



# From the picket to the women's strike: Expanding the meaning of labor struggles in Argentina

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## abstract

In the 1990s, during the height of neoliberal austerity measures in Argentina, the unemployed workers' movements emerged to challenge the growing unemployment, and, in the process, played a crucial role in the country's 2001 uprising. From appropriating the tactic of the picket from the labor movement, and blockading major highways, to creating 'work with dignity' in self-managed cooperatives, these movements redefined the meaning of labor itself. In the following years, the movements of the unemployed became an important political force and, in a large part, many of them became incorporated into governing structures. More recently, a new feminist movement has emerged in response to the increase in feminicides in the country. This movement has used the tool of the strike, specifically a women's strike, to challenge this violence, as well as the devaluing of women's labor which they understand as a root cause of violence. This paper argues that both these movements, the unemployed workers and the feminist movement, through appropriating tactics from the traditional labor movement to organize workers who have often been marginalized, point to both the complexity and heterogeneity of labor today, as well as new ways of organizing these workers.

## Introduction

Fifteen years ago, Argentina was known for the destituent social movements that overthrew the neoliberal government in an uprising marked by the

emergence of new social subjects and unprecedented alliances. In this uprising, the movements of the unemployed played a central role in questioning the premises of neoliberalism and mobilizing the poor across the country through the use of the roadblock. By politicizing the issue of unemployment, these movements highlighted the productive capacity of the unemployed and challenged the definition of work itself, pointing to the myriad forms of work carried out by heterogeneous subjects across multiple spaces. Along with a new generation of human rights activists, horizontally-organized neighborhood assemblies, workers occupying and self-managing factories, these movements were marked by a commitment to a way of doing politics otherwise, eschewing the traditional organizational forms of the party and the union, and instead opting for non-representational, directly democratic and territorial forms of politics (Sitrin, 2012). In this sense, these movements were also especially well-suited for the post-Fordist, neoliberal conditions, responding to dispersed and networked forms of power and capital with equally dispersed and networked forms of resistance (Colectivo Situaciones, 2012).

However, during the twelve years of Kirchner governments, many of those movements were incorporated into governance strategies, administering unemployment benefits, receiving state subsidies, or by having activist leaders directly join government agencies (Colectivo Situaciones, 2014). These movements were also, in many ways, at the heart of the country's 'recovery' from the crisis, as the cooperatives and other community-based enterprises became one cornerstone of the Kirchner economic development strategy (Gago, 2017). For those reasons, many of those movements have now found themselves less effective and versatile at resisting the right-wing government of Mauricio Macri or responding to the growth of precarious forms of work under this economic recovery.

However, recently, despite right-wing electoral victories, a new wave of feminist mobilizations has taken the country by storm, providing a new face and form to resistance to neoliberal and neo-extractivist capitalism. Emerging in 2014 first as a response to a series of brutal feminicides in the country, the *Ni Una Menos* [Not One Woman Less] (NUM) movement soon began addressing a series of other issues at the root of violence against women. Their analysis directly links violence against women to economic

exploitation and colonial power structures, organizing two national women's strikes in October 2016 and March 2017. While NUM has many differences from the movements of the 2001 era, emerging in a different institutional context, it also reflects an important line of continuity: challenging what is considered work and who are considered laboring subjects. By organizing explicitly around women's reproductive labor and proposing a women's strike, NUM challenges the very definition of what is understood and valued as work. In doing so, they have not only challenged the country's male-dominated trade unions, but the entire governing structure that depends on women's unrecognized labor as well as violence against women as a strategy (or pedagogy) of domination (Segato, 2016). Taken together, these movements have been able to re-appropriate the tools of the traditional labor movement to generate profound opposition to neoliberal capitalism in the region on the part laboring subjects that are often considered to be marginal or external to processes of capital accumulation.

By putting the unemployed workers' movement and NUM in dialogue, I am not attempting to make a direct comparison between the two, very distinct, movements, or to say that there is a linear connection between the two. What I am interested in is specifically exploring the question of labor: how these movements challenge traditional understandings of labor and thus push labor organizing in new directions. In times in which there is much lamenting about the impossibility of organizing contemporary forms of labor, due to its precarious nature and spatial and temporal dispersion, these movements in Argentina point to the potential and the necessity of organizing precisely those apparently un-organizable forms of labor. Specifically focusing on the forms of protest adopted by these two movements – the *piquete* (picket) of the unemployed workers' movements and the women's strike of NUM – will demonstrate how these movements politicize labor in new ways.

I start with an overview of the debates around the contemporary composition of labor, specifically focusing on questions of unemployment, informal and precarious labor, and reproductive labor. I then turn to the movements of the unemployed, exploring their use of the tactic of the *piquete*, as well as the movement's composition and their struggles to

redefine the meaning of labor. In this section, I draw on extensive fieldwork with two Unemployed Workers' Movements or MTDs (*Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados*) in the urban periphery of Buenos Aires between 2005 and 2013, including participant observations and interviews. While the movement of the unemployed was quite diverse, focusing on these movements, representative of the autonomous stream of the overall movement, allows me to highlight the radical critique of work being made by this movement. Finally, I explore NUM, drawing both on participant observation, interviews with participants, and the organization's official texts and statements. In both cases, I draw heavily on the theoretical production of the movements themselves, considering this as an important element of their political work (see Colectivo Situaciones, 2007; Roggero, 2014). Through this exploration, I hope to show how both of these movements have challenged concepts of labor, leading to a broadened definition of what counts as work and who count as workers, by re-appropriating tactics from the labor movement and recomposing heterogeneous laboring forces.

### **Debating and defining work**

These two movements point to the complexity of the composition of labor, arguing for an expanded definition of labor itself that takes this heterogeneity – in terms of the form, organization, and regulation of labor – into account and recognizes reproductive work and the work of social cooperation. Additionally, these movements point to the increasing informalization, precaritization, and feminization of labor. Here I will give a brief overview of the debates around these transformations in the world of work, particularly focusing on what is illuminated through taking up the perspective of the movements of the unemployed and the feminist movement. I begin with the question of unemployment to examine the role of unwaged labor in expanding a definition of labor, and then show how this perspective allows us to understand the informalization and precaritization of labor in a new light. Finally, I turn to the issue of reproductive labor to highlight its continued centrality to labor struggles.

The figure of *the unemployed* has traditionally been considered too reactionary or marginalized, or too heterogeneous and dispersed to be able to mount an effective opposition to capital (Mazzeo, 2006; Zibechi, 2003). Therefore, as unemployment increased in the country throughout the 1990s, Argentinean labor leaders and Leftist political parties often completely disregarded the struggles of the unemployed. Toty Flores, a leader of the MTD of La Matanza recounts, 'Leftist political parties, minus a few honorable exceptions, accused us of being "lumpens," and ordered us to go work in the factories. Of course, factories that no longer existed' (2005: 19). Recognizing that the permanent decline of Fordist employment and the Peronist welfare state, different sectors of the movement of the unemployed developed alternative understandings of the role of the unemployed in the conjuncture. One of the most suggestive analyses is that elaborated by autonomous sectors of the movements, which understood unemployment in terms of 'differential inclusion' or 'inclusion through exclusion.' Colectivo Situaciones and the MTD of Solano define exclusion as 'the *place* that our biopolitical societies produce to be able to include people, groups and social classes in a subordinated manner' (2002: 128), emphasizing that 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' go hand and hand. According to this analysis, the unemployed are not merely the outcasts or victims of capital, but also have a productive and creative role. By challenging the idea of this exclusion, Mazzeo (2006) argues that the piquetero movement made it impossible for structural unemployment to continue playing its role of social discipliner, its role of driving down wages and blocking the struggles of the employed.

Dinerstein takes this argument about the place of the unemployed further, challenging the conception of unemployment as lack or exclusion: 'More than a lack, unemployment is an intensified form of capitalist labor where the dematerialization of labor becomes apparent' (2009: 256). Thus, what unemployment makes visible, at least when the unemployed themselves make it visible, is precisely the transformations in labor, the immaterialization of work, due to the real subsumption of life under capital. Unemployment is not some nonplace outside of capital, but is fully subsumed into capitalist relations. Dinerstein argues for understanding unemployment itself as 'a *form* of work produced by the intensification and expansion of capitalist labor in its most abstract form: money (or abstract

labor in movement)' (*ibid.*: 245). Therefore, unemployment cannot be understood solely in terms of lack or exclusion, but must be seen as a specific, especially violent, form of exploitation and dispossession. It is the action of the roadblock, she argues, that makes this violence visible by demonstrating the materiality of unemployment.

Understanding unemployment as more than lack points us to the question of the material forms with which the unemployed manage to get by or sustain themselves. These heterogeneous forms are generally classified under the category of the 'informal sector,' which is usually defined negatively in relation to 'formal' employment, as work that is not regulated, not taxed, or without benefits. This position also continues to pose formal work as the norm, while informal work is seen as the aberration, hiding and devaluing the work of the unemployed. Against this position, Denning (2010) counters that it is wage-less life that precedes employment, thus forcing us to invert our perspective and start from questions of reproduction. In a similar vein, Gago (2017) posits the conception of 'baroque economies', characterized by a mixture of different forms of exploitation and dispossession, including some that are commonly considered 'pre-capitalist', 'communitarian', or 'indigenous'. In these baroque economies, various types of informal work and even forced labor, community labor, or family labor coexist both temporally and spatially with more formal work, making it impossible to speak of formal work as the norm. Additionally, these unwaged and 'informal' activities that continue to sustain the 'formal' economy and are also an important source of state revenue. Meanwhile, the legal 'flexibilization' of labor and the generalized precaritization of work blurs the line between informal and formal work, making clear distinctions between the two impossible.

This understanding of labor does not imply the necessity of a new vanguard figure, to take the place of the male factory worker, but rather the need to recognize the diversity of forms of labor. Toward this end, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) develop the concept of the 'multiplication of labor' to describe the intensification, diversification and heterogenization of labor under post-Fordist capitalism, very much apparent in the baroque economies described by Gago. This concept is useful for understanding the different ways through which the poor manage to get by and survive, which

characterize work and unemployment today. In other words, *precarious* work. While there is often to a confusion between the strategic and sociological use of the term (see Shukaitis, 2013), the social movement genealogy of precarity (Casas-Cortés, 2014) still points to the concept's radical potential. This is especially true when movements have expanded the concept of precarity beyond the workplace, as various social movements have done (see Frassanito Network, 2005; Precarias a la deriva, 2004). Colectivo Juguetes Perdidos (2014), working with youth in marginalized areas of Buenos Aires, describes this precarity in terms of terror, tying precarity not only to labor relations, but also to the instability of affective bonds, everyday life in the city, inadequate transportation, housing and health care, or the lack of effective ways to respond to the stress caused by this situation. This precarity can be linked to the extraction of value from more and more times and spaces of life, which puts social reproduction itself at risk (Federici, 2012; Hardt and Negri, 2009).

In Argentina, these expanded and heterogeneous forms of labor are increasingly being understood as a fundamental element of the neo-extractivist economy. Scholars and activists, drawing on the experiences of varied social struggles, have developed an expanded definition of the concept of 'extraction', beyond the extraction of natural resources, to include all forms of extraction of value from social cooperation in contemporary capitalism, regardless of whether or not a wage is present (Gago and Mezzadra, 2015). This definition of neo-extractivism allows us to include the myriad ways in which capital captures the value produced by social cooperation, extracting that wealth in a form very similar to the way in which it extracts natural resources from the earth. *Instituto de Investigación y Experimentación Política* (The Institute for Political Investigation and Experimentation) (2013) thus builds on this definition to link the violent dispossession of peasants from their land to forms of extraction through finance and real estate speculation in urban communities. These industries rely on the extraction of natural resources, as well as on the knowledges and capacities of the very people they subordinate in order to better use both urban and rural land and extract rent from it. This capture of knowledges and capacities adds yet another layer to the neo-

extractivist economy and highlights the importance of immaterial forms of labor along with the natural resource extraction.

Under this expanded notion of extractivism and the multiplication of labor, social reproduction becomes another site for value extraction and struggles around social reproduction acquire a fundamental importance. Referring to the labor necessary to reproduce labor power as commodity, as well as the social relation of capitalism itself, Marxist feminists have long pointed out how capitalist production depends on this, often unpaid and unrecognized, labor usually carried out by women, and struggled to redefine 'work' to include unpaid reproductive labor (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Federici, 2004, 2012). Gutiérrez Aguilar's definition of reproductive labor as 'the incessant efforts carried out primarily – although not only – by women to maintain and sustain life, to expand possibilities for pleasure and enjoyment, to materially and symbolically reproduce human and non-human life, day after day, year after year, and generation after generation' (2015: 171) also points to how it can function as a site of resistance, through creating possibilities for pleasure and enjoyment, and through that excess desire that always escapes. This idea of reproduction as also a point of resistance is one that has been picked up by both the piquetero movement, in their autonomous forms of social reproduction (see Mason-Deese, 2017) and the feminist movement through challenging gendered hierarchies in reproductive labor.

Today productive and reproductive work become increasingly integrated as what has traditionally been unpaid reproductive work enters into the market in the form of paid work, while the affective and communicative skills characteristic of reproductive work are becoming necessary for more and more forms of work outside of the clearly reproductive sphere, as part of what has been described as the *feminization of labor* (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010; Weeks, 2011). This overlap between 'reproduction' and 'production' is a key feature of the baroque economies described by Gago or the precarity described by Juguetes Perdidos, in which labor is as likely to be organized by obligations to family members, neighbors, or other informal groups as by formal labor contracts and often includes a component of maintaining affective ties or territorial knowledge.



Despite this general feminization of labor, most reproductive labor continues to be carried out by women. A 2014 report released by Argentina's INDEC shows that women on average dedicate 2.5 hours per day more than men to domestic work and carry out 76% of total domestic labor.<sup>1</sup> This work continues to be undervalued and often taken for granted. During the neoliberalism of the 1990s, women faced an increased burden as austerity measures attacked the social safety net leaving women to pick up the extra costs in order to protect their families. While many individual women referred to these issues when explaining their decision to join the organizations of the unemployed, it was not until NUM that they became explicit political points, for example in the movement's statement for the March 8 strike, claiming that unpaid domestic labor adds an extra three hours of day to women's work, and that women are the first to lose their jobs and feel the effects of neoliberal structural adjustment.

It is within this context that the expanded understanding of neo-extractivism becomes useful for understanding the exploitation of reproductive labor as well. As NUM writes in a statement condemning the government's decision to take out more foreign debt:

Finance, through debt, constitutes a form of direct exploitation of women's labor power, vital power, and capacity for organization in households, in neighborhoods, in territories. Sexist violence is made even stronger with the feminization of poverty and the lack of economic autonomy implied by debt.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, they are arguing that women's unpaid reproductive labor, in the household and the neighborhood or territory, is being exploited, that value is extracted from it, through mechanisms of debt and credit, as Federici argues, 'every articulation of the reproduction of labor power has been turned into an immediate point of accumulation' (2012: 102). They go on to argue that, as in the past, the new foreign debt with disproportionately affect women who will be forced to bare the brunt of the cuts to social

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1 Full report available at:

[http://www.indec.mecon.ar/uploads/informesdeprensa/tnr\\_07\\_14.pdf](http://www.indec.mecon.ar/uploads/informesdeprensa/tnr_07_14.pdf).

2 The complete statement can be read on the group's Facebook page: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=650738665117319&id=351635908360931](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=650738665117319&id=351635908360931).

services that will inevitably follow. Thus both the MTDs and the feminist movement, then, point to broad changes in forms of production and extraction of value, which is not limited to the formal workplace or instances of waged employment, but occurs throughout the spaces and moments of life, as life itself is put to work (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010). However, these movements also, as I will show in what follows, point to new forms of resistance to this capture and the re-composition of laboring forces.

### **The piquete**

Organizations of the unemployed emerged in response to increasing unemployment and poverty in Argentina in the mid 1990s as the result of neoliberal policies and international financial crises. After the unemployed in towns that had been devastated following the privatization of the state-run oil company began carrying out large and combative roadblocks to demand jobs and unemployment benefits, the tactic was quickly taken up by the unemployed across the country. The piquetes, an appropriation of the traditional labor movement's tactic of blockading factory gates, thus became the emblematic tactic of the movement of the unemployed (Svampa and Pereyra, 2009). The piquetes also demonstrated the power of the unemployed by directly using their bodies to disrupt the circulation of capital and economic flows in the cities (Dinerstein, 2009; Mazzeo, 2006).

In urban areas, the MTDs often started as spontaneous protests or gatherings of neighbors, acting in response to the shock of recent job loss, cuts to social services, and rising inflation, which made the costs of reproduction unbearably high. This initial organizing around issues related to reproduction and everyday life (Mason-Deese, 2017) could be seen in their very form of organization, which corresponds to the multiplication of labor described above. Zibechi compares these movements to the traditional labor movement, which took the spaces and rhythms of the factory and the state as their models, while the new movements of the unemployed turned to 'non-Taylorist, unordered, and nonhierarchical forms of being together' (Hardt et al., 2012: 167). In other words, movements of the unemployed adopted forms of internal organization paralleling transformations in work itself. The protests and subsequent organizations would take on different

forms in different places, corresponding to the specific composition and experiences of the unemployed in those sites.

The unemployed who participated in the piquetes included people with experiences of different types of informal work or other types of precarious employment, part-time employment, or underemployment. Many older men had previously held formal waged work, while many of the women and younger members had never had formal, contracted, waged jobs. The piquetes thus had a heterogeneous composition in terms of gender, age, race and ethnicity, as well as political ideologies and organizing experiences. Mazzeo (2006) argues that it was both this former political experience of older workers with trade union backgrounds, and the new energy of young people who had never held formal, stable work that accounted for the movement's innovation and success. For example, members of the MTD of La Matanza included former metallurgic factory workers and schoolteachers, former domestic workers, many 'self-employed' who made a living by reselling goods from wholesale markets or selling food prepared in their homes, as well as younger people with even less work experience. One young man recounts that he had worked in a family member's kiosk, as a handyman, and in a series of other odd jobs. Another that he had worked for a hairdresser and as an electrician, at the time, he was studying computer repair (Interview conducted, Apr. 19, 2012). In the most successful cases, the MTDs were able to use this diversity to their advantage, bringing together diverse segments of the population and people with different skills in order to create new, innovative projects from schools to health clinics to cooperative enterprises, drawing on that wide range of knowledges.

The piquetes adopted the traditional tool of the labor movement and reshaped its spatiality. Rather than characterize the piquete as a less effective strike, we must recognize that the piqueteros took their protests not to the factory doors, but rather, to the streets of the city, understanding the city as the crucial site of capitalist production. Thus, it demonstrates an understanding of the importance of the urban space for contemporary capitalism production through the wealth produced through forms of urban social cooperation, becoming a sort of 'wildcat strike against the metropolis' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 259). Ferrara elaborates:

The roadblock attacks one of the central necessities of capital: its circulation. The blocked roads are both a strangulation of the mercantile process and a blow to the legal foundations of the system. If traffic is disrupted, freedom of trade is curtailed, conducting business is prevented, the economic flow is detained, capitalist legality is questioned, giving a dismal impression to investors around the world. Therefore, it is an important measure that hits the system in its vital centers. Capitalism cannot withstand roadblocks for very long. (2003: 38)

Dinerstein (2009), on the other hand, comments that the piquete is powerful because it allows for the materialization of the 'abstract' conditions of unemployment and makes visible the violence inherent in the economic system. Thus, for these commentators, the piquete is an entirely effective form of disruption and protest of contemporary capitalism.

The piquetes, as a way of interrupting capital, thus point to the productive capacity of the unemployed. For example, the *cumbia villera* and rock music and corresponding fashions that are produced and made famous in the poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires become not only heavily commercialized, but are also then reproduced in the middle and high income neighborhoods of the city. Even more important are the territorial knowledges of local organizers and activists, women's work of cleaning and caring for households and public spaces, maintaining the affective ties that hold communities together, and the alternative and informal economic practices developed by the poor and unemployed to survive during the economic crisis (Gago et al., 2014). These activities all point to the importance of affective and knowledge labor, or 'biolabor' (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010). Yet, even while they are being exploited, these activities are often not recognized as work. Therefore, the MTD Solano emphasizes the importance of rethinking the concept of work itself:

The true obstacle seems to be the difficulty with breaking with the conception that labor is a capacity that is sold in the market, that is, something oriented toward producing profit. Thus, all of the productive activities not governed by this criteria are not considered work. Work tends to be thought of as the elaboration of products, which can later be justified to the government's administrative bureaucracies or sold on the market. (Colectivo Situaciones and MTD de Solano, 2002: 114)

They argue that we need to broaden our understanding of what is considered work, beyond the generation of material objects, recognizing the diverse productive activities of the unemployed, as well as what other types of work are possible.

The piquetes then made this productive capacity of the unemployed visible and showed what happens when the unemployed withdraw their labor from the reproduction of the capitalist relation. But more than a form of protest, they functioned as a site for the construction of new social relations and communal values. They were encampments in the middle of the street, bringing together people who had been largely isolated from one another due to a lack of common spaces, they became spaces where people took care of each other, sharing food and other responsibilities (Dinerstein, 2009). Since piquetes would often last for days or week at a time, daily life had to be organized within them, including food and medical care, informal forms of self-education and knowledge-sharing, as well as singing and music-making to foster a sense of community. As Sitrin argues, a piquete not only shuts down a road, 'but also to open up a new space on the other side of the blockade' (2012: 175). Accounts of early piquetes compare them to a carnival, a space where power relations are turned upside down, and new social relations are formed based on solidarity and trust (Colectivo Situaciones and MTD de Solano, 2002).

The piquetes recognized and valued diverse forms of labor and it was there where people began experimenting with new ways of organizing social and productive relations. These experiments were taken back to the neighborhood as many unemployed workers' organizations started their own cooperatives or other productive enterprises as a way of creating 'work with dignity.' These cooperatives served both as a minimal source of income for the unemployed and the organizations, but also as a way to imagine and create other ways of working and producing. Different MTDs started cooperative bakeries, textile workshops, metal-working workshops, and other enterprises. Usually these cooperatives operate through mechanisms of internal direct democracy, making decisions through assemblies in which all workers can participate as equals. Many of these cooperatives also emphasize training and rotating tasks to break down internal divisions between intellectual and manual labor. These cooperatives, as a form of

*autogestión* or workers' self-management are important both as a form of survival during times of neoliberal crisis and because they prefigure other ways of living, transforming organizations, social relations, and subjectivities (Vieta, 2014). In this way, these cooperatives operate as a form of 'labour commons' in which the workplace functions as a sort of 'organizational commons' (de Peuter and Dyer-Witherford, 2010).

Along with these cooperatives that focus on more traditional forms of 'productive' labor, many of the MTDs have also created cooperative forms for addressing issues of social reproduction. For example, the School Yo Sí Puedo, which broke off from the MTD La Matanza in 2007, is a cooperative primary and secondary school. The school uses the unemployment benefits and other subsidies provided by the state in order to remunerate both the teaching labor involved in running the school but also other forms of social cooperation and affective labor involved in territorial organizing (Mason-Deese, 2017). The former MTD of Solano runs a cooperative health clinic, providing community health services to low income neighborhood residents, usually connected to issues of drug abuse and psychological problems. They also operate a housing cooperative, where a growing number of families live together, collectively producing food, caring for children and the elderly, and studying and learning. For this reason, the group changed their name, because, as Neka Jara explains, 'we no longer want to be defined by our relationship to paid employment,' (Interview, conducted February 18, 2013) in other words, recognizing that they are more than 'unemployed' even if not receiving a formal wage for their productive activities.

It was the political productivity of these movements that created the space for Néstor Kirchner, and later his wife Cristina Fernández to come to office and these administrations attempted to bring more and more elements of these activities under government control through complex and subtle forms of governance and capture (Colectivo Situaciones, 2014; Gago et al., 2014). However, the movements ultimately forced the government to acknowledge the multiplicity of labor, both in terms of focusing policy on these sectors and in terms of recognizing the political force of those subjects, which can be seen in the new generation of state benefits programs (Gago, 2017). While elements of the autonomous wing of the unemployed movement continued exercising autonomy in their practices, other unemployed workers'

organizations were directly incorporated into the government, often through administering different social programs. However, this incorporation had very ambiguous effects: on the one hand, it meant more resources were available for cooperatives and other social movement projects, on the other, it limited the oppositional aspect of movements, as well as their creativity and inventiveness as they were forced to deal more government bureaucracy and the temporal rhythms of state governance. Yet both Dinerstein (2010) and Colectivo Situaciones (2014) argue that understanding the complicated relationships between movements and governments in terms of binaries of autonomy or incorporation, or resistance or co-optation is not useful because it ignores the situated and complex nature of that relationship and the inevitable tension between the affirmation and recuperation of autonomy (Bohm et al., 2010). Regardless, and despite these contradictions, the movements of the unemployed were responsible for a lasting shift in understanding what counts as labor and who are considered laboring subjects and this legacy continues to be felt to this day.

### **The women's strike**

Nearly two decades after the initiation of the piquetero movement, NUM formed in response to the increasing rate of feminicides in Argentina. Both an organizing collective comprised of journalists, writers, artists, and academics, and a larger movement made up of women from diverse class backgrounds, NUM has been responsible for organizing a number of large mobilizations, along with two women's strikes. The first national action in 2015 – in response to the brutal murder of Daiana García – included a public reading, including art, poetry, and other artistic interventions. The following year, NUM began organizing larger open assemblies, and then a large march on June 3 and a women's strike on October 19. This momentum carried into 2017, in the women's strike on March 8 and another large action on June 3. Yet the power of NUM is not only seen in these large public events, but also in how it has reframed the debate about gendered violence and women's work and contested gender relations at multiple scales and sites from the household to the university, from the street to electoral politics.

NUM builds on a long history of women's organizing in Argentina and a diverse genealogy of feminist struggles, especially the annual National Women's Meeting and the movement to legalize abortion. The National Women's Meeting, which has been held annually in different cities across the country since 1986, drew approximately 70,000 women to Rosario in October 2016. These meetings are self-organized, horizontal, open gatherings of women to discuss a variety of different issues affecting women, from reproductive health to domestic violence to discrimination in the workplace. There women come together from different political and ideological backgrounds, from different parts of the country, and importantly from different class and ethnic backgrounds. While women from various different political parties and some unions were already participating in the meetings, when women *piqueteras* began to attend in the early 2000s that the class character of these meetings shifted considerably. For example, debates about abortion from a human rights perspective were suddenly transformed when women living in slums began talking about friends who had died from unsafe, clandestine, abortions.

Drawing on these experiences, the contemporary feminist movement reflects a certain type of popular feminism, which has only recently taken hold in working class neighborhoods, often where the *piquetero* movement was strongest. Women's experience in the *piquetero* movement was contradictory and ambiguous: the movement featured high levels of women's participation and privileged feminine sites of the home and the neighborhood, while women rarely obtained leadership positions and were often confined to traditional gender roles associated with caring (Svampa and Pereyra, 2009; Dinerstein, 2010). However, women did not passively remain in those roles. In the MTD La Matanza, young women regularly challenged male members to have childcare work recognized as work equal to the work carried out in the cooperatives, or to be included in more of the leadership. Years later, these women, many of whom were only in their teens when they participated in their first *piquetes* are now leaders of the fight against gendered violence in their neighborhoods. For example, some of the young women formerly involved in the MTD La Matanza are now spearheading feminist mobilizations in that area, organizing contingents to attend the national marches, as well as workshops about gender violence



and comprehensive sexual education, self-defense classes for women, and feminist concerts and theater performances. This territorial work was essential in laying the groundwork for the women's strike.

In October 2017, in response to the brutal stabbing of Lucía Pérez by three men in Mar del Plata and violent repression against National Women's Meeting in Rosario, NUM called a women's strike. Organized in just over a week, the strike on October 19 was a huge success. Organizers called for women to leave their formal workplaces for an hour in the middle of the day, to participate in marches and other mobilizations in the evening, and to abstain from any type of reproductive labor for the entire day, including all types of domestic labor, caring labor, and the labor of reproducing the gendered relation itself. Participants emphasized the importance of telling their male partners and their male comrades within political organizations, 'we are not here for you today.' Indeed, they made it their mission to do only the work that was necessary to be together with each other, with *estamos para nosotras* as their slogan. The action thus made visible the myriad forms of labor that women carry out on a daily basis, often without recognition. And it served as a tool for bringing different women together, despite their differences, and to be able to recognize both the similarities and the differences in their everyday practices, their forms of labor, and their exposure to violence.

This effort to make women's labor visible and to link the devaluation of women's labor to violence against women is a key component of NUM's work. As the collective states in their statement calling for the March 8 International Women's Strike:

Using the tool of the strike allowed for highlighting the economic fabric of patriarchal violence. And it was also an enormous demonstration of power because we removed ourselves from the place of the victim to position ourselves as political subjects and producers of value. We complicated the category of women workers and made it clear that work is also domestic and informal work, and includes forms of self-managed association.<sup>3</sup>

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3 The statement was translated and published in *Viewpoint Magazine*: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/02/16/how-was-the-march-8-international-womens-strike-woven-together/>.

Or as Verónica Gago says speaking of the October strike:

To strike is to challenge and block the forms of producing and reproducing life in homes, in neighborhoods, in workplaces. It is to connect violence against women with the specific political nature of the current forms of exploitation of the production and reproduction of life. The strike was the key that enabled us to unite those two things. This produced an impressive effect. First, because it broadened the idea of the strike. We started bringing together women from all different sectors, waged or not, young and old, employed or unemployed. This really caught on and activated people's imagination about how to multiply the effectiveness of the tool of the strike. What does it mean to strike in your position? If you are not unionized, but also if you are in an organization (in school or a community network, for example) and so on. (Fernández-Savater et al., *Viewpoint Magazine*, 21 March, 2017)

NUM directly links economic precarity to women's vulnerability to male violence and to ideas about women's inferiority and disposability at the root of the gendered violence. The women's strike thus was about work, about challenging its masculinist definition and centering women's labor, but it was also about the economic and political function of gendered violence. In the organizing assemblies leading up to the strike, women share stories of facing sexual harassment on the job, of being afraid to advocate for better working conditions because of fear of violence, of staying in abusive relationships because they lack the economic means to leave. Organizers draw connections between these experiences, referencing Rita Segato's work (2016) to demonstrate how violence against women's bodies has a 'pedagogical' or disciplining impact that is essential to maintaining colonial power relations.

Yet, similarly to the piquetero movement, despite NUM's emphasis on labor, they have had a conflicted relationship with the major trade unions. The fast pace of organizing for the October 19 strike, called with little over to spare, meant that unions had little time to officially respond, leaving women workers from various unions free to participate in the action. However, the March 8 International Women's Strike was a different story. Called in January of 2017, in collaboration with feminist organizers from Poland and other countries, there was ample time to build wider coalitions. Toward this end, women from various unions approached the leadership of the union federations asking them to endorse the strike. However, the union

leadership (all men, of course) responded by declaring that they were the only ones with the authority to call a strike. Natalia Fontana, Communications Secretary for the Airlines' Workers Union, discusses the conflict:

On the one hand, there are those who argue that the strike is a tool that belongs to the unions and only the union federations can call one. That is, they don't consider that it could be a tool that goes beyond the unions or that it goes beyond the idea of the unionized formal worker. [...] It is hard for them to give credit to a strike called by women, women who are organized and who are capable of transversely coming together with other women from other unions federations and political and social organizations. (Fernández-Savater et al., *Viewpoint Magazine*, 21 March, 2017)

The trade union federations thus refused to endorse the International Women's Strike and, as a countermeasure, organized their own march in Buenos Aires on March 7. There union leaders were driven off the stage by rank and file workers demanding that the unions call a general strike. The next day, in the women's strike, one of the chants was: 'the national strike was called by women'. Pushed by the demands of their rank and file members, and especially women organizing within unions, the union confederations were forced to call a general strike for April. This shows how women's organization and specifically their use of the strike tool, both threatened and pushed the labor unions, unions dominated by masculine leadership structures and ideas about what counts as work.

The union-like institution that was most supportive of both women's strikes was the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers (CTEP), an independent organization comprised of cartoneros, street vendors, market stallholders, micro-entrepreneurs, artisans, workers in cooperatives and recuperated factories, and other informal sector workers. It thus represents some of the most marginalized and precarious workers in Argentina: workers without formal contracts, stable or guaranteed employment. CTEP is also on the front lines of redefining work and labor organizing in Argentina: purposefully bringing together workers around the concept of the *popular economy*, rather than that of the informal economy, in order to recognize the productivity and creativity of that sector, which has been marginalized by formal labor union structures. Because of their precarious position, these

workers run unique risks in participating in a strike action for even one day. Yet, they were one of the first groups to endorse the strike. Here the links between the feminist and the piquetero movements become increasingly clear. Gago recounts an assembly of popular economy women planning for March 8:

We went with our friend Neka Jara and she was greeted by and reunited with many women from the *piquetero* movement. But the most interesting thing, as Neka was telling us, was that 20-year old-women would greet her, that is, women who were only five or six years old during the assemblies of the *piquetero* movement around 2001. Neka said: 'It's very exciting, they are the daughters of the *piqueteras*.' There is a very strong generational element that brings this intersection of the lineage of the movements of the unemployed and those of the popular economy to the street. Of course this lineage is not linear nor can it be unproblematized. Yet it is intolerable for the world of unionism: for all of that to appear under the status of work is intolerable. Because it problematizes the idea of work itself. (Fernández-Savater et al., *Viewpoint Magazine*, 21 March, 2017)

Thus, a clear parallel can be drawn between the piquetero movement and the contemporary feminist movement through their problematization of the concept of labor itself and the attempt to appropriate tools of the traditional labor movement to organize laboring forces in new ways.

## Conclusions

The MTDs and NUM have much to teach us about the nature of class composition and labor organizing not only in Argentina but across Latin America as a whole. Defining labor only in terms of formal, waged employment ignores vast amounts of contemporary production and producers. Thus, the informalization, feminization, and precarization of labor point to general trends in which formal, waged labor is not the norm, and where affective qualities and social cooperation are increasingly put to work. These movements also show us that other strategies and tactics of organization and action are the most suited and have the potential to be most successful under these conditions. The piquete and the women's strike, as discussed above, are two examples of the re-appropriation of the traditional tactics of the labor movement, taken in new directions, but we could also look at the forms of internal organization and network-like

structure of these movements. Both the feminist movement and the MTDs are rooted in the spaces and practices of everyday life in parallel to the multiplication of labor across all times and spaces of lives. These forms of organization have also allowed the movements to be more heterogeneous and flexible, building on the diverse lived experiences of the unemployed, informal workers, and women workers.

These movements also show us that other ways of organizing socially necessary labor are possible, as are other social relations beyond work. In the piquetes, and to a greater extent in their cooperative enterprises, the unemployed realized that they do not need bosses, that they can collectively organize their own labor. Thus, the movements of the unemployed created hundreds of worker-managed cooperatives across the country, including everything from bakeries to textile workshops. Similarly, the women's movement challenges the gender division of labor toward creating new ways of sharing labor and responsibilities. The women's strike also served as a tool for bringing women together in a new way, in a sense demonstrating the same prefigurative aspect as the piquete. In the strike, women discover their collective power, not only mourning the deaths of the women murdered by male violence, but also celebrating a feminist desire. Participants take this experience back home and begin enacting new gender relations in all the spaces they inhabit.

The piquetero movement emerged as a challenge to the neoliberal order, the effects of structural adjustment and Argentina's growing international debt. They were able to show how the debt primarily affected low income populations, leading to higher levels of unemployment and the inability to meet basic needs. In a similar way, by making the connection between the devaluing of women's labor and gendered violence, the feminist movement has been able to make a profound critique of the violence on which the capitalist system is founded, as well as how this violence is necessary to maintain capitalist relations. They have also expanded their analysis to include a critique of the violence of financial capital, focusing on its gendered aspects, both in how women are disproportionately affected by the austerity measures accompanying the IMF loan, as well as how women are particularly affected by new forms of consumer credit for household items and basic expenses. In this, they were one of the first movements to bring

attention to and publicly protest the increase in external debt in the current moment under the government of Macri.

Looking at these movements, in these ways, opens up a new understanding of the current 'cycle of struggles' in Latin America. Going beyond the 'end of cycle' narrative that narrowly focuses on the governments in power, we can recognize the hidden undercurrents that tie together movements of the past with those of the present. Both the piquetero movement and NUM show that some of the fiercest opposition comes from these previously unacknowledged subjects and forms of labor. Yet, despite being unrecognized, this labor has long formed the backbone of capitalist production, and, as it takes place in a diversity of times and spaces, so do the forms of resistance to exploitation and extraction. Re-appropriating the tools and tactics from earlier generations of labor struggles, picketing the spaces of circulation and the urban production, striking from reproductive and affective labor, and creating new social relations in the process, these movements demonstrate the heterogeneity of labor and the diversity of points of extraction, as well as the complex forms that labor struggles take today.

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