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Argentina

# New frontiers of workers' control

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**December 19 and 20, 2001 were moments when a different history burst asunder previously held convictions. With anger in their throats, men and women left their homes and, demanding food and work, invaded the supermarkets and took over the highways. Police fired into the neighbourhoods, but the sounds of the pot-bangers, increasing in numbers, became louder and transformed these early discordant notes into a noisy sea that flowed through streets and city squares, breaking the state of siege and repelling the repression.**

[[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/31\\_Argentina\\_masses.jpg](https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/31_Argentina_masses.jpg)]

Young people changed their daily routines: many left their office jobs and went to the city centre to join thousands of others and participate in the battle of the Plaza de Mayo. It became normal, during these two days, to break the laws that had been imposed by governments, institutions and cliques of 'progressive' intellectuals.

It was an important event. The feeling of a break with the conventions of everyday life spread in the city streets and squares. At the same time, feelings of disillusionment with previous governments and institutions accumulated. This was a heightening of consciousness and a deepening of the people's experiences of spontaneous struggle. However, to go beyond this, in the short term, we are required to turn to history to understand the genesis of possible future developments in the struggle.

A government, elected within the framework of a democracy "which cost us so much", (laments a chorus of respectable historians), was overthrown by forces that had, until then, received little recognition in most academic reports.

The questioning of the old style politics crystallized around the popular slogan "They should all go!" which challenged the ideas of the UCR, PJ, and Frepaso [1] - organizations that had been formed within the structures of so-called 'representative' democracy. However, today it's easy to see the limitations of the events of the days of December: it was not possible to prevent the old parties, who were trying to save themselves in the crises, installing a new government, with themselves in power. Now, they wish to convert the slogan "They should all go!" into a well-arranged cosmetic modification of electoral images whereby nothing changes.

## **Destruction of productive forces**

The statistics and numbers in Argentina seem to have lost all sense of meaning: in the last months alone, a million and a half new poor, eighteen million below the poverty line, firings from jobs by the minute. Men and women are being driven into a corner. On the outskirts of Rosario, cattle have been slaughtered on the highway. In the city, cardboard collectors ('cartoneros') have organized themselves, with their wooden handcarts, claiming the 'right' to go through city refuse. All these are expressions of a social desperation that grows day by day.

Currency devaluation, like a voracious monster, has accelerated the process of decline; the economic crisis devours everything - food, housing, hospital supplies, wages, while thousands of tons of grain and cereals remain in storage in the silos at the ports, along with petroleum and gas, all the fruits from the land. Along with steel, fabrics, bricks and telephone cables, they are all there.

Thousands of factories and businesses are in a state of financial collapse or economic crisis. Since Duhalde took

over the government, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost. Wages have fallen by more than 50%. The public health system is in its death throes. An enormous destruction of the country's productive forces continues to unfold. Working men and women, the main productive force in the economy, are suffering the full weight of this decline.

It is a crisis of Argentine capitalism. Its irrationality condemns millions to misery, while a group of bankers together with their allies in the international financial organizations blackmail the government to the point of humiliation, claiming that the economy is at a 'sustainable level'. The crisis is not one of a particular 'model' or a political mistake but is the result of the anarchy of capitalist production in a dependent country that knew how to get 'good marks' from the world's capitalist establishment. It is ridiculous for some intellectuals who seek to 'regulate' capitalism or to find 'more humane' forms of distribution, to not question imperialism's domination of the country in the interests of the big banks and the foreign and national monopolies.

## Workers absent as 'social factor'

During December 19 and 20, the majority of workers, who were not part of the mobilisation, nevertheless witnessed what was taking place. In a factory in the area of Villa Constitucion, for example, between shifts, groups of workers came together to discuss what was being shown on television: they could see the attacks on the women, on the young people who filled the square. They witnessed the resignation of Cavallo and the setting up of the first precarious barricades. "Tomorrow we will stop": it seemed a possibility.

However, the next day was different, with a President fleeing by air from the heliport at the Casa Rosada, the Presidential Palace. The union bureaucracies, 'official' and 'dissident', suspended a previously announced general strike. The big factories continued working as usual, until the end of December.

The working class was not functioning as an organic factor or as a class during these days of crisis. By saying this, I am speaking quantitatively, as an aggregation of the numbers present, but in the sense that it was absent as a 'social factor'.

As Marxists, we are certain of the historical strength of the working class and see it as the privileged agent of the revolutionary transformation of society that goes beyond appearances and conjunctural forms. We are not looking for theoretical shortcuts to define 'new social subjects', nor are we interested in chit-chat about 'the end of work'. As such, those who say these things wish to bury the concept of workers and entomb it along with the category of class, these are fruitless intentions eating up thousands of printed pages, and quite a lot of dollars in the process.

At the beginning of this century in Argentina, the entrance onto the historic stage by this enormous social force, in unity with the whole of the poor, recreating their own methods of struggle and traditions, is still posed. We wish to contribute to building a history that rests upon these social forces, which breaks from the discourses mentioned above, which demystifies them and goes beyond the walls of academia and its institutions to forge a new, militant history. We wish to come to grips with the present day processes, in this case the experience of many groups of workers who are now providing us with signs of a new way forward out of the impasse.

## Hundreds of factories occupied

As a result of the economic crisis there is the beginning of a new and precise phenomenon appearing in the

economy: workers, faced with the terrible alternative of unemployment as a result of the closures or financial collapse, are occupying their work-places, seizing the machinery and refusing to leave. In some places, management have abandoned businesses because of the crisis. "We are not going", the workers say. In spite of all the 'evidence' presented to them to get them to leave, the workers are not submitting to giving up their only source of work. There are hundreds of workplaces occupied by their workers. We are able to see in these actions new important issues that should be discussed by militants.

When the acuteness of the economic crisis shakes the 'normal' functioning of capital, to survive, owners can often develop, from 'the margins' so to speak, economic forms that do not respond entirely to the needs of the characteristic capitalist relations, such as cooperatives and exchange clubs. While these cannot be sustained indefinitely under the hard law of value and competition, in the present economic impasse they can grow like mushrooms. Thus, there are some owners, who together with union bureaucrats and the Church, promote the formation of 'mixtures' of cooperative and conventional work in specific locales. They seek to dump the crisis onto the backs of their workers, and try to prevent the workers from taking even one small step outside capitalist legality.

Nevertheless, alongside the phenomenon of cooperatives in Argentina, other processes are developing that are quite different from these, which directly question capitalist relations. This can be seen in the experiences of the occupation of the factories of Ingenio la Esperanza in Jujuy, the Baskonia in Matanza, Impa, Panificacion 5 and Clinica Junin in Cordoba and Zanon and Brukman. It is worth examining the actions of these workers.

When a group of workers stand firm on the idea of producing 'without bosses', aren't we now face-to-face with the beginning of a new worker consciousness and a new experience compared to what has gone before? Aren't the secrets of capitalist functioning revealed when production is not moulded according to the need for capitalist profit, but is organized according to the needs of the producers? In recent months, two factories, the ceramic company, Zanon de Neuquen and the textile company, Brukman of Buenos Aires, have begun to be points of reference for these new phenomena, places that are in production under workers' control and where workers are in a struggle for the nationalization or expropriation by the state of their factories. These workers are being forced by events to think profoundly about the power of the workers' movement as a class that begins to take into its own hands the resolution of its own destiny.

### 'Under Workers' Control'

The struggle of the workers in the Zanon ceramic factory is an immediate example of this change. For over four months the ceramic workers have printed three important words on the wrapping paper of the factory's products: 'Under Workers' Control', this in a factory with one of the most modern porcelain production lines in South America, which is a large user of clay, gas energy and a highly modern industrial process of production.

The unique character of these actions by ceramic workers is revealed to the broader community in many small ways. For example, they are producing a special limited edition line of ceramic products dedicated to the movement of unemployed workers of Neuquen. For many months, unemployed workers have supported the struggles of the ceramic workers. Another ceramic line of products is decorated with designs of the Mapuche indigenous people, to honour the communities in the area of the country that provides clay to the factory. A ceramic object is a ceramic object, but not only that.

The provincial energy company has demanded that the ceramic workers pay a debt of 100,000 pesos, when the same company never pressured the owner of Zanon to pay an outstanding debt of \$500,000. The gas company plays its part in pursuing the workers and the state trustee responds with a demand for the removal of the workers from the factory through the intervention of the state's repressive forces. Also, a mafia gang in collusion with the police, organized a kidnapping, committed robberies and has threatened the workers. The occupation also provides

an example of a state defending capital's interests beyond its own frontiers: an official communiqué from the Italian embassy in Argentina to the Duhalde government demands that the government intervene against the 300 workers.

Why would so many forces conspire to get rid of a group of workers who only wish to work? The challenge to the authorities posed by the Zanon workers is immense because it's possible their example might be taken up by others in face of the magnitude of the capitalist crisis.

More than 1200 kilometres away from the Zanon ceramic factory in Neuquen's industrial park, the Brukman textile factory in Buenos Aires, which makes ready-to-wear clothes, is still operating under the control of the painstakingly skilful hands of its male and female workers. On March 17, 2002 people from the area around the factory, students and workers from the assembly in neighbourhood Eleven of the Federal Capital, chanted: 'Brukman is for the workers'. On May 1, 2002, a demonstration of over a thousand people was organized in front of the doors of the Zanon factory. It was made up of delegations from the Brukman factory in Buenos Aires, ceramic workers, state employees, teachers, delegations from the hospitals of Neuquen, along with students, the MTD [\[2\]](#) and many left organizations.

## What is workers control?

The laws of capitalism function on the basis of a separation of the waged workers from the products of their labour and their lack of control over their working conditions.

"The externalisation [Entausserung] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and beings to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien". (Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', Manuscript 1).

The worker is not only alienated in regards to what he has produced, but also in respect to his own productive process: "... the product is simply the resume of the activity, of the production. So if the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. The estrangement of the object of labour merely summarizes the estrangement, the alienation in the activity of labour itself". (ibid.)

Workers' control inside a factory begins to question this separation, as does the occupation of a particular business. It asks: who has the power in this factory? It can begin in a discrete way, such as in the control exercised by the workers over their working conditions, or over aspects of the organization of production, for example, to control the implementation of better safety conditions in the workplace and in the demand for opening the enterprise's account books for examination by the workers when a particular capitalist declares 'a crisis', to reveal the hidden practices of capitalist business.

What is being exercised in these instances is control. The word 'control' is understood here to refer to the task of observation, or the struggle to change the actions of others, in this case of the bosses, who exercise their power in the factory. Workers' control then begins to install dual power at the level of the enterprise while ownership remains in the hands of the capitalist, who is now confronted with the deeds of the producers.

There is a rich experience of examples of factory production under workers' control in history. In our country, during the 1970's, the experience of PASA in an area north of greater Rosario, is worth examination. For a month, in July

and August, 1974, there was the "taking over the factory with workers' control and management of production", and the formation of committees for production and security and so on, based upon the practices of workers' democracy.

In the cases of Zanon and Brukman, those who previously managed the factories are not present. Workers' control has reached a level there where it takes in the direct management of all production, including the marketing function.

In the Zanon factory, the workers now decide how to manage the factory's operations themselves by means of resolutions which are adopted in general assemblies of the workers, and in meetings of individual departments, where decisions are made about such issues as time of work, how to prepare new ceramic models for production, how to acquire the best materials and factory security and so on. Thus, the workers as a class have established a new form of solidarity that allows them to take steps towards self-determination.

Workers' control has revealed to the workers the secrets of capitalist exploitation. For example, during these recent months, the true function of the majority of earlier supervisors and managers of the enterprise during so-called, 'normal', periods, has been exposed: rather than guiding the productive process, their function was to maintain a permanent despotism over the workers and their work. In only two days of labour, the Zanon workers produced sufficient ceramics for a monetary value higher than the cost of the workers' wages for a whole month. This experience shows that at the level of an establishment, workers can control their own destiny and govern themselves.

## Cooperatives or Workers' Control?

However, a cooperative or a factory, occupied and producing goods under workers' control, isolated like a boat on an ocean of capitalist relationships of production, cannot maintain itself indefinitely. Everywhere in Argentina, there are examples of cooperatives, which although they have not 'perished' under the pressure of capitalist competition, have ended up super-exploiting their workers, more than in other factories. Alternatively, they collapse under the weight of the factory's debt or the impossibility of marketing their products. A cooperative isolated within the framework of capitalist relations, has no future: it is limited to trying to apply old reformist illusions about capital.

The difference between the cooperatives - which sections of the Church and the bureaucracy are promoting - and the cases of workers' control in the Zanon and Brukman factories is clear. The first, well-known, difference is that in the ceramic factory, the workers' wages have priority and are at a dignified level. The salaries of the Zanon workers are at a level of around 700 pesos, whilst in the majority of the cooperatives, the salaries of the workers are miserably low. In these latter cooperatives, this can be due to the level of salaries having been set for 'normal times' and they don't produce what is needed, or it may be because the management has decided to lower the wages of their own workers to allow their factory to continue functioning under the weight of their debt.

Wages, a minimum right of the slaves of production in capitalist society, tend not to be respected when the bosses are faced with an economic crisis. It is their way of counteracting the fall in profits. In the cooperatives, the capitalist logic of absolute capital appreciation, of reducing wages below a subsistence level and extending the working day, tend to be cruelly imposed on their own and associated workers.

In the cases of the Zanon and Brukman factories, the workers are refusing to take over the bosses' debts and are demanding the expropriation by the state of the factories without compensation to their owners, and their nationalization, while maintaining workers' control over production.

The struggle for the nationalization of the factories under workers' control denotes the unique possibility of rapidly incorporating more workers into the work force, and not allowing the factories to reopen with fewer, at a time when unemployment is increasing massively. Through the use of the business' current fixed capital, the Zanon workers, like those at Brukman, have worked out concrete proposals to permit the hiring of more workers into their ceramic factory.

Unused industrial capacity is a product of the economic crisis in Argentina. If the factories were nationalized, more workers could be hired under an overall plan for production. Whether a factory should produce or not, should not be subordinated to the interests of individual capitalists. The economy could produce according to the needs of the population through a programme of public works and through the building of homes, schools and hospitals.

The cooperatives, on the other hand, seem to be a way out of the crisis, but only for older workers, and only if it turns out well from the point of view of the capitalists (it is not important to them if those who buy their products are poor or rich nor if they have unmet needs). These establishments are able to take on new workers, and in those cases where they do, they always provide worse conditions than before, where the new workers don't become 'members' of the cooperative, but enter into a relationship of becoming employees of the members of the original cooperative.

The workers of the Zanon factory are trying to go down a different road as seen in their alliance with the unemployed of the MTD of Neuquen, of trying to obtain work for everyone. To make the idea of unity between the employed and the unemployed a reality, the Zanon workers are now discussing how to hire, from the different organizations (proportionate to their size) of the unemployed in the region, another 100 workers into Zanon's 'training school'.

## Unity of the oppressed

Questions that need to be researched and thought about deeply on this issue are the following: can these experiences of workers' control be sustained for an indefinite time? Is there room for the peaceful and evolutionary multiplication of experiences of 'workers' self-management', as local counter-forces to the power of capital? We can see some of the answers to this in the ferocious conspiracy of the owners, the provincial and national states, the forces of repression and the union bureaucracy against the Zanon ceramic workers.

If the phenomenon of workers' control does not spread, at least to the many hundreds of factories of the main industrial businesses, how will the workers be able to resist the attacks of their class enemies? Can there be a future for this experience, if it is not defended by other workers in the area, by the unemployed organizations and by neighbours and students, who should be taking up this cause as their own?

However, to achieve this unity, it is necessary to overcome the barriers that exist between the workers and the rest of the community, between the unemployed and employed workers, barriers imposed by the old union apparatus. Finally, it is necessary to develop a true unity between the workers and the poor people, confronting the divisions between them made 'normal' by the reproduction of the relationships developed under capitalist exploitation.

The Zanon workers, from the SOECN, [3] are trying to overcome these barriers. Their alliance with the MTD is an expression of this. Their proposal to constitute a coordinating committee made up of regional workers and the unemployed, based in assemblies and under control of the rank and file, also points in this direction, a concept that is advanced with the structure of the Coordinating Committee of Alto Valle (Rio Negro and Neuquen). Their demand for the nationalization of the factory under workers' control and a programme of public works to open up sources of employment and to cover the most basic needs of the population also solidifies the potential of this kind of alliance with other popular sectors.

However, to achieve this level of worker and popular unity, organically, on the scale of a province, or at the level of the whole country, we would be seeing a high point in the class struggle where bourgeois power would be questioned on a broad and deep level, bringing with it growing confrontation by the workers, not only with the employers, but with the union bureaucracy and the state.

Moreover, we understand that workers' control can be only an episodic moment in an advanced revolutionary process, or grows into a great experience that prepares the workers for the struggles to come. Precisely by this contradictory dynamic, workers' control is seen to be an enormously intense school of economic planning and anti-capitalist struggle. It demonstrates that workers can direct the whole economy, and to do this, it is necessary to expropriate the capitalist owners and confront their state and repressive forces. It also shows the need for the unity of workers as a class with the rest of the oppressed sectors of the population, in new democratic organizations such as coordinating committees that overcome the narrow frameworks of the old trade unions.

## 'Self-management' of crisis or socialization of wealth?

At present, in Argentina, unique experiences are appearing, where we see many workers, some of the unemployed or 'neighbours' in the popular assemblies, having to take into their own hands the methods needed to reduce the sharpness of the economic and social crisis. Popular assemblies in the Federal Capital and in Rosario have proposed the creation of community vegetable gardens or community kitchens and medical clinics in the neighbourhoods to try to solve the problems of hunger and the health crisis.

Some unemployed organizations such as the MTD of Solano and the Coordinating Committee of Anibal Veron are working with small businesses such as bakeries, brick makers and shoemakers with regard to plans for work or for providing subsidies to the unemployed.

The examples of the cooperatives already mentioned, are being promoted in many areas by the CTA [\[4\]](#) and sectors of the Church or in some factories, by their own workforces. In some hospitals, representatives of neighbourhoods, along with doctors and nurses are discussing the need for co-management together with the authorities.

Taking advantage of these tendencies, organizations such as FRENAPO [\[5\]](#) are promoting the idea of the 'participatory budget', a project the municipality of Rosario has voted for, following the example of Porto Alegre in Brazil. This concept, which is being proposed to the popular assemblies, calls on them to subordinate themselves to the state organizations and allow them 'to decide' how in some minor areas, the budget would be shared.

After so many years of passivity and waiting for solutions to come from on high, the tendency of the workers, the unemployed and neighbourhoods, to take into their own hands the resolution of their own problems, is a huge step forward. Nevertheless, a question still posed is whether the workers will be satisfied with the 'self-management' of the crisis or strive for the enjoyment by the majority of all of the social wealth.

In many cooperatives, as we have explained before, in order to survive, the workers have had their salaries severely reduced or they end up being enslaved, working more than twelve hours a day. For example, in the small enterprises set up as a scheme to provide employment for the unemployed, the workers there only receive a miserable 150 Lecop. [\[6\]](#) Thus there are millions of workers and unemployed who continue to suffer the agonies of the capitalist crisis.



Only by the working class seeking to take control of the whole economy, to self-manage the totality of production and distribution, is it possible to think of a dignified future for these millions. Self-management experiments which do not question the totality of capitalist social relations and which try to install 'alternative' enclaves in the economy in the middle of the misery of capitalist exploitation cannot be more than momentary illusions of hope, and are destined to fail.

A huge contradiction of capitalism is that which arises between the systems of capitalist planning inside the factory and the anarchy of production taken as a whole. Planning inside the factory is pure despotism and exploitation of the workers. Workers' control confronts this bosses' power.

Capitalist anarchy, which is born out of individual capitalists producing according to their greed for profits and not social needs, is causing, on the one hand, misery and on the other, over-production. At one pole, we have the starvation of millions, at the other, the private appropriation of enormous riches that have been socially produced. Only by questioning the whole of capitalist relations as an economic totality can there be hope of a dignified future for millions, with the vision of a society of freely associated producers, in other words, communism.

*Article taken from Rebellion Internacional. Translation: Jess MacKenzie and Ernest Tate*

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[1] UCR - Union Civica Radical;

PJ - Partido Justicialista;

Frepasso - a centre left coalition which put Fernando de la Rúa in office in 1999.

[2] MTD - Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados.

[3] SOECN - ceramic workers' union.

[4] CTA - Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos, the main trade union federation.

[5] FRENAPO - Frente Nacional contra la Pobreza.

[6] Lecop - the new Argentine parallel currency.