

# Argentina's New Forms of Struggle

## Direct Democracy, Popular Assemblies, & Self-Management

Patricio McCabe

In the late 1990s in Argentina, a new form of struggle emerged from the unemployed workers (who make up 20% of the people while another 20% are underemployed). This expression of resistance came from the provinces to the capital of the country and consisted of blocking roads to claim a subsidy for unemployment. Blocking roads has its origin with the well-known workers' tactic called "piquete" (picket). It consisted of people preventing the entrance of scabs who were trying to break the strike. Its goal was to prevent production in support of the workers' demands. Today, thrown out from production, the unemployed block the transportation of merchandise to support their demands. Not only is this blocking of circulation novel, but so is their organizational practice: direct democracy.

The first massive piquete happened in a province of southern Argentina, and the mass media pointed out that the government had difficulty finding a leader to negotiate with. To the question of who was responsible for the direct action, the piqueteros responded simply: All of us! Those in charge of negotiating were revolving and removable. Without leaders to corrupt, the negotiations became too complicated for the government. The piquetero movement was unfathomable to them.

The methods of the piqueteros announce a major event in history. We define event as: that which emerges in the present without owing anything to the past; something that is not deduced from the imperative rules of the system; something that breaks everything previous and inaugurates the new.

The previous forms of struggle were run by the logic of representation. The unions, the political parties, and the armed organizations were and are hierarchical organizations with well-known leaders. They are forms of organization similar to that of the state. The struggles of the 1960s and '70s are emblematic in this sense, and the heroic guerrilla commanders are examples of this manner of understanding politics. The state knows how to confront this logic. Instead, direct democracy is not easily assimilated to the forms of state and poses new problems. Along with the Berlin wall, a way of understanding politics also fell and the emergence of the Zapatismo in Mexico announces something different. The Zapatista event inaugurates a new world: "We fight for a new time of life."

### The piquetero experience

Just as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo invented a new form of being heard with their marches and claims, the unemployed had to alter the normalcy of a situation that ignored them by blocking roads, an expression that summarizes the wager of the piqueteros.

The piquetero experience reclaimed a good amount of union worker knowledge like the organization through assemblies, direct action, and the picket itself. But at the same time, it introduced a different way of inhabiting the neighborhood and addressing—in a collective manner—the basic forms of subsistence. It was necessary to be acquainted with the store owners of the neighborhood to obtain food and to know other neighbors to create clothes drives or to obtain materials for the construction of childcare centers. Different from other more specific

militant experiences that deal with particular problems, the piquetero activism aims to transform the totality of the conditions of life.

Some of the organizations of unemployed workers (which are not the majority but which are growing) are loyal to the original experience; their organization is horizontal; they seek direct democracy and distribute in assembly the obtained subsidies. They are autonomous from the State, the political parties, and the unions. In many ways, their approach to doing things is novel and powerful. What is obtained from the State by means of “piquetes” (road blocks) is distributed via an assembly. Autonomy is inherent in each of their undertakings.

They hold education workshops where a good amount of their people educate themselves. They also hold productive workshops where they take into account problems of health and nutrition. From these come their best known successes. With the few resources that they obtain, they have set up a network of pharmacies, a bakery, and cement brick factory.

The contrasts with the government initiatives are striking, and the example of the bread is symbolic in this sense. With all the resources of the richest municipality of the country, the government of Buenos Aires reduced the price of bread to 1.60 pesos for a few days, which failed rapidly. Instead, the piqueteros of the Coordinadora “Anibal Veron”, with their scant resources, distribute the bread at 1 peso per kilo.

This is a simple example of how direct democracy allows life to be organized in a more efficient way than the corrupt capitalist administration. The potential of this movement is far from exhausted and many are looking to the novelty of their actions. Of important note, most participants in this movement are extremely young and predominantly female.

## **The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December, 2001**

Argentina made the news all over the world. For the first time, a mobilization toppled an elected government. The intolerable situation for broad sections of the population drove thousands of Argentines out to loot grocery stores in search of food. The government’s response to the lootings was to declare a state of siege that, among other things, suspended democratic liberties such as the right to gather and demonstrate on the street. The largest demonstration occurred on the day when the State declared a state of siege. With absolute spontaneity, people went out into the streets without any notice and with a slogan that no one had heard before: “que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo!” (“Out with them all, none should stay!”).

There were signs that something might happen (though not in this manner). The politicians had been questioned greatly by a large portion of the population. During the parliamentary elections in October, the blank vote won throughout the whole country. This was an incident without precedent in any parliamentary democracy in the last few decades.

At midnight on the 19<sup>th</sup>, a crowd banging pots directed itself to the Plaza de Mayo (located in front of the house of government) to the shout of “everyone leave!” and remained singing until dawn. About 40,000 people remained shouting—not demanding anything specific but asking for everything. Once more, there were no leaders with whom to negotiate.

This was an insurrection without author; the incident became a fixture in Argentine life. The people were shaking off the terror instilled by the military dictatorship 25 years before. People did not go out for purely economic demands but with a directly political proposal and with an anti-state stance.

The only response that the State could articulate was a repression of absolutely peaceful demonstrations; in fact, the majority of the mobilization was made up of families with their children. At the height, there were about 40,000 people in the Plaza de Mayo plus a few thousand more about the whole city. The repression evolved into a pitched battle with the crowd trying to recapture the plaza time after time until the police withdrew at dawn. However, the confrontations continued the next day and did not cease until the president resigned. The day ended with 30 dead in the whole country. The murders were committed with the same methods of the military dictatorship.

The pots did not quiet down, and the ruling class and the media tried to decode the message. The cacerolazos (a form of protest where people take to the streets banging pots and pans, or cacerolas) continued for months, and meanwhile, four more presidents fell, without possibility of closing the crisis.

## The popular assemblies

The movement of the cacerolazo had its epicenter in the Federal Capital and with a strong component of the middle class. With the passing of the months, the neighbors that protested on the streets started to meet in assemblies. The spirit of those assemblies can be summarized in manifestos like the following transcript from a bulletin of the Nuriéz-Saavedra assembly:

What is your dream?

Do you remember the 19<sup>th</sup> of December?

That night you said, “enough of thieves.”

Yes, you shouted it. I heard you; we all heard you.

We also heard you when you said,

“I no longer want to be who I was.

I don’t want them to decide anymore for me.

I don’t believe in any political leaders anymore—

Nor in judges, nor in union leaders, nor in bankers

Nor big business men, nor policemen.”

I felt so much pride to see you and me.

It’s just that I did not expect so much of you, even less of me, you surprised me.

Because of that, because YOU pushed me, I am walking to find a way, banging pots, thinking out loud in the assemblies, with my neighbors.

Where are we going? you ask

Well, we are trying to create with the neighbors a democratic and assembly-based system from which our representatives can come forth. The majority express a firm

refusal of political parties; there is no space for them in the assemblies.

(*North Cacerola* (Northern Pot) Bulletin of the Nuñez-Saavedra popular assembly)

Assemblies’ grew like mushrooms in each neighborhood of the capital, and then, they extended into the suburbs. It is calculated that around 200 assemblies brought together an average of 200 participants in their moments of greatest participation. The shared viewpoint is the rejection of all politicians and the representation summed up in the slogan: “Out with them all!” The stage of deliberations gave way in time to the necessity to concretize tasks.

As in the piquetero movement, there are different political perspectives that coexist inside the movement of the popular assemblies. One sector of the assemblies is directed to put pressure on the government by means of marches and street demonstrations because it is understood that without the structure of the government, it won’t be possible to achieve any lasting change. They gather strength with the objective of seizing power from the government, either by electoral means or direct action.

Another sector, instead, understands it is necessary to create a different kind of power because it believes that it is not possible to salvage anything from what already exists. In general, they tend to redefine the public space. In this context, coffee shops, banks, and fields are being occupied with the objective of making cultural centers or organic gardens.

The public space is redefined as non-governmental. None of these practices is very well theorized. There is not yet a theory that allows these practices to be unified, but this does not deter things. In fact, the occupation of spaces is growing.

The reclaimed health care clinic might be a good example of this trend. The neighbors got this clinic back after the owners abandoned it many years ago, including expensive intensive care equipment. Two hundred and fifty doctors are presently volunteering. In the next few weeks, neighbors hope they will be able to offer free health care for the workers of the taken over factories.

In the workers’ movement, similar experiences have emerged. With the crisis, a lot of capitalists abandoned their factories, and these have been re-appropriated by the workers who self-manage as cooperatives. Approximately 80 factories are in this situation. Textiles, cooling systems, ceramics—these are some of the productive lines with workers’ self-management. Lately, there have been congresses of workers and unemployed workers to discuss the best way of taking charge of production.

The refusal to delegate to others the solutions to the problems in our lives is spreading to more sectors of the population, allowing levels of self-management previously unthinkable in this corner of the world. The process is completely open and its end result appears uncertain. Some questions remain without answers. How long will the Argentine ruling class and the US tolerate these experiments, especially in a context of increasing instability in the region? Will the resistance be able to transform itself into an alternative to government?

—Buenos Aires, Argentina, July 2002

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