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**In the Shadow of the Neoliberal Reforms**

The Cycle of the Mobilization of the Unemployed in Argentina

Juan Carlos Torre



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# In the Shadow of the Neoliberal Reforms: The Cycle of the Mobilization of the Unemployed in Argentina

Juan Carlos Torre

## Abstract

For many years social studies classified the mobilization of the unemployed as a highly unlikely phenomenon; it was argued that the loss of jobs generates individual apathy, resignation and impotence. In the last twenty years, this conclusion has been the object of substantial revision. The reason is well known: the rebellion of the unemployed has become a reality in many countries, as it was the case in Argentina in recent years. This unexpected development had roots in the specific development of the country's economy and society in the post-World War Two era. In the context of the neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, and their aftermath, the emergence of this movement had tremendous consequences for social equality, even today. This paper presents the specific factors which gave rise to this movement, its peak, and subsequent decline. Throughout, the focus is on the consequence for inequality among workers and in society.

**Keywords:** unemployment | mobilization | Argentina

## Biographical Notes

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## Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>The Road Towards Neoliberal Reforms</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Transformations in the World of Labor</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>The Unemployed at Bay</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>The Unemployed on the Move</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Marginality and Poverty in Greater Buenos Aires: Clientistic Networks and their First Challengers</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>The Role of Activists in the Organization of the Unemployed</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>Political Sources of the Mobilization of the Unemployed</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>9.</b>	<b>The Waves of Protest</b>	<b>29</b>
9.1	First Wave	30
9.2	Second Wave	32
9.3	Third Wave	37
<b>10.</b>	<b>The New Political Scenario of Protest</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>11.</b>	<b>The Economic Recovery and the Fall in Unemployment</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>12.</b>	<b>The Relationship between the Piquetero Movement and its Social Base</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>13.</b>	<b>Policing the Protest</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>14.</b>	<b>The Decline of the Piquetero Movement</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>15.</b>	<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>16.</b>	<b>Appendix 1: Number of Protests with Participation by Picketers' Organizations 1992-2007</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>17.</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>58</b>

“The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all.”

Joan Robinson, *Economic Philosophy* (1962: 45).

## 1. Introduction

Why the unemployed do not rebel was the question W. W. Daniel posed in an article published in 1981 in the British journal *New Society* when he observed that the rise in the unemployment rate did not translate into a parallel increase in protest (Daniel 1981). At the time, the acquiescence with which the loss of a job was received inspired a variety of explanations. These have included that the work ethic and the inclination to work have progressively declined; that redundancy payments and compensations have made the condition of joblessness more tolerable; and that the informal economy has progressively displaced the formal one, providing a refuge for the unemployed. In the author's opinion, it was not necessary to delve so deep for an explanation. For a high number of those who lose their jobs unemployment is not a state or a condition, but a temporary parenthesis. Their efforts thus are focused on a single objective: getting back to work as soon as possible. As W. W. Daniel stated, in most cases, the experience of unemployment was not a long one; hence it was not accompanied by adverse reactions. However, at the end of his article, he acknowledged that the average lapse of time between jobs had started to grow. Therefore, he warned that if the present trends continued, very probably what had been just a brief interruption of the link with the labor market would turn into a more lasting condition for a substantial number of people, affecting the prevailing tolerant attitude toward the lack of a job (Daniel 1981).

W. W. Daniel's article is a good testimony of a turning point. The tendency that the author noted in 1981 deepened in the subsequent years. In fact, since the crisis in the developed countries under the impact of the oil shocks at the end of the seventies, the dream of full employment gradually faded away. Furthermore, from the 1990s onwards, unemployment rates have increased incessantly. New economic difficulties have turned unemployment from a temporary into a structural problem, and large sectors of the population have become either permanently excluded from the labor market or at least for longer periods of time. In such a context, as Daniel thought, one would expect the unemployed to rebel.

However, it so happens that for many years, social studies classified the mobilization of the unemployed as a highly unlikely phenomenon. Material deprivation and social exclusion, it was argued, do not mechanically produce a drive toward collective action. The following are the three most frequently cited impediments. First, since job loss comes

together with a sharp and sudden fall in income, the unemployed tend to seek refuge in individual survival strategies rather than in collective action. Second, unemployment weakens the social networks within which they have built their daily life both inside and outside the workplace, thus confining them in a situation of social atomization hardly conducive to mobilization. Finally, the condition of unemployed is a publicly devalued status that deprives them of an identity that can be positively appropriated in order to legitimize their demands and break their political isolation. Under such circumstances, it was concluded, unemployment typically generates individual apathy, resignation and impotence (Maurer 2001).

In the last twenty years, this conclusion has been the object of substantial revision. The reason is well known: the rebellion of the unemployed has become a reality. Formerly considered improbable, the mobilization of the unemployed turned into a frequent phenomenon in different national contexts against the backdrop of industrial restructuring and austerity policies. Novel research, particularly in European sociology, has proposed new arguments to account for the fact that, against great odds, the unemployed have managed to organize, transforming their latent discontent into a powerful and sustained drive for collective action (Chabanet and Faniel 2012; Giugni 2010).

Taking as a point of departure the perspective opened by new research, this paper looks at the mobilization of the unemployed in Argentina. Argentina is a good case to study in the light of this perspective because since the postwar period its labor market evolved following a pattern very similar to that of the developed countries. I refer to the typical features of what is known as the wage-earning society; that is, the incorporation of great sections of the urban workforce into the framework of labor rights, social security protection, and job stability. As occurs with all social phenomena, this landscape undoubtedly had exceptions. But, in general terms, it accurately portrays Argentine exceptionalism among the countries of Latin America which were characterized by the extension of the informal economy, the limits of the welfare policies and large areas of poverty.

This labor scenario was drastically altered by the neoliberal reforms implemented, in particular, in the 1990s. The unemployment rate, historically situated at 4% or 5%, increased threefold; a vast universe of workers was confined to levels of social and material deprivation the country had never experienced before. To capture the effects of the neoliberal reforms on the world of work, many observers saw in them a latinamericanization of Argentine society. This is a plausible description. But it would be incomplete if it failed to mention the social and political process that gradually

gained momentum in the context of the great transformation of the 1990s: the vigorous mobilization of the unemployed that has no counterpart in other countries of the region. The purpose of this paper is to identify the conditions that made this process possible and explore its consequences. To this end, my main source will be the rich scholarly work it gave rise to. In the first three sections I will outline the historical background from which the unemployment problem emerged and turned into a public issue. In the fourth section, I will look at the pioneering episodes of unemployed mobilization that took place in the provinces 1996-1997, as a prologue to the fifth section that focuses on the area that will become the epicentre of social protest: Greater Buenos Aires. In the sixth and seventh section I will introduce some key concepts to understand the mobilization of the unemployed. The eighth section centers on the waves of protest that unfolded between 1998 and 2007. From sections nine to twelve I will explore changes in the political landscape, the economic situation and the policing of protest that lead to the decline of unemployed mobilization, covered in the thirteenth section. Finally, in an epilogue, I will refer to the consequences of this experience of the world of work on the trends of social inequality in Argentina today.

## **2. The Road Towards Neoliberal Reforms**

The 1970s oil crises brought to an end The Glorious Thirty Years which, according to the expression coined by French economist Jean Fourastié, had framed the development of the advanced nations since the end of the Second World War. Together with the effects of these crises, the intellectual consensus built around Keynesianism, the Welfare State, and full employment also came to an end. A telling sign of the times was the Nobel Prize in Economics awarded to Friedrich Hayek in 1974 and Milton Friedman in 1979, both staunch critics of state intervention in the economy and enthusiastic advocates of market forces. The high priests of the new gospel launched a strong ideological offensive but only achieved real influence on economic policy in the 1980s during the administration of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. This policy turn, however, had been anticipated many years before in the Southern Cone of Latin America; first in Chile in 1973 and then in Argentina in 1976.

On both sides of the Andes, an era of social and political mobilization had ended in military dictatorship. The regime presided over by General Pinochet took the lead and swiftly turned the Chilean economy into one of the least regulated and least statist in the West, and opened its borders to international commercial and capital markets. Initially, the monetarist recipe seemed incapable of curbing inflation, but by 1977 prices began to yield and soon after, the economy started growing again. The experiment set up

by the Chilean “Chicago Boys” under the helm of Pinochet’s dictatorial powers would, however, end up in a deep crisis and a forced change of plans in 1982. But when the military junta took over power in Argentina, the prestige of the neoliberal program was still intact and eased the way to revamping the foundations of a conflictive society.

The Argentine military’s reformist script was aimed against the semi-autarkic development model within which Argentina had operated under the economic leadership of the State (Gerchunoff and Llach 1998). When the time came to make decisions, the reformist ambition was forced to yield to a more urgent priority: ending the economic chaos prompted by an annual inflation rate of 700%. The anti-inflationary strategy launched by the economic policy-makers had to abide with a political imperative set up by the military: for security reasons, employment should not be affected. Therefore, the adjustment policy essentially consisted in a strong reduction of real wages of approximately 30% compared to previous years, and a price truce negotiated with the business sector. This first attempt at curbing inflation was a blow for wage earners who were simultaneously affected by a ban on union activities. In the end, these measures proved mostly ineffective. This attempt would be followed by others which, dictated by changing approaches to the problem of inflation, would be equally unsuccessful: a monetary reform which opened the way to classic monetarism, a tariff reduction designed to curb internal prices by increasing imports, and finally a crawling-peg exchange rate regime intended to anchor inflationary expectations. The latter program led to intense speculation as the expected convergence between the exchange and inflation rates proved unattainable.

However, help arrived in time to aid the economic policymakers’ blind attempts to curb inflation. After the oil shocks of 1973 and 1978, the abundance of liquidity in the international financial system opened the gates to a massive influx of capital to Latin American countries as a choice destination. Argentina was a major beneficiary. The arrival of foreign capital gave the economic experiment a brief reprieve. The downside was an increase in foreign debt. This timely aid actually helped the government buy some time, but did not reduce uncertainty about the future of the economy, in particular because the military leadership became receptive to the newly critical voices from the business community. After five years of continuously frustrated economic experiments, the country experienced capital flight and the onset of a deeply-feared recession. Thereafter, old and new economic teams spent their efforts on rescue operations – from forcing state- owned firms to contract debt abroad, to nationalizing private sector debt in order to avoid a generalized bankruptcy of the business sector – while inflation and the fiscal deficit climbed back up to extraordinary heights. In this ominous context, macroeconomic discipline melted into thin air. In turn, the original reformist drive was

already waning under the effects of various factors: the military veto to the privatization of public firms, the economy's troubles caused by a trade opening that ended up in massive imports and the destruction of industrial sectors and, ultimately, due to the almost always clandestine response of the losers of adjustment policies, who resorted to defensive tactics they had learnt throughout years of chronic economic instability. The 1982 Malvinas/Falklands War dealt the final blow to a dictatorship that left the economy in tatters and an impoverished society alongside the tragic legacy of political repression.

The return to democracy in 1983 faced the new civil administration with a double bind: the weight of foreign debt and renewed conflict over distribution. The efforts of the Alfonsín administration were gradually consumed by the challenges of such a demanding scenario, to which the deteriorating terms of trade soon added even more somber tones. Against this background, the attempts to bring inflationary pressures under control followed one another, and were neutralized time and again by the war of attrition among all economic actors seeking to win back lost ground in the battle for income distribution – a war of attrition all the more destabilizing because of the presence of a new actor, the foreign creditors.

The hyperinflation that would put an end to the first democratic transition government turned out to be more powerful than the military's sword: the experience of economic chaos caused any social resistance to crumble and cleared the way for a process of sweeping neoliberal reforms (Sigal and Kessler 1997). In the shadow of hyperinflation a chapter of Argentina's history was closed and another one opened. Thus, the country's exceptional status within the Latin American context would gradually come to an end in the 1990s. According to Maristella Svampa, this exception consisted of a society that, beyond its regional heterogeneity and despite the strength of its economic elite, had distinguished itself throughout history by its ability to incorporate successive waves of population into employment, education, and welfare, offering opportunities for individual and collective advancement (Svampa 2005). Certainly, this process of social inclusion was not effective for everyone nor did it work the whole time. Nevertheless, the outcome of the experience was a rise in social expectations sustained by the memory of several decades in which new generations were indeed better off than their predecessors, or at least could aspire to be so. The gap between expectations and achievements widened more than once in the course of the country's turbulent history. Nevertheless, time and again the mobilizing myth of equal opportunity reactivated the quest for increased access to resources and rights. The great transformation brought about by neoliberal reforms and its main consequence – the de-incorporation of vast

sectors of the working-class – altered the social structure that had hitherto distinguished Argentina from its neighbors in the region.

The reform process that changed that societal model forever was marked by a true irony of history: it was promoted by the political movement that had contributed decisively to its inception in the postwar years: Peronism (Gerchunoff and Torre 1996). The closer one looks at the process of pro-market reforms, the more the consequences of this peculiar political development come to light. As already pointed out, the heightened social tolerance to economic adjustment induced by the experience of hyperinflation facilitated the new economic course. However, in this critical juncture, the Peronist government led by president Menem sought and found the necessary room to implement the reforms in a way that would provide them with less contingent political support. With this purpose in mind, the government paid attention to the groups and economic sectors that could be negatively affected by the reforms and whose hostile reaction entailed a risk to the sustainability of the reform program: the big national conglomerates which had grown under the auspices of trade protection and state subsidies, the larger unions, and the clientelistic political machines of the governing party itself.

A complex negotiation process thus took shape: the losses imposed by economic reforms on these strategic actors in certain areas were compensated by concessions in other areas. The outcome was a partial deregulation of markets, exceptions to the generalized trade opening, the sale of state-owned firms to selected buyers, and the selective reduction of public employment. In the realm of labor relations, greater flexibility was introduced for individual labor contracts but unions managed to preserve the centralized framework for collective bargaining, and their control over the financial resources of union-run health services. As Sebastian Etchemendy has pointed out, reforms could follow the neoliberal script and move forward in some areas because they were left incomplete in others (Etchemendy 2001, 2011). The cleavages introduced by market reforms thus tended to create divisions within, rather than between, groups and sectors. This dynamic exerted a strong pressure towards the segmentation of the socio-economic structure of Argentine society.

The control of inflation through the introduction of a currency board – the rigidity of which sought to compensate past stabilization failures – was in turn critical for leveraging the deployment of market reforms and their effects. The favorable international context, with foreign capital flows during the 1990s, also contributed to the outcome. In a more stable framework, the economy resumed growth. At first it did so strongly, subsequently less so, until the stubborn adherence to the formula that had made it

possible to overcome hyperinflation complicated the adaptation to the changes in the global economic climate. An acute recession ensued and, under the new government of President Fernando de la Rúa, the currency board collapsed in 2001. Throughout the nineties the social landscape of the country as we knew it became unrecognizable. If the process of globalization marked by neoliberal reforms was associated in Argentina with the image of a social scene in ruins, it was because there was a lot to destroy: the material foundations and institutions of the more inclusive society that had emerged throughout the years following spells of prosperity and under the state initiative.

### **3. Transformations in the World of Labor**

To put the impact of the neoliberal reforms on the world of labor into perspective, I will now underscore some defining characteristics of the labor market. Historically, Argentina contrasted with the typical setting of many Latin American countries characterized by strong demographic pressures and excessive labor supply. Argentina's singularity was the outcome of a slower pace of growth of the economically active population which, in turn, was the effect of relatively low demographic growth, produced by an early transition to low levels of birth and mortality rates. With two thirds of the population residing in urban areas, the pool of rural labor force was limited by the absence of masses of poor peasants present in other Latin American countries. These factors explain the fact that the country regularly received an additional supply of labor provided by migrant waves from neighboring countries, in particular since the 1950s.

With a slow-growing active population as well as comparatively lower underemployment and unemployment rates, for many years the Argentine labor market exhibited a more balanced dynamics that tended to favor the demands of wage earners. An important contribution to this pattern was the incorporation of vast contingents of the urban labor force into labor right guarantees, social security protection, and stable employment (Torre 2004). Despite the frequent ups and downs of the country's political trajectory, these labor market institutions stood out for being more inclusive. Although informal labor did exist, its size was not large enough to alter this general picture. Finally, to complete Argentina's profile, a critically important aspect must be emphasized: income distribution was much more equitable in a region where strong social inequality had been traditionally the norm.

In the mid-1970s, three indicators summed up the main features of the world of labor. First, the low incidence of poverty: only 5% of urban homes had per capita incomes below the poverty line. Second, a situation of quasi-full employment: the open unemployment rate affected a mere 3.4% of the labor force. Finally, inequality as measured by the Gini

coefficient – a relatively low rate of 0.34 – differentiated Argentina from all other Latin American countries (Cruces and Gasparini 2009).

The first cracks in this working-class landscape were the consequence of the economic adjustment policies of the last military dictatorship. In 1984 the state's statistics agency published a study, "La Pobreza en la Argentina" (Poverty in Argentina), based on the 1980 national census. The study revealed the considerable increase of poverty: 22.3% of homes were then below the poverty line, highly concentrated in urban areas. The results of this study amounted to a veritable culture shock to the self-image of a country in which poverty was considered to be a residual phenomenon, limited to small sections of the population (Grondona 2014). The effects of the drastic reduction in real wages placed the problem of hunger at the center of the public agenda.

In 1984, the new democratic administration launched an emergency program consisting of the periodic distribution of food boxes to families in situations of extreme social vulnerability. The beneficiaries of food aid amounted to 5,600,000 people. The projected duration of the program was two years, in the belief that the problem was temporary and would become irrelevant as the country resumed the path of growth following proactive economic policies. The still relatively low unemployment rates, around 6% throughout the 1980s, lent support to this belief. But despite brief and increasingly sporadic successes, inflationary pressures proved hard to check and induced successive renewals of the food aid program to compensate for the deterioration of the lowest strata of society's income. The 1989 hyperinflationary crisis predictably increased the share of homes under the poverty line, which reached 44%, and simultaneously widened its scope by adding a new group called the "new poor", who came from the most vulnerable layers of the middle class (Kessler and Di Virgilio 2003), to the vast population of "structural poor" who had always been on the edge of indigence. From this moment on, food programs would become a permanent feature of public social policy.

The market reforms in the 1990s opened new fissures in the labor market. For much of the decade, a novel phenomenon in the country's history took place: economic growth combined with job losses. The unemployment rate, which by 1991 was 6.9%, began its ascent to 10% in 1993, reached 18.6% in 1995 – due to a brief external shock – and then scaled back to 14.5% in 1998. Since then, with the economy now in recession, the unemployment rate moved steadily upwards until it reached 21% in 2001, on the eve of the collapse of the macroeconomic stability regime set up in 1991 (Beccaria and Maurizio 2012). The main engines powering the rise in unemployment rates were the liberalization of trade and the privatization of state-owned firms. The former entailed

the destruction of jobs associated both with the disappearance of firms that could not adjust to a more competitive environment and to the reduction of the labor force by firms that incorporated new technology or changes in the organization of the production process. Likewise, the transfer of big state- owned firms –the telephone, electricity, gas, water, airline, oil, chemical and steel companies– to private capital opened up a massive wave of layoffs. The size of the labor force in the former state firms, bloated for political reasons, was drastically cut down: an estimated 195,000 workers lost their jobs between 1989 and 1995. In the same period, the other engine of unemployment was the many rationalization plans of the national public bureaucracy, which reduced its labor force by 118,000 jobs in the same period. Last but not least, I must mention the impact of unemployment on the mass of workers with fragile ties to the labor market: those whose source of subsistence was precarious jobs within the wide universe of the informal economy.

The advocates of market reforms initially believed that economic restructuring could be accomplished without a sustained deterioration of employment levels. The speedy recovery of economic activity as from 1991 induced them to foresee the possibility of absorbing the labor supply growth. But the leap of the unemployment rate to two-digit figures since 1993 dealt a blow to those expectations and shed light on a central flaw in the ongoing restructuring process: the absence of active policies oriented to maximizing the chances of pulling people back into the labor market.

To illustrate these consequences I will briefly examine a selected case of privatization policy: the sale of the state-owned steel firm, Sociedad Mixta Siderúrgica Argentina (SOMISA), to a strong national private group in 1991 (Beccaria and Quintar 1995). As part of the purchase, 6,200 workers, about 50% of the firm's staff, were fired and received generous monetary compensation. The new owners of SOMISA introduced changes to its production strategy which led to the closure or downsizing of many firms and shops that had provided it with supplies and services. After two years, the combined effect of the personnel rationalization at the firm and the layoffs in its network of contractors generated an increase of 16.2% in unemployment in the industrial area where SOMISA was located. But there is additional data that renders a clear picture of the loss of human resources and welfare brought about by the way the privatization process was implemented. By then the majority of workers with jobs were either self-employed or owners or employees of very small establishments. This occupational structure owed a lot to the fact that those who lost their jobs invested their compensation money in setting up small businesses: cigar and candy stores, lottery agencies, clothing stores, taxicab companies, appliance stores, etc. Most of these investments would, in the end, be short lived because, against what these improvised

entrepreneurs expected, local economic activity did not grow. A similar frustration was experienced by those who allocated their compensation money to home improvements in the belief that unemployment would be temporary and they would relatively soon get back their old jobs. Very few would be so lucky: in an industrial area characterized by high levels of formal employment, the only job offers to increase would be those for informal positions with no social security benefits.

Returning to the big picture of the labor market in the years of neoliberal reforms two traits indicated the epochal change: the reduction in the ability to generate jobs and the deterioration in the quality of employment. I have already noted the increase in unemployment rates. I should now add that the job losses in manufacture were staggering: by 2001 industrial employment had dropped 41% compared to 1991. In the construction sector employment fell by 22%. The exception was the commerce sector, where the level of employment showed steady growth, but evidence indicates that the quality of jobs offered was poor. The second characteristic of the period was, indeed, the increase in precarious and self-employed work swelling an informal sector which was already considerably large. Many of those expelled from the formal sector as well as family members looking for work to compensate for the job loss of the household head found refuge here. In 1991 the percentage of the active population in the informal sector was 50.2%; by 1996 it had risen to 52.2%, and reached 54.2% in 2001 (Beccaria and Lopez 1997).

New legislation contributed to widen the ranks of this labor universe where the instability of labor career-paths was the norm. The new rules incorporated a trial period to labor contracts, subject to cancellation after three months without warning, which subsequently promoted a high turnover in firm personnel. Thus, these were years in which it was not only hard to find a job, but also in which those who found one tended to stay in it for less time. Although these mutations in the labor market affected all wage earners, the lower strata of the population were the ones who bore the brunt of the fall in employment levels and the deterioration in the quality of employment. Their employment problems neutralized what they had gained from the increased price stability of their main budgetary item (foodstuffs) caused by the success of the anti-inflationary policy launched in 1991. In this context, it is hardly surprising that poverty levels, after dropping to 21.6% from the peak registered during the 1989 hyperinflation, grew back to 32.6% in 2001 and, to crown a decade of market reforms, the Gini coefficient rose to 0.52, abruptly taking Argentina's society back to a distant and forgotten past (Cruces and Gasparini 2009).

## 4. The Unemployed at Bay

In this section I deal with the policy responses to the impact of neoliberal reforms on the labor market, the dominant reaction of the main unions, and the isolation of the unemployed from both trade union activity and the public agenda.

The main objective behind the political logic with which the Menem administration approached economic liberalization was, according to Sebastián Etchemendy (2011), to neutralize the potential resistance of strategic actors from the previous economic order by resorting to selective compensation mechanisms. In the labor arena, these sectors were the major trade unions which had grown under the protection of legislation that guaranteed them monopolistic representation of workers, centralized collective bargaining and the control over union-run health services financed by compulsory payroll contributions from employers and workers.

To review the types of compensation allocated to unions, I begin with a few selected cases of privatization policy. As indicated above, the sale of major state-owned firms to private capital was accompanied by layoffs and early retirement of personnel. Those who retained their jobs received 10% of the shares of the new private companies. The management of employee share ownership programs was assigned to the unions. Additionally, many unions participated in the purchase of state-owned assets, as was the case with the oil trade union that bought part of the state oil firm Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF), and the light and power union who bought from 20% to 40% of the shares of various thermal energy plants. Certainly, this type of compensation was confined to the unions operating in former state-owned firms. But another large-scale privatization initiative offered new business opportunities to the majority of the biggest unions. In 1994, the social security system was reformed by adding an individual capitalization tier, managed by private pension funds, to the existing public one; the new regulatory framework also authorized the unions to set up their own pension funds (Alonso 2000).

An important consequence of the political exchange between the government and the unions must be highlighted: the refusal of the national union leadership to support the rather limited and sporadic protests against the waves of layoffs caused by market reforms. Between 1991 and 1993 attempts at rebellion promoted by the local union sections exploded in the more affected sectors – steel, telephone, oil and railways – but mostly ended in resounding failure, abandoned by their national union leaders and beaten down by President Menem's heavy-handed policy.

Two factors facilitated the political exchange between government and unions. The first was the influence of political loyalty. Its incidence became manifest by the sudden demise of the union leadership that had successfully launched 13 general strikes against adjustment policies during the previous Alfonsín presidency. When Menem set market reforms into motion, they made a call to resistance, only to discover its audience was limited. Soon afterwards, most of the main trade unions rallied under the banner of collaboration with the Peronist government. In fact, the majority of the union leadership reacted with the same spirit of understanding that predominated among the socialist trade unionists in Spain when the leader of their party in government, Felipe Gonzalez, turned to economic liberalization in the early 1980s (Beroud 2012).

The second factor that eased the political exchange between government and unions was the persuasive power of neoliberal ideology. It gained its strength from the convincing linkage promoted by the economic establishment and international financial institutions between the 1989 hyperinflationary crisis and the termination of the state-led inward development cycle. Due to the disrepute that past protectionist and statist positions had fallen into, the reforms promoted by the fashionable Washington Consensus won the cultural battle when the time came to determine the way out of the emergency. The slogan “There Is No Alternative” that Margaret Thatcher popularized in Great Britain penetrated vast sectors of public opinion as well as the ranks of the governing party. While it is true that the compensation policies implemented by president Menem introduced corrections in the road to economic liberalization, these did not alter the new course. Facing a structural adjustment that was regarded as necessary and inevitable, the major unions pragmatically opted not to challenge the Peronist government in order to take advantage of the opportunities that the dynamics of political exchange offered to protect their corporate interest.

Oscillating between open cooperation and tactical retreat, the national union leadership organized in the CGT provided President Menem with a key ingredient to manage the reform process: the labor truce. Argentina during the 1990s thus showed that unions could not only mobilize but also de-mobilize, and that in the absence of their cooperation, the travails of economic transformation were potentially more hazardous and conflictive. The few pockets of workers resistance tended to be concentrated in unions of public employees, teachers, and the lower strata of the public bureaucracy. Resorting to strikes and walkouts, they demanded better wages and working conditions with uneven success and in time joined forces to constitute a minor dissident labor confederation, the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) that later on played a role in mobilization of the unemployed.

The labor truce set the context for negotiations between the government and the unions on the priorities of the neoliberal agenda regarding labor matters (Etchemendy and Palermo 1998). On one hand, there was the reform of labor relations in order to make contracts more flexible, decentralize collective bargaining, reduce payroll taxes and cut back compensation for layoffs; on the other hand, the de-regulation of union health services to open up the market of workers' health coverage to private firms. Both matters were negotiated on the grounds of reciprocal concessions. This was the case with the first round of labor reforms in 1991: the unions backed the introduction of time limits for new labor contracts and the government bailed out heavily-indebted union-run health services. The fluidity of this political exchange was notably interrupted when the economic source of trade union power, the union-run health services, was at stake. In 1992, when the deregulation bill became public, the union leadership put to rest its disputes over tactics and closed ranks, launching the only general strike that took place under the Menem presidency. In the face of union pressure, the government set aside its original idea: the reform that was eventually implemented limited competition to the existing universe of union-run health services by allowing workers to choose among them, regardless of the branch in which they were employed – a mechanism that ended up benefiting the most powerful unions which later on, in no small measure, became business partners with private health firms.

In the course of negotiations, the use of extreme measures such as a general strike was not an exclusive resource of union leaders; to achieve its aims, the government also resorted to the unilateral tool of presidential decrees. Using this tool, it limited the right to strike in public services, conditioned wage increases to improvements in productivity, and introduced deep cuts in employer contributions to social security in order to reduce labor costs. The most ambitious legislative initiatives were also unilaterally drafted by government officials. When the time came to make decisions, however, this procedure proved ineffective. The reform bills were blocked in Congress due to the labor confederation lobbying the government party's parliamentary group. To end the impasse, the government resumed its bargaining strategy in 1994: it summoned the CGT and the UIA (the business association) to jointly discuss and design the bills before sending them to Congress. This corporatist exercise was fruitful; predictably, the bills bore the marks of the logic of political exchange. The new legislative framework incorporated more flexible labor contracts, both in terms of their duration (shortened in time) and of the termination costs (reducing severance payments), and of working conditions (hours, vacation days and their distribution throughout the year, workforce mobility, etc.). Through the pressure of the CGT, these reforms were circumscribed to small and medium enterprises, and left out major firms. Collective bargaining was also decentralized to SMEs, but the legal capacity to negotiate remained in the hands of the

national union leadership which could delegate it to local sections, closing the door to the emergence of firm-level autonomous unions.

One last chapter remains to be mentioned to complete this brief account of labor reform in Argentina in the 1990s: In 1998, in the final stages of President Menem's term in office, a new law reversed many of the flexibility norms that had been passed in 1991 and 1994. But before characterizing this step back in the neoliberal agenda as proof of the political influence that the unions managed to wield, the event must be placed in a wider context. There is considerable evidence showing that the limits the union leaders were able to set to the legislative offensive in favor of labor flexibility were not sustained. In reality, under the pressure of uncertainty over employment, workers were forced to adapt to the de facto flexibility imposed by management. The obstacles put up by union leaders to stop the reforms that affected their organizations proved to be more effective: they preserved the legal monopoly of union representation, the primacy of centralized collective bargaining, their control over health services, and even accessed new business opportunities with the purchase of state assets and the financial administration of shares from privatized firms and pension funds. In exchange, union leaders tolerated the implementation of a structural adjustment that led to the decline of the wage-earning society and with it to the social de-incorporation of wide sectors of the world of labor.

Indeed, the situation of the unemployed was not on the radar of the main union organizations. In the words of Maria Victoria Murillo, their energies were invested in a strategy of organizational survival aimed at extracting resources for their leaders and advantages for their members from the political exchange with the government (Murillo 2005). In comparative terms, the Argentine unions were not alone in their lack of action in favor of the unemployed. The existing literature points out that the relation between unions and the unemployed tends to be ambivalent (Faniel 2012). Unions are potentially more available to mobilize against layoffs or bankruptcies in which their own bases are affected than to back an anonymous mass of unemployed workers who are frequently perceived as a debilitating factor for the situation of employed workers. Furthermore, massive job losses usually translate into weakened ties with organized labor and create a gap that conspires against introducing the problem of the unemployed in the union agenda. This gap may widen when the unions take part, as social partners, in bargaining over the impact of reform policies. What happened in Argentina also occurred to the Spanish labor confederations during the Felipe Gonzalez administration. Without necessarily sharing the same policies, union leaders in Spain also gave priority to the protection and compensation of the most stable core of wage earners, and abstained from launching initiatives in favor of those workers increasingly

excluded from the labor market (Beroud 2012). The cause of the latter was taken up by local support networks in the areas most afflicted by unemployment, this was also the case – as we shall see later – in the Argentine experience.

The situation of the unemployed was also absent from the government's agenda as it embarked on the road toward neoliberal reforms. This absence made a special case of Argentina in the Latin American context. Indeed, it was common for the promoters of structural adjustment to set up safety nets to alleviate the transition costs for the most vulnerable social sectors (Graham 1994). Two initiatives, different though they were, can be noted in this respect. In Chile, the Pinochet dictatorship launched the Minimum Employment Program in 1975, a year after putting economic liberalization into motion. Its aim was to carry out infrastructure works at the local level – cleaning up streets and parks, painting public buildings, and other menial jobs – by hiring unemployed people for part-time jobs with a meager monetary payment. In Mexico, President Salinas de Gortari created the National Solidarity Program PRONASOL at the same time he promoted the deepening of fiscal orthodoxy and market reforms. The PRONASOL was simultaneously aimed at curbing poverty levels and offering job opportunities, thus channeling investments to the most vulnerable urban and rural areas via food, health, public works programs.

In light of these experiences, the performance of Menem's government left a lot to be desired both in terms of the timing and scope of its employment policies. It must be acknowledged, however, that the labor reform passed early on in 1991 included the National Employment Fund. It was intended as an unemployment insurance scheme that would replace a similar program that was actually ineffective because the hitherto high value of layoff packages operated as a functional equivalent. Two factors played against the impact of this initiative. First, the selection criteria tended to favor wage-earners in the formal sector and explicitly excluded informal, temporary, domestic and construction workers – the segments of the labor market more vulnerable to unemployment. The profile of the unemployed population was eloquent in this respect: three out of every four used to have informal jobs; that is, no social security protection. After four years of implementation the unemployment scheme only covered 5% of all the unemployed in 1996. The second factor was that its financial architecture - significantly dependent upon employers' contributions to social security - made it vulnerable to changes in economic policymaking. That was the case when shortly after the introduction of the National Employment Fund, in order to cut labor costs, the government decided to sharply reduce employers' contributions. Thus, benefits diminished precisely at the moment workers were flowing into the lines of the unemployed (Golbert 1998; Bertranou and Paz 2007).

Direct job-creation policies to ease the plight of the unemployed were adopted only after six years of structural adjustment. In 1996, the Trabajar Program was launched, financed in part by loans from multilateral financial institutions and following a design similar to that of the Minimum Employment Program in Chile: the participation of unemployed workers in temporary employment programs managed by municipalities for infrastructure improvement works in exchange for small monetary compensation. The comparison between the Chilean and Argentinean programs illustrates the limits of the belated initiative of the Menem administration. Both programs were similar in design, but their coverage could not have been more contrasting: while in Chile the PEM covered up to 34.6% of unemployed workers, the PT in Argentina only covered 13.4% of the unemployed population including the beneficiaries of the unemployment insurance scheme (Schipani 2006; Golbert 1998). In short, one conclusion must be drawn: left to their own devices by the unions and with limited protection from the state, the workers expelled from the labor market were held at bay. For many of them the only resource at their disposal would be the clientelistic networks of the Justicialista party, a strategy of social protection to which we will return later in this article.

## **5. The Unemployed on the Move**

In this account of government policies and union stances vis-a-vis the unemployed, we have now arrived at a turning point: the beginning of the mobilization of the unemployed circa 1996-1997 that broke the relative ease with which structural adjustment was being implemented. In order to reconstruct those mobilizations and their further developments, I will rely on the work of Maristella Svampa and Sebastian Pereyra, the first systematic sociological study of the collective action of the unemployed (Svampa and Pereyra 2003).

The pioneering episodes in the mobilization of the unemployed took place in Cutral-Co and Plaza Huincul, in the southern province of Neuquen, and in Tartagal and General Mosconi, in the northern province of Salta. Economic activity and community life in these small towns was organized around the dominant presence of YPF, the state oil company, which used to be the country's largest firm. With higher-than-average wages, urban improvement works, two-week paid holidays in Buenos Aires and other summer resorts, hospitals, housing and sports clubs for their staff, YPF had turned these oil enclaves into hubs of strong demographic growth. The privatization of the firm in 1992 changed all that causing huge layoffs. Just like in other privatized companies, the unemployed received generous severance payments. The smaller group of workers who kept their jobs obtained shares from the new private firm. The national leadership of the oil workers union managed to obtain additional compensation: the creation of

small venture firms staffed by former YPF workers that would provide services for the newly privatized company. As occurred in other privatization cases, this initiative was not followed up by policies to aid these brand new entrepreneurs in coping with their new challenges. Four years later, highly indebted and unfit for competition, most of them went bankrupt. However, although their individual survival strategies also failed, the experience of these former YPF workers contrasted with that of the former SOMISA workers mentioned above.

The former state steel company was located within an industrial cluster. The proximity of alternative sources of employment offered an expectation of future reinsertion into the labor market to all those who were forced to close down their kiosks, sell their taxis, and lay to rest their dreams of self-employment. The scene that faced the former YPF workers was initially more somber because the restructuring of the firm after its privatization resulted in a quick contraction of economic activity in those oil enclaves. However, it was soon clear that economic depression would eventually play to their benefit. By affecting most social sectors in these towns, economic depression built bridges between the plight of the unemployed and the grievances of shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs, public employees, teachers, and local politicians, sowing the seeds of a large-scale revolt.

The social dynamics of these oil enclaves just outlined enabled the unemployed to overcome the traditional obstacles hindering their collective action. The ecology of these towns, structured by dense social networks just like in company towns where the workplace and the residence overlap, neutralized the risk of social atomization and made it possible for individual deprivation to be perceived as collective dispossession. In turn, the multi-sector nature of grievances provided the adequate framework for the unemployed to avoid political isolation. Finally, the context of economic depression closed the door on the search for individual solutions and cleared the way for resorting to collective protest.

In Cutral-Co and Plaza Huincol the trigger for mobilization was the provincial governor's decision in June 1996 to suspend the bid for building a fertilizer plant. The response was cohesive and forceful to the likely prospect of the loss of investments that could rekindle economic activity and diminish the threat that those small cities could become ghost towns. Summoned from the local radio station, citizens marched onto the national highway and cut off traffic, demanding to be heard by the governor. The mobilization, which at its peak brought out 20,000 people, was maintained for seven days, alongside various roadblocks which served as rallying points for the different actors involved, and managed to attract the attention of the national media because of its dramatic scale.

Faced with the size of the protest, repressive measures were put on hold, and after feverish negotiations with the governor at the site of the protest, terms were agreed upon to lift the roadblocks: a deferral of debt payments for shopkeepers and small business, and the distribution of social aid among the poor and the unemployed. In the short term, only the former was effectively implemented. In view of the delay in receiving the promised aid, the unemployed and youth groups from poor neighborhoods brought back the roadblocks ten months later, riding the wave of teachers' protests against wage reductions. This mobilization, on a somewhat smaller scale, faced repression which provoked one death and left several people injured. The news about the clashes with the police triggered an immediate popular reaction: about 10,000 people took to the highway, forced the security forces to retreat, and reopened negotiations with provincial authorities. Apart from bringing a solution to the teachers' protests, negotiations ended with a decision that would have momentous consequences on the future development of the mobilization of the unemployed: the distribution of 1,500 Trabajar subsidies.

The May 1997 mobilization in the oil enclave of Tartagal/General Mosconi in the province of Salta showed several features in common with the experience of Cutral-Co/Plaza Huinul. First, what spurred the protest was also an issue with strong impact on the area's social and economic life: the rise of public utilities and the frequent interruptions in the electricity service by the local electricity company. Beyond its immediate consequences, the issue channeled the discontent over the end of the social and economic system that had supported the existence of these oil enclaves for many long years. Second, and predictably, the mobilization also revealed a multi-sector nature that enabled the former YPF workers and their families from poor neighborhoods to join a united front with journalists, political leaders and businessmen. Third, the tactic to which the mobilized resorted was also the roadblock. For seven days, with logistical support from the population – who provided food and clothing – they kept a permanent guard and successfully cut off traffic. The massive mobilization halted the repression and secured ample coverage from the national media. It should be noted that roadblocks were divided into two clearly-distinguished poles that were distant from each other: one organized by the notable figures in the community and the other grouping the unemployed. In the negotiations with provincial authorities, the latter adopted the more intransigent positions; for several hours the conflict seemed to worsen, until the intervention of the local bishop enabled an agreement.

The terms of the agreements followed a set script. A deferral of payments for debt contracted with public banking institutions, loans for business, funds for school dining halls, and a wide range of compensations for the unemployed: 3,000 Trabajar subsidies for one year, another 1,000 for six months, unemployment subsidies for

1,000 people for one year, and 1,400 permanent jobs in private oil firms. Still, there was one significant difference with the experience of Cutral-Co/Plaza Huincul. While the mobilization of the unemployed there left no organizational legacy, in Tartagal/General Mosconi an association was formed, the Union of Unemployed Workers (UTD) which brought together the worker identity and union tradition of former YPF workers, and the belligerent energy of the youth from poor neighborhoods with little formal labor experience. In the following years, the UTD would play a crucial role in triggering new protests in the northern provinces.

The successful denouement of the mobilization of the early risers, to borrow an expression from Sidney Tarrow (1994), generated a formidable demonstration effect on jobless workers by revealing the vulnerability of the authorities to protests and signaling the time was ripe for engaging in the contentious demand for workfare benefits. The consequences of the mobilization were particularly noteworthy in the urban periphery of Buenos Aires, an area with a high concentration of unemployed in the population. In the words of one of its leaders, “In 1997 we had our organization but did not know what to do with it. Then the events of Cutral-Co took place. So we went up to the mayor of the municipality and said to him: ‘You give us Trabajar subsidies or we will block the road’. To avoid a roadblock they gave us what we asked for” (Garay 2007). Thus, under the auspices of these events began an intense wave of conflict that held the country’s political life on tenterhooks for years. With it a rapid process of diffusion, imitation, and adaptation of the pioneering experiences of the oil enclaves to Greater Buenos Aires took place turning it into the epicenter of the piquetero movement. Due to its singularities, the urban periphery of the country’s capital posed new challenges to the mobilization of the unemployed.

## **6. Marginality and Poverty in Greater Buenos Aires: Clientistic Networks and their First Challengers**

Greater Buenos Aires is the vast urban periphery that surrounds the capital of Argentina, and is home to one third of its inhabitants. Its 24 districts are not a homogeneous space in social and urban terms. For the purpose of this study, the most significant cleavage is the difference between the Northern zone and the Western and Southern zones. The Northern zone was the site of an early process of suburbanization of high and middle class sectors. The Western and Southern zones, on the other hand, were the result of different developments. Their expansion began in the 1930s and 1940s when the effects of the 1929 World Depression on agricultural export-led growth gave a new impulse to industrialization based on the internal market. The new factories that settled in the outskirts of the capital acted like magnets on the waves of internal migrants that flocked to the city from the crisis-ridden agricultural areas. During these years, the

socioeconomic contours of Greater Buenos Aires were drawn: large firms and a myriad of workshops and small businesses around which dense suburban networks emerged, characterized by the vigorous and predominant presence of the working class.

Changes in the productive structure and new demographic movements gradually redefined the social landscape of the urban periphery. In the 1960s, the manufacturing sector began to produce new goods with capital-intensive techniques, consequently lowering its capacity to create employment (Gerchunoff and Llach 1998). However, Greater Buenos Aires remained the preferred destination for people looking for work.

Following in the footsteps of the rural population escaping agricultural crisis in the 1930s, it was next the turn of migrant workers from the northern provinces ravaged by the sugar industry crisis. In turn, they were joined by the growing influx of immigrants from neighboring countries, particularly Bolivia and Paraguay. Predictably, these new job-seekers would not find employment in the industrial sector. Out of the 730,000 jobs created in the Greater Buenos Aires between 1960 and 1970, almost half were found in the service sector: 25% in retail, 20% in construction, and only 7% in industry (Llach 2011). As these new cohorts joined the labor market, their presence resulted in a proliferation of low quality jobs. They would only find relatively stable employment in low-skilled and highly informal jobs such as construction works and domestic services.

While the labor market still exhibited low unemployment rates, the urban periphery, on the other hand, displayed less welcoming features. The districts closer to the capital, inhabited by internal migrants from the first phase of industrialization that had benefited from housing, transport and public services policies, were already saturated. Therefore, the newcomers had to settle in more distant areas and in highly precarious conditions due to the lack of drinking water and sewage systems, and the slow and deficient provision of gas and electricity. It was in this last and inhospitable frontier of the Greater Buenos Aires where early mobilizations demanding housing and shelter for the constant influx of new settlers would emerge (Merklen 2005). A frequently-used strategy to push forward their demands was to occupy vacant land, generally owned by the state. These initiatives, which would multiply in the more permissive context of the transition to democracy in 1983, often received support from external actors such as priests from nearby churches and human rights organizations. Ranging from the logistical support for the mobilizations to the resolution of legal conflicts, their contributions made a difference for the popular sectors demands. And they were also instrumental for framing the illegal occupations as reactions to a flagrant, visible injustice: the lack of access to the right to a decent urban habitat, historically acknowledged by the State, and the benefits of which were already enjoyed by workers

who had settled earlier around the city's perimeter. This state of affairs, brought to the fore, in the words of Silvia Sigal, a "situation of marginality" (Sigal 1981:158); that is, a situation characterized by the lack of correspondence between the societal definition of recognized rights and the effective enjoyment of those rights.

The demand for basic conditions of the urban habitat – a plot on which to build a house, the infrastructure of public services – had an important political consequence: the emergence of the neighborhood as an arena of solidarity and common objectives for popular sectors otherwise divided by different forms of insertion in the labor market. While the search for employment tended to rely on individual strategies, the demand for urban public goods promoted cooperation and the formation of networks centered on the place of residence. As the seminal work of Denis Merklen on land invasions in Greater Buenos Aires showed, local communities played a crucial role in mobilization during the 1980s (Merklen 2005). When successful, these mobilizations strengthened the local communities because they stimulated the creation of neighbor associations. The purpose of these associations was two-fold: on one hand, they bargained with the authorities for property rights over the occupied land and, on the other, they demanded the provision of basic public services, schools, health centers for the new settlements.

In the course of time, the associations born from the claims for a decent urban habitat would not be the only expression of the politicization of the popular sectors. With the reactivation of party competition, Greater Buenos Aires witnessed the deployment of the powerful Peronist party machine, the Partido Justicialista (PJ) (Ollier 2010). Comfortably installed in a setting where its electoral predominance was uncontested and financed by the resources of public patronage, this political machine came to rest on a vast web of neighborhood organizations, sports clubs, cooperative associations, and school kitchens. This organizational fabric reflected the mutations taking place within the party's grassroots since the 1980s. The gradual shrinkage of the formal labor market reduced the relative importance of unionized workers and expanded the weight of the more heterogeneous universe of the popular sectors. In this context, the PJ was transformed, as underscored by the excellent study of Steven Levitsky, from a party grounded in the unions to a party based on clientelistic networks (Levitsky 2003).

Keeping the municipalities of the Greater Buenos Aires and the patronage resources at their disposal under their iron-fisted political control, the local party bosses put into motion a variety of social assistance initiatives to cater to the basic needs of the lower-income strata. Neighborhood brokers (locally known as punteros) were awarded a key role in the implementation of social assistance policies (Zarazaga 2014). Men and women were dedicated full-time to political activities and firmly rooted in their territories,

the brokers operated as links between the people and the authorities. As such, they exerted influence on choosing who would benefit from the distribution of food, clothing, and medicine, in exchange for their support in the factional disputes of the PJ. In a social landscape marked by acute, pressing needs, the informal party organs also operated as problem-solving networks (Auyero 2001), becoming involved in obtaining collective goods such as electricity, roads, subsidies for school kitchens and sports clubs, and general aid for families in distress due to illness or death of relatives, or eviction threats. The provision of particularistic benefits and collective goods paved the way for the capillary penetration of the patronage-based party and forged strong reciprocity ties between brokers and their clients.

These political practices did not change significantly when President Menem, in a radical departure from traditional Peronist policies, launched his pro-market reform program. This issue has deserved special attention in Levitsky's study. In his field work during the nineties, Levitsky polled militants from several popular neighborhoods and discovered that a significant number of them were unhappy with the government's neoliberal turn. In light of this evidence, a question arose: Why did such dissidence not result in active opposition? The answer Levitsky offered stressed the importance of two factors. The first was access to state patronage. Though grounded in political loyalty and personal ties, the workings of the party at the local level relied on public resources. These were vital for fueling the clientelistic networks as much as for providing militants with jobs in the state. This double dependency conditioned the reaction to Menem's policies. Leaving the party, particularly in the urban periphery where Peronism was culturally and electorally hegemonic, meant giving up decisive resources and walking out into the cold.

However, leaving the party was not necessarily on the menu of options for dissidents. The second factor that explains why dissidence did not turn into active opposition was the autonomy enjoyed by the local branches in the PJ organizational structure. Contrary to what happens in centralized mass parties, in which subunits must adhere to the national committee's directives or run the risk of being expelled, Levitsky showed that the decentralized structure of the PJ prevented militants from having to choose between seconding Menem's policies or facing political ostracism. During the 1990s, the PJ operated as a wide umbrella that allowed the local leaders to continue practicing their own version of Peronism which had little to do with the official agenda. With masses in the memory of Evita, homages to the historic date of October 17th and Perón, and the permanent invocation of social justice and nationalism, they kept the Peronist political subculture alive. As already mentioned, in Greater Buenos Aires there were also more small and marginal community organizations led by activists

from human rights and popular Catholic associations that focused on social work and maintained less clientelistic linkages with their grassroots.

This political landscape experienced a significant mutation in the aftermath of the mobilizations in the oil enclaves in the provinces of Neuquen and Salta. As underscored by one of the leaders of the future piquetero movement in the Greater Buenos Aires in the quote cited above, the success of these mobilizations was an important source of inspiration and provided the neighborhood-based organizations with new aims and methods. Born in many cases out of land-occupation initiatives, these organizations were initially rooted in the La Matanza district of western Greater Buenos Aires. With 1.3 million inhabitants, this area had one of the highest shares of poor population in the urban periphery (Manzano 2013). The first initiatives of these neighborhood organizations had aimed at increasing the access to government food programs. To achieve this objective, they set up soup kitchens in public squares, led demonstrations to the City Hall, and occupied public buildings. Therefore, at the time the events of Cutral-Có/Plaza Huincul and Tartagal/General Mosconi gained notoriety, in La Matanza there was already a core of activists trained in territorial mobilization and in possession of two valuable assets: the de facto recognition they had obtained from the authorities and the substantial amounts of food they had distributed independently of the networks run by Peronist brokers. Their next step would be getting the unemployed to claim the benefits of the workfare programs.

## **7. The Role of Activists in the Organization of the Unemployed**

In an earlier section I have referred to the demobilizing effects that the experience of unemployment produces upon individuals. Well documented in the classic studies on the impact of unemployment, these effects were confirmed in the research developed in Argentina by sociologist Gabriel Kessler: job loss not only generates economic costs to individuals. The sudden impossibility of providing for their family produces a severe loss of self-esteem while simultaneously generating a deep skepticism about the possibility of changing their fate by way of collective action (Kessler 1996). The misery of unemployed, states Della Porta, does more to deter protest than to facilitate it by creating feelings of shame and hopelessness among the affected individuals (Della Porta 2010). From the many available testimonies, I quote one from an activist in La Matanza:

We started to meet up with other fellows from the neighborhood that had lost their jobs. Many were in that inward-oriented mood, and ashamed of having to admit they had lost their job and their electricity was being cut off because they couldn't afford to pay the bill (Interview published in Schipani 2006: 87).

Given the prevailing mood among the unemployed, their propensity to see their situation as a personal failure and therefore to fall into a state of passivity and impotence, activists in the urban periphery did not encounter a pre-existing disposition to protest. To promote this disposition was the taxing task they had to engage in, as was highlighted by Andres Schipani's study on the mobilization of the unemployed in Argentina (Schipani 2008). By focusing on the role of hard-core activists, Schipani relied on the approach that emphasized the key role played by external agents in the organization of unemployed (Richards 2002). For this approach, the unemployed are a relatively powerless and deprived sector of society. In the language of the social movements literature, they have few resources to mobilize, and therefore to engage in collective action they must overcome severe obstacles. The outcome of this struggle is generally uncertain and fragile. This is why most of the time, the unemployed are mobilized instead of mobilizing themselves. The availability of external agents, whether political activists, union militants, or members of NGOs, thus constitutes a key requirement for the political articulation of unemployed discontent since it provides them with the necessary organizational skills, technical assistance, and leadership.

In this case, however, the use of the concept of external agents requires some clarification. Taken literally, this concept may evoke the image of activists landing on economically-depressed areas with the aim to exploit an existing potential for mobilization. As will be shown below, this is not what happened in the early stages of unemployed collective action in the Greater Buenos Aires. The activists who promoted in the first initiatives in demand of workfare benefits in La Matanza had solid roots in the local terrain. These roots notwithstanding, they can be viewed as external agents due to another aspect of their credentials: their close links to political networks that transcended the local communities where they intervened. This is the sketch that emerges from the two main cores of activists, Federación Tierra y Vivienda (FTV) and Corriente Clasista Combativa (CCC) (Manzano 2013).

The origins of FTV go back to the early 1980s when a group of young Catholics and priests influenced by liberation theology began to roam the neighborhoods preaching the reading of the Bible. Religious preaching gave way to social work and thus to the formation of self-help associations of poor families. The intervention of these activists, who took charge of the needs of sectors to which they didn't belong but towards whom they leaned out of a sense of solidarity, was subsequently the focal point for new recruits: militants from local sections of teachers and public employee unions. With time, groups of neighbors joined their social work, and their contribution led to the creation of a network of neighborhoods that towards the 1990s gathered local associations, school kitchens, and cooperative associations. The cradle of the FTV was the cooperative association El Tambo, formed on the basis of a successful land

occupation in 1986 led by Luis D'Elía. A teacher coming from popular Catholicism, after some activism in the Christian Democratic Party, D'Elía joined the center-left group Frente Grande, born in 1993 as a splinter from Menem's Peronism, and was elected councilman for the La Matanza municipality. In 1998, he joined the CTA, the workers confederation opposed to the official CGT. Attuned to the times, the CTA had launched the slogan "The Neighborhood is the New Factory", and promoted the formation of the FTV as its territorial branch and entrusted its leadership to the rising Luis D'Elía.

The La Matanza CCC was created by extreme left-wing militants residing in the district. The biography of who would become its best-known spokesman, Juan Carlos Alderete, sums up the typical profile of this group of activists. Born in the northern province of Salta, Alderete moved to Buenos Aires in the 1960s, found work in a dairy products factory, and soon became a union delegate enrolled in the most militant groups of the times. During the military dictatorship, he was imprisoned twice and lived a clandestine life. With the return to democracy he resumed union activism as a worker in a textile factory and joined the Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR), a small Maoist left-wing organization. In the mid-1980s he settled in La Matanza and led a land occupation. Along with other union activists from his party, in 1987 he established the La Emilia neighborhood association, through which the property rights to the land and the basic utility infrastructure for the neighborhood was eventually obtained. La Emilia became a PCR stronghold in the urban periphery to which professionals affiliated with the party (physicians, teachers, lawyers, psychologists, social workers) went to offer their services. In 1995 Alderete lost his job and joined the ranks of the unemployed. Since then, he has refocused his activism from union workers to the unemployed. Coordinating with his comrades from the northern provinces, who had redirected their efforts to the same terrain and built the CCC in Jujuy, in 1997 Alderete organized the La Matanza CCC, the main branch of the PCR among the unemployed.

The individual trajectories of the main leaders of the FTV and the CCC are a fine illustration of the attributes of the activists who took charge of the problem of unemployment in the Greater Buenos Aires. They were mostly professional, full time militants, experienced in managing conflict and negotiating with the authorities. To these personal skills they added their links to support networks from which they obtained technical assistance, material resources, and media contacts. One last attribute must be mentioned to complete their profile: the motivation behind their political practice was to achieve aims beyond the cause of the unemployed, such as the creation of a pole of social resistance or the transformation of the existing social and political order. Their commitment to these long-term objectives acted as a shield against the personal sacrifice inherent to activism in unfavorable contexts and against powerful adversaries.

On the basis of their still-embryonic organizations, these activists embarked on a new enterprise: politicizing the issue of unemployment. To move forward, they had to deal with several obstacles posed by the social and political landscape of the urban periphery. As cited above, existing studies underline the strong presence of clientelistic social networks. In the midst of the gradual decay of welfare levels, the Peronist political machine was able to exert a certain degree of social control over the urban poor that neutralized the formation of independent neighborhood associations. The calls to action by activists therefore had to be made in neighborhoods that hitherto channeled their demands through Peronist brokers. This obstacle proved less insurmountable in some districts than others. Specifically, in those where organizations could count on support networks external to the local communities and on the persistent action of politically committed militants. Thanks to these resources, the organizations that would eventually constitute the FTV and the CCC in La Matanza managed to survive the tactics of cooptation and intimidation and to break through the traditional clientelistic networks. It must be noted, though, that similar experiences took place, albeit on a smaller scale, in other districts. One of them was the formation of the Unemployed Workers Movement (MTD) in southern Greater Buenos Aires, after the Hunger March of September 1996 in which 2000 people paraded through the main square of the country's capital, the Plaza de Mayo.

Another challenge the activists met in trying to get a foothold in such hostile terrain was the heterogeneity of the unemployed population. The likelihood that a group will engage in contentious action is higher when it is located in a context that facilitates the sharing of experiences. In such a setting, the members of the group not only put forward the same demands but also do so in the same place, at the same time and against the same people. This was typically the background to the pioneer mobilizations in the oil enclaves. The close social bonds inherent to company towns and the visibility of the effects of the privatization of YPF created a favorable context for collective action by inducing the emergence of a sense of identity and a principle of opposition among the workers who had lost their jobs. Unlike what happened in the oil enclaves, job losses in the urban periphery occurred in a different moment and under different conditions. The universe of the unemployed encompassed recent and long-term unemployed workers; youth seeking in vain for their first job; former industrial workers, and a high share of informal workers. This variety of experiences conspired against the emergence of common attitudes and made it more difficult for the different sections of the unemployed to identify those politically responsible for their exclusion from the labor market.

It was in this hard, complex environment that activists had to carry out their task of creating a climate of agitation and protest against unemployment. Two developments

came to their aid: the impact of the successful mobilizations in the oil enclaves and the political dynamics of workfare programs.

## 8. Political Sources of the Mobilization of the Unemployed

As I indicated earlier, the political window opened by the pioneer episodes in the provinces of Neuquen and Salta had a positive effect on the mobilization of the unemployed in Greater Buenos Aires. There were three more productive legacies: (1) the emergence of a new identity among the unemployed; (2) the popularization of a new mode of collective action; (3) the definition of a common policy goal. These three legacies lent inspiration and vigor to the wave of protest that, in subsequent years, would lead the unemployed from the margins to the center of the political stage.

For a brief characterization, let us begin with the first, the new identity. Daniel Mouchard (Mouchard 2010) has pointed out that an excluded sectors' first act of rebellion concerns their identity. More specifically, it consists of the passage from a negatively valued "us", an expression of wants and a source for stigmatization, to an empowered "us", a carrier of a demand for justice and dignity. This act of rebellion usually manifests itself through a discursive operation. The sectors in question seek to replace the name for which they are conventionally known by a novel one that designates the birth of a collective identity that is also new. Piqueteros was the name the unemployed mobilized in Cutral-Có/Plaza Huincul and Tartagal/General Mosconi called themselves. It referred to the roadblock to which they resorted to give visibility to their grievances and to demand solutions.

In the tradition of the working-class struggle, the picket was a barricade set up by workers in conflict at the entrance of plants in order to block the way for strike-breakers. By extension, the roadblock, with cohesive groups occupying the highways and piling up burning tires to cut off traffic, recreated that format of disruptive action and gave its promoters a platform to build a new collective identity. Forged in the experience of mobilization, the name of piqueteros played a de-stigmatizing role: it provided the basis for a positive identity to all those who had been confined to the socially devalued status of unemployed. A new source of dignity, the capacity for struggle and resistance, as pointed out by Maristella Svampa, filled the empty space of the dignity of work (Svampa 2005).

As a modality of claim-making activity, roadblocks were not an innovation; groups in rural areas had used it in the past. The novelty, rather, was the fact that it was used to force the authorities to act on the problem of unemployment. In fact, the recourse

to roadblocks could be seen as a sort of collective bargaining by riot. This expression was coined by Eric Hobsbawm in his study of the Luddite movement England in the early nineteenth century (Hobsbawm 2013). In the absence of better tools in these early stages of working-class struggle, the destruction of machines was, according to Hobsbawm, a weapon to put pressure on factory owners in order to extract concessions on wages and working conditions. From the perspective offered by this historical reference, the picket reveals another important dimension. As we just pointed out, it was certainly a means through which the unemployed built a new collective identity and secured their visibility. But they resorted to the picket first and foremost because they expected to get something in return: to establish a bargaining arena with the authorities for the allocation of social aid. Without other means of pressure available, the unemployed made the picket their main instrument to enter the political fray: the lifting of the roadblocks became their bargaining chip to obtain unemployment subsidies.

Finally, the creation of workfare programs since 1996 had a catalytic role in the mobilization of the unemployed by providing a common policy goal. The existence of a solution, or at least the promise of one, was a powerful incentive that transformed what was until then diffuse discontent over the lack of jobs into a strong stimulus for collective action.

Let us now focus on the second process under consideration, the political dynamics of workfare programs. In what follows I shall explore its effects on the mobilization of unemployed. I start with a proposition drawn from the literature on unemployment and protest. It states that a high level of unemployment is not necessarily translated into protest by the victims of this situation. Rather than the level of unemployment, it is the frustration of the expectations created by the awareness of the existence of a solution that spurs the feeling of deprivation and with them the willingness to protest. The demands of the unemployed increase in view of the rights they have at their disposal, generating stronger and more sustained protests when the enjoyment of those rights is diminished or limited (Chabanet and Faniel 2012). That is why the context most conducive to the mobilization of the unemployed is one that combines a certain level of social protection coupled with restrictions on its benefits. This was indeed the scenario produced by the design and implementation of the Plan Trabajar created in 1996.

The launching of the workfare programs had a crucial initial impact on a symbolic level: it removed the lack of work from the sphere of individual responsibility of those who had lost their jobs and framed it as a public issue that should be addressed by public policies. In other words, it implied official recognition of the legitimacy of the

unemployed grievances and turned them into potential creditors of social benefits from the government. However, the way in which Plan Trabajar was designed and implemented did not facilitate the transition of a great number of unemployed to the condition of effective holders of social protection. As will be remembered, the distribution of workfare benefits was assigned to the municipalities. From the beginning, the universe of potential beneficiaries remained higher than the number of subsidies available. This fact, in addition to the absence of clear criteria for their allocation, had a predictable consequence: it supplied Peronist local bosses with resources they could manipulate in a discretionary manner to maintain their clientelistic networks.

The lack of transparency in the distribution of workfare benefits generated growing discontent among all those unable to access them. Stressing what they have in common despite their differences – deprivation of social protection as a consequence of clientelistic practices – activists were able to instill among the unemployed a sense of injustice, precisely a requisite for mobilization. In addition, the example of Cutral-Co gave activists more arguments to encourage the unemployed to make demands and to drive them into action. First, it showed that through struggle, injustice might be redressed. Second, the adoption of the name of “piqueteros” provided the unemployed with an identity in conflict with those who were concretely responsible for their marginalization. The activists managed to create among their followers a sense of injustice, a feeling of agency and a belligerent identity; in sum, the three components of what Doug MacAdam has called “the process of cognitive liberation” that makes possible the transformation of acquiescence into resistance (Mac Adam 1982: 34-35)

Considering the general state of demoralization among the unemployed and the dissuasive presence of the party patronage machines, it is not surprising that the practical effects of the process of cognitive liberation were limited at the onset. Nevertheless, they were sufficient enough to enable the activists and their organizations to gather an initial critical mass capable of taking action and thus opening an alternative access channel to workfare benefits. This situation made consecutive protest more likely as the activities of this avant-garde gave the unemployed a feeling of empowerment and set in motion a self-reinforcing process of political protest (Olivier, Marwell and Teixeira 1985)

## **9. The Waves of Protest**

The protest by the unemployed in the Greater Buenos Aires unfolded over almost a decade throughout four waves.

## 9.1 First Wave

The first wave covered the 1997-1998 period. As indicated above, it began in July 1997 with the successful challenge against the clientelistic distribution of workfare programs in La Matanza by La Emilia Neighborhood Association, led by Juan Carlos Alderete. It organized a demonstration in San Justo, the district capital, disrupting traffic and occupying the main square in demand for subsidies from the Barrios Program that the provincial government had launched following the model of the Plan Trabajar. The mobilization replicated another one carried out a year earlier in which protesters successfully obtained food aid from the municipal authorities. This time, after several days of protest, they were promised seventy workfare subsidies but the promise was only partially fulfilled because the local PJ bosses distributed the subsidies discretionally. In this context, the Neighborhood Committee, capitalizing on the experience of La Matanza activists, resorted to the same methods that El Tambo Cooperative Association had used shortly before that: it carried out a community census in order to build its own list of potential beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the committee also had to resort to more direct action measures, such as the occupation of City Hall, to enforce the promise of the seventy subsidies. The denouement of this first episode encouraged the agitation and propaganda efforts of the activists: it showed that real chances existed of getting results through collective action. Fairly soon, the unemployed in other nearby neighborhoods flocked to the La Emilia Neighborhood Association in search of support, thereby preparing the ground for the formation of La Matanza CCC in 1998. That year and after six months of struggle, the CCC managed to secure 100 new benefits for each of the neighborhoods that constituted the organization. Activists within Luis D'Elía's area of influence built up similar experiences which, as previously mentioned, paved the way to the creation of the FTV as a territorial branch of the CTA.

A closer look on the political logic of the mobilization promoted by the unemployed organizations brings an important matter to light. Although these organizations demanded unemployment subsidies in the name of the need of the unemployed, when the time came to decide who the beneficiaries would be, the selection criterion centered not on the condition of poverty but on the degree of personal involvement in mobilization. This criterion served as an effective mechanism to overcome the classic collective action problem: the free-riders, individuals who aspire to enjoy the benefits of a collective good without participating in the efforts to obtain it. The consequences of this kind of behavior are predictable: if all the unemployed could indiscriminately access the fruits of the picket they would have no reason to participate in it, depriving the organizations of their pressure power to provide the collective good. Thus the distribution of workfare programs by the organizations was conditioned to the merits

accrued by the unemployed through their participation in the struggle. The picket, therefore, did not only open up an alternative channel to clientelistic networks for access to workfare programs; it also offered the unemployed organizations selective incentives to guarantee and strengthen their mobilization capacity (Franceschelli and Ronconi 2002).

The criterion for the distribution of benefits was applied using a registry of participation in each and every demonstration. The organization's activists in the neighborhoods went through the picket lines and demonstrations checking attendance. The order of merit among the unemployed was then established on the basis of their participation in collective action: the more they participated, the higher their chances of obtaining a subsidy. The arguments of a CCC leader go to the heart of the matter:

We have been much criticized for the issue of giving scores for participating in the protest. But we understand that a neighborhood in great need that mobilizes 100 demonstrators cannot get the same as another neighborhood with the same needs that only mobilizes 10 demonstrators. That's why we tell the people: you are only going to get something as long as you can organize yourselves and mobilize. He who wants fish must get wet (Manzano 2013: 149).

The scoring system admittedly had some exceptions: only a few absences with justifiable causes were tolerated; cases of extreme need also received special treatment. But as a rule, the participation in a protest was the only way to get one of the unemployment subsidies the organizations negotiated with the authorities. In Greater Buenos Aires, an area permeated by the culture of clientelism, the link between unemployment subsidies and commitment to the struggle played an important pedagogic role: it helped to modify the self-perception of the unemployed by making it possible for them to stop viewing themselves as recipients of the favors granted by political brokers and start crediting their own effort for the improvements in their living conditions.

The mobilization of the unemployed in the urban periphery, subsequently extended to the urban centers in the provinces, led the authorities to multiply the number of national and provincial workfare programs in an attempt to defuse social tensions. The monthly average number of beneficiaries of the Plan Trabajar escalated from 62,000 in 1996 to 126,000 in 1997. There was a slight decrease in the two following years: from 116,000 in 1998 to 105,000 in 1999 (Golbert 2004). It should also be noted that there was a parallel decrease in the level of protests. This decline would only constitute a brief lull in the cycle of the unemployed mobilization.

## 9.2 Second Wave

The second wave of protest took place in 2000-2001. This was a period of strong growth of the piquetero movement. To account for it, allow me to take one step back and focus again on the profile of the activists in the Greater Buenos Aires area. Although their activism was centered in the neighborhoods and revolved around the question of unemployment, their organizations were neither mere neighborhood associations nor unions for the unemployed. As noted before, the main motivation of these entrepreneurs of mobilization was to be able to weigh in the national political arena in pursuit of their long-term objectives. With this aim in mind, as they managed to take root in their territories, they oriented most of their efforts to networking throughout the several focal points of protest that emerged in the urban periphery. This task was facilitated by the high level of mutual acquaintance between the leaders of the unemployed organization. As noted in Andres Schipani's research, in the past a significant number of these leaders had forged strong ties through shared experiences in the political and union arenas. These ties were crucial for coordinating joint action. A first exercise in such coordination took place in La Matanza in mid-1998 when the FTV and the CCC decided to close ranks with a view to organizing future mobilizations. With this larger organizational platform, they were in better position to take advantage of the political opportunities that would be opened up by the inauguration of President De la Rúa in December 1999.

Elected by a non-Peronist coalition – between the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) and Frente País Solidario (Frepaaso) – and confronting a difficult economic situation, De la Rúa began his tenure launching an adjustment program featuring strong public spending cuts. The reduction in the number of beneficiaries of the Plan Trabajar initiated by the previous administration was intensified: they were scaled back to 50,000. After several months of low activity, the piquetero movement responded by increasing the frequency and duration of roadblocks. To give greater scope and visibility to their plight, the FTV and the CCC launched in June 2000 a bold initiative: the blockage of the National Route 3, a central highway that traverses the La Matanza district and links the national capital with the south of the province. The roadblock lasted six days and was only lifted when the national authorities agreed to restore unemployment subsidies to the district and to deliver significant amounts of food aid. Five months later, due to the lack of implementation of the June agreements, a second roadblock of Route 3 occurred. This time, the La Matanza groups were joined by other organizations from southern areas in Greater Buenos Aires. This organizational cooperation led to an upward scale shift by clearing the way for a mobilization that could move contention beyond the local communities in which each group had been operating.

A brief description of this mobilization episode allows us to gaze at the two faces of the picket line. This is certainly an instrument for collective pressure. But it is also an arena in which a sense of community is forged and strengthened. Collective action, Donna Della Porta tells us, allows the unemployed to escape from the misery and hopelessness of daily life and share with others an active experience of solidarity (Della Porta 2010). According to the press reports, 3,000 people participated in the six-day roadblock. Entire families camped out in tents made of sticks and plastic tarpaulins at the side of the road. Women, children, and elderly people guarded the tents during the days and were relieved by the men at night. The division of labor was a first-order priority for the organizers. Activists were in charge of distributing the food provided by the associations' soup kitchens; others had to maintain security by controlling the entrances and exits from the picket line; there were also medics and nurses on call in case health issues arose. A platform was set up in a central spot that served as a meeting point for the assembly that was summoned every day to inform about the ongoing negotiations with the authorities and to discuss the measures to be adopted. Priests from neighboring parishes held a daily mass while in the evenings there were shows with musicians and invited artists. An activist summed up the experience in an interview: "It is a big self-help group and at the same time it's like a big home for all" (CELS 2001).

The context of political opportunities in which the roadblock took place in November 2000 played out in favor of its organizers by making available the support of influential allies. The first were the local bosses of the Peronist machine. The drastic reduction in the number of the Trabajar Program beneficiaries entailed a severe blow to the survival of their clientelistic networks. Faced with the emergency, they decided to show support for the piquetero movement and offered their services as mediators with the national authorities. With some exceptions, the majority of the activists reacted positively towards those who had hitherto been their adversaries and were now joining in a marriage of convenience in the common struggle for unemployment allowances. The roadblock was also extensively reported by the media. Television screens thus gave public opinion a window on the landscape of misery and hardship in the urban periphery, giving the problem of unemployment even greater national visibility.

The government, however, postponed the initiation of negotiations. It was then that new influential allies entered the scene. The CTA and a number of important unions led by the truck drivers' union threatened to call for a general strike if the demands of the unemployed organizations were not swiftly met. The threat proved to be effective because the government appointed a presidential delegate who travelled to La Matanza to discuss the terms of an agreement. The negotiations with FTV and CCC

leaders and municipal officials ended with the offer of an ample set of benefits: more food aid, funds to repair school infrastructure and deliver medicines, and a significant increase in the number of unemployment subsidies. The magnitude of the concessions contributed to framing the protest as a successful strategy. Once activists perceived that the struggle paid off, they embarked on an intense door to door canvassing, touring the neighborhoods, encouraging new protests in order to obtain more benefits. The contagion effect enabled unemployed people with weaker organizations, such as those from southern areas in Greater Buenos Aires that had lost workfare benefits under the pressure of Peronist brokers, to access new subsidies and restart their road to growth.

The expansion of the piquetero movement was also due to the new format for workfare programs introduced by the De la Rúa administration. This new format was aimed at limiting the resources that nourished the PJ's political machine in the urban periphery and reducing the discretionary nature of the distribution of benefits. After centralizing the management of the Trabajar Program in a state agency, the government established that not only the municipalities – as was until then the case – but also NGOs who submitted workfare programs at the local level could become recipients of benefits. Simultaneously, it was established that the workfare conditionality to which beneficiaries committed could be fulfilled both in the municipalities and through the community action of NGOs. The effects of the new format soon became clear: the existing unemployed organizations quickly turned into NGOs and several others promoted by new far left groups also claimed and obtained their status as such.

Candelaria Garay has underscored that the redesign of workfare programs empowered the unemployed organizations in several ways (Garay 2007). It increased their membership transforming the distribution of benefits in their hands into a selective incentive to recruit more associates. It provided the organizations with additional resources to finance their activities through small sums collected from workfare beneficiaries. Finally, the possibility of managing their own workfare schemes allowed them to consolidate the internal cohesion of their organizations through the participation of their members in several activities, such as bakeries, soup kitchens, small sewing businesses, and vegetable gardens. The unforeseen effect of the government's strategy aimed at weakening the clientelistic machine of the PJ bosses was therefore the strengthening of the piquetero movement.

This second wave of protests was marked by new roadblocks motivated by the partial, if not total, lack of implementation of the agreements between the authorities and the unemployed organizations. The most important occurred in May 2001, again in La

Matanza. The blockade of Route 3 lasted sixteen days and ended in a double success: the concession of even more workfare subsidies and social aid measures, as well as the ratification of FTV and CCC as authorized voices of the unemployed.

Indeed, the government's linkage to the mobilization of the unemployed was not limited to the policies adopted in response to their demands; it also encompassed the reactions to their recourse to disruptive action. As highlighted by Della Porta and Reiter, this is a crucial dimension in the interaction between the state and the protest movements (Della Porta and Reiter 1998). In this respect it is fair to say that the De la Rúa administration made an effort to avoid coercive interventions against the protesters. In an area as politically sensitive as the Greater Buenos Aires – the popular stronghold of the Peronist opposition – law enforcement was considered less important than peace keeping. The protest was handled with tolerance, and the government abstained from the use of force. Still, it brought lawsuits against the promoters of the roadblocks. In this context, a debate on the right to protest divided both the courts and public opinion (Gargarella 2005). Some condemned the picket for blocking the free flow of traffic and regarded it as a crime punished by the Penal Code. In contrast, others considered the picket as a manifestation of the constitutional right to petition before the authorities. While the former prioritizes their concern for those who suffered the disruptive effects of the roadblocks, the latter argued it was the duty of the courts to uphold the right to free expression of groups who had no access to conventional means of petition to advance their demands. While this debate ensued in the courts, the press reported in June 2001 that opinion polls showed that most of the people rejected the use of repressive policies to manage the unemployed protest.

The resort to repression sidestepped by the national authorities was, however, the standard response among the provincial governments. The most notorious case occurred in Northern Argentina, in the province of Salta. In June of 2001 a prolonged roadblock in the town of General Mosconi gave rise to harsh confrontations between protesters and security forces that led to two deaths and the arrest of many activists. The impact of the use of force was immediate and widespread. The entire community of the former oil enclave closed ranks around the mobilization and, in the rest of the country, various piquetero organizations went out into the streets to repudiate the repression, and ask for the release of those arrested. As would be clear in the future, the use of coercion tended to escalate the level of the protest instead of acting as a dissuasive mechanism. In a democratic context, the resort to repressive violence by the state becomes an additional source of claims and demands, and wakens powerful feelings of indignation and solidarity that strengthen collective action. On this occasion,

the De la Rúa administration intervened again sending a high government official to reopen negotiations and defuse the conflict.

This second wave of protests culminated in the launching of an ambitious initiative: the merging of the already vast collection of unemployed organizations. Galvanized by the success of their recent struggles, the FTV and the CCC called a national conference in July of 2001 in La Matanza which boasted the name of “Capital of the Piquetero Movement”. The purpose was to prepare joint activities with a view to constituting a common front of mobilization of the unemployed. The participants at the meeting, carried out in the premises of the main church of the district, belonged to the kaleidoscopic and fragmented universe of the Argentine far left. Although they had little electoral weight and just a marginal presence in the organized labor movement, they had been able to gain a foothold among the unemployed by exploiting the cracks in Peronist clientelistic networks. But when the moment of decision regarding future strategies and objectives arrived, strong disagreements emerged among them.

One of the issues in dispute centered on the recourse to roadblocks. From the beginning, roadblocks had been the instruments par excellence to open a space of negotiation with authorities and obtain access to the distribution of unemployment subsidies and social help. Four years since the pioneering experiences in the oil enclaves, this modality of disruptive action was laid open to discussion. This first challenge –there would be others in the future- was dictated by political prudence: the practice of totally blocking off traffic on the roads provided the government with a good excuse for resorting to repression. Therefore, it was proposed, that from then on, roadblocks be partial; that is, that alternative lanes or routes be left open for vehicle circulation. The supporters of this tactical turnabout were the FTV and the CCC, the largest organizations due to the magnitude of their ranks both in the urban periphery and in the provinces. The dissident voices belonged to the representatives of relatively minor organizations located in the southern zone of the Greater Buenos Aires. For the MTD activists, the tactical turnabout amounted to a distortion of the meaning of their protest. As leaders of organizations that had developed in a more hostile context, they announced they were not willing to renounce a methodology of action tempered in the intense competition with the Peronist brokers.

A split emerged between those who advocated more moderate tactics and those committed to radical initiatives of direct action. This division was not only an expression of their contrasting positions in the political chessboard, it also revealed their opposed strategic visions. For the MTD activists, the piquetero movement had to deepen the struggle to cause the fall of the government, opening the way to a revolutionary

alternative, while the efforts of the FTV and CCC were aimed at an institutional solution through the creation of a wide political social front. In spite of their disagreements, the participants of the July national conference agreed to launch new mobilizations which ended up providing new occasions for their disagreements to become public. It did not come as a surprise that unity was not achieved in the second conference in September either. From then on, the piquetero movement unfolded between two poles, the one formed by the FTV and the CCC and the one called Bloque Piquetero Nacional composed of organizations associated to extreme left groupings – the main one of which was the Trotskyist Polo Obrero – and others with a more autonomous profile such as the factions of the MTD.

### 9.3 Third Wave

The third wave of protests took place against the backdrop of the social and economic crisis that exploded at the end of 2001 and caused President De la Rúa's resignation.

Measured against the expectations its electoral success had generated, De la Rúa's performance after its two years in office could not have been more unsatisfactory. Poverty and unemployment levels remained high; the promised economic recovery did not occur, and attempts to overcome the emergency translated into unpopular economic austerity measures. With these scarcely promising precedents, the government faced its first electoral test in the legislative elections of October 2001. Compared to the votes received two years earlier in 1999, the UCR-Frepaso coalition lost 4.94 million votes, or 61 percent. The other face of the electoral result was the scale of political disaffection, mostly due to the loss of votes of the parties in power: More than 40% of the electorate either abstained from voting or cast void or blank votes. The Justicialista party also lost votes, but retained sufficient seats to control of both chambers of Congress. This ominous political stage marked the last days of De la Rúa presidency (Torre 2005).

While the recession deepened and fears of a default on the foreign debt ran wild, the government intensified the fiscal adjustment measures, proposed renegotiating the payment of foreign debt and requested the IMF's financial assistance. The fruits of these efforts were short lived. In view of the unmet fiscal objectives, at the beginning of December the IMF announced it would interrupt the supply of funds. Capital flight, already in progress since the beginning of the year, gained renewed momentum and produced a run on the banks. Deposits fell to such a degree that the economic authorities took a decision that would have grave consequences since it implied the de facto end of the currency board regime: in order to protect the banking system, they restricted cash withdrawals to a small sum. The impact of the sudden scarcity of pesos

in the street did not affect everyone to the same degree. Principally it affected the daily life of the popular sectors who funded their needs with the money that circulated through the networks of the informal economy. In addition, the abrupt halt of food assistance and unemployment subsidies deepened the climate of despair and anger growing in poverty enclaves.

In mid-December of 2001, a spiral of collective violence shocked the country. On the 14th, groups of families in the popular neighborhoods of the city of Rosario, province of Santa Fe, started to throng round the entrances to supermarkets and, to the cry of “We are hungry“, demanded they be given food. When their demands went unheeded, they broke into the premises and, before bewildered managers and employees could react, took away all kinds of merchandise. During the next few days, a wave of looting broke out in the country’s main urban centers. By the end of the week, nearly 300 supermarkets and grocery stores had been sacked, eighteen people killed, either by the police or by store owners, hundreds more injured, and thousands arrested.

Javier Auyero’s remarkable reconstruction of the December 19 and 20 lootings in the Greater Buenos Aires has thrown light on the backstage of those events and showed the role played by the Peronist political machine (Auyero 2007). When the demands for food broke out, the first protagonists were the unemployed organizations that mobilized in front of the big chain supermarkets which were under strong police protection. The negotiations between the piquetero leaders and the managers unfolded in a tense atmosphere but, in most cases, culminated without incident in the mass distribution of food. The fate of grocery stores and small supermarkets that were not lucky enough to receive police protection was very different. The absence of police or, more often, their passivity created “liberated zones” in the urban periphery: within them, the presence of Peronist brokers was visible, going through neighborhoods instigating their followers to rush the unprotected stores and take away all they could carry. There were storeowners who distributed food and avoided the looting; others, barricaded in their stores, fired at the multitude. During various days, television cameras bore witness to scenes of violence and fury in the greater Buenos Aires. For not a few observers –the piquetero leader Luis D’Elía was one of them – the intervention on the part of Peronist brokers and the police behavior were both factors of the onslaught orchestrated by the Justicialista party of the province of Buenos Aires with a view to shortening the days of De la Rúa’s Presidency.

On December 19, protest broke out in the Federal Capital and new actors entered the stage. Sections of the middle class went out into the streets banging pots and pans to protest against the freezing of bank deposits or simply to express their indignation.

Their example inspired similar mobilizations in cities in the provinces. That night, a state of siege was decreed but the measure had no dissuasive effects. The next day, an irate multitude spontaneously occupied the Plaza de Mayo and merged with groups from Greater Buenos Aires. Police repression on the demonstrators killed fifteen more people. As the day was coming to a close, abandoned by his own party, De la Rúa resigned.

The vacant presidency activated the constitutional norms that place the task of designating a new executive in the hands of Congress. Notwithstanding the legislative majorities, the Justicialista party leadership arrived at the time of decision immersed in internal conflicts. The first president lasted only a week in office. He was replaced by Eduardo Duhalde, the party strongman in the province of Buenos Aires, in order to complete ex-President De la Rúa's outstanding two years. Once in office, Duhalde devaluated the currency and put an end to the currency board economic regime.

The economic crisis of the end of 2001 reached its peak in 2002 amid the traumatic experience of abandoning the economic regime within which the country had functioned for the previous ten years. GNP contracted 11%, the unemployment rate increased from 16.5 to 21.5%, purchasing power fell 30%, the proportion of people living under the poverty line climbed from 39% to 58% (Beccaria and Maurizio 2012). This disturbing social situation, together with the still fresh memory of collective violence and its tragic sequels, set off alarm bells in the new government. On January 28 2002, a large demonstration led by the FTV and the CCC reached the doors of the presidential palace demanding urgent solutions. The piquetero leaders brought with them a proposal: the creation of a basic citizen income. In the days before the events of December, the CTA, the organizer of a National Front against Poverty (FRENAPO in Spanish) had carried out an informal popular poll that collected some 3 million signatures in favor of the initiative. Two days after the large demonstration, Duhalde received Luis D'Elía and Juan Carlos Alderete and told them that he was about to launch a social program with premises similar to those of the Frenapo proposal. The bases of the future program had been discussed in a crisis committee – called the Diálogo Argentino – active the last days of De la Rúa's Presidency, with the participation of representatives of the church, trade unions, urban and rural employer associations, the UNDP and ONGs (Golbert 2006).

Framed as a "right to social inclusion", the Head of Household Program (HHP) announced in April 2002 was aimed at providing a monthly income for unemployed male and female heads of households with children under eighteen. The monthly transfer – 150 pesos, 40 USD at the time – was not a temporary benefit; it would be

received until program beneficiaries found employment in the formal labor market. In turn, the heads of households had to fulfill certain conditionalities such as complying with school attendance and health controls for their children. The new program, which replaced the Trabajar Plan, was initially funded by state resources supplied for the most part by a tax on exporters who had profited from devaluation. A year later, a loan from the World Bank brought more funding and an additional conditionality: that program beneficiaries should participate in community development workfare projects. Aiming at reaching those in the direst straits, the working hours required were fewer than the previous workfare program: 20 per week instead of the 30-40 demanded by the Trabajar Plan (Golbert 2006; Andrenacci et al. 2006).

The HHP coverage expanded rapidly: by the end of 2002 its beneficiaries reached two million households. Later evaluations of the program have coincided in underscoring that not all beneficiaries satisfied the eligibility requirements, and that there were notorious deficiencies in the oversight of the fulfillment of conditionalities (Galasso and Ravallion 2003). Still, and in hindsight, this program contributed to setting up a timely safety net in the peak of the crisis.

The institutional architecture of the new social policy included the creation of advisory committees tasked with supervising program applications and monitoring workfare activities. President Duhalde reserved a seat on those committees for representatives of the unemployed organizations in their capacity as NGOs. But only the FTV and the CCC accepted the offer; the remaining organizations strongly criticized their collaboration and kept a critical distance. In more general terms, the recognition of the leaders of the piquetero movement as authorized voices in the negotiation of the HHP entailed a striking innovation: for the first time in the country's history, a social actor without an explicit linkage to the labor market was granted the capacity to discuss social policy.

With more responsibilities, the unemployed organizations became more professionalized over time. In addition to their mobilization activities they created technical and administrative units in charge of processing the routine operations of the social programs. The testimonies collected by anthropologist Virginia Manzano in La Matanza illustrated these developments (Manzano 2013). One of the interviewees, a CCC leader, recalled:

When we started with the 70 programs in 1997 we filled all the applications by hand. Now the whole system has been automated, so we had to get our first computer. We were forced to set up our own structure. Then came the

second computer, and the third... Today there are quite a few because a daily follow-up is required: if you don't do it, the state always screws you and fails to deliver. That's why we figured out that, apart from a central technical unit, each neighborhood had to have its own technical team. (Interview, CCC Leader, in Manzano 2013: 189).

Many were the tasks of the technical and administrative units: entering data into the IT systems, assigning beneficiaries to the different community projects, registering attendance at the organization's activities, receiving monthly benefit transfers, reporting the program performance to the state authorities, following up on claims for rejected applications, and restoring benefits. This list of bureaucratic procedures speaks for itself of the range of skills and resources demanded by the co-administration of social welfare policies. A case in point: CCC militants interviewed by Manzano declared that they managed 36,000 HHP benefits at the national level (Manzano 2013: 188).

The massive growth of the new workfare program contributed to the expansion of the piquetero movement. However, a more careful look at the numbers shows that the PJ's political machine reaped the lion's share of the program's benefits. According to some estimates, only 10% of HHP allowances were distributed by the unemployed organizations, while the remaining 90% were channeled through provincial governors and municipal mayors, for the most part enrolled in the governing party. With these initiatives, President Duhalde sought to neutralize the looming social conflict while simultaneously attending to a no less urgent imperative: re-building the ties with the popular base of Peronism in order to face a crisis of unprecedented magnitude with stronger political resources. The truce offered by FTV and CCC aided him in his endeavor. But he had to deal with the challenge from the other organizations which maintained a belligerent attitude. Their protest became a true political confrontation, under the barely concealed expectation that President Duhalde would eventually follow in the steps of former President De la Rúa. On June 22nd, 2002, the Bloque Piquetero Nacional and the MTD groups announced that in the coming days they would block all access to the Federal Capital.

On June 26th, about 2,500 demonstrators marched on the Pueyrredón Bridge, the southern access to the city of Buenos Aires, with the intention of occupying it and blocking all vehicle circulation. On the bridge they ran up against police forces that tried to disperse the crowd with tear gas and rubber bullets. The demonstrators responded by throwing sticks and stones. The police reacted by launching a full-scale repression that ended up with the murder of two young militants. The images of the murders, registered by press photographers, triggered a massive wave of public indignation, which led

that very afternoon to more protest in the city main square, Plaza de Mayo. The next day Duhalde, who upon taking over the presidency had stated that the crisis would not be solved “with bullets or with bayonets”, condemned the police repression and ordered the arrest of those responsible. But his actions were not enough to neutralize the political crisis unleashed by the unexpected repetition of the tragic episodes of December 2001. Shortly after, he announced he would shorten his term in office and bring the presidential election forward to March 2003.

## 10. The New Political Scenario of Protest

From mid-2003 onwards, a fourth wave of protests took place within a context of changes in the political landscape and the economic situation. These changes modified the conditions that had hitherto shaped the trajectory of the piquetero movement: on one hand, the existence of a large mass of unemployed, and on the other, the marginal political position of the activists who led their mobilization. Regarding the latter condition, we have already indicated that the piquetero movement drew its leadership from the left wing of the political chessboard. As a result, and despite ideological disputes and tactical disagreements, the leaders shared a common stance: to oppose any government in office. The rapprochement of the FTV and CCC to the Duhalde administration within the framework of the HHP broke that common stance but only in part: their organization remained mobilized. As the leader of the Justicialista party in the Province of Buenos Aires, Duhalde was the embodiment of the clientelistic networks against which they had struggled in the Greater Buenos Aires. Consequently, the leaders of both organizations kept a critical distance from the Duhalde government and did not give up the resort to protest. However, the 2003 national elections would alter the political landscape in which the piquetero movement had grown (Novaro, Bonvecchi and Cherny 2014).

Still torn by internal divisions, the Peronists presented three candidates in the national election, which took place in two rounds. In the first round, the candidates that gathered more votes were Carlos Menem (24.4%), and Nestor Kirchner (22%). The second round, however, did not take place because Menem withdrew in order to avoid being beaten, as the polls predicted he would. Under such circumstances, and with a slim margin of legitimacy, Kirchner became President. He was the former governor of a remote southern province, and took over the presidency with a strong discourse: he rejected neoliberal reforms in the name of a return to a national form of capitalism, he exalted the memory of the desaparecidos under the military dictatorship as he called for deepening the cause of human rights, and used his relatively peripheral position in the Peronist galaxy to present himself as a new man, without ties to the traditional political

class and the corporate powers. His speech and his energetic gestures generated great expectations among large sectors of public opinion, and provoked a realignment in the ranks of the piquetero movement.

The new countenance of Peronism in power provoked opposite reactions among the cadres of militants in the organizations of the unemployed. For those who came from left-wing populism, it represented an opening and a unique political opportunity: the levers of the state were in the hands of a leadership in sync with the national-populist tradition of Peronism. They rapidly surrounded a president in need of political support, in exchange for resources for their own organizations. Like Duhalde before him, Kirchner, no sooner he was installed in power, met with the leaders of the FTV and CCC, and made them an offer of dialogue. When the time came to reward their willingness to cooperate, however, the benefits were distributed unequally. Luis D'Elía, who had participated in Kirchner's presidential campaign, took the lion's share. Juan Carlos Alderete was sidelined, and a year later he led the Maoist militants from the CCC into the ranks of the opposition to the government. The impact of the new political landscape was the divergent paths taken by the two organizations that had hitherto led the mobilization of the unemployed.

The gamut of pro-Peronist organizations included, in addition to FTV, others that were more recent, among them Barrios de Pie and Movimiento Evita. In order to satisfy their demands, the government established an informal cabinet composed of many who had shared a long history of militancy within the Peronist left in alliance with the piqueteros activists (Boyanosky Bazan 2010). Because of this privileged acquaintance these groups received the largest share of benefits from the new social plans, such as subsidies for the construction of homes and for investments in small businesses. Together with the flow of funds, Kirchner offered them jobs in the public administration, in particular in those sectors that managed social and community activities. The most salient appointment was that of Luis D'Elía, for whom the government invented a new agency inside the Ministry of Social Action, as Undersecretary for Land and Housing.

Predictably, the integration into government structures induced tactical changes in the pro-Peronist ranks. Access to power sites made direct inside pressure more effective than the resort to public protest. In order to obtain benefits, they opted for closed-door negotiations over collective mobilization. But this tactical shift was not the only visible effect of their new political status. More generally, the very political design of these organizations changed. Though originally designed to serve the cause of the unemployed, their insertion in the government turned them into players in the wider political game, as peons in the strategy of the new president to develop support for his

policies outside the orbit of the Justicialista Party, where his ascending leadership met strong resistance. On a political stage where Kirchner played the role of conductor and strategist in chief, the pro-Peronist activists could hardly avoid becoming dependents that, in exchange for the benefits they obtained for their own organizations, were now subordinate to political and tactical moves beyond their control.

The ideological versatility of Peronism, which promoted neoliberalism under Menem, and then became critical of neoliberalism under Kirchner, made no impression on the other wing of the piqueteros' movement: the organizations under the umbrella of the Bloque Piquetero Nacional, and the new left wing currents of the MTD. All of them, from those more attached to a party to those that sought to preserve their autonomy, coincided on the same diagnosis: the new government represented the continuity of previous administrations. Or, to put it in their own words, it was just another astute version of the strategy of the dominant class. Thus, they remained in opposition. This decision had two consequences. First, their decision placed these organizations against the mood of public opinion, the majority of which yearned for a return to institutional normality after the recent traumatic episodes. Second, it led them to confront a president who, a few months after his inauguration, was gathering high levels of approval as the guarantor of a new beginning for a shaken nation. Both consequences paved the way to the political isolation of these non-Peronist factions of the piquetero movement. The political dynamic that ensued is well known: from political isolation stems radicalization, in a mutually reinforcing spiral (Della Porta and Diani 2011). The more isolated a movement becomes, the lower will be its expectation of immediate gains and the greater its ideological radicalization and its belligerence in political action. This dynamic soon became clear when these organizations resorted to the same disruptive tactics that they had used before 2003. The price they would pay for their dissonance with the general consensus was a dire one: the gradual erosion in the legitimacy of social protest.

## **11. The Economic Recovery and the Fall in Unemployment**

The new scenario of Argentine development after 2003 not only undermined the unified action of the piquetero movement; it also affected its social base as the improvement of the economy made unemployment drop. We have already mentioned the negative impact that the rupture of the monetary straitjacket of the currency board had on economic output, employment, and salaries, and the subsequent increase in poverty. But now, after a few months, still under the clouds of crisis, the economic engine managed to restart, to the almost unanimous surprise of both analysts and the government itself (Levi Yeyati and Valenzuela 2007). The deepest depression in the

contemporary history of the country proved to be quite short: in the last quarter of 2002 the first signs of economic reactivation appeared. Some public policy decisions, in conjunction with new external economic factors, put an end to four years of recession. The initial push came from exports. The agrarian sector, which had been modernized during the previous decade, reacted positively to the monetary devaluation by the Duhalde government by increasing production and diversifying supply. The same was true of export industries – auto, steel, and paper – which recovered their lost markets. By mid-2003, economic recovery had spread beyond the export complex. The industries oriented toward the internal market took advantage of the protective barrier of a higher rate of exchange and rapidly promoted an active import re-substitution. In turn, construction made its own contribution. Under such circumstances, a new virtuous circle radiated over the entire economy: as production increased so did employment, the fall in unemployment made salaries rise, and all of these factors made production increase further. The government also contributed to this recovery through the fiscal surplus it generated, based on two pillars, namely, higher tax revenues from exports, and the drastic reduction in external payments on a reduced debt as a result of the 2001 default.

With more resources at its disposal, the government increased social spending and investments in infrastructure. During 2003, the economy grew at an annual rate of 8.8% in a context of low inflation. It was then that the country received a powerful boost from international markets. Thanks to the great demand from China and vigorous world growth, the prices for agricultural goods exported by Argentina reached levels never before attained. By 2005, the dark forecasts for the economy were eclipsed by a new wave of growth that would last until the end of the decade.

With the economic recovery, the proportion of the population with employment problems diminished steadily. The rate of unemployment of 25.5% registered in 2002, the peak of the crisis, fell to 20% in 2003, 13.1% in 2005, and 8.5% in 2007 (Beccaria and Maurizio 2012). Changes in the labor market and their consequences – the creation of employment and the parallel strengthening employed workers' power to exert economic pressure – modified the nature of social conflict. After two years in which more than 50% of the conflicts were promoted by the organizations of the unemployed, from 2005 on, over 75% of the conflicts were led by the trade unions (Etchmندی and Collier 2007). The shift in the axis of protest from employment problems to the distributive conflicts translated into the return of trade unions to their central position in the world of work, one hand and, into a gradual retreat of the piquetero movement, on the other.

The effects of the post-crisis period meant a serious setback for the survival of the organizations of the unemployed. Starting in 2003, the number of beneficiaries of the Heads of Households Programs diminished: from two million in 2003 to 1.5 million in 2005 and 750,000 in 2007 (Repetto and Diaz Langou 2010). Even though many of the former beneficiaries migrated to other social welfare programs created in 2005, the majority took advantage of new job openings to return to the labor market. The subsequent loss of power and resources of the organizations of the unemployed highlighted an issue that had always haunted them; namely, how could they secure the support of the unemployed on a sustained and permanent basis?

## **12. The Relationship between the Piquetero Movement and its Social Base**

In order to explore the nature of the aforementioned problem, we could begin by referring to the ideal portrait of the unemployed organization drawn by M. Svampa (2005). Beyond their ideological slant and differences in size, these organizations are networks of association with varying degrees of participation and political engagement. They all have a center occupied by the leadership and a first ring composed of intermediate cadres that perform as delegates of the organization in the neighborhoods. They all share the strategic vision of the movement. There follows a second tier of sympathizers with less political involvement; finally, there is a vast periphery of people that approach the organization propelled by their urgent needs for the most elementary goods and services. The great challenge for the leaders and the hard core of the organization – the very heart of the piquetero identity – has always been how to anchor the ties to this vast periphery more on a political commitment than on sheer material necessity.

When we shift our perspective to that of the population at risk in terms of employment, as revealed in the excellent ethnographic study by Julieta Quirós (2011), we understand the magnitude of the challenge faced by the piquetero activists. Usually, the unemployed put their names on the waiting list of a given organization in order to qualify for the benefits of a workfare program. If they do not comply with the conditions attached to such benefits (foremost their participation in mobilizations) or if they do not receive the expected benefits reasonably soon, they try their luck in other organizations offering the same services in their neighborhood. This shopping around moved across political boundaries. In the microcosm of the unemployed, there was no neat distinction between the piqueteros and the local Peronist political brokers. Members of the same family shared the benefits and contacts of different organizations, regardless of disputes among their leaders. More specifically, Quiros found that many of the unemployed did not see themselves as “piqueteros” but as “being with the piqueteros” (Quiros 2011:

323). This expression reveals the transitory nature of their affiliation, in opposition to the permanent commitment of more politicized minorities, who lived by and for the movement.

Indeed, those ties could be transitory but they were also socially intense. As Quiros has stressed, “being with the piqueteros” meant more than the simple expectation of receiving a subsidy. At the same time, “being with the piqueteros” offered the chance of overcoming fatalism and vulnerability: it meant doing something to change one’s predicament and showing that being unemployed was not equivalent to being socially dead. But this subjectively rewarding experience did not generally imply a commitment of the unemployed to the political cause of the piquetero organizations. According to Quiros, the stronger ties were formed with the neighborhood delegates of those organizations, because they were directly involved in meeting the people’s needs. Such personal commitment was very often revealed when one of those delegates broke with their organization, and took with them a sizeable number of the unemployed.

The political achievements of the far left activists at the helm of the unemployed organizations always came up shorter than their ambitions. In the view of the activists, the mobilization of the unemployed was just a platform from which to gain influence on the national political stage. However, when they tried to transfer the support they had obtained in the struggle for benefits for the unemployed to the service of their political causes, the results were almost insignificant as the 2003 elections showed. Just before the elections that carried Kirchner to the Presidency, the CCCs launched a call to abstain, but when the votes were counted, it became evident that the level of electoral participation had increased compared to the previous election. In turn, the harvest of the small parties of the left who had opted for participation was very low also. The percentage of votes obtained by the legislative candidates of the Frente de Izquierda Unida and the Partido Obrero in the district of the province of Buenos Aires was 2.45% and 0.84%, respectively. It should be noted that the meager 22% that supported Kirchner came principally from the popular sectors of the Great Buenos Aires, the traditional constituency of the Peronist party. What emerges from this short digression on the links between the piquetero movement and its bases is evident: thanks to a persevering militancy in the territory, leftist activists were able to mobilize a great number of jobless people around their more pressing demands; however, they faced serious obstacles when the time came to translate the social backing they had garnered into solid political commitment to their cause.

### **13. Policing the Protest**

Towards the end of Kirchner's first year in the presidency, the situation of the piquetero movement was characterized by two contrasting developments: on the one hand, the demobilization of the pro-Peronist organizations, and on the other, the intensification of the protest by extreme left organizations. In this fourth and last wave of protest encompassing the period from 2003 to 2007, the blocking of highways lost the importance it had held in the past. The frequent resort to this instrument of protest had contributed to a negative image of the mobilization of the unemployed. That is why they started resorting to street protests instead. Periodically, columns of the unemployed from the urban periphery entered the city and marched in downtown areas converging on public offices or the Plaza de Mayo. Their goal was to denounce the loss of subsidies and demand their restitution. The bureaucratic controls on the distribution of benefits, which were often prey to misuse and petty corruption, targeted those organizations that were not aligned with the government. There were also demonstrations that had a more clearly political objective. Such was the case of those staged on the anniversary of the Pueyrredón Bridge assassinations or against the judicial indictment of militants.

The policing of protests by the government had two phases according to the research carried out by Federico Fuchs (Fuchs 2006). During the first, a permissive policy prevailed, whereas in the second, stronger measures were adopted but they fell short of direct repression. Once installed in the presidency, Kirchner made it clear that there would be no repression of social protests. His decision acknowledged the criticisms on the part of human rights organizations of the management of social conflict, and was part of his efforts to enlist support for a government that had begun with scant electoral backing. The policy of no repression was, in addition, in tune with the spirit of conciliation that prevailed among wide portions of public opinion. But there was also another reason: the lack of confidence in the ability of law enforcement personnel to handle disruptive actions. The use of direct force to defuse situations of acute conflict risked an escalation of violence, as had occurred in the episodes of December 2001 and June 2002. Thus, during the first phase, official policy was that the police abstain from intervening in street marches. They were deployed inconspicuously during demonstrations, avoided direct contact with the demonstrators, and acted only to prevent incidents.

This permissive policy towards unemployed mobilizations elicited strong objections from business organizations, opposition parties, and the traditional press. At the Peronist headquarters in the Province of Buenos Aires, Eduardo Duhalde also questioned the government's softline approach towards social protest. Even some district mayors of Greater Buenos Aires, while supporting the government, strongly objected to the presence of piqueteros on the streets. The Church also joined in the chorus of critics by

warning that the government's passivity could lead to social chaos. President Kirchner responded with harsh words and accused all of them of seeking a return to the political violence of the past. With an eye to the polls that registered a high degree of approval for his government, he ratified his commitment not to repress social protest.

In the provinces, on the other hand, local police forces did not always go along with central government policies. Under orders from the respective governors, they repeatedly repressed actions that blocked highways causing several deaths. The federal government kept to its position, even when the repertoire of protests would have justified more extreme measures. That was the case of the one-day occupation of the Ministry of Labor – the agency that was in charge of workfare programs – in October 2003. Kirchner sternly criticized the occupation but did not authorize police intervention and left the resolution of the conflict in the hands of the Ministry personnel. Thus, a dual strategy that would become the hallmark of the immediate future started to take shape: on the one hand, a rejection of protest as a form of extortion, and on the other a refusal to use force against it. Four months later there was a new occupation of the Ministry of Labor, this time with another measure: during six days, the piqueteros improvised an encampment in the street facing the ministry, asking to be heard. The practice of camping out, installing both tents and soup kitchens, already in use in the provinces, now reached the city of Buenos Aires broadening the repertoire of protest at a very visible site, the Plaza de Mayo.

During this fourth phase of the protest, a cleavage began to emerge between opposing factions within the piquetero movement. The larger organizations, the CCC and the BPN, started to moderate their disruptive mobilizations. When they blocked highways, they did it outside rush hour and without a total blockage of the traffic flow. They also distanced themselves from more extreme measures, like the ones aforementioned, acknowledging their negative impact on public opinion. But the groups who still promoted these tactics did not suffer from such scruples. These were mostly smaller splinter organizations that had formed during the 2003 crises of piquetero organizations. The government's refusal to use force played a role in this process of fragmentation. The tactical differences and ideological squabbles typical of the extreme left found expression in different organizations, partly as a consequence of police passivity. The opportunity to engage in cost-free demonstrations led the dissidents inside the protest organizations to break with them, multiplying the sites of conflict.

This was the context of the second phase of government policy towards protests. The occasion arrived in July 2004 when the legislature of the city of Buenos Aires was considering adopting a set of ordinances regarding access to public spaces.

The new code of access forbade street prostitution, as well as street vendors, and especially street demonstrations without prior official permission. In repudiation of such measures, the piquetero organizations staged a march on the city legislature. At the end of the demonstration a small group of activists broke away and provoked serious incidents by stoning the legislature building, and damaging its main doors. Faced with this turn of events, the protest organizers decided to leave the site and, in later statements, condemned the infiltration of “unidentified elements” and their attempts to sabotage the popular mobilization. The government’s first reaction was a tactical retreat. For several hours the violence increased with no police intervention. Finally, the police forces were given the order to advance. Not without difficulty, and with the use of tear gas, they restored order in the streets and made numerous arrests. The confrontation was televised and had a significant public impact. The dramatic TV images lent credence to the government’s narrative that placed the blame for the serious disturbances on a small group of some “fifty extreme-left provocateurs”.

After these episodes the government started to revise its strategy and replaced its previous permissive attitude with a policy directed at limiting the number of disruptive actions. Public buildings were protected with barriers so that they could not be occupied. There were no restrictions to the practice of setting up camps, but on the few occasions in which protestors attempted to do so in front of Government House, they were met by a tight cordon of police. There was no more tolerance for the complete blockage of highways or other means of access to the city of Buenos Aires. Street marches continued to take place but with a more visible presence of police. The new official tactic consisted in a strong show of force, saturating public spaces with police forces equipped with anti-riot gear (helmets, sticks, and shields, but no firearms) as dissuasive devices.

In any event, police control was selective. The piquetero organizations that adapted to the new situation could act without much risk. In some instances they engaged in negotiations with the government, which led to the curtailment or suspension of mobilizations. When an organization close to the government, such as the one led by Luis D’Elía, engaged in extreme measures against a rival faction, it was not repressed. However, the small groups of activists that defied the police were severely punished, and many were prosecuted and harshly sentenced by the justice system.

The end of the permissive policy, clearly visible in 2005, closely followed the shifts in public opinion regarding the piquetero mobilizations. In order to place this sequence in context, it is useful to remember what has been said about protest as a principal resource for social groups at the margins of the political system for negotiating with

public authorities. As stated by Michael Lipsky in his classic study, the efficacy of this method of pressure depends on the capacity of those who use it to draw support from other more mainstream groups that are well-situated to influence decision makers (Lipsky 1965,1968). The resort to protest thus sets in motion a process of indirect persuasion. Those who protest aspire to obtain sympathy from “third parties” which, though distant from the causes of conflict, are politically significant for the powers that be. If the plan succeeds, these “third parties” will most likely intervene demanding that the authorities pay attention and offer solutions to the demands of those who protest. As such, the process of indirect persuasion faces the protest leaders with a dilemma: they must calibrate their action in such a way as to avoid alienating third-party support and turning it into an unfavorable disposition or a hostile reaction. If the latter is the outcome, the action and demands of these influential actors will shift from a plea to the authorities to correct an unjust situation to demanding they put an end to the disturbances generated by the protests.

The political dynamics sketched above describe well the avatars of the fourth wave of protests. As shown by Federico Fuchs (2006), the choices made by the government were strongly conditioned by the pressure of public opinion. In general terms, this should not be surprising since it is to be expected in a competitive political system. But in this particular case, President Kirchner’s sensitivity to the popular mood had a more immediate and personal source: it was all of his political capital. Elected with a low percentage of the vote, the main source of support for his government stemmed from maintaining the high indexes of approval he had obtained in his first months in power. Those high levels owed a great deal to the perceptions of the metropolitan middle class which was precisely the sector whose daily routines were most affected by the marches on the streets.

As I have already remarked, initially public opinion reacted favorably to the mobilization of the unemployed. According to the opinion polls examined by Fuchs, until mid-2004 the government’s permissive attitude was largely approved. The episodes that took place at the city’s legislature in July of that year changed this trend. A poll taken after those events shows that nearly two-thirds of people interviewed disagreed with a policy of no repression and half of them blamed the government for the incidents. The impact of those incidents endangered a politically sensitive area: the positive image of the government, when a university institute reported a fall in the level of confidence. These were the circumstances that led to a turnabout in the tactics for policing protests.

## **14. The Decline of the Piquetero Movement**

Besides their contribution to the end of a permissive policy, the shifts in public opinion had other two consequences. The first concerns the status of protest. As remarked above, the resort to protest by the piquetero movement provoked a debate about the right to protest versus the right to circulate freely. Towards the end of 2004, the second position prevailed leading to the growing litigation of protest. The second consequence was the delegitimation of the piquetero movement as such. The frequency with which the marches interrupted the city's daily life ignited a sense of irritation and anger among the middle classes of the city and Greater Buenos Aires. As was to be expected under such circumstances, these sectors tended to regard the piquetero movement - whether for or against the government - less as an expression of suffering by the victims of the social crisis than as the work of agitators.

This change in public opinion coincided with a sustained expansion of the economy and a rapid increase in job creation. With the return to the practice of collective bargaining, labor conflicts multiplied and came to the fore. It should be noted that the resurgence of labor pressure took place in a context of a rate of unemployment that was still high (13% in 2005). As would become clear in the following years, the segmentation of the labor market produced by the neoliberal reforms altered the terms of the distributive struggle. Most of the informal sector and the unemployed could not compete with the more privileged workers that were occupied in the formal sector of the economy. Under these circumstances, even though they covered only 40% of the labor force, the unions woke from their long lethargy and started to reassume the leadership of social protest.

Despite a more hostile political setting, the piquetero movement also intensified its mobilization in 2005, raising the banner of those that were being left behind in a growing economy or had difficulties in joining it. Their mobilization not only took place in a public space that was more controlled by the police. It also had to face President Kirchner who had been strengthened in his quest to take command of the governing party (Novaro, Bonvecchi and Cherny 2014). This dispute took place mainly in the Province of Buenos Aires, and against his principal rival, former President Duhalde. With abundant fiscal resources at his disposal, Kirchner managed to co-opt key local bosses of the Greater Buenos Aires political machine. With their support, he presented his own list of candidates in the legislative elections of October 2005 and roundly defeated the Peronist candidates linked to Duhalde. Empowered by an electoral victory that also had backing from other provinces, Kirchner emerged from the election as the unquestioned leader of the Peronist movement, heading a larger and stronger government coalition that brought together both the party machine bosses and the branches of the unemployed organizations.

With greater political support and the backing of a public opinion that had become less tolerant of street demonstrations, the government reacted with a strategy of wearing down the piqueteros' offensive: it allowed the mobilizations but firmly rejected their demands. Under such circumstances, the resort to protest ceased to work as an instrument to open up channels of influence and negotiation with the authorities. This resulted in a feeling of impotence among the piquetero leaders. The words of Juan Carlos Alderete – the leader of the most important organization of the unemployed – illustrated this predicament well: “If the government calls us to negotiate, we will suspend our measures” (Fornillo 2008: 243). But the authorities remained firm in their policy of refusing negotiations. At the beginning of 2006, the CCC mobilizations showed a marked decrease in their ranks and a year later their marches grew more sporadic and confined to the neighborhoods in the urban periphery (Fornillo 2008).

The more drastic official attitude towards unemployed demonstrations combined with a significant fall in unemployment weakened the piquetero movement. This decline was also intensified in turn by the shrinking of its social base. As mentioned above, large numbers of the unemployed left the movement and started looking for jobs. The jobs they found were precarious, especially in the building trades, since that was the growing sector in terms of employment. Nevertheless, the “odd jobs” – occasional, informal occupations – were more attractive than the workfare programs, because the allowances were not indexed, despite rising inflation. Another cause of desertion from the movement was the pressure from local Peronist political brokers, and from pro-government unemployed organizations, backed by more resources and more political protection. Some organizations, however, managed to keep their positions in neighborhoods and their subsidies flowing despite the adverse context, but they tended to retreat to the Greater Buenos Aires area where they created some pockets of subsistence economy. By 2007, the cycle of the unemployed mobilization in Argentina had come to an end.

## 15. Epilogue

For almost ten years, the unemployed movement mobilized against the negative consequences of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and the subsequent impact of the 2002 crisis triggered by the collapse of the currency board. At the time of their decline as socio-political actors, the original sources of their collective protest had already begun to weaken: the high unemployment rates, the growth of informal labor, the increase of poverty, the levels of inequality previously unknown to one of the least unequal countries in Latin America.

As emerges from the literature discussed in a recent book by Gabriel Kessler, the positive evolution of social indicators was prompted by a favorable economic situation and the effects of income policies (Kessler 2014). The economic recovery initiated by the end of 2002 continued until 2010 at an annual rate of 8% of GDP (except during 2009 due to the impact of the global crisis) and resulted, as previously indicated, in a steep fall in unemployment rates, which eventually settled around 8% in 2010. The speedy increase in labor demand contributed to the recovery of wages after the losses experienced during 2002. This recovery was also facilitated by government policy. At its outset, when unemployment was still high and labor unions correspondingly weak, the government granted wage increases for the whole of the workforce through emergency decrees. Another official initiative was the series of minimum wage hikes established by law, to compensate for the loss of their real value. As the labor market improved, the authorities promoted the return to collective bargaining; business-labor agreements thus proliferated after years of scarce and sporadic settlements. The revitalization of this institution channeled the increasing bargaining power of workers towards the defense of real wages. The effects of income policies were actually stronger in the formal economy, though they also served as a reference point for wage settlements among the segments not covered by social security and the self-employed. The plight of the workforce in the informal economy also gained prominence in the public agenda. The labor authorities launched a vast campaign aimed against informal labor and at reducing the number of workers forced to endure in precarious jobs with no stability or social benefits. The payoff from these efforts and the post-crisis economic growth was the reduction of the share of informal labor from 55% in 2003 to 45% in 2010.

The succession of Nestor Kirchner by his wife, Cristina Fernandez, in the 2007 presidential election secured the continuity of this re-regulation of labor institutions. The new administration expanded the reach of social assistance directed at the most vulnerable sectors of the population: the conditional cash transfer policy, of which the dwindling Head of Household Program was the most relevant example. In late 2009, a new program was introduced by decree, the Universal Child Allowance (AUH), which consisted of a monthly transfer for each child under 18 years of age to the households whose heads were either informal or unemployed workers. The reception of this benefit was conditional on the commitment by the parents to certify before the authorities that their children were attending school and receiving regular health checkups. Financed with budgetary transfers, the new program increased protection for the most needy, given the strong association between informality, unemployment, and poverty. Of the 3.4 million of children covered during the first year of implementation of the AUH, 80% came from the poorest 40% of the population (Gasparini and Cruces 2010). By virtue of its design, this program vastly superseded the Head of Households program: its coverage

is higher, the access to its benefits does not lend itself to discretionary practices, its amounts are periodically updated, and its magnitude has a strong incidence on family income. Additionally, with an eye on informal labor, the government implemented an initiative with strong distributional effect: the granting of pensions to people who had reached the age of retirement but, due to their status in the labor market, had not been able to make the required contributions to the social security system.

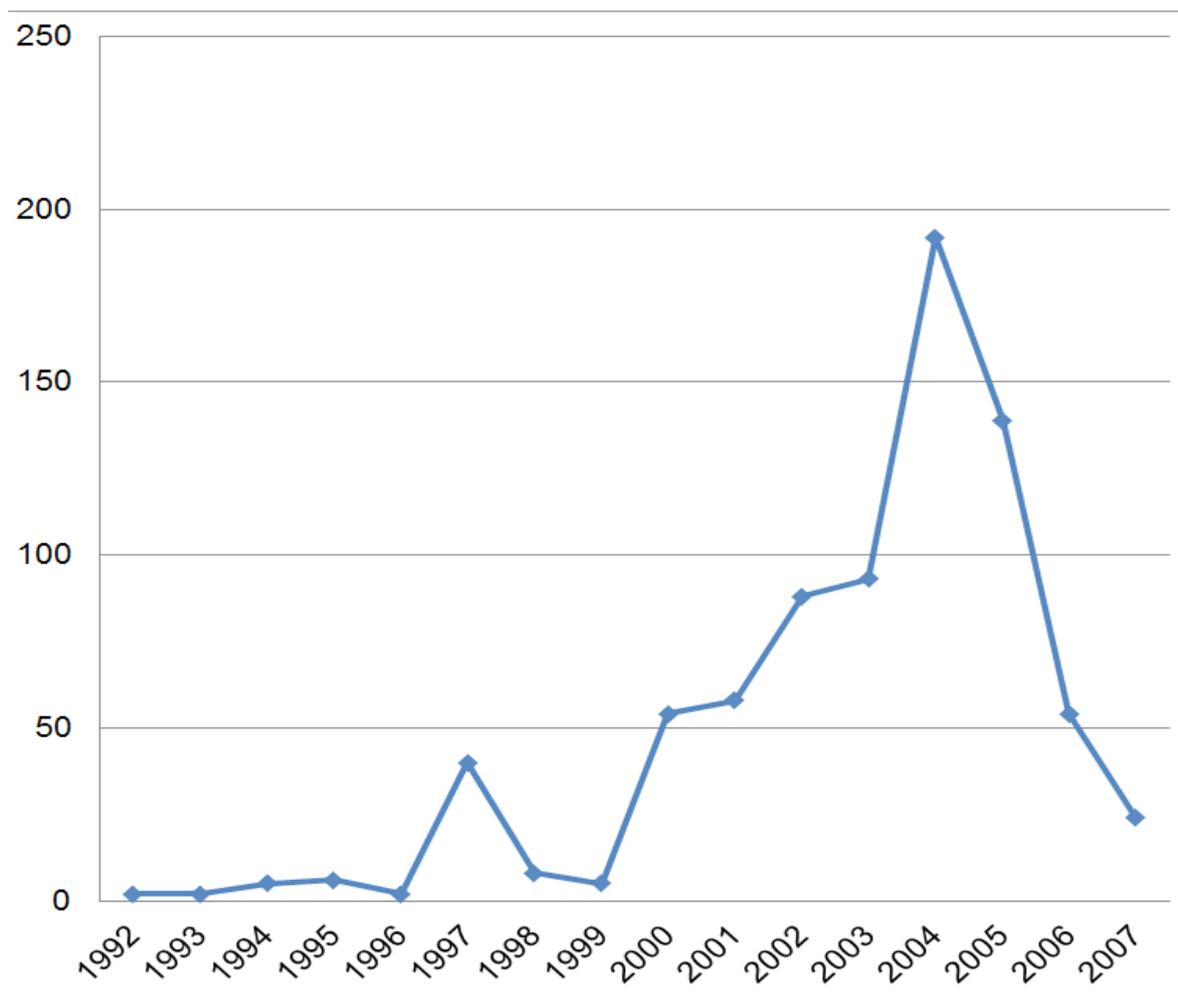
The situation that emerged from 2003, marked by the pace of the aforementioned economic and institutional changes, altered the extant patterns of inequality and poverty. In their initial phase, the 2003-2007 period, the increases in employment and real wages were accompanied by a substantial improvement in the inequality index: the Gini coefficient dropped from 0.53 to 0.47. Subsequently, the rise of inflation and its effects on purchasing power stymied this fall, eventually reaching a Gini coefficient in 0.44 by 2010. That this tendency towards the fall of inequality continued notwithstanding inflation and its effects owed a great deal to the increase in social spending due to the implementation of the AUH and the expansion of non-contributive pensions. As others have underscored (Perez Sainz 2013), the mere drop in the Gini coefficient is not enough to describe an increase in equality, because this index is focused on the secondary distribution of income, the one that takes place after capital and labor have divided the pie. Therefore, the data need to be examined from the complementary viewpoint of the primary – or functional – distribution of income. When observed through this lens, the 2003-2010 period also shows a fall in inequality. The share of wages in national income, which by 2003 had fallen to 34.3% in the aftermath of the previous crisis, rose to 41.4% by 2010.

To complete this brief account of the changes in social indicators, let us draw attention to the evolution of poverty. This dimension of the social landscape depicts the light and shadows of all efforts made to revert social welfare losses. At first sight, the tendency here also appears to be positive: the share of the population below the poverty line fell from 58% in 2002 to around 25% in 2010. The biggest chunk of this fall in the incidence of poverty took place between 2003 and 2007; later on, the process stopped as inflation rose and growth rates slowed down. It is indisputable that the situation in the labor market improved in the context of the social and economic turn after 2003, but it is also true that the levels of social deprivation remained high insofar as almost one third of the population is currently poor. This points to the limits of the policy instruments used to provide social assistance to the needy. These instruments have typically been conditional cash transfers. As such, they are effective at reducing the poverty gap in the short term by attending to the most urgent material necessities. But they do not

improve the personal capacities of the poor or their ability to autonomously generate income in the medium term (Lavinás 2014).

In hindsight, the achievements in the reduction of inequality and poverty, threatened as ever by the more recent oscillations of Argentine economic performance, have not sufficed to overcome the most enduring consequence of neoliberal reforms and their aftermath: the emergence of entire populations with weak ties or no tie at all to the world of labor, who survive on precarious jobs and the help of social assistance, such as the inhabitants of Greater Buenos Aires shantytowns. In comparative terms, the existence of these populations has placed marginality in the spotlight, not because their level of destitution is higher than that in Rio de Janeiro's favelas but rather because they have grown in a country that historically developed under the promise of a more equal access to resources and rights for all its citizens; indeed, the same promise that inspired and set in motion the mobilization of the unemployed.

## 16. Appendix 1: Number of Protests with Participation by Picketers' Organizations 1992-2007



N=772

Total protests registered for the period: 7759

Source: Dataset, Grupo de Estudios sobre Protesta Social y Acción Colectiva (2014), Instituto Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires.

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