

United we stand, divided we fall. Union organization and political activism among Jewish woodworkers in early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the formation of the working class in Argentina, specifically within the Jewish East-European sector of the furniture industry during the early twentieth century. It examines Jewish immigration, their integration into the timber sector of Buenos Aires, and diverse labour relationships. Through an analysis of social and labour conflicts, the paper aims to study how Yiddish-speaking workers integrated into a highly cosmopolitan working class, put, at the same time, into a broader perspective of Jewish immigration into the Global South. By doing so, we hope to enhance our understanding of the significant role played by Jewish workers in the trajectory of the Argentine working class.

KEYWORDS

Jewish immigration; working class; furniture industry; social conflicts; labour relationships; Buenos Aires

Between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the geography of Buenos Aires city was shaped by an accelerated process of urban development, linked to the expansion of capitalist modernity in Argentina. The export boom of raw materials and the arrival of thousands of male migrant labourers from Europe boosted the growth of Buenos Aires, alongside the expansion of a local industry that constantly required foreign inputs.¹ In a place where more than half of the residents were foreigners, Jewish workers in the urban landscape constituted a significant ethnic community since 1905, becoming the third largest in terms of numbers by around 1914, behind only Italian and Spanish migrants.² By the early 1920s, the Jewish community in Buenos Aires had become the largest in Latin America and the third largest in the southern hemisphere, gaining a significant presence in a rapidly growing and expanding port city.³

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Whereas the institutional and associational life of the Jewish-Argentine community has been largely documented and studied (partly due to the greater availability of sources), academic research on Jewish working classes or on the Jewish poor in Latin America have been scarce. Indeed, an exaggerated image of Jewish-Latin American social mobility, thereby acquiring a middle class or even higher status, seems to weigh more heavily as an impression amongst scholars. For this purpose, this paper contributes to the social history of Jewish-Argentines and, in particular, to the study of the formation of the working class in Argentina, focusing on the Jewish-“Russian” sector by analysing the case of the furniture industry in the city of Buenos Aires during the early twentieth century.⁴ Therefore we seek to answer the question on how the Jewish workers integrated into the Argentine working class, framed at the same time in a broader perspective of Jewish immigration into the Global South. By doing so, we aim to enrich the major picture of Argentine working-class history.

Our main argument states that the immigration of Jewish workers represented a new and collateral phenomenon in the process of formation of the working class in Argentina, shaping three dimensions within the creation of Jewish workers identities: firstly, from the assimilation process; secondly, from the class-struggle tensions within Jewish community; thirdly, from the relations between Jewish workers and non-Jewish workers and owners. From this perspective, the paper firstly analyses the characteristics of Jewish immigration to Argentina, their integration in the industrial wood sector and the different emerging labour actors (skilled and unskilled workers, *bolicheros* -owners of a workplace-, and *cuenteniks* -peddlers-). Secondly, it deals with the years of social conflict between 1909 and 1910 and how the Jewish working class was articulated with the rest of the class, despite its own problems and demands. Thirdly, the article examines the forms of trade union organizations amongst Jewish furniture workers and the points of contact with the rest of the labour movement. Finally, a series of conclusions and starting points for further research are made. In short, this paper reconstructs the significant role of Jewish workers for the creation of the Argentine working class.

In search of the *naye velt*: Jewish immigration in twentieth-century Buenos Aires

Although there were some previous antecedents, Jewish immigration into the Global South gained importance between 1905 and 1906, following the Russo-Japanese War and the violent outcome of the Russian Revolution of 1905, when over 20,000 people from the Pale of Settlement arrived in Buenos Aires, fleeing political reaction, social misery, anti-Semitic xenophobia, and the pogroms of the Tsarist regime.⁵ In comparison with other national

groups such as Italians or Spaniards, that in several cases after some years returned to their homeland, Jewish migrants settled in Argentina with hardly any expectations or possibility of returning home.⁶ The choice for Argentina was powered by different factors: first, the large campaign driven by the Argentine government within Europe since late 1890s, encouraging people to establish in the country and subsidizing transatlantic fares; second, there was a significant publicity run by the press and publications about living in Argentina, which resonated particularly within the Polish and Russian Jewish populations. As one scholar has correctly observed, the fever for Argentina represented an alternative answer to the same social and political compelling problems that both Zionism and Jewish Socialism began to address.⁷ In the search for *di naye heym* [the new home], Argentina had the global reputation of its huge geographical extension and, in addition, the requirements for entering the country were almost non-existent in comparison with those to migrate to the USA. In any case, this does not mean that the social experience of Jewish migrant workers in South America was free of obstacles, dangers, and difficult times.

In 1909s Buenos Aires, the municipal census recorded 16,589 “Israelites” residing in the city, while other sources reported 40,000, 80% of which were of Russian origin.⁸ The difference between these numbers is related to the problem of identifying the unit of analysis, the high grade of secularism within the Jewish migrants, and the social proximity between Russians and Jews. On the eve of World War I, the US embassy estimated the Jewish population in Buenos Aires to be 65,000.⁹ Jewish immigration came to a halt during the 1914–1918 war and resumed in 1920, continuing at a slightly slower pace than before the war until around 1930. A general estimate suggests that between 1890 and 1940, approximately 250,000 Jews arrived in Argentina, varying their national composition depending on the wave of migration.¹⁰ German, French, Dutch, Turkish, and North African Jews were also part of the cosmopolitan mosaic of the city during the interwar period.¹¹

The predominance of Eastern European Jews gave the Jewish community of Buenos Aires a distinctive character. In the early twentieth century, “Russian” quickly became synonymous with Jewish, regardless of whether they were Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Czechoslovaks, Yugoslavs, or Hungarians. In general, the main language they used was Yiddish, which frequently represented a heavy barrier regarding political and trade union organization within the Argentine labour movement. As scholars have noted, Yiddishism was a cultural-linguistic form of Jewish nationalism and identity-bearing. As a cultural movement, it sought recognition across borders and helped Jews to mark their diasporic ethno-national identity without being rooted to a singular geographical location.¹² “Russians” or Jewish-Argentines constituted a minority in numerical terms (less than 5% of the city’s one

million inhabitants in 1909) but had great political significance, being identified by public opinion as a dangerous and subversive social group, associated with political terrorism and the sex trade.¹³ Despite the community's efforts to fight against the "impures" (*umreyn* in Yiddish), and although political terrorism was more of an exception than a constant, it persisted an exaggerated link between Jews and "anti- Argentine" politics, especially regarding the enormous adherence of Jewish Argentines to the left wings.¹⁴

The main political currents active within the Yiddish-speaking world of work were bundism, anarchism, socialist-Zionist Poalei Zion, and socialism; by the 1920s, communism would gain ground. Broadly speaking, these were delimited spaces both organizationally and ideologically, although their boundaries remained blurry for many of their participants. Indeed, they all moved and intervened within the same ethnic-geographic space. In contrast to the experience of underground militancy in their native Russia, they could now openly engage in street activities.¹⁵ Various newspapers, magazines, and publications came to light but had ephemeral existence, except for the Bund's periodical *Der Avangard* (The Vanguard). As one anarch-syndicalist militant of that time recalled, the profile of these early propagandists was distinctly working-class.¹⁶ During the same period, *La Protesta*, *La Vanguardia*, and even trade union publications (such as the cabinetmakers' newspaper, *El Obrero Ebanista*) intermittently included a Yiddish section. Putting aside the political differences, one major strategic debate divided left currents into whether to assimilate into the receiving society and existing trade union structures, or instead, to recreate a Jewish ethnic identity, particularly through Yiddish-speaking channels.

Like other contemporary metropolises such as New York or Paris, the Jewish labour market in Buenos Aires was separated from the labour market of other national groups and was structured around different "ethnic bags of work," linked to the needs of the ethnic group but also to trades and services demanded by urban development.¹⁷ Even though there was not a formal barrier, Jewish workers were more likely to be employed by other conational rather than by a non-Jewish owner. As we will analyse throughout this paper, the Jewish economic activity within the wood and timber industry exemplifies this peculiar type of labour relations, which have lately received little attention by scholars. Among the migrant Jewish working class in Buenos Aires, the characteristic figures were former merchants lacking professional qualifications and small artisans with limited capital, who practised all kinds of manual crafts.¹⁸ In some cases, Jewish migrants had learnt the job in their homeland, ranging from big towns to small rural villages (*shtetln*); in some others, they just learnt the new craft inside the workplace, by assisting and imitating former workers, and not receiving any paid during an uncertain period of time (named *aprendices* or *peones*, in English apprentices). Either way, their

knowledge of craftsmanship and the furniture trade allowed them to make their path in a labour universe tainted by instability and unemployment. Moreover, in the case of Jews in Buenos Aires, job stability was particularly affected by the existence of intermediation and subcontracting of labour in the main activities they performed.

Cabinetmakers, *bolicheros* and *cuenteniks*: the Jewish furniture industry in Buenos Aires

Unlike other areas of the economy where their influence was less than 5% or non-existent, the Jewish presence in the furniture industry was prominent from the late nineteenth century. Together with bakers, tailors, joiners, and shoemakers, furniture making was one of the oldest occupations amongst the immigrants in Buenos Aires. Due to their high skills and the cultural status surrounding the discipline, cabinetmakers and joiners were referred as *balmelokhe* (“holders of a trade”).¹⁹ In general, the region of origin often influenced the work methods, techniques, and crafts, as well as the products and their quality. For example, it was likely that a fine Jewish cabinetmaker would come from an urban background rather than from the countryside. The first Jewish furniture stores in the city date back to 1894, mainly dedicated to cheap furniture and located in the nearby areas of Plaza Lavalle. Shortly thereafter, several wealthy Russian Jews who had sold their properties settled in Buenos Aires and opened stores, trading clothes and furniture.²⁰ Beyond these precedents, Jewish furniture production had its most recognizable origins around 1905, with the proliferation of small workshops called *boliches* (due to their size), alongside the Once quarter (Balvanera), known as the “Russian neighbourhood” (or “Israelite quarter”): “A cluster of 4000 Russian Jews who occupied two blocks in the centre of District 11 -one of the few clearly visible ethnic enclaves in the city.”²¹ From that same year dated the first attempts to organize Jewish furniture makers within the established labour union rules, as the following picture shows (Figure 1). Written in Yiddish (but published in the regular trade union journal), the article invited the newly arrived Jewish carpenters and cabinetmakers to join the organization in order to reinforce and defend their actual conditions.

Later, with the resumption of post-war immigration, urban expansion towards the west occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, with the growth of settlements in Villa Crespo (where a significant portion of the Polish immigrants lived)²², Caballito, La Paternal, Villa del Parque, and Parque Patricios (where large sawmills were located).²³ Although Jewish shops were mostly small establishments with miserable conditions, in terms of environment, hygiene, and safety, a few businesses employed several dozen workers, such as the Lapidus’ furniture factory or Greiser’s store, where sources reported 150 piece-rate workers. As we can observe in the map below (Figure 2), the

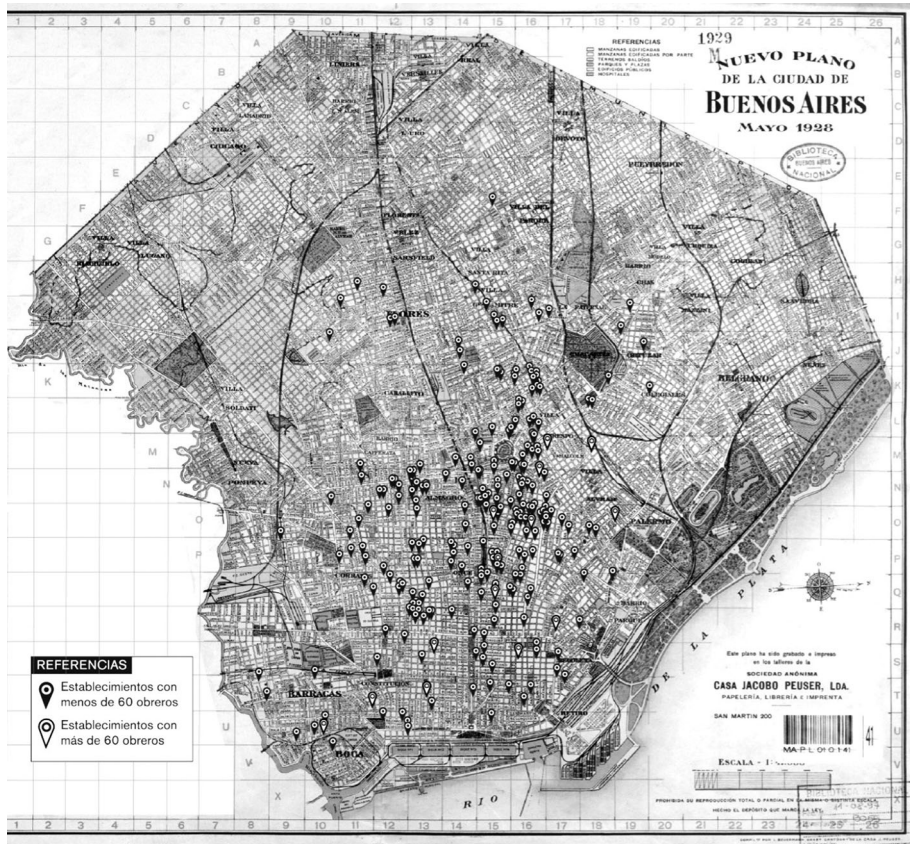


Figure 2. Distribution of workshops and sawmills in the city of Buenos Aires. Source: own elaboration on a scan from the Argentine National Library of a map made by the Jacobo Peuser's house in 1928. This map was built from the survey of the trade union press between 1915 and 1930.

At this time, the “world of wood” was composed of a variety of little individual companies which operated with very reduced amounts of capital and employees, commonly working with backward technology under craftsmanship conditions.²⁶ Inside the sweatshops, with an exploitative system of piecework, labour rules were unwritten, and management adopted a family nature. In particular, the system of piecework aimed to guarantee a certain level of productivity, and, because of this, it posed a real threat to other non-Jewish workers, as we will see below. Likewise, occupational fluidity characterized the *bolichero* production. In this regard, the fact that workers could become employers and then return to their worker status (due to the low level of capitalist development in the industry) blurred the boundaries between the two groups. Indeed, Jewish workers, contractors, and owners had all experienced this form of labour-social mobility in Russia and brought it with them to the *naye velt* (new world). As production modernized, class divisions within the community became more rigid, and the

classic distinctions between workers and owners were solidified. In a way, piecework, the increasing employment of child labour, and the predominant role of women in home-based work (but not limited to it) were the cornerstones on which the expectations of “making America” were based.²⁷ Although the generalized form of upward mobility was for a skilled worker to become a small shopkeeper (*bolichero*), substantial numbers of workers also experienced downward mobility.²⁸

The sweatshops under Jewish management produced lower-quality furniture, using veneered wood in the “French style” and pine wood in the “English style,” employing various forms of piecework. To establish a *boliche* (small workshop), “it was not necessary to invest a large capital; it only required renting a warehouse, while the workers brought their own tools and workbenches. The wood was obtained on credit.”²⁹ Thereby, this testimony accounted for the embryonic state of the industry. One form of piecework was the “work on demand” (*kort arbeit*), which consisted of subcontracting newly arrived workers as “hands” or “helpers.”³⁰ Without capital and unable to acquire their own tools, the “greens” were employed by fellow countrymen, generating higher productivity than other workers; “they could not yet ‘*hacerse la América*,’ [making America] and this was the most difficult element during a strike.”³¹

Unlike other furniture companies, where workers were usually well paid and partially controlled the production rhythm, Jewish *bolicheros* paid their workers a very small amount per piece, allowing them to sell their items at lower prices, and thus intensifying commercial competition. Furthermore, compared to good furniture, their quality could not be superficially distinguished by someone who was not an expert. If in 1904, the sector had sold items for a value of four million pesos, by 1907 this number had risen to seven million.³² Because of the type of wood employed in the product, and the less-complex working-process involved, competition not only existed between capitalists (large and small) but was particularly fierce among workers. For the Jewish-Argentines, it was “natural” to work on a piecework basis, and they viewed the trade union as “a misfortune that wanted to steal a few hours of work from them every day.”³³ In this regard, it could be said that piecework production (and the excessive effort put into it) encompassed the aspiration for economic and social progress. Conversely, from the union’s perspective, economic furniture production in the *boliches* meant “the ruin of the profession” and a constant pressure to lower working conditions. It was quite common to accuse the “Russians” of “destroying the furniture industry” since, despite all attempts and even agreements with the *bolicheros*, there were many who worked a few extra hours on a piecework basis after the regular workday.³⁴ Either way, the permanent search for jobs hit the working class as a whole equally hard. In an interview, the Jewish cabinetmaker José Epstejn recalled during the 1920s:

sleeping next to *Di Presse* [famous Yiddish journal], sleeping next to the factories. Where you arrived first, you were taken, but in general there was no difference

between *goyim* and *yidn*, everyone fended for himself as much as he could in his search for work.³⁵

At this point, it is clear that the analysis of the Jewish sector involves ethnic aspects, but it also refers, in the same way, to a working world crossed by specific labour issues.

Within the *boliches*, working conditions were deplorable, with almost no union organization, and the labour hours exceeded twelve hours, for meagre wages that were often paid late. The employment of minors as apprentices or peons was also common, and they were subjected to overexploitation and mistreatment.³⁶ In these small-sized establishments, without proper ventilation, lighting, or cleanliness, dust and wood shavings accumulated on the floor, sawdust floated in the air, and hygiene was not considered at all, resulting in an everyday spread of tuberculosis and other diseases. Together with the emergence of *boliches* in the urban environment, labour conflicts started to multiply, although their development was quite often disorganized and unrelated to the cabinetmakers' union, primarily because of language difficulties. It was a contradictory situation: On the one hand, Jewish cabinetmakers had the advantage of mastering a craft that was difficult to replace in strikebreaking whereas, on the other hand, language barriers, a tendency towards isolation, the low concentration of employees per workplace, and the ethnic (and even social) proximity to the employers were factors that hindered their organization.

The phenomenon of *bolicheros* and pieceworkers was not limited to the furniture production sphere. As a non-exclusive feature of this industry, the figure of the *cuentenik* (peddler) and their network of sellers expanded in pace with the urban expansion of Buenos Aires and the scarcity of commercial and logistical infrastructure, constituting a vast and unique sales network, mostly composed of Jews. Emerging from the popular neighbourhoods away from the city centre, *cuenteniks* travelled through the peripheral areas offering all kinds of non-perishable goods (clothing, furniture, and other household items), and facilitating their role as intermediaries through instalment payments.³⁷ Similar to the *bolicheros*, the *cuentenik* can be compared to a kind of mirage of upward mobility that ultimately proved impossible. Due to their characteristics (production processed outside union control, prices overcharged, and their atomized character), these merchants were opposed by left-wing activism.³⁸ From left-wing militants' perspective, *cuenteniks* and *bolicheros* represented two sides of the very same labour, commercial, and productive relations: cheap-made furniture made inside an awful working environment. As an illustrative example, the following chronicle reflects their miserable conditions and social proximity to the living and labour conditions of the working class:

... these poor "*bolicheros*" spend entire years confined in a small room or a dismantled warehouse, working day and night, exploiting, due to the lack of skilled workers, poor little creatures who, in that environment, learn everything except how to be good

workers; (...) they are seen wandering the central streets of the city, sitting on the driver's seat of a cart-carrier, inside of which some pine furniture can be seen, (...) stopping at every furniture store they come across to offer their merchandise. (...) The furniture store owners, upon the approach of one of these caravans, seeing an opportunity to obtain furniture for half its real value, offer a price for the goods that doesn't even cover the cost of materials. And the aspiring great patron, after wandering all day and in anticipation that the following day won't bring better luck, hands over his cheap furniture to the most usurious of the furniture store owners.³⁹

The presence of the Jewish community generated a chronic tension between, on one hand, an ethnic identity rooted in the region of origin and segregated in the receiving country, and on the other hand, a class identity forged in the daily exploitation they shared with other Jewish and non-Jewish workers, which opposed them to the group of Jewish and non-Jewish employers. The result of this complex bond expressed a hybrid social identity, which was articulated within the workplace and extended beyond it into other spheres of sociability and acculturation, such as bars, cafés, cultural centres, libraries, clubs, theatres, amongst many other places. Despite some isolated episodes of anti-Semitism (Centenary of 1910, Tragic Week of 1919), the Jewish working class found in Argentina a climate of racial tolerance superior to that of their country of origin, thus allowing, over time, to leave behind some of the habits and customs of the *shtetl* and Eastern European cities, while redefining others, and adopting new rituals such as mate, tango, or football.⁴⁰

While this adaptation occurred gradually, integration, on the other hand, was not so easily achieved. The geographical clustering into concentrated areas reflected the efforts to create a new Jewish world with its own values, practices, and institutions, as well as a marked tendency towards urban segregation. According to Susana Sigwald, the ethnic enclave functioned as a greenhouse for the newcomers, where the “greens” could germinate. In other words, passage through the ghetto was seen as an ideal means for non-traumatic integration, articulating itself as a link between the society in which they seek to rebuild their lives and their original culture.⁴¹ However, it is important to note the distance that separated the “Russian neighbourhood” on Pasteur and Lavalle streets from the characteristic ghettos of Europe. Within Buenos Aires' framework, Jewish neighbourhood was just a part of a greater and even more ethnically and culturally diverse urban space. In any case, the group's hegemony over urban space was expressed, where visible institutions played a significant role, ranging from businesses and community associative spheres to those political, labour and sociability spaces that represented left political cultures. In these ethnic urban spaces, community life reinforced tendencies towards ethnocentrism, slowing down the process of assimilation and integration into the receiving society whereas, in the opposite direction, the hardness of daily labour exploitation fuelled the need of class independent organizations within Jewish workers, together with non-Jewish.

Yiddish-speaking worlds of work: the 1909 strike of Jewish cabinetmakers

Despite being one of the most tumultuous years in Argentine history, 1909 has received little attention from historiography, with only a few exceptions.⁴² However, significant events marked this particular year: the “red week” in May, the formation of the Confederación Obrera de la República Argentina (CORA) [Argentine Republic Workers’ Confederation] in September, the general strike against the execution of Catalan anarchist and educator Francisco Ferrer occurred in October in Barcelona, and, in the next month, the assassination of police chief Ramón Falcón by a young libertarian of Russian origin, namely Simón Radowitzky. According to the National Department of Labour, the wood industry accounted for 28 strikes out of a total of 138, involving 885 workers (including 84 apprentice children employed in furniture workshops).⁴³ In any case, the emergence of labour disputes preceded the general strike cycle, emerging from an unexpected sector: the Jewish furniture workers.

The necessity to organize these workers became apparent in 1908 during the “sheet metal strike” (“*huelga de la chapa*”), when Israelite cabinetmakers, amidst diminishing labour movements and a weakening of worker activism, went on strike to eliminate piecework, a common practice in the industry. They initially succeeded, although the agreement was later interrupted.⁴⁴ As stated before, in many instances, they were the workers themselves who sought to deceive the union by working overtime at the end of the day, driven by a desire for social advancement that was rarely fulfilled.

Building upon this background, at the end of 1908, the labour movement in the industry was reactivated with the goal of eliminating piecework. To organize their demands, a core group of revolutionary syndicalists, along with Yiddish-speaking activist Israel Landan,⁴⁵ launched a “reorganization campaign” through a series of meetings with Jewish cabinetmakers. They agreed to request a 10% wage increase and to ensure that no worker would be fired due to the strike.⁴⁶ In early January 1909, the demands were rejected by the Jewish workshop owners, leading to the “pine tea strike” (“*huelga de la pinotea*”), which encompassed workshops producing inexpensive white furniture made from pine wood in the “English” style. After a month, the employers yielded to the workers’ demands, abolishing piecework and establishing a daily wage. They also agreed to an eight-hour workday and, instead of the original 10% wage increase, a 5% raise was agreed.⁴⁷

Despite resentments and suspicions, the cabinetmakers’ union understood the risk that overexploitation of Jewish workers posed to their own conditions, so they fully supported the strike.⁴⁸ In the union newspaper, revolutionary syndicalist Luis Macchia stirred up enthusiasm, stating: “Our Russian comrades in the cabinetmakers’ society have valiantly joined the struggle. The rest of us must

follow their example! Not doing so shows cowardice, that we are afraid, and we refuse to fight!”⁴⁹ As seen, the union proclamation revolved around a certain “positive stereotype” of emulating the courageous example set by their Jewish comrades in a context of low unrest. By the way, the call explicitly addressed a particular type of “brave” worker, who strikes in a masculine way and was opposed to those who do not (the coward or not-male). Conversely, the ruling classes nurtured a “negative stereotype,” associating Jewish workers with transnational networks involved in sex trade and, later, with political destabilization.⁵⁰

Although the conflict was brief, the ties of solidarity with the rest of the workers expressed the potential that the organization of the Jewish furniture sector could acquire, and the danger represented by its disintegration:

... the triumph of this strike is of great importance, considering that these workers laboured on a piece-rate basis for thirteen, fourteen, and even fifteen hours a day, which means that one worker did the work of two skilled craftsmen, while others were left idle due to the lack of work.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the new labour framework had a fleeting existence: “piecework in large quantities (...) continued to be maintained, and work on Sundays continued.”⁵² In the following months of 1909, Jewish workshop owners took advantage of the repressive climate, created by the state of siege during May 1909s “red week,” in order to roll back the agreed conditions and reintroduce piecework.⁵³ On the organizational front, however, two Jewish workers were elected to the administrative committee of the cabinetmakers’ union, enabling the dissemination of Yiddish propaganda in the labour press. According to Brusilovsky, the shift in the union’s leadership was made possible “thanks to the pressure from some bundists, who at that time already wanted to create a Yiddish joiners’ union federation,” similar to what existed amongst tailors, hat-makers, and bakers of Jewish origin.⁵⁴ Israelite strikes in the woodworking industry were integrated into a landscape of high labour conflict within Yiddish-speaking unions, alongside bakers’ strikes (1909–1910, through boycotts and, most of the time, supported by consumers of Jewish bread, who decided to buy elsewhere) and tailors’ conflicts (isolated and unrecorded). Based on this foundation, in 1908 different political organizations and unions decided to form an “Israelite Workers’ Centre for Labour Agitation.”⁵⁵

At the beginning of the twentieth century, community ties and class solidarity prevailed within the furniture makers’ union, overshadowing social prejudice towards the “Russians.” This solidarity was primarily expressed in a corporative-sectorial form, aimed at defending their privileged current working situation. Indeed, the needs of a skilled-labour union such as the furniture makers of Buenos Aires, with a high level of organization and deliberation, offered the conditions required for breaking the borders of the foreign community and integrating migrant workers into union structures, following

the customs, traditions, and regulations in place. Thus, despite the centrifugal forces of an ethnic nature and the obstacles posed by Yiddish for dialogues with the rest of a cosmopolitan working class, the pressure and struggles to improve working conditions together with the high degree of initiative amongst Jewish workers, paved the way for a rich universe of left-wing political cultures to unfold, reaching beyond national borders and extending to different metropolises across the planet.

In the following decades, the cycles of social and labour unrest (1908–1910; 1916–1922; 1928–1930) strengthened the reciprocal bond between left political cultures and this Jewish working class in *statu nascendi*, combining different characterizations, organizational repertoires, tactical modulations, and political strategies, in a trajectory that was not exempt from temporary setbacks, serious defeats, and long periods of inactivity. In hindsight, the strike of Jewish cabinet-makers in 1909 represented the prologue to the events that would follow during 1910, which we will now focus on.

Repression, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism: the celebration of the national anniversary

On the eve of the first 100 years of the Argentine Republic, the most numerous woodworking trades, such as joiners and cabinetmakers, were on strike. The strong impetus of labour conflict merged with the political initiative of anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists turned the May celebrations into a monumental workers' protest. In the days leading up to 25 May 1910, events escalated rapidly, and the situation quickly deteriorated. On 14 May, the revolutionary syndicalist trade union federation CORA set the start date of the strike for 18 May. From the government's point of view, it was enough evidence to unleash repression. A few hours later, dozens of militants and labour leaders were imprisoned. Sources from national newspapers reported between 100 and 300 detainees, although according to revolutionary syndicalist Marotta, there were over 500. "The treatment [towards the detainees] had never been so inhumane, even though violence had not been spared in the past. The working-class prisoner represented a beast; as such, they were treated."⁵⁶ Among the political prisoners were key activists from all currents, including the Jewish furniture activist, Landan, and his two brothers. While it was already happening, on 14 May, an extraordinary parliamentary session declared the state of siege, which was the signal that paramilitary groups were waiting for to join the state repression.

The degree of ferocity and violence that emanated from the May 1910 attacks against the working class does not represent, however, an original or unprecedented element in Argentine national history. Nevertheless, we must emphasize the intensity that repression assumed and its subsequent scope.⁵⁷ The events of

14 May are sadly well-known: An angry mob, led by several prominent members of the traditional oligarchy and the repressive apparatus, together with school and university students, assaulted, destroyed, and burned down numerous trade union shops and left political venues, where workers' newspapers such as the anarchist *La Protesta* or the socialist *La Vanguardia* were printed. In addition, proletarian neighbourhoods and private houses were also raided.⁵⁸

In comparison to the repression against the labour movement, the pogrom that occurred during the nights of May 14th, 15th, and 16th is less well known. Led by General Luis Dellepiane,

police and bourgeois gangs, in search of “terrorists,” descended upon the Russian neighbourhood located on Lavalle Street from Callao to Ombú [actual Pasteur], and in some blocks from Corrientes Street at the same height to Junín, Andes [actual Uriburu], Río Bamba, etc.,

which refers to the Once neighbourhood and its surroundings.⁵⁹ This was the first collective attack against Jews in Argentine history for which records exist, nearly a decade before the more famous massacre during the “Tragic Week” of January 1919.⁶⁰ Frequently, the 1910 pogrom in Buenos Aires has been overlooked.⁶¹ As in other cases, it is difficult to establish the exact scale of the massacre. However, sources describe brutal tortures, several being wounded and beaten, extensive sexual assaults against women, and arson attacks on businesses and residences. Among other emblematic locations, the premises of the *Avangard* socialist centre were assaulted. Inside functioned the “Russian library,” gathering over 2,500 volumes in Yiddish, which were set fire to on the street in front of the Argentinean National Congress.⁶² Short-lived, but with an indelible impact on the first generation of the Buenos Aires' Jewish working class, the Russian Library was driven by almost all political currents that intervened among Jewish-Argentine workers.⁶³

A month after the centennial celebrations, on June 26th, a bomb exploded at the Colón Theatre, causing a social uproar rather than significant material damage and leading to the prosecution of the Russian anarchist Romanoff.⁶⁴ In response, and as the culmination of the repressive offensive, the parliament approved the “social defence” law the following day, which prohibited the entry of individuals suspected of threatening social order and also banned any association or meeting “intended for the propaganda of anarchism or the preparation and instigation of acts suppressed by the law.”⁶⁵ By means of these disciplinary measures, one of the darkest chapters in national history came to a close.

The challenge of organizing Jewish workers

During the highly conflictual years of 1916–1922, the organization of Jewish workshops in the furniture industry continued to expand and strengthen.⁶⁶

From the union's point of view, this was an essential task to ensure the conditions recently obtained; otherwise, capitalists had a readily available and inexpensive reserve army of labour. Thus, during the general strike of furniture workers in July 1916, the conflict persisted due to 46 "Russian" manufacturers who had formed a common bloc, pledging not to make any individual agreements. In fact, around 400 Jewish cabinetmakers actively participated in this strike, holding their own assemblies in Yiddish. Among other initiatives, they released a manifesto in their language and called for a family meeting, attended by their partners and children, where "the purpose of the strike was made clear, so that these partners would not think their husbands were abandoning work out of laziness, but rather to bring a little more bread to their children."⁶⁷ Once again, the positive-male stereotype appears, in this case under the image of the breadwinner, who needed to struggle to fulfil this role. Therefore, due to the sexual division of labour, it was women who were responsible for household chores (including upbringing and care), so men could become involved in the strike movement indefinitely, also justifying their absence from home.⁶⁸

Within the cabinetmakers' union in Buenos Aires, although there was a Yiddish propaganda committee, this was not fully accepted by the revolutionary syndicalist's core leadership. For this current, the existence of language or ethnic factions undermined the unity of the class as it meant prioritizing other values that would lead to divisions. Shortly after the end of the furniture strike in 1916, León Mas published an article in the *Idishe Zeitung* (The Jewish Newspaper) calling for the formation of an exclusive trade union for Jewish joiners.⁶⁹ Not long after, a group of bundists called for a meeting to establish a trade union of Jewish furniture workers, despite opposition from another sector of the Bund and the socialist-Zionist Poalei Zion. Thus, between late 1916 and early 1917, within a framework of growing labour conflict, the leadership of the cabinetmakers "became scared" and approved the establishment of a section that would have representatives in the leadership of the cabinetmakers' union but would not enjoy any economic independence.⁷⁰ Therefore, even with certain limitations, the existence of the language committee was formalized and established as an autonomous fraction. The "Israelite subcommittee," as it was called, held assemblies and meetings, handled propaganda tasks, managed an educational Yiddish library (with over 2,000 copies, it became the most important in Buenos Aires after the destruction of the "Russian Library") and intervened in conflicts with Jewish employers.⁷¹ Additionally, the committee published the monthly newspaper *Der Holtz Arbeter* (The Woodworker, 1917–1923).⁷²

The Yiddish subcommittee operated in a space marked by political, labour, and ethnic tensions, particularly those resulting from the systematic intervention exerted on the community by mutual and philanthropic societies, that were opposed by a large part of the left-wing Jewish workers. This aspect is evidenced by the following response to criticism of the committee's actions:

“Regarding the purpose of detaching Israelite comrades from chauvinistic ranks, another inaccuracy is committed because I am sure that if we were to combat nationalist tendencies, we could not achieve the success that greatly satisfies us today.”⁷³ By the end of 1917, the Yiddish section conquered full autonomy, and an assembly of Jewish workers elected eleven representatives. In early 1917 there were an estimated (and surely exaggerated) 400 Jewish members in the guild (the approximate number of participants in 1916s strike), whereas by 1918 this figure had risen to 1,500, and in 1919 it was estimated to be over 2,000.⁷⁴

Examining the timing of the strike cycle among Jewish furniture workers, the peak of conflicts occurred around July 1919, when the workers of 55 workshops joined in the demand for a 44-hour workweek, which had been agreed upon in April by the major establishments within the industry. In November of the same year, a similar wave of strikes occurred in another large series of Jewish *boliches*.⁷⁵ It is interesting to note that both peak strike periods took place shortly after the pogrom during the Tragic Week, when repressive forces and paramilitary gangs fiercely attacked the Once neighbourhood, as in the case of 1910 but on a much larger scale.⁷⁶ In this regard, many Jewish woodworkers were subjected to repression during the 1919 pogrom.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Jewish workers strengthened their organization afterwards and engaged in labour struggles within the timber industry.⁷⁸ During this period, the cultural centre “Luz y vida,” located at Bulnes 816, in the heart of Villa Crespo, resulted a common meeting place for socializing, militant organization, and in the event of strikes.⁷⁹

In summary, with the aim of integrating the Jewish workers, the Israelite subcommittee of the furniture industry virtually replaced the functions of the trade union leadership, leading to clashes and friction. Perhaps more than any other economic branch in early-twentieth-century Buenos Aires, the experience of cabinetmakers uncovered the necessary structural conditions required to assimilate the “Russians” into the trade union framework (long-way organization, high-skilled labour, certain cultural background, leftist wings presence). However, differences in labour conditions between Jewish and non-Jewish workers persisted during these initial years.

Conclusions

By the early twentieth century, the immigration of Jewish (so-called “Russians”) workers to Buenos Aires had become an unavoidable reality for any contemporary observer. In general, there was a split labour market, which divided Jews from other ethnic-national groups. Thus, different Yiddish-speaking labour worlds *sui generis* were constituted from ethnic bags of labour, linked to the needs of the Jewish community and the urbanization process.

Within the framework of the furniture industry, an employment sector of highly skilled workers with a long organizational tradition, Jewish

cabinetmakers produced cheap, lower quality goods, generally working on a piecework basis and disregarding trade union regulations. This caused permanent tensions and clashes with non-Jewish workers, who viewed the newcomers as “the ruin of the profession.” Likewise, an occupational fluidity characterized the production of the *boliches* (workshops), often involving the desire for social advancement.

Nevertheless, and despite the linguistic, cultural, and also labour difficulties, the strong disposition of the Jewish workers for organization and struggle was expressed in the Yiddish furniture strikes of 1908 and 1909. These experiences nuanced prejudices against the Jewish-Argentines and enhanced a positive stereotype worthy of imitation by other non-Jewish workers. In the following years, the so-called “Israelite element” would likely have represented one of the most dynamic factors in the labour struggle within the furniture industry, rebelling against the harsh conditions of the *boliches*.

On the contrary, the massacre and the number of political prisoners on the eve of the centenary of 1910 and, in particular, the pogrom unleashed against the “Russian neighbourhood” of Once, took the practical consequences of the “negative stereotype” to the extreme. In this sense, even though the attack had an anti-Semitic edge, we must consider that it did not take place in isolation but within the framework of a repressive offensive by the State and the capitalists against the entire working class as a whole, within which the Jews stood out for their “exoticism”, even in a city where more than half of its inhabitants were foreigners. Moreover, it was quite common to exaggerate the link between Jews and subversive “anti- Argentine” politics, especially in consideration of left political cultures.

Ultimately, this analysis has revealed the interplay and tension between ethnic and linguistic dimensions against the backdrop of labour, organizational, and political aspects. The dominance of one or the other tended to vary with the political moment, and, especially, with the capacity of the trade union and the orientation of its leadership. Sometimes together with non-Jewish, sometimes alone, Jewish-Argentine workers engaged in significant labour struggles in Buenos Aires, thereby becoming the most dynamic ethnic group in the sector of furniture-making. This observation suggests a pertinent and promising avenue for future research, aiming to explore the intersections and meanings between politics and ethnicity, labour, and migration. Such an inquiry would contribute to a richer comprehension of the Jewish workers within the broader context of the formation of the Argentine working class, shedding light also on national history.

Notes

1. Gabaccia and Hoerder, *Connecting Seas*, 281–301. For a better insight on Buenos Aires’ urban history, see: Gorelik, *The Grid*; Rocchi, *Chimneys in the Desert*.

2. Laikin Elkin, *The Jews*, 59–60; Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires*, 20–2.
3. We will use the term “Russians” as the meaning in that time, in reference to Jewish migrant workers, in general, who came from the Eastern European region and, in particular, from the “Pale of Settlement,” a region designated by Tsarism to circumscribe the Jews. Bordering Central Europe, it included the territory of Russia, Romania, the Ottoman Empire and Morocco. See Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires*, III; Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle*. Regarding its composition, four-fifths of the Jews of Buenos Aires were of Ashkenazi descent while the other fifth were Sephardic. The former were called “Russians”; the latter, “Turks.” See Visacovsky, *Argentinos, judíos y camaradas* [Argentines, Jews and Comrades After the Socialist Utopia]; Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires*.
4. For a general analysis about the formation of the working class in Argentina, see Poy, “Hard Times,” 553–64.
5. Sofer, *From Pale to Pampa*, 8–9; Lewin, *Cómo fue la inmigración judía* [What Jewish Immigration Was Like].
6. Between 1881 and 1910, for example, the number of immigrants that returned to their homelands, mostly Italian and Spanish, was more than 36% of the total. See Devoto, *Historia de la inmigración*, 247.
7. Kalczewiak, *Polacos in Argentina*, 53.
8. Green, *Jewish Workers*, 42.
9. Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America*, 60.
10. Moya, “What’s in a Stereotype?,” 83; Herszkowich, *Historia de la comunidad* [History of the Community], 43.
11. Green, *Jewish Workers*, 9.
12. Rein, *Jewish Argentines*, 2–4.
13. Moya, “What’s in a Stereotype?”; Yarfitz, *Impure Migration*; Guy, *Sex & Danger*.
14. Rein y Sheinin, “Structuring Jewish Buenos Aires,” 10.
15. Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires*, 130.
16. Brusilovsky, “Los judíos” [The Jews]. Unpublished source, translated into Spanish for this research by Lucas Fiszman.
17. The concept of “ethnic bags of work” refers in this case to those trades or jobs where the number of Jewish workers was particularly relevant. See: Bilsky, “Etnicidad y clase obrera” [Ethnicity and Working Class], 25; Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands*; Green, *The Pletzl of Paris*. For a discussion on the concept of *split labour market*, developed by Edna Bonacich, see Peled y Shafir, “Split Labour Market,” 1435–60.
18. Bilsky, “Etnicidad y clase obrera,” 25, 81.
19. Schiller, “La participación” [The Participation], 39–44.
20. Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos* [History of the Jews].
21. Scobie, *Buenos Aires*, 24–5.
22. In 1930 it was estimated that some 30,000 Jews lived in Villa Crespo, that is, about 25% of the Jewish population of Buenos Aires at that time. See Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos*; Visacovsky, *Argentinos, judíos y camaradas*; Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires*. About the Polish migration, see Kalczewiak, *Polacos in Argentina*.
23. Camarero y Ceruso, “Una historia del sindicato” [A History of the Union], 1–15; Herszkowich, *Historia de la comunidad*.
24. Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos*.
25. “Municipales - Industriales clandestinos” [Municipalities – Clandestine Industrialists], *La Vanguardia* [The Vanguard], 24/7/1907.
26. Camarero y Ceruso, “Una historia del sindicato.” For a general overview from that time about labour conditions, see: Patroni, *Los trabajadores* [Workers].
27. Sofer, *From Pale to Pampa*, 36; Green, *The Pletzl of Paris*.

28. Elkin, *The Jews*, 133.
29. Brusilovsky, "Los judíos."
30. Bilsky, *Etnicidad y clase obrera*, 29.
31. Brusilovsky, "Los judíos."
32. Benario, "El comercio" [The Trade], 75.
33. Brusilovsky, "Los judíos."
34. Bilsky, *Etnicidad y clase obrera*, 29; "Informe de secretaría" [Secretarial Report], *Acción Obrera* [Workers' Action], no. 26, August 1926.
35. See interview to José Epstejn in Bilsky et al., *El movimiento obrero judío* [The Jewish Labour Movement], 223–33.
36. "A los aprendices de la I. del Mueble" [To Apprentices in the Furniture I.], *La Internacional* [The International], 8/6/1925.
37. Bilsky, *Etnicidad y clase obrera*; Feierstein, *Historia de los judíos*. For a general overview of the cuenternik's figure, see Diner, *Roads Taken*.
38. "Influencia del actual sistema sobre el trabajo a destajo. Los bolicheros. Casos de incendio y sus perjuicios inmediatos" [Influence of the Current System On Piecework. Bolicheros. Cases of Fire and Its Immediate Damage], *El Obrero en Madera* [The Woodworker], no. 18, February 1908.
39. "Influencia del actual sistema sobre el trabajo a destajo. Los bolicheros. Casos de incendio y sus perjuicios inmediatos," *El Obrero en Madera*, no. 18, February 1908.
40. Rein, *Fútbol, Jews*.
41. Sigwald Carioli, *El proletariado ruso judío* [The Russian Jewish Proletariat], 22.
42. Franco, "El estado de excepción" [The State of Emergency], 29–51; Belkin, *Sindicalismo revolucionario* [Revolutionary Syndicalism]; Frydenberg and Ruffo, *La semana roja* [The Red Week].
43. *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo* [Bulletin of the National Labour Department], no. 12, March 1910, 240.
44. The name of the conflict alluded to the fact that part of the Jewish production was of cheap, French-style veneered furniture. Brusilovsky, "Los judíos."
45. Cabinetmaker and Bundist militant. Coming from England with a trade union recommendation, he joined the cabinetmaker leadership in 1909, representing the Jewish sector. According to the interviewed Chalcoff, he was the main Yiddish leader of the furniture makers' union. See interview to Iginio [Iehiel] in Bilsky, *El movimiento obrero judío*, 171–83.
46. "Huelga general de los obreros rusos que trabajan en el pino de tea" [General Strike of Russian Workers Working in the Tea-Pine Industry], *El Obrero En Madera*, no. 28, January 1909.
47. "Triunfo completo de la huelga de los compañeros rusos" [Complete Victory of the Strike of the Russian Comrades], *El Obrero En Madera*, no. 29, February 1909.
48. The cabinetmaker's leadership, moreover, contributed with a considerable amount of money (\$538,38) to the support of the strike. "Comité Federal. Ebanistas. Informe presentado a la asamblea del gremio celebrada el 15 de abril" [Federal Committee. Cabinetmakers. Report Presented to the Guild Meeting Held on 15 April], *El Obrero en Madera*, no. 31, 1/6/1909.
49. "¡A la lucha!" [To the Fight], *El Obrero en Madera*, no. 29, February 1909. Signed by Luis Macchia.
50. Moya, "The Positive Side," 19–48.
51. "Triunfo completo de la huelga de los compañeros rusos", *El Obrero En Madera*, no. 29, February 1909.
52. Brusilovsky, "Los judíos."

53. “Historia del Sindicato de Ebanistas” [History of the Cabinetmakers’ Union], *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 94, July 1920. Signed by Ángel Renoldi.
54. About the activity of the Bund in Argentina, see Wolff, *Yiddish Revolutionaries in Migration*.
55. Díaz, “El anarquismo” [Anarchism], 119–40.
56. Marotta, *El movimiento sindical argentino* [The Argentine Trade Union Movement], 77.
57. For a detailed analysis of the repression of the Centenary, see: Iñigo Carrera, “Aproximación al análisis” [Approach to Analysis], 69–116.
58. “Bajo el imperio de la barbarie burguesa. La canalla burguesa-policial, asalta e incendia los locales obreros” [Under the Rule of Bourgeois Barbarism. The Bourgeois-Police Rogue, Assaults and Burns Down the Workers’ Premises], *La Acción Socialista* [Socialist Action], 14/6/1910.
59. “En el Centenario de la Revolución por la Libertad. Los atentados contra el pueblo trabajador” [On the Centenary of the Revolution for Freedom. Attacks On the Working People], *La Vanguardia*, 30/9/1910.
60. About the Tragic Week of January 1919, see Bilsky, *La semana trágica* [The Tragic Week]; Koppmann y Asquini, “Espías, rusos y maximalistas,” 165–83 [Spies, Russians, and Maximalists].
61. The pogrom is mentioned, instead, by: Lvovich, *Nacionalismo y antisemitismo* [Nationalism and Antisemitism], 122; Iñigo Carrera, “Aproximación al análisis”; McGee Deutsch and Dolkart, *The Argentine Right*; Senkman, “Los anarquistas en idish” [Anarchists in Yiddish], 109.
62. “En el Centenario de la Revolución por la Libertad. Los atentados contra el pueblo trabajador”, *La Vanguardia*, 30/9/1910.
63. Wald, “Di geshikhte,” 12–5.
64. About the attack at the “Argentine Coliseum” and public opinion’s construction of the event, see Fernández Walker, *Colón*.
65. Marotta, *El movimiento sindical argentino*, 81–4.
66. About the 1916–1922’s cycle of unrest, see: Ceruso, *La izquierda* [The Left]; Camarero, *Tiempos rojos* [Red Times]; Koppmann, *La madera* [The Wood].
67. “La huelga de los ebanistas, lustradores y silletteros” [The Strike of the Cabinetmakers, Polishers and Silletteros], *El Obrero en Madera*, no. 75, July 1916.
68. About sexual division of labour and social reproduction, see Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*.
69. León Mas, whose real name probably was Leon Mednick, participated during the twenties in the *Idische Sektzie* from the Communist Party of Argentina. “Commemoración de la Revolución rusa” [Commemoration of the Russian Revolution], *El Obrero del Mueble*, núm. 8, diciembre 1924.
70. “Subcomisión israelita” [Israelite Subcommittee], *El Obrero Ebanista* [The Cabinetmaker], no. 85, November 1918.
71. “La acción sindical del comité israelita” [Trade Union Action by the Israelite Committee], *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 99, December 1920. Signed by Jacobo Cris.
72. See: “Balance julio 1918” [Balance July 1918] y “Balance septiembre 1918” [Balance September 1918] in *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 84, October 1918 y *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 85, November 1918, respectively.
73. “La acción sindical del comité israelita,” *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 99, December 1920.
74. “Comité de propaganda” [Propaganda Committee], *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 85, November 1918.
75. “Movimiento sindical – Talleres israelitas” [Trade Union Movement – Israelite Workshops], *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 88, August 1919; “Movimiento gremial. Ebanistas” [Trade Union Movement. Cabinetmakers], *La Vanguardia*, 7/11/1919.

76. Mirelman, “The Semana Trágica,” 61–73.
77. See: Lewin, *Cómo fue la inmigración*, 177–93.
78. “En los talleres de personales israelitas” [In the Workshops of Israelite Personnel], *El Obrero Ebanista*, no. 95, August 1920.
79. “Movimiento gremial. Obreros ebanistas. Huelga del taller Greiser” [Trade Union Movement. Cabinetmakers. Strike in Greiser’s Workshop], *La Vanguardia*, 24/9/1918.

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