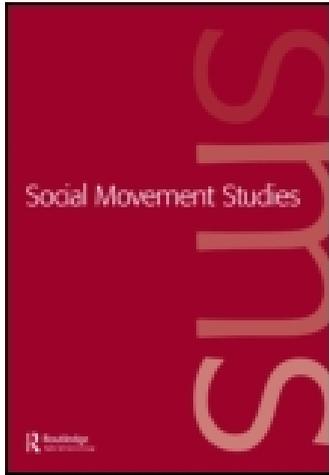


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Building Factories Without Bosses: The Movement of Worker-Managed Factories in Argentina

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ABSTRACT *In the 1990s and 2000s, Argentina suffered one of the quickest and most extreme processes of neoliberal state reforms in the world, leading to the closure of numerous factories. To resist the increased unemployment produced by neoliberalism, workers started to organize in a movement aimed at defending their only source of income: their labor. In this article, I analyze the main characteristics of the movement of worker-managed factories in Argentina by exploring how factories were occupied, what motivated the workers' decision to create co-operatives, what made the factories economically viable, how they were legitimated by the community, which legal reforms workers achieved to support their struggle, and how they manage their factories.*

KEY WORDS: Factory occupation, workers, co-operatives, neoliberalism, Argentina

In the 1990s and 2000s, Argentina suffered one of the quickest and most extreme processes of neoliberal state reforms in the world. Among other effects, this process led to the closure of several factories due to the increased importation of goods. As a result, in 1995, the rate of unemployment had reached 18.5%; in addition, only 7.1% of the unemployed were receiving any type of economic compensation, and only 1.3% of the economically active population was covered by unemployment benefits (Etchemendy, 2004, p. 282). These figures gave Argentina the second highest rate of unemployment in Latin America, just behind Nicaragua (McGuire, 1997, p. 222). To resist the increased unemployment produced by neoliberalism, the workers started to organize to defend their only source of income: their labor. In 1992, the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* was founded, and with it a new type of unionism began to organize resistance to exclusion at the neighborhood level. In 1996, a movement of unemployed workers emerged that organized pickets and massive mobilizations to demand unemployment subsidies and a return to the labor market. During the same period, workers began to occupy factories that were closing as a result of the economic crisis.

This article is based on a report I wrote for the المبادرة المصرية للحقوق الشخصية (Cairo, 2012).

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In 1998, the movement of worker-managed factories (known in Spanish as the *movimiento de fábricas recuperadas*) emerged when Metallurgical and Plastic Industries of Argentina (*Industrias Metalúrgicas y Plásticas de Argentina*, IMPA), a medium-sized factory, was occupied by its 190 workers to impede its closure. IMPA became a workers' co-operative and, with other organizations, promoted the coordination of a movement of occupied factories. Since that time, the movement has grown steadily, particularly after the 2001–2002 crisis. According to Ruggeri (2010), approximately 205 occupied factories now exist. The production areas covered by these factories and companies range from chocolate and baked goods to textile and metallurgic products. In most cases, the companies are small and medium-sized, but the movement also includes restaurants, schools, hospitals, and hotels. Several large factories are also worker-managed, such as Renacer (ex-Aurora, a home-appliances manufacturer with its own industrial port that currently produces washing machines, microwaves, and vacuum cleaners, and will soon manufacture flat TVs), the ex-Gatic factories *Textil Pigüé* and *Cooperativa Unidos por el Calzado* (the surviving units of the main textile company in Argentina that were able to restart the production of sneakers and T-shirts), and Zanón (a 400-person worker-managed factory that is the main ceramics producer and exporter in Argentina) (Lavaca, 2004; Magnani, 2003).

Since 2000, the movement has comprised two main organizations that join workers' efforts: the National Movement of Recovered Companies and the National Movement of Recovered Factories by Workers. The main difference between these two organizations is their relationship with political parties. Whereas the National Movement of Recovered Companies defines itself as political and has even gained one parliamentary seat, the National Movement of Recovered Factories by Workers considers itself a movement that only supports factories. Apart from their political affiliations, no practical differences exist between the two organizations, and the two have been supporting factory occupations in similar ways. Their main shared objective has been the reform of the Bankruptcy Law to favor the creation of co-operatives instead of selling the factory assets when a company fails. In other words, the organizations have been lobbying to change the law to stipulate that the right of employees to work is more important than the right of creditors to have debts honored (Lavaca, 2004, pp. 97–115).

Until 2003, a third organization existed, the National Commission of Recovered Factories, which had a short history focused on two factories: the textile company Brukman and the ceramics factory Zanón. These two factories were initially struggling for nationalization under workers' control. This alternative failed because nationalizing a factory in Argentina requires a constitutional reform altering property rights. The more moderate proposals of the other two organizations were successful because the only reform required to support workers' co-operatives was a national law. In addition, transferring the administration of the factory from the owners to the workers did not require a violation of property rights. Initially, the crucial issue for workers' legal success was demonstrating that a factory had gone bankrupt due to illegal mismanagement and asset stripping by the previous owners. If this was proven, the factory was subject to judiciary intervention and, with the new law, to workers' self-management (Bialakowsky, Grima, Costa, & López, 2005, pp. 367–368).

The purpose of this article is to offer a brief introduction to the movement of worker-managed factories for activists and scholars who are unfamiliar with Argentine politics. I briefly explain how factories were occupied, what motivated workers' decision to create co-operatives, what made the co-operatives economically viable, how the factories were

legitimated by the community, which legal reforms workers achieved to support their struggle, and how workers generally manage their factories.

How Factory Occupations Were Accomplished and the State Response

Factory occupations are part of the repertoire of contention of the labor movement in Argentina. There are several examples that predate the occupation of IMPA in 1998. In 1959, meat-packers occupied a meat-processing plant to stop its privatization. Between 1963 and 1965, the *Confederación General del Trabajo* coordinated 11,000 factory occupations as part of a national campaign. In 1974, 2,500 workers occupied the primary national metallurgical factory of Argentina. In 1985, the Ford factory was occupied by its workers and produced cars without management for almost one month (Basualdo, 2010). The legacy of these past struggles explains why the decision to occupy a failing factory presented itself as an option for many workers with political or trade unionist experience.

In general, the process of factory occupations has followed this series of steps: first, the workers observe an unusual behavior by the owners. For example, the owners underproduce, send workers on compulsory holidays, and take loans with the excuse of modernizing the factory, and machines are taken from the factory but no new ones are installed. Second, workers are paid less and asked to continue working under normal conditions although the executive board stops regularly appearing in their offices. In some cases, trade unions support workers' distress, and some mobilizations are organized. For example, the Quilmes branch of the *Unión Obrera Metalúrgica* (UOM) and the province of Buenos Aires *Federación Gráfica Bonaerense* supported factory occupations at IMPA and at printing companies such as Chilavert. In a few other cases, the journalists' union became involved in the struggle to stop the liquidation of media companies, such as the Córdoba newspaper *Comercio y Justicia* in 2004. In other cases, trade unions are compliant with the owners' asset-stripping strategy, with the expectation of securing some severance pay for the employees, as occurred with several tannery factories in Avellaneda. In some few cases, an organization of workers starts to emerge in the form of factory assemblies to discuss the situation. In many of the early factory occupations, the previous experience of some workers in trade union assemblies at the factory level, shantytowns and neighborhood associations linked to urban land occupations, and in Christian grassroots organizations was very important, in addition to the experience with guerrilla organizations such as the left-wing Peronist Montoneros. In Zanón, for example, factory-level assemblies were too controlled to be spaces for proposing radical strategies, and workers thus planned the factory occupation during football matches organized by the union delegates to create solidarity among workers (interviews with factory-based workers' leader, and lawyer and movement leader, 7 and 12 August 2013, Buenos Aires).

If the economic situation inside the factory worsens or the workers realize that an asset-stripping process is underway, the workers generally decide not to leave the factory. In most cases, workers take this step to be paid or to demand information about what is happening with the company. The owner's reaction typically has been to reply with an informal negotiation, offering money to some workers and promising to restart production soon. If workers do not divide themselves as a result of this offer or if the minimum number of workers necessary to continue factory operations is still mobilized, they can reject the owner's blackmail and continue occupying the factory. If this occurs, the owner appeals to the judiciary to use the police to expel workers from the factory. The networks

built by the workers during previous struggles are then crucial for securing a successful occupation. Workers affiliated with supportive political parties, trade unions, and/or other social movements will generally be able to build a supportive network that will provide them with a lawyer, money, food, and water for the occupation as well as favorable media coverage and the mobilization of the local community in support of the factory. The support of the UOM of Quilmes, the Trotskyists *Partido Obrero* and the *Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores* were particularly important, whereas the co-operative movement has not played any supportive role. In addition, other movements that emerged in this period were important for the factory occupations, such as the assemblies' movement of Buenos Aires. This movement coordinated neighborhood support for those factories undergoing difficult times. For instance, the Cid Campeador Popular Assembly supported the struggle of the textile factory Brukman to stop a violent eviction in 2002, and the Neighborhood Assembly of Palermo Viejo helped the bread-making factory Grissinopoli to sell their products to restaurants located in their neighborhood (Rossi, 2005). In general, factory occupation is a long process, typically lasting a year.

When the workers occupy the factory and restart production, they are always expelled from the factory by the police or paramilitary forces contracted by the factory owner. To succeed, they must demonstrate their will to make the factory produce again to the judge, by re-entering the factory with the support of other occupied factories, political parties, and trade unions. The judiciary then typically expels them once more at the request of creditors or the owner, at which point the workers re-enter the factory, or camp in front of the entrance. The workers' main goal is always to control all the entrances to the factory to stop any attempt by the management to sell the machines and assets, and thus impede the factory from continuing to work. The most common worker's strategies have been to organize barricades, camp inside or outside the building, organize human chains, and live inside buses parked across the entrance doors.

In all cases, the workers' main goal has been to re-enter the factory and restore productivity as soon as possible. Workers have mostly accomplished this illegally by re-entering the factory at night. For example, Chilavert workers were able to protect printing machines from being taken from the factory, thanks to coordination with IMPA, the UOM of Quilmes, and the assemblies' movement. While the workers stayed inside the factory, the doors were sealed by supporters outside, the media was called, and protests were organized in front of the factory. Later, when the workers were expelled from the factory following the judge's decision, they parked a school bus across the entrance of the factory, and workers slept there to impede the police who were there to take the machines from the factory.

As a result of legal changes since 2002, reoccupation can be completed through legitimate judicial procedures. However, no legal reforms would have been possible without worker disobedience to the old regulations. In the meantime, it is crucial for the successful legalization of the workers' occupation that a lawyer and other professionals (generally coming from the student movement of the University of Buenos Aires) find evidence that can convince the judge that the owner has illegally led his or her company to bankruptcy, which would allow for a swifter judicial expropriation of the company.

What Favored the Decision to Create Workers' Co-Operatives?

A factory occupation does not necessarily lead to the creation of a workers' co-operative, but in most cases in Argentina, workers decided to create co-operatives for pragmatic more than ideological reasons.¹ A co-operative is the cheapest possible commercial organization

in Argentina. It requires six members who can place 10% of the minimum legal salary in a common fund, which was approximately US\$45 in 2004, compared to the US\$300 necessary to establish a public corporation. In addition, new co-operatives are registered at the National Institute of Associative Activities and Social Economy, a small state department with a more favorable position toward the creation of workers' co-operatives than the National Institute of Co-operatives, which was reformed during the last dictatorship to produce a department closed to innovation. Finally, since the Bankruptcy Law was reformed, the only way of making an occupied factory economically viable is the creation of a new legal entity that does not respond to the mismanagement of the previous owner but allows the workers to restart production without having to pay the debts contracted by the former owner (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007, p. 654; Lavaca, 2004, pp. 22–23).

What Initially Made the Occupied Factories Economically Viable?

The key issue that makes an occupied factory viable is restarting production. The money required initially for the production process mostly originates from informal loans from other occupied factories and results from production *à façon*, which means that the factory receives materials and commodities from a contractor who is guaranteed exclusive rights to the manufactured goods. Production *à façon* allows production to continue without the need for capital. Production *à façon* is so relevant that 44% of the occupied factories were still using the system in 2003 (Rebón, 2005, p. 12). This type of production system predominates among textile and printing companies because raw materials are cheaper. Even in food production, for example, the chicken meatpacking company *Avícola Moreno* combines a mix of its own stock of chickens with processing from other companies' stock of animals. However, when materials are more expensive – such as aluminum – production may suffer from lack of supply. In the case of IMPA, production could be only temporarily recovered as a result of solidarity networks that collected aluminum waste to recycle it at IMPA into basic home utensils. In any case, this production system could only be applied when the workers could first protect the factory machines from being removed by a judge or the former owner.

Since 2005, dependence on *à façon* production has declined because the national government developed specific policies for the first time to support occupied factories that could establish a workers' co-operative. The Ministry of Social Development offers subsidies for specific projects that can improve the lives of workers, whereas the Ministry of Labor offers technical support to improve labor conditions and safety, provides unemployment subsidies for workers in a co-operative to sustain themselves during the first year of production, and subsidizes the purchase of consumables required to restart production. The process for making workers' co-operatives viable has thus been made much easier than before. However, these ministries play no role during the occupation process but are instead crucial for workers' efforts to build strong community relationships and solidarity networks.

Legitimacy Building and Community Relationships

The key to the sustainability of occupied factories is not only economic. Although workers must produce efficiently, balancing costs and quality, the initial stages of worker-occupied factories were determined by the development of a legitimization network. Legitimation networks refer to a series of community relationships with other factories, trade unions,

political parties, NGOs, and social movements that enable workers to occupy a factory with the political and social support of other more experienced groups. Occupied factories have frequently developed cultural centers to link their efforts with the local community and to maintain the factory building in use after working hours. This is so important that in a survey conducted in the City of Buenos Aires in 2011, Kasparian (2013, p. 4) found that 68% of the occupied factories were engaged in community-based activities. IMPA pioneered this approach, becoming one of the main theaters and cultural centers of the alternative scene in Buenos Aires. Grissinopoli, a food company, has also followed this trend, even making a film about its own history. In partnership with the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Buenos Aires, the publisher Chilavert hosts an archive and research center of occupied factories. Inside their buildings, IMPA and Chilavert have also opened small schools for young adults and workers who need to finish formal education. The hotel BAUEN is the main convention center used by social movements in Argentina, hosting hundreds of political events each year. Such solidarity has also worked inside the movement, where support among factories is common, including IMPA's help to Chilavert and the support that Chilavert has given to the small balloons factory *La Nueva Esperanza Global* since 2012 (interview with factory-based workers' leader, Buenos Aires, 7 August 2013).

International support was also provided with flexible loans given by the US-based NGO *La Base*. In addition, in many cases past relationships with suppliers and clients have enabled factories to continue production, thanks to the trust built across time, offering co-operatives some support during their transitional period. This was the case with *Avícola Moreno*, which continued receiving chickens from the usual suppliers as a way of supporting the company's continuity. In the case of the industrial ice-cream factory Vieytes (ex-Ghelco), it was crucial that it was able to buy sugar with flexible payment plans, and ice-cream shops continued buying from the factory (interviews with factory-based workers' leader, and lawyer and movement leader, 7 and 12 August 2013, Buenos Aires).

In all of these cases, linking the occupied factory with the community has helped the struggle in three main ways. First, it has informed the community about the workers' grievances and struggles and legitimated their methods. Second, it has incorporated a great variety of human capital due to the increased link with students, professionals, and artists from the middle classes. Finally, it has allowed for the production of a socially responsible company that not only uses worker-managed production methods but also offers the community cultural, social, educational, and health services (Lavaca, 2004, p. 24; Rebón, 2005, pp. 50–52).

Legal Reforms

In 2002 and 2010, the legal framework was changed as a result of the movement's call for the reform of Bankruptcy Law 24,522 to favor worker administration of 'broken' factories. Prior to the reform, the law stipulated that once a company failed, a judge would intervene to sell its assets to pay taxes and creditors. Following the reforms, the law now establishes an additional alternative solution to bankruptcy: the option exists for the continuation of the factory's activity as a co-operative created by the workers employed by the failed company. The co-operative can only be created if the company's employees formally express to the judge their will to continue exploiting the infrastructure of the factory. If the judge accepts the proposal, only one additional requirement exists to allow for a temporary

process of self-administration of the factory: the workers must pay the judiciary a fee for the use of the infrastructure (Bialakowsky et al., 2005, pp. 368–370). Since the 2010 reform, continuity is a right of workers, if they request it. Another important change is that the fee is now paid with the money owed to the workers by the failed corporation considering 100% of their non-paid salaries. These legal reforms were not copied from international models. Instead, the reforms were the result of legal expertise that was acquired by some movement leaders in the 1985–1986 wave of urban land occupations. During this wave, they learned how to successfully occupy private property, organize grassroots assemblies, and achieve legal expropriation in favor of the poor (interview with lawyer and movement leader, Buenos Aires, 12 August 2013).

The new law favored the broad expropriation in capitalist terms of the factories under occupation. For example, in Buenos Aires in 2004, the legislature simultaneously approved the expropriation of 13 factories. Because this was a capitalist expropriation, workers have 20 years to pay for the factory building and a portion of the bankruptcy costs. These payments are completed with the factories' profits and flexible loans provided by state-owned banks and state subsidies for co-operative production. In a few cases, such as Zanón, workers made no payments because the parliament of the Neuquén province decided to pay the factory's debts. However, in 2011 and 2012, attempts by the local parliament to expropriate 32 new factories (19 of them had been producing under worker management for over a decade) were twice vetoed by Mauricio Macri, the center-right mayor of the City of Buenos Aires.

It is important to emphasize that the movement of worker-managed factories started in 1998 with the occupation of IMPA, and the movement grew without having a favorable legal environment. However, no occupied factory could materialize as a legal co-operative until after this law was changed. The vast majority of the occupied factories were open, producing and selling their products, but they were not legally recognized as co-operatives before the law was revised. For example, Zanón was occupied in 2001 and restarted production in 2002 but could only gain legal recognition in 2004, and its definitive expropriation occurred in 2009, when it became Fa.Sin.Pat (*Fábrica Sin Patrones*, Factory Without Bosses). In sum, the legal reform was not crucial to the emergence and growth of the movement. The legitimation network built among trade unions, political parties, social movements, NGOs, and other factories was more important. However, the consolidation of the movement was a result of the legal reforms achieved in 2002 and 2010 by the movement and the institutional support that came from the center-left Peronist national governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner after 2005. Matters since then have become less contentious, with a legal and institutional framework that channels the bankrupt process toward workers' co-operatives when workers attempt to build a co-operative and present a viable economic plan – sometimes even with state support.

Management

Workers must acquire management knowledge to reorganize their factories. The introduction of a system of self-management implies a redesign of labor relationships and the structuring of productive processes to be efficient and avoid hierarchical management models. The main dimensions are: (i) the introduction of a participatory model of administration; (ii) the establishment of co-operative dynamics that are based on non-hierarchical relationships; (iii) the elaboration of an internal system of rules and

procedures that is the result of a common agreement among workers; and (iv) the rotation of duties and responsibilities with the goal of avoiding the distinction between intellectual and manual roles.

Two main innovations have emerged in the occupied factories. First, in two-thirds of the factories, all workers receive the same salary, regardless of whether they are in intellectual or manual positions (Rebón, 2005, p. 36). Second, regarding the decision-making process,

The assembly is considered as the main body for decisions and the place where each worker can freely express his/her opinion. The management council, elected by the assembly, is in charge of daily administration, commercial responsibilities, legal representation and executive tasks. (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007, p. 660)

Job rotation is part of the central principles of the movement, but only a few factories practice it. The goal is to improve capacity building among manual workers and to eliminate the division between manual and intellectual roles in a company (Rebón, 2005, p. 19). In this sense, Atzeni and Ghigliani (2007, p. 664) say

While the technical division of labour appears an improbable area for innovation, job rotation might have been considered to alleviate workers from routines and repetitive tasks. None of the productive units have adopted job rotation, [...] with the remarkable exceptions of FASINPAT/Zanón (ceramics), and to a lesser degree, Brukman (textiles).

However, these authors recognize that although job rotation is not easy,

The experience of self-management in a market economy forces the workers to take on commercial tasks: they have to become sellers of their production, find new markets, maintain commercial relationships with suppliers and customers, advertise their products, deal with banks, keep the books of the firm, and so forth. As white collar workers did not participate in the occupations, workers have had to cope somehow with these multiple commercial issues. [...] Indeed, this division between workers in charge of commercial/administrative tasks and those dedicated to production tends to be preserved and reinforced by obstacles to job rotation related to skill specialization. (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007, p. 662)

Therefore, in a sense, job re-qualification is needed to preserve the factory's productivity levels.

The elimination of the old managerial system does not mean the end of rules and regulations inside the factory. In other words,

the main characteristic of self-managed factories is the elimination of managerial and supervisory posts, and hence, of the former system of control. As a consequence of this, the relaxation of discipline is noticeable. In the absence of vertical disciplinary apparatus, individual responsibility is the value advocated by interviewees to ensure a smooth process of production. (Atzeni & Ghigliani, 2007, p. 665)

However, this new system has generally fashioned a new logic of control based on the moral responsibility of each worker and the assembly's punishment of those who violate a consensus-based system of rules and regulations.

Final Words

The movement of worker-managed factories in Argentina demonstrates that workers should not be resigned to capitalist determination of their working lives. Using the factory as a space for socialization and construction of alternative forms of management is possible. If workers aim to preserve their source of income and improve their quality of life with the introduction of less hierarchical, more participatory, and socially minded production systems, the occupation and self-management of factories is one option. A significant movement that promotes this goal could be built in Argentina because solidarity with the community could be created to make co-operatives economically viable and legitimize their method of protest. The main result of this movement has been the introduction of an alternative economic logic within a capitalist society, reducing the selfish principles of capitalism by introducing a discussion about the right to a decent life as the main social role of the national industry of Argentina.

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Note

1. The existence of more than one group in the movement is unrelated to the path that was taken by all the factories, but is relevant to their relationships with different support networks – some linked to left-wing parties and others to Peronist groups – and to personal conflicts among the leaders of this movement.

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