

THE PIQUETERA/O MOVEMENT OF ARGENTINA

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The Piquetera/o Movement of Argentina

By Andrea D'Atri and Celeste Escati

Introduction

The word “*piquetero*” or “*piquetera*” comes from the pickets or protests held by unemployed workers, usually to block highways and roads, as they demanded work and opposed the rising unemployment rates devastating Argentina during the 1990s financial crisis.

The *Piquetero* Movement is now a combination of groups and organizations that essentially manage the unemployment subsidies provided by the State and occasionally carry out joint street mobilizations. Nevertheless, this collection of organizations had an undeniable presence in the streets of Argentina during the latter 90s on up to 2004, and their methods of struggle were taken up as an example by other social sectors, lending higher visibility to their protests. At the present time, for example, people in one Argentine border town use pickets and highway blockades to stop the flow of tourists and merchandize to and from neighboring Uruguay in protest against the installation of a highly polluting factory on the opposite bank of the Uruguay River.¹ Teachers, government workers, oil workers and members of the student movement habitually arrive to demonstrate at the blockades.

Even though the *Piquetero* Movement reached its high point of public exposure and recognition during 2001 and 2002 (when the crisis concluding the preceding period broke out into the open), and is not a key actor in the current social struggles, its methods have served as a milestone in the tradition of struggle of the working class, student movement, and other social movements in the country.

We can point to three periods in the development of the *Piquetero* Movement:

- a) **The Beginning**, with the leading role played by oil workers fired during the privatization of the State-owned business Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF), their families, and other social sectors in the areas where the economy depended on oil (teachers, businessmen, etc.). As several different authors have pointed out, the *piqueteros*, paradoxically, emerged from the more highly paid workers of the welfare state, given that their origin as *piqueteros* is linked to the disappearance of this economic model and the breaking up and subsequent privatization of the YPF. These first *piquetero* movements were located in some of the provinces in the heart of the country whose economy essentially depends on the gas and oil deposits.
- b) **The Second Stage**, in which the movement that had spontaneously emerged began to take on the features that it now has, as the sum of organizations associated with political parties and other leftist formations, trade unions, and even Peronist political formations that support the current government, etc. We also found that in this period there was a rise in the growth of the organizations in outlying regions of the Greater Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. In the Buenos Aires Province, the wealthiest and most heavily populated in the country, a strong network based on political clientelism had always existed, which, in this case, also played a role in containing the social crisis that gave rise to the tremendous increase in unemployment and

1. The protest had the greatest international repercussions when a young, bikini-clad woman from this area got past the security forces of the Vienna Summit and paraded before more than 60 Heads of State with a poster that said “No Pulpmill Pollution – Greenpeace”.

dire poverty; this network has close ties with the local *piquetera* organizations.

- c) **The Current Period**, marked by the division between a government-related sector (some of whose members hold positions as functionaries in ministries and other state agencies) and a minority sector that continues to confront the government in the streets, but that has plainly lost its former mobilization capacity.



The Beginning

The initial period of the *Piquetero* Movement in Argentina can be divided, in turn, into three moments: the *Santiagoñazo*, the First *Cutralcazo*, and the Second *Cutralcazo*.

On December 16, 1993, there was a popular revolt in the Santiago del Estero Province,² revolving around government employees who hadn't been paid for three months. Since their situation also affected the entire economy of the province's capital city, including small businesses, etc., they were joined by other social sectors. In actions known as the "*Santiagoñazo*,"³ the masses burned down the government headquarters in the province capital and attacked several state agencies, plus the homes of politicians deemed corrupt and others considered responsible for the suffering of the people. This revolt marked the beginning of the first phase in which the rebellions of state workers spread, in opposition to the neoliberal policies

imposed by the government of Carlos Menem⁴. In these revolts there were street clashes with the police and other repressive forces.

The second phase of the beginning period can be placed in June 1996, in the Neuquén Province,⁵ with the first blockades set up by oil workers fired by the State company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF), sold some years later to the Spanish transnational corporation Repsol. Protestors blocked the Cutral Có highway in a small town where almost everyone depends on this company, either directly or indirectly. These actions are known as the "First *Cutralcazo*."⁶ The fired workers weren't the only ones who participated in these pickets; they were joined by their family members and many townspeople.

The third phase of the movement began with the events known as the "Second *Cutralcazo*," which spread to similar popular uprisings in the provinces of Salta and Jujuy.⁷ The Second *Cutralcazo* was sparked by an education workers' strike strongly supported by the townspeople who blocked the highway and fought fierce battles against troops of the National Gendarmes sent by the federal government to station themselves in the region; these troops, however, were forced to fall back in the face of popular resistance. It was there that a policeman's bullet felled young Teresa Rodríguez, a 24-year-old domestic employee who was witnessing the demonstration and became an emblem of the *Piquetero* Movement from that time on.⁸

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2. We have attached a map of Argentina showing the location of provinces and cities mentioned here.
 3. The name commonly used to describe these actions, reminiscent of a semi-insurrection in the Córdoba Province in 1969, known as "*El Cordobazo*." In the contemporary history of the country, people use similar terms to describe all mass uprisings, insurrections, etc.
 4. A politician and lawyer who was President of Argentina for the Peronist Justicialista Party for two consecutive periods from 1989 to 1999. He introduced neoliberal reforms, privatizing state companies, deregulating the economy and instituting freedom of prices. His Minister of the Economy, Domingo Cavallo, established the Law of Convertibility, in which one Argentine peso was the equivalent of one United States dollar. This law was in effect until the crisis of December, 2001. Such measures achieved economic stability that favoured the input of flight capital, while the country sold off its natural resources at bargain prices and accelerated rising unemployment rates and job flexibility.
 5. In West Central Argentina on the Chilean border. See attached map.
 6. On December 31, 1990, through a national Executive Decree, the State company "Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Sociedad del Estado" was transformed into the anonymous society "YPF Sociedad Anónima." This is how the process began of transferring the State hydrocarbon company to the private domain. In 1999, Repsol acquired almost 90% of the company's total stock package.
 7. In Northwest Argentina on the border with Bolivia. See attached map.
 8. One Unemployed Workers' Movement (MTD) was re-baptized as the Teresa Rodríguez Movement in homage to her.

The *Piquetero* Movement of this period was essentially characterized by two methods: the picket, for conducting the struggle, and the assembly, for decision making. With this combative, democratic methodology as a point of departure, participants were able to outline a program for the fulfilment of their demands, using direct action against the repressive forces of the State as they tried to unite with employed workers. The assemblies became true political embryos of “dual power” in some places, where townspeople broke into police arsenals and held off the State’s repressive forces.

The government took action to avoid the development of this movement, still spontaneous at the time, in several different ways; repression, containment, and cooptation. After the focal points of revolts originating in the interior of the county were violently repressed by the National Gendarmes, most of these movements were subsumed by the government. In some cases, the assemblies were transformed into multi-sector entities that allowed for the intervention of representatives of the Catholic Church, chambers of commerce, and leaders and bureaucrats of traditional political parties; they had both unemployed and employed workers as members, participating under the principle of one person, one vote. In other cases, the organizations were made up exclusively of unemployed workers fully incorporated into a communal government regime. The majority retreated upon receiving subsidies, loans for small undertakings, and other forms of State assistance.

Although all studies coincide on the point that women were the majority of those who put their bodies on the line in the blockades and mobilizations that gave rise to the *Piquetero* Movement, these women had extremely low visibility. The recognized leaders, even by movement members themselves, are mainly male. Nevertheless,

even though they have had extremely low visibility, women had a leadership role during this period that breaks with all the stereotypes of domesticity.”⁹

Women who participated in the *Piquetero* Movement during this period have said that their husbands got depressed, fell ill, died, or abandoned their homes when faced with the disarticulation of the world of work, but that the women “had to grow stronger”; “as women, when we felt impotent—not incapable, but impotent—we summoned up our courage.”¹⁰ These women, the wives of oil workers for the most part, found themselves in a very particular situation: accustomed to their husbands being away from home for several days or weeks, they had experienced a relatively higher degree of autonomy than other women of their class. In many cases, they had already been militant activists. Some had participated in neighbourhood commissions or the National Women’s Encounters held annually in the country,¹¹ and others had engaged in a variety of activities aimed at community improvement, while those who had worked had gained experience in union activities.

Women were thus able to incorporate demands related to everyday life into the list of grievances of the *Piquetero* Movement: gardens tended by mothers, neighbourhood nursery schools, higher budgets for popular dining rooms, health care improvements, and tax exemptions for unemployed families. Furthermore, some of these women were elected as spokeswomen by the assemblies in a process of direct democracy to enter into dialogue with authorities, politicians, and local functionaries, thereby becoming figures recognized by the movement as a whole. This is the case of Laura Padilla, a teacher in the town of Cutral C6, who led the first *pueblada*, or popular revolt, of this period and continued to be a well-known figure in the protests in the years that followed.¹²

9. On the contrary, further on in the study we will see how, during the second period, the *piqueteras* acquired visibility, but in functions and roles closely associated with gender stereotypes.

10. Interview with Andrea Andújar in “De la ruta no nos vamos,” a paper presented at the Xº Jornadas Interescuelas / Departamentos de Historia, Rosario, 2005.

11. In 1985, a group of Argentine women travelled to the Third International Women’s Conference in Nairobi. On their return, they took the initiative of organizing national women’s encounters, and the first encounter was held in Buenos Aires with 1,000 participants. Year after year the encounters were held in different parts of the country with ever increasing attendance.

12. Recently, she filed suit for damages against her ex-husband, demanding indemnity payment for the violence of which she and her children had been victims. This legal action is the first of its kind taken in our country, given

The Second Stage

In 1997, unemployed people in the metropolitan area surrounding the national capital, known as Greater Buenos Aires, blocked highways twenty-three times, while another fifty-four roadblocks were set up in the rest of the country. During this period, unemployed workers began to form their own organizations, giving rise to the first *Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados* (MTD), or Unemployed Workers Movements. In the years to come, the *Piquetero* Movement went from being an inorganic expression of the protests of oil workers, sugar workers, state workers and others against the exclusion produced by neoliberal economic policies, to becoming an organized movement made up of territorial groups that came together in different coordinating bodies and political blocks. This “new” *Piquetero* Movement that appeared in the country’s political and economic centre, emerged from social organizations with a prior history of struggle of their own, related to land takeovers and the formation of small cooperatives and mutual neighbourhood civil associations, some lay Christian communities, etc.

Another defining characteristic of the unemployed workers’ organizations that emerged in this period was that they were mainly made up of men and women who had been unemployed for a long time; for this reason, they basically appeared in some of the outlying areas of the city of Buenos Aires, where by this time structural unemployment had affected almost two entire generations. To the central demand for “genuine work” raised by the movement of the unemployed in the first period, the State responded in 1996 with a program of

unemployment subsidies granted in exchange for work performed in compensation (Work Plan). This program was reformulated in 2002 as the Heads of Family Plan, with subsidies that now amount to less than fifty dollars a month.¹³ This government policy made subsidy grants become the central bargaining point between the State and the *Piquetero* Movement.¹⁴ Nevertheless, this response was not innovative: food distribution was one of the most common forms of state assistance and a source of clientalist relations, organized by political bosses and functionaries of the traditional parties. In the province of Buenos Aires, the most heavily populated in the country, this State assistance network was organized during this period by unemployed women who functioned as neighbourhood leaders known as “*manzaneras*.”¹⁵

For the MTDs that emerged in this period, the main activities consisted of drawing up and presenting community work projects to local authorities in order to receive subsidies and loans for micro-undertakings, organizing unemployed people in the area, and fighting to obtain government “employment plans” for food, gas tanks, etc. One sector calling for political and organizational autonomy approved a new general slogan for the struggle of the movement: “Work, Dignity, and Social Change.” As of 1998, this led to a profound debate in the organization: one sector posed the need to centre the axis of struggle on social change, while the other maintained that the priority should be obtaining State subsidies and other issues related to social assistance.

This debate produced a split dividing the MTDs regionally. The “social change” sector insisted that it was necessary to promote the establishment of

that the suit was filed despite the fact she had signed papers for a divorce by mutual consent, all of which placed the case of Laura Padilla in the major national news media. She told the press she would prove that she signed the divorce papers, having been “conditioned to live in terror for so many years with a person who permanently carried a pistol.” Her ex-husband is an accountant who works for different oil service companies in the region.

13. Currently, the basic family food basket is calculated at nine hundred dollars a month, a figure that doesn’t even cover the legally established minimum wage.
14. “From an initial volume of approximately 200,000 subsidies in effect in 1997, the figure rose to 1,300,000 plans in October of 2002. This social plan now has an even broader scope in Latin America, reaching 1,760,000 people. It is important to note that only 10% of these plans are directly controlled by piquetera organizations, while the remaining 90% are handled by municipal governments mostly associated with the Peronist Party.” Maristella Svampa, *Revista Barataria* N° 1, September 2004, Bolivia.
15. We will come back to the issue of the *manzaneras* further on.

a “Republic of Assemblies” and the construction of the “New Man”, insisting that a struggle must transcend the questions of poverty and unemployment. This was called the Teresa Rodríguez Movement (MTR) and called for the participation not only of unemployed people, but also of students and other social groups:

“This is an organization of the people struggling for social change. Our movement calls those people to join our ranks who pay homage to work and dignity. Why struggle? Because nobody has ever given us anything, because we’ve gotten everything by struggling, casting out everyone who tyrannizes us, taking away all of our rights; we’ve learned that without struggle we’ll never have anything. And above all, because as long as injustices exist, the struggle is our reason for being.” Luciana Garrido¹⁶

This sector organized itself into assemblies, in which debates were held and decisions made by consensus or majority vote by show of hands. This was also the method used for electing movement people considered most capable of carrying out the agreed-upon measures. In case the elected person proved to be incapable of performing the task or didn’t carry out the assembly’s mandate, the body met again and revoked the mandate. They advocated self-management with respect to housing construction, food preparation and distribution, the organization of popular dining rooms, literacy and popular education workshops, etc. In their own words, the main characteristics of these groups favouring autonomy were to have originated

“outside the country’s social and political institutions, such as churches, political parties, unions, etc. It’s not only that their development is autonomous, but that this autonomy is directly related to the disrepute of these institutions.”

They also recognized that *“the piquetera struggle, as such, gradually grew from the periphery of the country to its centre”* and that it displaced the axis

of the conflict from the industrial productive process to the circulation of merchandise with the blockage of highways and roads. With the aim of advancing the consciousness generated by this situation, they state that the *Piquetero* Movement should propose new ways of legitimizing itself politically (thus, the method of direct democracy, as opposed to representative democracy). They also recognized that violence *“is manifested as self-defence. As such, it occurs through a high degree of mass mobilization and legitimacy. It is not violence organized by a centralized organization, nor does it have the goal of taking power.”*¹⁷

In the Aníbal Verón MTD and the more recent Darío Santillán Front,¹⁸ similar characteristics are found, as well as the particularity of the women in the movement deciding to hold their own assemblies in order to demand more participation in decision-making in the movement as a whole. These assemblies emerged during the monthly blockades of the bridge called Puente Pueyrredón after the murder of the protesting *piqueteros* Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki by the police under orders from the national government during demonstrations at the same bridge in June, 2002.¹⁹ In the context of the blockades, which lasted for several hours in the middle of a bridge that normally has heavy motor vehicle traffic to Buenos Aires from the South, the *piqueteros* developed commissions for the discussion of various issues, and the women created the Assemblies of Women *Piqueteras*. *“We put our bodies on the line, but we need to have a voice,”* said a young, 25-year-old *piquetera*.²⁰ These women demanded a movement that would have at least two spokespeople whenever it was necessary to make a press statement at a roadblock or other action: a man and a woman.

In addition to participating in the National Women’s Encounters, they organized their own encounters of women in the organization.

16. Professor and Director of the Executive Board of the MTR.

17. “Notas para la reflexión política (a propósito de la lucha *piquetera*),” Colectivo Situaciones, September 2001.

18. The slogan of the Darío Santillán Front is “Building People’s Power for Social Change” and the group describes itself as “anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal.”

19. We refer to this event further on.

20. *Diario*, p. 12, July 4, 2004.

"I left my home because my dad abused me, and almost all of us have had experiences of violence from our love partners, fathers, or brothers. And many times the same men that are with you during a roadblock, confronting the police, go home and hit their woman. We want these issues to be taken up by the organization, we want them to be issues for everyone, but in order for this to happen, we have to keep meeting so that we can talk among ourselves first because it's more comfortable for us to do it that way, and then take our proposals to all the movements." Monica ²¹

The changes are basically seen in the attitude towards domestic violence, which began to be an issue debated in a number of *piquetera* organizations, and in the role of women, not only in the traditional tasks of cooking and childcare during street actions and mobilizations, but also in jobs related to blockade security (watching out to make sure there aren't infiltrators in the mobilizations, that no alcohol is consumed during the street actions, that the organized columns aren't abandoned, that there aren't any police provocations, etc.) and the public representation of the movement, which was formerly under male hegemony.

One of the innovations incorporated by the women of the movement is the action against domestic violence. In the *Piquetero* Movement, people don't go to the police in these cases; instead, "persuasive actions" are taken towards the aggressor. Several women go to the home of the man who has engaged in violence against his companion to talk to him about what this means, about why he shouldn't continue to act this way, about the way his companion suffers, etc. The first goal is to let him know that his violent attitudes are a public matter, well-known in the neighbourhood, and to insist that he seek out a self-help group or other type of therapy. In some cases, when these measures haven't produced favourable results, the women remove the aggressors from their homes by force.

The force behind the incorporation of the women *piqueteras* into women's mobilizations for the right to abortion or against violence towards women came in part from feminist university students, mainly in the field of Social Work, Sociol-

ogy, Psychology, etc. These young activists who came forward to offer workshops on sexual and reproductive health gradually introduced the need for women's self-organization in order to struggle for their own rights. However, the *piqueteras* are aware that the fundamental step was taken after first attending the National Women's Encounter held in the city of Rosario in 2003, which aroused their interest in continuing to debate these questions.

Although some formations now exist with characteristics similar to those described above, the large majority of the organizations that emerged in this period don't have the same operating structure or the same political purposes. The large majority function on the basis of consensus reached among leaders and, although assemblies are held periodically or in certain zones, these tend to be more a matter of form than substance. Generally speaking, the assemblies ratify the proposals made by the board of directors or leaders of the political parties to which each *Piquetero* Movement belongs. As we have pointed out, the demand for genuine work that characterized the first period gave way to the primary demand for subsidies and food parcels for unemployed families. In order to strengthen the *Piquetero* Movement in its negotiations with the State, several different organizations came together in the National *Piquetera* Assembly. In this assembly, the groups that had been most confrontational with the government formed the National *Piquetero* Block

Since 1992, the government of the Buenos Aires Province had organized thousands of unemployed workers to implement assistance plans. The requirements stated that these workers were to have a "vocation of solidarity," that they were not "conflictive," and that they didn't run businesses, public dining rooms, or political centres in their homes. This was how the government created an "army of *manzanas*," as the press called it, or an "army of love," as the governor's wife called it, of more than 35,000 women who acted as coordinators between the food distribution project of the provincial government and the families who benefited from this aid. The choice of women for the creation of this governmental assistance network

21. *id.*

was not a matter of chance.²² One of the project directors explains that

*“women were chosen because it was well-known that this would be unquestionable...and furthermore, because we understood that women would be more honest and that they would do a better job of making the distribution of resources transparent.”*²³

The women’s network was organized like this: Two *manzanas* were responsible for every ten *manzanas* (a “*manzana*” refers to a four-block housing sector). They received the food rations from municipal authorities and distributed them among the homes under their jurisdiction. Nevertheless, their job was not limited to food distribution; they also counselled pregnant women about state programs, mothers of small children, etc. In order to do all this, they had to make a record of the beneficiaries and “establish bonds of trust with the neighbours.”

The enormous movement of *manzanas*, created by the provincial government as a network of aid and containment in a widespread socio-economic crisis, was later exploited by the *Piquetero* Movement in the region. These women massively entered the MTD organizations that had emerged in different parts of Greater Buenos Aires in response to the governmental crisis and the breaking up of

the state containment network. Their presence caused the *Piquetero* Movement in Buenos Aires to be seen during this stage as mainly female (70% of the movement were women) although its representatives were almost exclusively men whose leadership displayed strong aspects of boss rule.²⁴ Contrary to what happened in the first stage, in this case the women *piqueteras* achieved a significant visibility, but their primary role was essentially reduced to the organization of tasks related to domestic stereotypes: responsibility for dining rooms, mothers’ gardens, community orchards, micro-undertakings related to food preparation (bread, sweets), etc.

During 2001, under the Fernando De La Rúa presidency, national demonstrations and blockades by *Piqueteros* continued. During the crisis of December, when the President was forced to resign in the midst of mobilizations defying government orders, thousands of unemployed people participated in looting supermarkets and other businesses in different cities in the country. More than 30 people were killed by police forces, including several women and children. The mobilizations continued during the emergency government of the Peronist Eduardo Duhalde, and it was during his presidency that the police killed the two young *Piqueteros* Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki at a demonstration blocking the southern access

22. The speech given by the person in charge of these networks, the wife of the Governor of the Buenos Aires Province, is eloquent: “*Why women? Because, supposedly, a woman is closer to these things that have to do with our children’s basic necessities, she is more concerned about their health, she worries more about everything that has to do with life, and, in a society with fewer hardships like our own, she must theoretically have a little more time for carrying on solidarity work.*” At the official presentation that set the *manzanera* program in motion, she stated that, “*our women have always been present, voluntarily, in every initiative of community assistance, promotion, and organization. Mobilized in order to assure the health of their children, they usually come from the most humble neighborhoods. The province government understands the importance of coordinating these joint actions that cover their basic necessities and, at the same time, spread their deep wisdom throughout the community.*”

23. Interview cited by Laura Mason in *La política en femenino*, IDES, Bs. As., 2004.

24. Out of the organizations that originated in this region during this period, there is one noteworthy woman leader of the Independent Movement of Retired and Unemployed Workers: Nina Pelozo. She is now the only woman widely recognized as a *piquetera* leader. A rural woman married to the *piquetero* leader Raúl Castells, Nina began to work in the fields at the age of seven. As an adolescent, she began to work in the refrigerator industry and other industries. In 2001, she joined her husband in demonstrations and quickly became famous. She gained popularity when, after posing for the cover of a magazine dressed in a miniskirt and wearing makeup befitting a model, she became a topic of discussion in the news media. In spite of attacks in the press, however, her movement continued to favour her public appearances in order to take advantage of her rising popularity levels; thus, Nina became a show business personality. She participated in a number of television shows and generated lengthy debates about the role of women in the popular sectors, the “frivolization” of social struggles, etc.

to the city of Buenos Aires, as mentioned previously. This deed, known as the “Massacre of Puente Pueyrredón,” sparked an enormous demonstration in solidarity with the *piqueteros* as a form of popular response. Sectors of the middle classes also participated in this demonstration, obliging President Duhalde to call new elections earlier than planned.

The Piquetero Movement had won massive participation and territorial expansion, but at the cost of a lower level of combativeness and independence with regards to the State. These aspects would define its course up until the present time, when the movement has tended to disappear.

A Special Case: Women Workers without a Boss

Together with the open crisis at the end of 2001 and the massive emergence of the movements of unemployed people, yet another internationally recognized phenomenon appeared. In the face of bankruptcy, factory closings, or factory abandonment by the owners, men and women workers decided to occupy the plants and to produce “without a boss.” This phenomenon extended to hundreds of businesses, most of them small or medium-sized, which, in time, became cooperatives. The most well known examples of such takeovers by workers are Zanon Ceramics, the most import-

ant high-tech ceramic flooring producer in South America, located in Neuquen Province; and Brukman Textiles in Buenos Aires.

The Zanon workers, who soon became role models for other factories that were taken over, inasmuch as they were able to increase production “without a boss,” decided to incorporate more workers into the plant and, to do this, they decided that the new workers should be members of the Movement of Unemployed Workers, chosen by popular vote in their assemblies. In this way, they established an alliance with the *piquetero* movements that allowed them, in turn, to come to their defence in case of legal efforts to evict them or repressive attacks by the police or the union bureaucracy. Above and beyond this, however, they showed that they were capable of resolving the problem of the lack of work and that business interests were solely responsible for their not being able to do so.

In the case of Brukman Textiles, the women workers took over the factory almost “by chance.” On December 18, 2001, they demanded the payment of salaries owed them, and the boss promised to go to the bank and take out the money. But he never returned. The business was occupied by the workers who were patiently waiting. Many of them couldn’t go home because they didn’t even have the money for their fare.²⁵ The following day, as they continued to wait inside the factory, the country exploded. It was December 19, 2001.

25. In a 2002 interview with Celia Martínez, Brukman worker and undisputed leader of this process, she described what happened that day: “At two o’clock in the afternoon, we went downstairs and nobody was left. The head of personnel wasn’t there, just a boy who worked in management; he was there because he was doing some work on the computer. None of the bosses—nobody, nobody. So then we decided to wait, thinking that they had gone to get the money and would come back. And we stayed there and we’re still there, waiting...” In the same interview, Celia says: “*Now I dream that the factory is ours, whether it becomes state property or not, we look for some legal way for us to be able to run it, for us to be able to work for hospitals maybe, to do some kind of work for the community, for us to have hundreds of jobless people here inside, because now I see that unemployment is close at hand. This is a need I see when we march with people from the Piquetero Block or the Aníbal Verón group. I see all those women taking their children by the hand, walking for a long way in the rain, in the cold or in the summer when it’s so hot...all those people with their children in a march demanding jobs, a social salary, a dignified salary. Now they’ve changed. I see all these things now and what interests me is finding a solution to help those people from where I stand, from my factory, even though many comrades are still stingy and don’t want to share a tiny little piece of the factory with an unemployed person. That’s really made me angry so many times. Because I insist that we should take people in, that we should already have unemployed people working here. We have the place. We have the machines. All that’s lacking is a little understanding, a little solidarity on the part of some comrades who still don’t understand this part that’s so necessary to at least make a minimal change in the situation of the unemployed.*” Andrea D’Atri: “Ahora sueño que la fábrica sea nuestra”, interview with Celia Martínez, Brukman worker. *Revista Travesías* N°11, CeCyM, 2002.

After intense mobilizations and *cacerolazos* (pots and pans protests) that lasted all night and on into the afternoon of December 21, President Fernando De La Rúa resigned.

Soon, the Brukman workers made contact with the Zanon workers and decided to follow their example. They continued to occupy the factory, which was surrounded by the solidarity of thousands of neighbours who gathered in local assemblies at the plant, as well as unemployed workers' movements, student organizations, human rights organizations, leftist parties, etc.

But the women workers had one very special encounter with the feminists. On March 24, 2002, as these workers participated along with thousands of other people in the mobilizations marking the anniversary of the coup d'État of 1976, they were chanting *"In '76 they killed thousands of our comrades. At Brukman we remember them all, as we fight for workers' control."* At that moment they met up with a column of feminist demonstrators and chanted to them: *"Come along with Brukman. Women, come on. Without you, our struggle won't be won."* Immediately the feminists responded: *"Brukman belongs to the workers. Whoever doesn't like it can get fucked."* This encounter was drawn out as feminists participated in all the activities and mobilizations in solidarity with the Brukman factory, and the workers participated in the National Women's Encounters that had been held in Argentina for twenty-two years.

As one might imagine, this experience changed the life and the subjective approach of these women. Celia Martínez, a Brukman worker, said: *"In other times I would never have dreamed of being so far from home and fighting for demands that I believe are just (although some people don't agree). Trying to tell people about the struggle of my factory and my people, well...these things...I'd never have seen myself doing this. I'm sure I always had the ability hidden away and that it was part of me, but I had never developed it. I think that's what it was because that's what I feel. I was*

*always combative because raising five children and helping my husband maintain a home on a worker's minimum wage and seeing that the kids have turned out all right, all things considered...to do all that you have to be combative and have a lot of strength because if not, everything goes to hell."*²⁶

Celia is one out of many women who came into the social and political struggle due to the economic crisis, unemployment, the closing of workplaces, and this struggle also transformed her everyday life. From being a quiet seamstress, she went on to speak at rallies and mobilizations before ten thousand people. In the course of all this, she coined memorable phrases that became slogans of the *piquetero* movements, of factory takeovers, etc. When threats of repression and eviction hung heavy over Brukman, she called for solidarity from the other factories that had been taken over: *"A blow against one is a blow against all."*²⁷ Even now that phrase resounds in mobilizations and social struggles in Argentina. She also knew how to explain things in a few words: *"If we can run a factory, we can run the country."* So many women like Celia left the privacy of domestic life behind during this period and explored new paths of struggle that allowed them to find personal abilities that they'd never been aware of: *"I realized that we women don't only exist to cook and wash clothes, that we're capable of much more. And now that I see this...I don't plan to stop."*²⁸

For unemployed women, feminists, students, activists, and leftist militants, the "women workers without a boss" became emblematic. Their factory and the tent they put up on the corner outside the factory when they were violently evicted by the police inevitably became places for holding meetings, assemblies, women's rights activities and other events. They have now recovered the factory and continue to work without bosses in the centre of the city of Buenos Aires, insisting that the government pass a definitive expropriation law regarding the business so that it can be fully turned over to their cooperative.

26. Id.

27. This slogan was later incorporated into feminist mobilizations against violence towards women.

28. Interview with Celia Martínez, op.cit.

 The Current Period

Under the present Peronist government of Néstor Kirchner, an effort was made at the beginning of his term of office to control the *piquetera* organizations through a strong media stigmatization; this created a rupture in the alliance between the unemployed workers and the rest of the society. It also increased the criminalization of social protest and, finally, ended up fragmenting the movement with the incorporation of some organizations started by the State (Kirchnerist *piqueteros*) and the isolation of the rest, who lost their bargaining power (the “hard line” *Piqueteros*).

“Now there’s a different climate; the unemployed workers are insulted today, while only two years ago we were applauded. We were better prepared to deal with the repression than to face a policy like Kirchner’s.” Alberto Spagnolo²⁹

During recent years, there has been notable growth in the Argentine economy, primarily based on the international price of raw materials. This growth produced a relative economic reactivation that made it possible to lower unemployment rates and raise consumption levels, basically for the upper and middle classes. It also increased tax revenues, with which the government strengthened its policy of subsidies, incentives, and credits for the sectors of the *Piquetero* Movement that were willing to abandon the struggle in the streets. For example, the Federación Tierra y Vivienda (FTV), or Land and Housing Federation, an unemployed workers organization in the Greater Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, implemented 1500 production projects and signed agreements with the government for the construction of more than 1200 homes.

According to data from the National Ministry of Labour, there are around two million beneficiaries of the Heads of Family plans, of which almost a million and a half are women recipients and a half million are men. Out of these subsidies, as mentioned above, less than 10% are handled by the organizations of the *Piquetero* Movement. In this latest case, for each “plan” of 150 pesos paid out to an unemployed worker, the organization to which he or she belongs keeps from 3 to 5 pesos for general organizational expenses.³⁰ This means that the organized *Piquetero* Movement is handling a monthly total of between half a million and a million pesos.³¹

 Conclusion

Through repression, at first, and then through cooptation, the government was able to fragment, dismember, and demobilize the *Piquetero* Movement. Only a small minority of the *piquetera* organizations continue to confront the government and the regime’s institutions. Even so, they all reproduce clientelism, historically repudiated as a methodology used by the traditional parties, based on corruption. This methodology has been adopted even by some leftist parties; through the administration of “employment plans” and other subsidies granted by the State, they maintain an “apparatus” that is larger than their own real forces, which allows them to increase their mobilization capacity and street presence. In general, the different organizations favor their own control over the base sectors that they represent and also favor their role as mediators with the State for obtaining subsidies.³²

29. Interview by Raúl Zibechi with Alberto Spagnolo, ex-priest and one of the leaders of the MTD Solano.

30. This sum of 150 pesos is equal to 50 United States dollars.

31. The *piquetero* groups who are now loyal to the government not only hold positions as functionaries and slots on the lists for the upcoming national elections, but they are also promoting the candidacy of the current President’s wife, Senator Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, for the office of President of the country... Among the different forces and public personalities supporting her candidacy is the Movimiento de Mujeres Evita (Evita Women’s Movement), an allusion to Eva Duarte de Perón, wife of the Argentine President Juan Domingo Perón and national political leader who promoted women’s right to vote in our country.

32. Against this majority tendency, only a few voices are being raised to propose a single, democratic *Piquetero* Movement, in which mobilization would be a free, voluntary, conscious decision of its members. Only the convergence of different organizations in a single movement would be capable of overcoming the fragmentation that favors the government alone, and only the broadest possible democracy and control from the base of the

Nevertheless, the experiences of struggle against unemployment and dire poverty have served as an example for millions of workers who have seen the loss of their job sources during the implementation of neoliberal policies. They may also represent a tradition of struggle that will be taken up anew by the working class in the face of probable future economic crises that are already being predicted.

For thousands of women, this experience has marked their entry into public, political life and the transformation of their everyday domestic lives. This is now seen in the massive participation of women from the popular sectors in the National Women's Encounters. But it's not yet possible to predict what changes there will be in the new generations of girls raised by these mothers who "put their bodies on the line" in roadblocks, unintentionally confronting ancestral models and stereotypes.

APPENDIX 1

Timeline of Key Events

- 1995** Municipal unemployed worker commissions are organized in the Neuquén Province.
- June 1996** First *Cutralcazo*. Unemployed workers in the Neuquina town of Cutral Có block highways and stop the passage of oil trucks. The workers are "fogoneros" (campfire builders) because they made their decisions in horizontal assemblies at campfires known as "fogones" improvised on the highway.
- April 1997** Second *Cutralcazo*.
The police repress a demonstration of women teachers and unemployed workers in the Neuquén Province, killing Teresa Rodríguez, whose name becomes emblematic of the Unemployed Workers Movement.
During the rest of the year, highways are blocked in other provinces in the interior of the country and the first blockades are set up in the areas surrounding the country's capital city.
- 1998 and 1999** Repeated popular uprisings known as "puebladas"³³ occur in the towns of Tartagal and General Mosconi (Salta Province).
- May 2000** 10,000 people march to General Mosconi (Salta) from a neighbouring city in support of the 500 unemployed workers blocking Highway 34. They confront 1,000 gendarmes and police, obliging the police to withdraw. Numerous protestors sack and burn the municipal building and other public buildings. A truce is called due to the intervention of the local Bishop, as well as national and provincial government officials. That night, however, a group of unemployed people block the highway again. In different parts of the country there are acts of repudiation against the repression in General Mosconi.

movement would be able to counteract the State's cooptation maneuvers. This doesn't mean suppressing differences in formal unity, but rather encouraging direct democracy in the heart of a common organization, with freedom of tendencies and public debates.

33. Popular insurrections. The name refers to "an uprising of the people as a whole" against institutional order.

- September 2000** Around 300 unemployed oil workers from the Patagonian region meet in front of the Repsol-YPF headquarters, demanding 1,000 jobs from the oil company.
- November 2000** The worker Aníbal Verón is killed by the police during an insurrection when agents try to clear the highway blocked by transportation workers demanding salaries owed to them. They are joined by hundreds of unemployed people from the region demanding “genuine work.” In the Buenos Aires Province, unemployed worker organizations block Highway 2 in the La Matanza District, a heavily populated area with a high structural unemployment rate, demanding food parcels and subsidies.
- February 2001** More than 3,500 unemployed workers block highways and avenues in different points in the Buenos Aires Province, demanding jobs, food, medicine, and housing.
- May 2001** In the Jujuy Province, around 2,000 people, including unemployed workers, *campesinos* and aboriginal people from the town of La Quiaca, block the International Bridge, demanding 300 employment plans subsidized by the national government.
- June 2001** Workers blocking the national Highway 34 at the entrance to the town of General Mosconi are evicted with both lead and rubber bullets and teargas by 400 gendarmes. The repression leaves a balance of 2 dead, 50 wounded, and several arrested. The following day, 18 townspeople from General Mosconi are arrested. Later, a mobilization of 1,000 participants forces the troops to retreat.
- July 2001** The First National Assembly of Unemployed Workers (ANT), or *Piquetera* Assembly, is held, with more than 2,000 people participating.
The first national day of roadblocks is held, with the participation of more than 100,000 people throughout the country.
- August 2001** The second national day of protest is held with 48-hour roadblocks throughout the country, in which more than 150,000 people participate.
- September 2001** The Second National *Piquetera* Assembly is held, with the participation of 1,500 delegates from more than 14 *piquetera* organizations from the entire country. In these assemblies, the sectors of the movement who most favour conciliation try to appease the more radicalized sectors of the struggle of the unemployed. Although a vote is taken to continue with the struggle for “genuine work,” from this moment on, the practice of the movements is gradually more subordinated to the push for obtaining and administering “Work Plans” granted by the State.
- December 2001** The national government decrees measures for confiscating bank deposits, internationally known as “*el corralito*.”
On December 18 and 19, looting in the outlying area of the capital city and mobilizations in the centre of the city lead to the fall of the De La Rúa government. On those same days, the women workers at Brukman Textiles take over the plant after the boss has fled. As of this moment, there are daily mobilizations of unemployed workers, neighbours from barrio assemblies, people with savings marching on the banks, all of which go on for several weeks. This convulsive situation lasts until January, resulting in the country having a series of five pres-



idents during this short period (De la Rúa, Ramón Puerta, Adolfo Rodríguez Saa, Eduardo Caamaño, and finally, Eduardo Duhalde).

January 2002

Senator Eduardo Duhalde (Peronist) is proclaimed national President by the Legislative Assembly due to the acephalia produced in December of 2001.

June 2002

The *piqueteros* Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki are killed at point-blank range during a peaceful demonstration of unemployed workers, known as “the Massacre of Puente Pueyrredón.” The immediate response is a massive mobilization to the House of Government by thousands of unemployed people, workers, and sectors of the middle class in repudiation of the repression, forcing the government to advance the elections.

January 2003

4,000 unemployed workers from different organizations begin a 48-hour day of protest demanding the restitution of 10,000 employment plans, the expansion of benefits to include all unemployed people in the country, and an increase in benefits, doubling the amount received. Other groups of unemployed workers block the national highway in the North of the country for an entire week, demanding the recuperation of 500 Heads of Family plans. They lift the roadblock in response to the promise that representatives of the national government will come to the area to analyze the situation.

February 2003

Unemployed workers of the National *Piquetero* Block begin a new plan of struggle that will last for an entire month, with the blockage of highways and streets, marches and assemblies at the site of protests, demanding an increase in subsidies. They march to the national headquarters of Repsol - YPF where a rally is held. At the same time, other groups block the entrances to the Firestone and Coca Cola plants. The protest includes 36 picket lines at factories throughout the country.

Around 50,000 people, including members of human rights organizations, unemployed workers groups, and political parties march to the United States Embassy to demonstrate against the war.

Around 100,000 people called out by the Founding Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and other human rights, social, student, and unemployed workers organizations, along with assemblies and leftist parties march to the House of Government, 27 years after the end of the last military dictatorship.

April 2003

The fourth National Assembly of Employed and Unemployed Workers is held with the participation of more than 2,500 people.

More than 2,500 people gather in front of the Zanon factory (under workers' control) in order to prevent the evacuation ordered by law.

Around 300 police troops evict the women workers that have sustained the occupation and production under worker control of Brukman textile factory taken over in December, 2001, after the closure declared by the owners. Hundreds of neighbours, students, *piqueteros*, and leftist parties gather at the factory gate all day long and decide to hold a vigil. The following day, more than 7,000 people from barrio assemblies, unemployed worker organizations, student organizations, and leftist political parties march to Brukman. The workers tear down one of the police barriers closing off the factory and walk to the plant, where ferocious police repression is unleashed, with teargas and both rubber

and lead bullets. The repression leaves dozens wounded and more than a hundred arrested. During the night, people gather in front of the police stations in the area to demand the release of the prisoners. On the following day, 25,000 people join the Brukman workers in a new mobilization to the factory to repudiate the brutal repression and demand access to the workplace, installing a huge tent as a centre of resistance at the site.

One day later, protesters block the Pueyrredón Bridge and march through Buenos Aires in repudiation of the repression against the Brukman workers.

May 2003

A number of different actions are carried out throughout the country in commemoration of International Workers Day. Piqueteros and leftist parties bring more than 20,000 people together at a rally in the Plaza de Mayo across from the House of Government.

Néstor Kirchner is inaugurated as President.

Around 5,000 *piqueteros* march to the Plaza de Mayo to demand the inclusion of unemployed workers in the infrastructure plans announced by the government and the doubling of unemployed worker subsidies.

June 2003

Around 30,000 *piqueteros* march to the Plaza de Mayo to demand a response to the petition that they submitted to President Kirchner for the creation of genuine jobs, the expansion of employment plans to include all unemployed people, and a subsidy increase amounting to double unemployment benefits.

August 2003

The National Congress annuls the Full Stop and Due Obedience laws that, since the return of democratic regimes in 1983, had guaranteed the impunity of the military personnel responsible for State terrorism during the most recent military dictatorship.

More than 10,000 women march through the city of Rosario on the second day of the 23rd National Women's Encounter. The right to abortion and the right to a woman's own body is the main demand of the huge mobilization.

September 2003

Piqueteros block access to the ticket windows in subway stations in demand of a 6-hour day for workers in this sector and the creation of genuine job posts.

October 2003

Around 15,000 *piqueteros*, together with other organizations, march against the criminalization of social protest.

November 2003

More than 30,000 *piqueteros*, along with 30 other social organizations, march under the slogan of "For jobs and salaries, break with the IMF. No to the criminalization of protest."

The police dislodge *piqueteros* blocking the entrance to a distillery in the town of General Mosconi. People come out to hear live local radio reports of the repression. They take over an oil refinery and set fire to a fuel tank, go into Refinor and Tecpetrol company offices, throw out the computers, break them to pieces, and burn them on the highway. They also try to occupy two plants where the 8th Gendarmery is stationed; demonstrators are arrested. At night, they block the entrance to the city seeking the release of the people arrested.

December 2003

The events of December 2001 are remembered with various actions and marches, called for by different organizations (pro-government and government

critics), which bring out around 50,000 demonstrators. In the course of the action organized by the *piqueteros* critical of the government, the “hardliners,” a bomb explodes that was placed by State intelligence services, wounding 25 demonstrators.

2004

The *Piquetero* Movement’s activity begins to decline (see report).

APPENDIX 2: Different Currents and Organizations in the Movement

- **MTD “Aníbal Verón”:** This Unemployed Workers Movement with an autonomist orientation is a conglomerate of organizations divided into one wing that is more autonomist and another that is more populist. They are the best-known internationally, due to the repercussions of the killings of two young *piqueteros* by the police on June 26, 2002, during a peaceful manifestation that ended in repression, dozens of arrests, and the deaths of Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki.
- **Coordinadora de Unidad Barrial (CUBa):** The Neighbourhood Unity Coordinating Body was organized in mid-1995 by a small party of the Guevarist-populist tendency.
- **Unión de Trabajadores Desocupados “General Mosconi” (UTD):** The General Mosconi Unemployed Workers Union was founded in 1997; the main spokesperson is a former YPF worker. The union is now part of the communal government of General Mosconi, the oil town where the group emerged.
- **Federación de Tierra y Vivienda (FTV):** The Land and Housing Federation is linked to the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos, or Argentine Workers Central (CTA), whose Social Christian leader is Luis D’Elía, a participant in land takeovers in the 1980s. The FTV was formed in 1998 as a conglomerate of social organizations and is the largest organization of unemployed workers. It is now loyal to the current President, Néstor Kirchner.
- **Corriente Clasista y Combativa (CCC):** The Combative Classist Current founded in 1998 is linked to the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party, and its main leaders are Juan Carlos Alderete and Amancay Ardura.
- **Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez (MTR):** The Teresa Rodríguez Movement emerged in 1998 after a rupture in the Teresa Rodríguez Movement of Unemployed Workers.
- **Polo Obrero with ties to the Partido Obrero (PO):** The Trotskyist Workers’ Pole, is led by Néstor Pitrola, a former graphic worker. It was founded in 1999, but addressed itself to organizing unemployed workers in 2001.
- **Barrios de Pie:** Neighbourhoods Take a Stand, of the revolutionary nationalist tendency, was founded at the end of 2001. Its main spokesperson is the lawyer Jorge Ceballos, now a functionary in the National Ministry of Social Action.
- **Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Desocupados (MIJD):** The Independent Movement of Retired and Unemployed Workers is led by the populists Raúl Castells and his wife Nina Pelozo. The movement emerged from a rupture with the CCC in 2001.
- **Movimiento Territorial de Liberación (MTL):** The Territorial Liberation Movement was founded in mid-2001, uniting several small organizations linked to the Communist Party (PC). Their main spokesperson was Alberto Ibarra, an important neighbourhood leader from the PC. In 2004, he separated from the organization along with a group that has formed a nucleus with other smaller groups.
- **Frente de Trabajadores Combativos (FTC):** The Front of Combative Workers is divided into the FTC and the FTC-National Board, made up of Trotskyist groups.

