward off the evictions. In turn, the unemployed workers movement took it upon itself to take over abandoned factories and start producing again, as was the case of SASETRU, a food factory.

Other sectors of the RSP implemented the piquetero movement's methods and have supported some of its actions. We have seen, for example, that the cardboard collectors demanded exclusive train services to transport their cardboard-loaded carts. To achieve this, they carried out pickets on the railway, preventing trains from running, and were

supported by unemployed workers and sectors of the *petit bourgeoisie* that participated in the popular assemblies. In turn, organisations of cardboard collectors took part in mobilisations of the *piquetero* movement (Villanova 2012). The RSP rooted in the rural areas also got involved in the movement through encampments and roadblocks, but without completely integrating itself into the *piquetero* movement. Being unable to organise the rural workers in a massive and steady form has been one of the weaknesses of the *piquetero* movement.

After the *Argentinazo* insurrection of the 19th and 20th of December 2001, a new organisation called ANT (*Asamblea Nacional de Trabajadores Ocupados y Desocupados* – the National Assembly of Employed and Unemployed Workers) emerged, enhancing the previous experience of the ANP. The first ANT was held in February 2002, and in it, delegates from all over the country met on behalf of the unemployed. Each of the delegates was chosen to represent 20 organised workers, whether they were employed or not. Representatives from occupied factories, and from popular neighbourhood assemblies of the *petite bourgeoisie* which had taken part in the insurrection, also participated. The ANT had a revolutionary political programme, based on class independence. During 2002, three ANTs were organised and became the centre of coordination for the main struggles of the period.

Since the end of 2002, the struggle has ebbed. An economic recovery, founded upon the rise in the international prices of the main export products, allowed for a reduction in unemployment, and gave the state the economic resources to negotiate concessions and co-opt sectors of the movement. These concessions are realised at the same time that the repression against the *piquetero* movement has been intensifying, particularly against the so-called ‘hard’ sector, which defended its political independence from the government. In consequence, the political activity of the unemployed underwent a decline.

In the most acute moment of the crisis, all the layers of the RSP were united by their common unemployment, since even informal production such as cardboard collection and home-work were interrupted by the recession. Therefore, attempts to achieve a common organisation were more effective. The demand for a universal subsidy to the unemployed served as a unifying banner of the RSP. At the same time, it established links of unity with the employed working class, because the unemployment subsidy acts as a minimum salary for the employed workers and contributes to halting the deterioration of wages.

With the economic recovery, a more varied range of situations comes about. On one hand, the division between the productive working class and the RSP does not disappear. Despite the devaluation of the peso, the Argentine economy has not recuperated its competitiveness in the world market. There is no creation of jobs that would bring average productivity for the sector to normal. But there is a new impetus towards low-productivity jobs in the stagnant RSP, such as home-work and cardboard collection. Thus, even though official unemployment levels fall, the numbers of the RSP do not decline. There is also an expansion of diverse forms of cooperative labour subsidised by the state. At the same time, the government abandoned universal social policies for policies focused on selected groups. Part of the unemployment movement was co-opted by these programmes, while other fractions were repressed. Consequently, *piquetero* organisations soon found themselves divided and partially neutralised.

In contrast, over the last ten years there has been a recovery in the activity of the employed working class. The same left-wing organisations and political parties that had oriented the piquetero movement gained control over some internal committees of the trade unions and formed new boards of delegates, thereby reasserting the unity of the employed and unemployed workers. In this period, solidarity from the unemployed movement was essential to obtain victories in various strikes carried out by employed workers. For instance, in the Kraft (food company) strike (2009), the piquetero movement had an important role and supported the strike with roadblocks and massive demonstrations. The triumphant struggle of the outsourced railway employees was also buoyed up in 2010 by the unemployed workers' movement, to the point that Mariano Ferreyra, a militant from the unemployed workers' organisation Polo Obrero, gave his life in a solidarity protest that was severely repressed. This political effort towards the regrouping of the working class can be seen also in many demonstrations performed together by employed and unemployed workers in recent years.

At the present time, this solidarity between employed and unemployed workers is being threatened by the government tax policy that engenders new divisions in the working class. After the 2001 insurrection, net social benefits for the working class increased. But since 2008, when the effects of the global economic crisis appeared, they have contracted. A study based on Tonak methodology (1987) shows that from 2008, the taxes paid by the working class increased to a level at which they equal social benefits. Thus one part of the working class finances other fractions' social assistance (Seifer 2012). The post-tax income of employed workers has declined. In particular, the so-called 'tax on profits' is responsible for deductions that affect workers earning over 7,000 pesos (just US\$1,400). The government insists that these workers are 'privileged' and that, as such, they should contribute to sustain the poorest people; yet revenues from financial operations do not attract any tax liability at all. In strikes in 2012, demonstrations and *cacerolazo* protests have demanded the elimination of this tax. Right-wing leaders, pushing for severe cuts in unemployment benefits, are trying to channel the discontent of better-paid workers. If this succeeds, the unity of the working class will be severely compromised. Despite this, the union of the employed and unemployed is still sustained. On 29 November 2012, a general strike demanding the abolition of the taxes on salaries was also supported by unemployed organizations, which maintained 29 pickets of the 217 that were mounted (Harari 2012).

However, there are two main limitations that must be overcome. First, left-wing parties tend to put all their organisational efforts into the most mobilised sectors of the movement to the detriment of other fractions of the working class. In this way, when the activity of a particular sector ebbs, the previous political construction is halted. This is reinforced by the competition between rival parties with similar political programmes. This results in an unnecessary duplication of the efforts to organise certain sectors, while others are neglected. In particular, there has been no meaningful organisation of immigrant workers employed in home-work, or with rural workers who suffer seasonal unemployment. This task ought to be systematically approached and has strong potential, since both sectors have led important struggles, such as the demands for unemployment subsidies between harvests by rural workers, and the struggle for housing for immigrant workers living in the cities.³ Second, to a large extent, this failure is due to a lack of

knowledge of the living and labour conditions of these working-class fractions, which have suffered large changes during the last decades. The study of the RSP and its different fractions is thus not only a theoretical issue, but also a vital political problem.

If the economic recovery in Argentina reaches its limit and the economic crisis, which was already heralded in 2008, comes back to the forefront, the political unity of the working class will be indispensable. The principal challenge today is to underpin the organisation of the different layers of the RSP and to strengthen their political bonds with other fractions of the working class. The relations of solidarity built up since the 1990s, and the organisations developed in the same period, constitute a strong foundation for new political developments.

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Endnotes

1. See 'Industria de la celulosa y papel en México', at <www.mxl.cetys.mx>. Last accessed 18 January 2013.
2. In this sense, the creation of a RSP is not observed in the Asian countries. On the contrary, it can be seen in the form of absorption of the rural population that begins to be employed productively by capital.
3. In some provinces, rural workers have organised themselves in an embryonic fashion and struggled for unemployment subsidies during the period between harvests. In a few cases, left political activists and parties have also participated. However, a large proportion of rural workers still remains completely unorganised. More explosive and less structured was the fight for housing performed mainly by immigrant workers living in the cities. This movement took the form of land occupations in which the left wing parties had only a very marginal role. Land takeovers were severely repressed. A great deal of spontaneity and a lack of coordination facilitated their defeat.

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