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Argentina

Old and new forms of struggle

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV328 - February 2001 -

Publication date: Saturday 10 February 2001

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In the final days of November 2000 workers in Argentina observed a 36-hour General Strike, called by the country's three major trade union federations. New forms of struggle were used that grew out of the past and were generalised in this strike. This article attempts to give an account of these events.

For the third time in its current term - less than one year - the Argentine Government has had to face a general strike, with marches, protests and street meetings jamming the streets, roads and means of communication throughout the country in a combination of old and new forms of struggle and organisation corresponding to the transformations going on within Argentinean capitalism.

The capitalist restructuring that has taken place in the country since the mid-1970s acquired a vertiginous rhythm in the 1990s leading to profound changes in the socio-economic structure of Argentina. In opposition to this violent process of change, there has been a spreading of resistance throughout the whole country in the last decade. However, this enormous social conflict has never had a centralising focus that could guarantee its continuity. On the contrary fragmentation and dispersion were its characteristics, despite the numerous struggles and general strikes that also took place in the period.

This combination had a strong impact however on the relations of state and civil society and in the mediations of the traditional system of representation. The parties, the institutions of parliamentary democracy and the unions, had all internalised the crisis of the interventionist state [1] characteristic of populism and proved unable to channel social conflict, or at least encountered serious difficulties in doing so. In an economic and political context that differed from the previous period, the social movement has searched for new paths through which to raise and express its resistance to the advance of the neo-liberal order that day-by-day reduces the living conditions of the workers and lower classes.

The so-called *cortes de ruta* (mass roadblocks) which first appeared at the beginning of the 1990s have extended to practically every part of the country - in large and medium sized cities, localities and towns, and rural areas. They appeared as the form of autonomous self-organisation characteristic of this period, used by part of society to express resistance to conditions of increasing day-to-day impoverishment.

According to a recent study by the liberal Centre of Studies of the New Majority, "the *cortes de ruta* are replacing strikes... as an expression of social protest". This is expressed in the following figures.

Industrial conflicts reached a peak in the period 1986/89, climbing to 3,575, falling in 1990/94 to 2,222 and in 1995/2000 to 1,228. On the other hand the evolution of the *cortes* showed the following sequence: 1997:140; 1998: 51; 1999: 252 and in the first ten months of 2000: 238.

"The average appearance of a *corte de ruta* has been one every 2.6 days in 1997, one every 7.1 in 1998, one every 1.4 last year and so far this year one every 1.2 days" [2]

Although this data expresses the magnitude and the evolution of the distinct forms of struggle throughout the decade, in our view it does not point to the disappearance or the loss of centrality of the conflict between capital and labour or the consequent social relations engendered by the capitalist mode of production. Rather it shows that they are being expressed in new forms.

Faced with structural unemployment and the exclusion from production and consumption of increasingly large sectors of society, faced with insecurity and the despotism of the bosses which reigns in the factories and workplaces, the workers and popular sectors meet serious and growing difficulties in acting in the centres of production and accumulation of capital.

Hence they concentrate on disrupting the distribution and circulation of commodities and persons, thus preventing, at least temporarily, the realisation of profit. It is clear that we are not talking of a conscious act, but rather an objective process, combining the struggle of the employed against capitalist exploitation and those excluded from production and consumption.

In practice these new modalities of action produce a reconfiguration and relocation of the boundaries of social confrontation.

Other studies [3] question what they call a "superficial vision" that assigns the motor role in the cortes only to the structurally unemployed demanding work. In fact the forces driving the cortes include a variety of social subjects according to the objectives being pursued in each case.

These include workers (employed or not), the structurally unemployed and diverse fractions of the petty bourgeoisie - farmers or raisers of livestock, small businesses, students - who have mobilised in order to keep their jobs or subsidies for working class communities: against arrears in pay or reductions of salary: in support of demands for reductions in taxes: for easy credit: for the reconnection of public services cut off for non payment (gas and electricity): for the creation of jobs, for diverse state subsidies (food, medicine, clothing, building materials, hospitals, transport, the refurbishment of public schools, the paving of streets) that improve the quality of life of the people.

All of this has built a unity of demands which is articulated in a complex form - some demands through their immediate character cannot go beyond the level of existing political consciousness but others exceed it - those which demand changes in policy at the state, provincial or local level. In many cases this diversity of subjects and demands comes together in a single corte leading to a mobilisation with strong popular support.

This is particularly the case for cortes in medium sized cities which have developed around a hegemonic activity - mineral, oil, railways, oil - in general centralised in a state enterprise. [4] The policy of privatisation altered in a very short time the order of things established over many decades leaving the working population unprotected and vulnerable - in many cases highly qualified and previously protected through labour stability (typical of this were the cases of Cutral Co-Plaza Huinca, privatisation of FYPF; Sierra Grande, privatisation of HIPASAM; Libertador Gral San Martín, the technological reconversion of Ing.Ledesma; Tartagal and the privatisation of Petroquímica Gral, Mosconi.)

The transfer without mediation of activities from the public sector to the private and market deregulation have accentuated social fragmentation, poverty and marginalization. This process converted areas that had previously made great social progress into ghost towns without hope or a future.

New forms of struggle have always been accompanied by new organisational forms.

If the corte has as its central novelty the reconfiguration/relocation of the area of struggle, its organisational forms are no less significant; the picket and the assembly.

The picket, the central nucleus of the corte, is formed by a group of men and women who organise it and assume

responsibility for maintaining it, although not necessarily leading it. Because the sphere of decision making is the general assembly, plural and democratic, with the participation of thousands of people coming together in a plenary session of direct democracy. Here proposals and demands are debated and a consensus is articulated, proposals are established, collective identities and new ideas are constructed, in many cases transitory ones as the crisis sometimes obliges them to be reviewed.

In the spreading wave of *cortes de rutas* that unfolded during the months of last October and November which constituted the prelude to the 36 hour General Strike, the level of organisation was superior to any known up until then.

If there is a debate regarding the spontaneous character and organisation of the *cortes*— what has been appreciated in the course of the last few months is that, with the deepening of the national crisis, the spontaneous component was decreasing and an inverse rise of organisation was evident.

This was particularly evident in the *cortes* seen in the province of Buenos Aires, in the industrial area a few kilometres from the federal capital and in the provincial capital, where for many hours the city of La Plata was virtually cut off from all connections overland. In La Matanza, an overpopulated zone in the west of the Buenos Aires urban conurbation—the *corte* lasted ten days and according to some accounts involved between four and seven thousand people. The changes of picket duty, the internal order established, the social control, the massive assemblies discussing a global program of demands, going far beyond demands for subsidies, were among the outstanding features here.

Diverse political currents participated, including local leaders of the major parties of the system and a sort of alliance was established with the organised workers in the region. But this did not change the character of the *cortes*. They constituted an autonomous movement that exceeded the boundaries of both union and party.

In the zone south of the Buenos Aires urban conurbation, Quilmes, Lanus, Almirante Brown, other *cortes* advanced their political definitions and came together with their own demands, the demand for freedom and the dropping of charges against social leaders as well as a call for a general strike of 36 hours. In some cases, they questioned the participation of local political officials of the majority parties; reaffirming its autonomy, the assembly of the *corte* refused to accept the mediation of local community leaders as well as that of the church.

In general, the *cortes* received the support of the public and thus obtained a legitimacy for the use of social force in raising popular demands. They also showed a growing will to struggle and a readiness to confront the repressive forces, as is also shown by the covered faces of the pickets, armed with sticks and slingshots.

The recent general strike in Argentina was a response by the workers' organisations to a new package of socio-economic measures that were clearly anti-worker and anti-popular, but it was also preceded by a wave of *cortes* during October and November that expressed the despair of facing an uncertain future. It is because of this reality that the general strike received more support than any in the past decade and was accompanied by a multiplicity of marches, acts of protest and *cortes* the likes of which have not been seen for a long time. The old forms of struggle fused with the new, with the workers organised and acting in a centralised and disciplined way.

Argentina is passing through a dangerous period. The foreign debt is growing faster than an economy and demands permanent adjustment; the political crisis renders the institutions of bourgeois democracy exceedingly weak; the social conflict grows day by day in explosive forms; but the social movement has not yet created a political force capable of facing up to the challenge.

The future is open.

Buenos Aires, December 2000

[1] The form taken by the welfare state in Latin America and particularly in Argentina.

[2] "In conclusion, a global view of the phenomenon of social protest in the last two decades shows that:

- a) During the 1980s, the predominant expression of social protest was labour conflicts— with the unions making claims for higher wages.
- b) At the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, actions characteristic of non-unionised sectors who faced desperation generated by hyperinflation, came to be the predominant expression of social protest.
- c) In the second half of the 90s, wage struggles had subsided before the gravity of unemployment and the chronically unemployed started to use the corte de ruta as their predominant expression of social protest, a situation which lasted until the early months of 2000".

Centro de Estudios Nueva Mayoría - Bs.As., October 2000.

[3] Nicolás Iñigo Carrera/Maria Celia Cotarelo, "Los llamados 'cortes de ruta'" - Argentina 1993-1997. Documento de trabajo n° 14 - PIMSA. Bs.As. 1998. Nicolás Iñigo Carrera/Maria Celia Cotarelo, "La protesta social en los '90. Aproximaciones a una caracterización". Documento de Trabajo n°27. PIMSA. Bs.As. 2000.

[4] O. Favaro/M.A.Bucciarelli/G. Luorno, "La conflictividad social en Neuquen. El movimiento cutralquense y los nuevos sujetos sociales". Realidad Económica n° 148 - Bs.As. mayo-junio 1997.