

# ***Piqueteros*** **(workers/unemployment movement in Argentina)**

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The *piqueteros*, or unemployed workers movement, is the main contentious actor in the resistance to the social consequences of neoliberalism and the struggle for reincorporation of the popular sectors (i.e., the poor and/or marginalized strata) into Argentina's political arena. The name *piqueteros* (picketers) is based on the type of protest that made this movement publicly known – the picket on the national roads. The origin and characteristics of the *piqueteros* movement are traceable to four main processes: (1) the social consequences of the collapse of industrialization by substitution of the imports model and the application of neoliberal reforms that produced a massive and fast deindustrialization from the 1980s; (2) the territorialization of politics since redemocratization as a result of the dissolution of the main corporatist arrangements for solving popular sectors' claims; (3) the adaptation to a democratic setting of left-wing groups that had participated in armed struggle during the 1970s; and (4) the creation of territories for political organization without risks for unemployed people, by some unions, human rights organizations, and Catholic Church dioceses in the 1980s and 1990s.

## ORIGIN AND GOALS

The *piqueteros* emerged in two petroleum enclaves, in the Patagonian province of Neuquén and in Salta on the border with Bolivia in 1996–1997 (Sánchez 1997; Auyero 2003). Later the movement diffused to the city of Buenos Aires and its suburbs through networks of militants of Christian-based

communities, left-wing groups such as the Movimiento Guevarista (MG), parties such as the Partido Comunista Revolucionario (PCR) and Patria Libre (PL), the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (CTA), and the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Rossi 2011: ch. 5). In 1996, 'The March against Hunger, Unemployment, and Repression' was organized by militants of the PCR, the Trotskyist Movimiento al Socialismo, and the Partido Comunista de Argentina (PCA) (Flores 2007). In 1997, the first pickets in suburban Buenos Aires that succeeded in getting unemployment subsidies were coordinated (Svampa & Pereyra 2003). Since then the movement has spread throughout the whole country and is associated with a multiplicity of social movement organizations (SMOs).

The main immediate goal of the *piqueteros* is to recover full employment for the urban poor. This goal is related to the quest for reincorporating the popular sectors in the political arena. In a mid- and long-term perspective, each SMO has diverse goals based on their ideologies and repertoires of strategies. Some SMOs claim revolutionary aims, while others expect gradual reforms in coalition with governments.

## THE MAIN SMOS

As with any movement, the *piqueteros* is composed of several SMOs (Table 1). This movement contains multiple ideologies but a common identity of "unemployed workers." Although the number of SMOs that compose the movement has gradually expanded, it began with three main groups: the Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados (MTDs), the Corriente Clasista y Combativa (CCC), and the Federación de Trabajadores por la Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat (FTV). Despite the ideological diversity of the movement, the *piqueteros*' rank-and-file share a Peronist, nostalgic, national-populist social matrix (Svampa & Pereyra

**Table 1** The *piqueteros* movement (2008)

<i>Main SMOs</i>	<i>Related political organization</i>	<i>Ideology</i>
Barríos de Pie (BP)	PL – Libres del Sur	National–populist (N–P)
CCC	PCR	Maoist
Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados “Aníbal Verón”	Movimiento Patriótico Revolucionario – Quebracho	N–P
Frente Popular “Darío Santillán”	None	Autonomist
FTV	CTA until 2006	N–P & Liberation Theology
Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Desocupados	None	N–P
Movimiento “Evita” (ME)	None	Left-wing Peronist
Movimiento Sin Trabajo “Teresa Vive”	Movimiento Socialista de Trabajadores	Trotskyist
MTD “Aníbal Verón”	MG	Guevarist
MTD of La Juanita	Alianza por una República de Iguales since 2007	Center-left
MTD of Solano & allies	None	Autonomist
MTD “Teresa Rodríguez” – Coordinadora de Unidad Barrial	MG & Partido Revolucionario de la Liberación	Guevarist & Trotskyist
Movimiento Territorial Liberación	PCA	Marxist–Leninist
Organización Barrial “Túpac Amaru”	CTA since 2003	N–P & Indigenist
Polo Obrero (PO)	Partido Obrero	Trotskyist
Unión de Trabajadores Desocupados of Mosconi	None	Syndicalist

2003: 195–196) that is part of Argentina’s popular sectors’ political culture.

#### THE PIQUETEROS’ INTERACTION WITH THE GOVERNMENT

The *piqueteros*’ relationship with the government had been mostly defined as a clientelistic one. However, recent studies showed that the picture is much more complex (Lodola 2005; Quirós 2006; Pereyra & Pérez 2008; Rossi 2011). The *piqueteros* use a wide collection of contentious and routine strategies.

The *piqueteros*’ contentious repertoire is related to the use of the picket as a tool for blocking the distribution of products. Their territorialized type of mobilization is a result of being linked to the urban land occupations of the 1980s (Merklen 2005). This strategy generally follows a sequence. First, mostly in association with the municipality or with

a local political organization, a *piqueteros* SMO organizes a picket by burning truck tires and putting tents in a road crucial for nearby companies in order to claim for unemployment subsidies and/or jobs. Second, usually under the decision of a federal judge, the Gendarmería (military police) arrive in order to secure the free transport of goods. Third, in most cases state brokers arrive at the picket site and negotiate with the SMO leaders in order to achieve a concerted solution. Fourth, if an agreement is achieved, the leaders will generally explain it to the people in the picket who will then deliberate in an assembly and vote on whether to accept the accord. Fifth, if unemployment subsidies are allocated, this will be done by the ministry of labor, as it is the responsible agency. In almost all cases the state will refuse to give actual jobs. Sixth, if the government is less eager to support the *piqueteros*’ request, the Gendarmería will usually repress the picket and secure traffic.

If such repression occurs in Buenos Aires, this will generally lead to supportive CTA strikes and/or mobilizations in front of the seat of government by other *piqueteros* SMOs, human rights and left-wing groups. Seventh, if the allocation of unemployment subsidies is effective, this will tend to produce more protests by the same and other SMOs.

The *piqueteros*' institutional politics repertoire is based on access to state positions. The FTV, BP, ME, PO, and the MTD of La Juanita have achieved legislative seats. The FTV and CCC have participated in the Peronist Eduardo Duhalde (2002–2003) presidency. The FTV, BP and ME have participated in the Peronists Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2011) presidencies. Due to strategic differences, the movement has been divided into two sectors since 2003. The social movement sector that has been participating in the governmental coalition is very much interested on accessing state positions. The other sector, which remained in opposition to the government, has been interested in establishing routine rapports with state agencies, but not in getting posts for their members. Overall, accessing the state has not meant participation in the employment public policy decision-making process. Rather, it has meant increased access to state resources and spaces for the noncontentious struggle to end or reduce the influence of neoliberalism in Argentina (Rossi 2011: ch. 7).

SEE ALSO: Labor movement; Labor movement in Latin America; Liberation theology/base communities (South America); Peronism (Argentina); Politics of grief and grieving “mothers” movements; Strikes within the European context; Strikes in US history.

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