Introduction

Since the economic recovery of 2003, traditional and mainly unions led labour conflicts have occupied the scene of social mobilization in Argentina. The growth of the economy, government’s emphasis in employment generation and collective bargaining, the role given to central trade unions confederations in tripartite bodies, can all be considered as factors that have contributed to a re-habilitation of trade unions as major actors in the economic sphere and industrial relations. This context has certainly increased the power of existing trade unions structures, their role as institutions and their mobilising capacity but without much innovation in terms of strategies, political orientations and patterns of workers’ representation (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 2011). However, in parallel with this institutional growth, the same context has also produced a fertile soil for the re-emergence of the democratic and movement sides of unionism (Cohen 2006).

Grass-root mobilisations and direct actions have empowered workers’ at the workplace and favoured a renewal of strategies and leaderships, within a more Leftist ideological discourse. These bottom up movements, even if proportionally few, have nonetheless represented, through their emphasis on participation and democracy, qualitatively a step forward with respect to traditional unions’ representation and methods of struggle, re-installing in Argentina the debate on union democracy and forms of workers’ representation in the construction of unions power, while at the same time expressing in their everyday demands the most radical opposition to neo-liberal flexibility (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2012).

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1 Some of the issues presented in this paper follow the outline of a previous conference paper co-authored with Pablo Ghigliani

2 The author is a Marie Curie International Outgoing Fellow. European Research Agency support to participate in this conference and to do fieldwork research in preparation of this paper is acknowledged
What are the challenges faced by these democratic experiences of organising? Are democratic and participatory practices sustainable in the long term in the face of employers’ offensives and changing economic cycles and market contexts? Is democracy sustainable in situations of conflict? Is democracy compatible with leadership? Are institutionalisation and delegation irreversible tendencies?

Following up from previous research on democracy and collective organising (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2010), this paper aims to engage with some of these questions by starting from the assumption that workplace democracy is fundamentally the result of a social construction whose limits and possibilities are set by the context of struggle, the employment structure and the institutional framework in which workers are inserted. In this perspective, the paper, rather than considering democracy per se, aims to consider it as a mean to establishing and strengthening workers’ organising power. In order to map the interconnections of these two dimensions, the paper presents empirical findings of two of the most representative cases of grassroots organising that recently occurred in Argentina, in both the informal and the formal sector of the economy. In the first case, that of SIMECA, an association of delivery workers, workers’ pursued collective organising through democratic decision making processes in precarious conditions of employment, without any legal protection or previous unionisation. In the second case, that of the Buenos Aires underground, workers’ experience with democratic organising took place through conflicts in a highly visible/high impact sector of activity, with existing workplace representation and in a historically unionised sector. These two highly contrasting contexts can help to better grasp and disentangle the complex and contradictory dynamics underlying the relations among workplace democracy, workers organising and workers power.

**Workplace democracy, collective interests and the construction of workers’ representation**

The issue of workplace and trade unions’ democracy has always been central to any discussions concerned with the progressive and emancipator role of the labour movements in societies and remain crucial today to many academic and militant debates, notwithstanding trade unions’ global political decline. Historically, from the analyses of the Webbs on trade unions functions to the comprehensive Gramscian critique of the ambivalent nature of trade unions as institutions operating within the logic of the capitalist system, a negative perspective on the practice of workplace democracy has always dominated, although for different reasons. While the Webbs (1897), starting from the collective bargaining function assigned to the trade unions, emphasised the existence of organizational factors leading to bureaucratization and accepted this to strengthen collective regulations, Gramsci (1969) explained the tendency to a centralisation of decisions within the trade unions and thus the deficit of democracy as a function of both material and ideological determinations. As organisations that negotiate over the price of labour, trade unions represent workers ‘in a form dictated by the capitalist regime’, that
determines, according to the type of productive activity, the ways, times and forms in which workers are employed and work is organised. This in turn is reflected in different salaries, jobs and working conditions, that creating divisions among workers are material obstacles for broader forms of representation. The existence of this structure shape the ways in which trade unions interrelate with the employers and the State, particularly their institutional insertion through collective negotiation that, demanding increased specialisations, skills and personal attitudes produces a centralisation of decisions and a deficit of democratic representations. Moreover, the acceptance of rules and procedures that is implied by collective bargaining increases the need to impose disciplines among workers during moments of peace, further distancing leaders from rank and file workers. Thus, this process of institutionalisation completes the sets of determinations affecting the possibilities for a democratic structuring of workers’ organization, justifying Gramsci’s search for an alternative workers’ organization in the form of the factory councils.

Notwithstanding Gramsci’s convincing argument about the multiple determinants and social processes underlining the construction of workers’ democratic representation, the original thesis of the Webbs on the existence of specific organizational factors conducing to bureaucratization has dominated the debate for a number of years following the work of Michels (1959) and Lipset (1963). Michels’s study of the german social democratic party reconfirms the idea of an ineludibly tendency of big organizations, notwithstanding the existence of formal democratic channels, to concentrate decision making power in the end of few professional leaders and organisers whose power increase proportionally to the growth of the organisation, assuming in Michels’s view almost the form of an ‘iron law of oligarchy’. Lipset (1963) reconsidered some of these insights also in the light of a previous study on union democracy in the International Typographical Union (Lipset, Traw and Coleman 1956) and identified a set of factors that influence the formation of oligarchies in the unions. Those workers elected to representative roles would soon inevitably distance themselves from the rest of workers for both the different skills, experiences and social life associated to the directive function and for the social prestige that can be associated with it. The management of funding, frequent contacts with governments’ representatives and employers, presence in the media, the learning of discursive skills are all factors important in terms of generating new knowledge and aspirations that diverge from those of the normal worker. While these are important in gaining consensus from the rank and file, further strengthen leaders’ power within the organization increasing their control over the flow of information and over the different resources of the trade union structure.

But is this tendency irreversible? Can we limit our analysis simply to the influence of organizational factors? Would a union with a more extended participation in the internal decision making process be more or less efficient in defending workers’ interests?

These are some of the questions raised by a number of more recent studies that diverging from the previous negative views, rehabilitate a more participationist perspective of democracy within trade unions. Stephan-Morris and Zeitlin (1995), against the view that oligarchy is a necessary condition for the union’s efficiency, show how the existence of
both procedural and informal channels for communication and information, broadening workers’ participation, has often been central to gain improvements in working conditions and to preserve workers’ control of the labour process. Moreover, the establishment of democratic practices in the life of the organization, promoting debates and discussions within the collective would also improve the conscious political engagement of workers, developing their knowledge, consciousness and solidarity. In this sense, the exercise of democracy would allow a better definition of workers’ collective interests and an important factor in opposing the hegemony of capital at the workplace. Recent research confirm this view, arguing, for instance, that trade union democracy is fundamental in strengthening solidarity and militancy (Levi, Olson, Agnone and Kelly 2009), in building collective consciousness and identification with the organisation (Levesque, Murray and Le Queux 2005), and in consolidating the union in the long term as well as in legitimating its shop-floor delegates (Peetz and Pocock 2009). In this construction of democracy and more in general of effective rank and file organization, further research has recognized, how important it might also be the leadership role of union militants of left-wing orientation (Stephan Norris and Zeitlin 2002, Darlington 2006, 2001)

More in general, in a context of worldwide union decline, the existence of effective channels of participation and voice for workers is essential to any debates about union renewal and revitalization (Fairbrother 2005) and at the very core of unions’ identity (Hyman 1975, 1979, 2001). Indeed, it is just through formal and informal processes of internal democracy that workers’ individual interests are redefined and, in what Offe and Wiesenthal (1980) call a dialogical process, become collective. Thus, democracy does not just constitute an important element in strengthening workers’ organizational power and efficacy but it is also intimately connected to the definition of their collective interests and attitudes which are fundamental in a mobilization perspective (Kelly 1998). This emphasis on the relation between democracy, interests formation and workers’ representation, is in turn a cornerstone in understanding the complex dynamics existing between rank and file workers, activists and leaderships. Bureaucratic and anti-bureaucratic visions of unions have often dominated the debate but have never moved away from a binary division between rank and files workers and leaders, treating these two groups as separate entities. The first would be described as alternatively passive victims of oligarchies taking decisions or active, true representative of the class interest and the second as a group dominated by either personal or political interests diverging from those of the rest of workers (for a recent analysis based on the work of Hyman, see Darlington and Upchurch 2012 and Martinez Lucio 2012)

Rather than accepting this division, the analysis proposed here starts from the principle that workers’ collective interests are social construction whose empirical manifestation is always the contradictory result of the clash between individual and collective interests, clash that constantly emerge as a consequence of the fragmentation, subordination and exploitation of the working class. Thus, the material, ideological and institutional factors that shape social practices and forms are constitutive processes of the way in which unions’ actions and demands are structured. Moreover, these actions are further mediated by a set of ‘organizational’ factors concerning the different type of workers’
representation, the style of leadership, the decision making process and the level of participation.

The overall mediations and variables that can affect unions’ actions, once referred to the practice of workplace democracy, always result in a complex dynamic of interrelations between rank and file workers, activists and leaderships. As the empirical part of this paper will attempt to show, while democratic decision making has produced in both cases a redefinition of workers’ collective interests and it has given substance to solidarity, political awareness and organizational strength, it will never appear as fixed in specific procedures unchangeable over time. Although assemblies and elections are regularly held, there is no apology of these. Leaders do take certain decisions without formal consultation and have spaces of autonomy. Thus, while democracy and participation is to a large extend part of the genetic codes of workers, democratic practices, particularly in moment of conflict, are flexibly adapted to resist all those material, ideological and institutional pressures that always affect the action and efficacy of workers’ organizations.

Labour revitalization and workers’ representation in post-crisis Argentina

The growth of cases of grassroots organising, with their emphasis on workers’ democracy and participation, should be seen within the socio economic context, favourable to trade unions’ and workers’ demands, produced by the sustained economic growth that followed the default crisis of 2001. While during the 1990s the impact of massive neo-liberal reforms, changing the structure of employment toward flexibility, precariousness and unemployment, divided trade unions and atomised workers’ struggles, the new economic cycle and political climate that emerged from 2003 onward, has represented a fertile soil for a renewal of trade unions’ role as both political and collective bargaining agents. On the one hand, the Kirchner’s government elected in 2003 favoured the reunification of the CGT\(^1\) and the promotion of tripartite agreements, in an attempt to gain hegemonic control upon the broader process of social mobilisation that emerged in coincidence with the 2001 crisis. On the other hand, the increased demand for labour in both the industrial and manufacturing sectors of the economy and the inflation driven growth paved the way to a revitalization of labour conflicts and to their accommodation by mean of collective bargaining at national and industrial level (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 2010, 2011).

This economic and political context has been favourable to workers’ and trade unions’ action and it has changed the balance of power in the workplace and inverted the downward trend of real salaries levels. But it has also reopened in Argentina, on the wave of cases of grassroots movements leading conflicts in parallel and against existing formal trade unions structures, the debate about trade unions organisational model and representativeness, the weight of union bureaucracy and the lack of union internal democracy (Abal Medina 2009, Inigo Carrera y Fernandez 2009, Palomino 2009, Belkin and Ghigliani 2009).
These debates, which have, as outlined in the previous section, a broad theoretical relevance and political implication as to the extents, forms and structures of workers’ organizing power, are further exacerbated in Argentina by a legislative framework that by strictly regulating workers’ representation strengthen the tendency to bureaucratization. In this system, which has been in force without major alterations since the rise of Peronism in the mid-40’s, a period that corresponded to the juridification of the industrial relations system (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2009), legislation has always enabled the State to play a central role. The most important aspect of this legislation is the one that regulates trade unions’ representation by giving legal recognition for the negotiation of collective agreements and representation of workers at the workplace or in courts (the so called personería gremial), to just one organization per industrial sector or economic activity. This has strengthened trade unions, introducing a system of vertical control and the centralisation of decision-making. At the same time, a breach of law, or ministerial intervention, often put trade unions at risk of losing their personería gremial. Besides, legislation also regulates cases in which the arbitration and participation of public authorities is compulsory, as in the Ministry of Labour formal approval of collective agreements, or in this latter right to force conflicting parts to accept mediation (conciliación obligatoria), period during which both employers and trade unions must abstain from taking actions. This legislative framework, which has been functional to the development and establishment of the peronist movement, has historically empowered trade unions national structures and leaderships but it also meant that their shop steward structures, the so-called comisiones internas, developed and became stronger, frequently in open confrontation with national or regional trade union leaderships. While collective bargaining has tended to revolve around wage matters, in Argentina the comisiones internas have directly challenged managerial control over the labour process and working conditions, apart from being also the only effective way of guaranteeing the fulfillment of collective agreements at the workplace.

In summary, the result produced by this system of top down regulations is contradictory. On the one hand, the monopoly of workers’ representation strengthens trade unions power at national and workplace level in their negotiations with the employers and the State. But, on the other hand, institutionally limits the possibility of the establishment of real democratic practices in trade unions’ organizational lives. However, these constraints to democracy have often given space to grassroots worker mobilizations to recover spaces of representation within the union that, redefining workers’ interests, have redefined the terms and forms of their representation.

Brief Description of the cases

SIMECA, the union of delivery workers, was born in the years 1999/2000 as an organization mainly representing motorbikes’ workers delivering documents and small parcels in the city of Buenos Aires. These were traditionally services internal to companies and public administrations but during the 1990s these were outsourced to small, often undeclared agencies that operated as intermediaries, opening up for many young people a possibility of employment but in a highly precarious and unregulated sector. The levels
of workers’ exploitation, their segmentation and division due to the type of work made particularly arduous the organization with the lack of recognition always implying moving in between the border of legality and illegality to gain visibility.

The organization of these workers however emerged in coincidence with the social unrest of 2001 and it consolidated with the recovery of the economy starting in 2003. In the same year SIMECA obtained by the ministry of Labour the inscription as a union, the first step in the recognition of the personeria gremial. In 2005 they joined the CTA, the trade union confederation alternative to the CGT, in an attempt to gain further legitimacy and state recognition. Meanwhile they started with success to organize campaign to put pressure on the government and the employers for the contractualisation of all workers doing delivery in the city and particularly with those employed by big food chains and restaurants (as McDonald for instance). However, after years of legal battles for the recognition of the organization and despite this latter legitimacy in representing workers in the sector, in 2009 the Ministry of Labour granted, for political reasons, the personeria gremial to a newly formed union belonging to the CGT. This provoked a gradual dissolution of SIMECA and its virtual disappearance in 2012.

Contrary to SIMECA which had to fight for organizing workers and obtain recognition within a context of informality and invisibility, which meant to address workers in extremely precarious working conditions, divided and, most importantly considering the final outcome of the SIMECA’s experience, in the absence of a trade union representing the sector, the case of the grassroots movement in the Buenos Aires underground (SUBTE as in commonly known) emerged within a strategically located sector of activity as a response by workers to both company’s flexibilisation policies and the trade union representing the sector, UTA (Union Transporte Automotor) collusion with the company (Metrovías).

The organization of the SUBTE’s workers started in 1997 when a group of, mainly, young workers new to employment, that were organizing in previous years clandestinely and in small groups, become visible by leading two successive wildcat strikes called against company’s disciplinary dismissals. These groups’ initial actions gradually conquered the majority of workers to support the establishment of an organization really engaged through democratic means in representing workers’ interests. The consolidation of the organization went through different phases. Once visibility was achieved through these actions, recognition was then searched first by gaining election for delegates within UTA, the union formally representing workers in the sector. This official legitimacy was then used as a platform to organize workers in resisting company’s attempts to further extend flexibility and for the gradual improvements in their working and salaries conditions. In 2003, after a long struggle, underground workers obtained the 6-hour working-day. In 2004, workers decided to take industrial action against an agreement signed by UTA, the company and the Ministry of Labour without their consensus. It was maybe the most important conflict faced by the new grass-root organisation. It lasted four days of direct actions and workplace occupations which paralyzed Buenos Aires. Later on in 2005, they actively supported and campaigned for the reincorporation to Metrovías, under the same
collective agreement, of outsourced cleaning, surveillance and other auxiliary workers, thus reunifying previously divided groups of workers and extending solidarity and representativeness. These achievements and the overall improvements in working and salaries conditions signaled the strength of workers’ delegates vis a vis the company but also their independence from the official union, leading first to a situation of continuous conflict and then to a breakaway in 2009, when workers voted for the creation of an independent union (AGTSyP or Sindicato del subte). In November 2009, underground workers embarked in further industrial actions, paralyzing again Buenos Aires, to force the recognition of their independent organization by the Ministry of Labour. The conflict ended temporarily with an agreement between public authorities and the newly formed union in which legal protection and recognition was given to the former and to its delegates. The full legal recognition of the new union, through the previously mentioned personeria gremial, is still pending and a source of continuous conflict. This is further augmented, as events occurring at the time of writing are showing, by the dispute between the national and the city’s government for the regulatory responsibility and financial support of the SUBTE transport system.

While the cases of SIMECA and SUBTE, that will be considered in more details in the following sections of the paper, have been among the most visible examples of workers’ recent attempts to promote a more democratic and participatory decision making in the life of their organizations, functional to an improvement of their working and salaries conditions, the different contexts in which each organization was born and later developed left its birthmarks in many respects.

**SIMECA: Building democracy and grassroots organising in the informal sector**

Workers that delivery goods in the urban space of a huge and dynamic city, as is Buenos Aires, share similar working and employment conditions. The variability of whether conditions, air and sound contamination, the harshness of human relations in the midst of chaotic traffic, mechanical problems affecting their means of transportation and service production go together with a type of work structured around urgency and a system of payment based on piece rate which increases the rhythms and length of work and in turn adds to the possibility of road accidents. Delivery workers, while employed on an individual basis by a myriad of different employers, are thus collectively exposed to danger and suffer similar levels of physical exploitation.

*At the beginning, when we did not even have a meeting office, we used to say that SIMECA was everywhere, in every street of the city. Indeed SIMECA was born in the street, in the intersection of (the streets) Peron and Nueve de Julio, where motor bikers usually stop in between deliveries. The street has always identified us very much”*(SIMECA General secretary 2005/2010, interview with author).

Workers that participated in the creation and activity of SIMECA would always emphasize the centrality of this ‘work process extended in the urban space’ in generating among
them identification and solidarity, almost as if this solidarity produced by the sharing of exploitative material conditions represented the natural bedrock of their collective organizing.

“When, after a rainy winter week, you finally arrive to a Friday afternoon to drink a mate with the other guys that suffered like you, this produces very strong, very human ties. These, later on in the street get transformed into solidarity....our job is highly individual, you are alone in the street, the boss tighten you, cars step on you, police ask for bribe and the only one that can help you is another delivery worker who has experienced the same situations as you did’ (SIMECA unpublished material).

As argued at length in previous works (Atzeni 2009, 2010), solidarity plays a pivotal role in explaining grassroots forms of mobilization and organizing. On the one hand, it is the social expression of the collective grievances and sharing ‘rooted in the class needs and demands of the rank and file’ (Cohen 2006: 4). On the other hand, it is the mean through which informal democratic decision making processes are implemented among the collective of workers. In this sense, solidarity helps to structure that forms of ‘dialogical democracy’, of consensus based decisions which is necessary for the collective organising of workers (Offe and Wiesenthal,1980).

In the case of SIMECA, an organisation that emerged in a new, highly precarious and risky, sector of activity, among young and not unionised workers and which was born literally on the street, collective decision making, in the terms expressed above, was at least initially a constitutive element of workers’ organising. As in the quotes, the first activists would trace back the origin of the organization in the informal chatting of workers’ in meeting places in the city centre, chats which were then reinforced at lunch gathering held in usual bars during the workday and later further developed in the football matches or in other social activity outside work. However, this sort of ‘built in’, spontaneous democracy of grassroots organizing, associated to solidarity and embedded within the structure of contradictions of the labour-capital relationship, has been concretely shaped by both internal and external factors.

An important factor has been represented by the socio political context in which workers organizing initially started and consolidated, in between the years 2000-3, which coincided with a very turbulent time in the social history of Argentina. In the face of massive unemployment, flexibilisation of labour and a spiraling economic crisis that led to the default of the country on its sovereign debt, roadblocks, marches and social mobilization were daily reality in the street of Buenos Aires and other major cities. This state of constant mobilization, of confrontation with the established power, of refusal of traditional party politics, found a way of expression in the idea of horizontality in decision making processes, idea promoted and present, at that time, in the discourses and practices of many social organizations. SIMECA was heavily imbued at the beginning with these ideas of collective participation and alternatives politics which were often associated to practices of direct action. This latter, symbolized by the escrache, was to become one of the central aspect of the mobilization strategy of the organization, partly
due to the dispersion of workers in different agencies/workplaces in the city, and partly for being direct action the only mean available to workers to change the balance of power with employers in the unprotected informal economy. While in its activities always promoting and focusing on the immediate needs of its direct constituency, the union character of the organization at the beginning often blurred with its role as social organization. Indeed, up until 2003 they did not even feel the need to formalize their association as a union, the name of their own organization was initially that of an assembly of delivery workers (in direct connection to the growth of ‘neighborhood assembly’ in Buenos Aires during the year 2002). SIMECA participated in solidarity in many of the marches led by the movements of the unemployed; members of the union participated in the neighborhood assemblies and were active in left parties or other territorial organizations operating in the city suburbs poor areas, in which many of delivery workers lived. Thus, to sum all this up, we could argue that this specific political context of social unrest in which ‘everything seemed to be possible’ and the unregulated, not unionized sector in which workers were organizing, acted on the formation of SIMECA very heavily, shaping the character of the organization: independent, anti-bureaucratic/anti-institutional, horizontal in its decision making process and direct in its action.

While all these foundational features were to remain as part of the genetic code of the union until its last days, starting from 2003 the changing economic and political context imposed a differentiation in the strategies and targets of the organization, moving the axis of its action from the social to the more strictly union sphere. This imposed at the same time a reconfiguration of the relation with the State, the need to conform to its rules and institutions and, for the central role of the State in industrial relations in Argentina, to accept its ‘political’ arbitration of labour conflicts and disputes for union recognition. More in general, the newly formed organization had to inscribe workers’ defense and representation within the limits offered by accepted legality

\textit{At the beginning we used to say that we did not need state recognition, we could put 400 motorbikes in front of the Minister of Labour and put it on fire. We were not interested to be defined as a union or not, we were the motor bikers! In 2001 we were not interested, we had our people in the street, making barricades against the bourgeois legality, we went to the front, no problem, the matter was easy. After this we started to realize that we could not sign a collective agreement, we were gaining conflicts against the employers but we were nothing} (SIMECA former activist, interview with autor)

These changes and the material conditions in which workers were building organizational power acted on the internal decision making processes of SIMECA firstly by redefining the meaning of democracy and then, while keeping this as the central tenet of the organization’s life, by setting the ways and forms in which democratic decisions making processes were promoted and implemented. This in turn implied a substantial division of roles between the most active militants and the rest of workers.
The original meaning of democracy was associated to horizontalism. This more idealistic approach however was later criticised and abandoned for a more pragmatic one in which discussion and debate were organized in order to give equal time and opportunity for expressing concerns to any of the members participating in the assembly.

*The horizontal assembly usually ended up as a dictatorship of the minority, of two or three guys that did not work as much as the rest and had the time and physical strength to stay in the assembly until late just in order to get what they wanted. I was totally in disagreement that a matter had to be discussed for a thousand hours* (SIMECA former activist, interview with autor)

Notwithstanding the existence of instrument to make participation effective, the commitment of the organization to this principle and to enlarge the number of people taking an active role in decisions, there were different, though inter-communicating, levels of decision making within the union. One was represented by the directive commission, which comprised approximately 40 among the most active members, divided into different areas of work (conflict and negotiation, media, relations with institutions, cultural). Another was the so called periphery, a network of about 400 members less involved in the union internal dynamics but highly supportive and with personal linkages with activists in the directive commission and capillary diffused in the city. This group was always, though most often informally, involved when important decisions had to be taken and activated to guarantee a solid base of support for mobilization. This structure implied a certain level of delegation, however this was accepted as largely based on the recognition of the trajectory of specific individuals and of their honesty in managing the union activity. This trust was reinforced by the fact that all were active workers thus no real distance between base and structure really existed, leaders could be questioned anytime and ‘face to face’ in the street.

Delegation was however also a need imposed by the diffused workplace in which delivery workers were operating. Workers in small agencies could be more easily organised but this could have not necessarily improved their working conditions, as clearing workers (paying social security for instance) was not a good business for small, often unregistered, companies. Similarly, the different products delivered (food, medicaments, money, documents) implied a different kind of employer subjected to a lesser or greater extend to the fluctuations of market demands and competition and, as a consequence, more or less willing to grant concessions to workers (Mc Donald is not the same as a small local ice-cream shop or as an unregistered parcel delivery business). Thus, because of these reasons, it was impossible and somehow not useful to maintain a widespread process of collective decision making, since there were areas of decisions immediately related to the needs of specific groups of workers and other areas important to all.

Depending on these different claims and on the type of collective action more suitable for the specific situation (direct actions or massive mobilizations), the relation between the directive commission and the rest of workers and the function of the first within the overall union structure changed.
When called up by workers of a specific workplace to give a hand with the process of recognition, thus when acting representing the interests of a group of workers, the directive commission role was somehow that of a pressure and support group, helping out in the process of negotiation and conflict with the employer under the terms and conditions set by the workers directly involved. Thus, the commission was in this case almost occupying a secondary/intermediate role. By the contrary, when taking decisions on working conditions on behalf of the whole workers of the sector, decisions were taken in a plenary enlarged to all members but, the usually scarce participation of members in these activities for lack of time, the impossibility to participate in the assemblies or simply for delegation, effectively meant that decisions were taken and then implemented by the two spheres of militants mentioned above, the directive commission and its periphery. However, even in these cases, a more varied participation was searched as for instance in the composition of workers’ delegations when discussing issues at ministerial level or in the rotation of speakers during public events.

**SUBTE: The shifting meanings of union democracy**

The organizing process of SUBTE’s workers has been praised as a paradigm of union democracy. While this is certainly a salient feature of the experience, particularly, in comparison to the traditional top-down style of leadership and the restrictive practices of the decision-making processes of most Argentinean trade unions, different ideas and practices about the meaning of democracy have been competing within the workplace structure of representation in the more than a decade long struggles of SUBTE’s workers. These differences can be explained partly for the existence of groups with sometimes opposing visions about democracy and partly for the material and institutional obstacles that in the course of democratic organizing workers had to face.

As to the first aspect, in the main, it is possible to differentiate between three groups in the SUBTE: grass-root fundamentalists, activists belonging to Trotskysts parties and a group of radical independent activists. While the first two defends as a matter of principle the priority of mass meetings in the decision-making process, although for different reasons, the last independent group, which has achieved the leading role in the grassroots organising through the years, has a more flexible and quite pragmatic understanding of union democracy.

These different understandings entail different views about the role of workers’ delegates. For those who advocate the mass meetings as the cornerstone of the decision-making within the union, delegates should be just the voice of the assembly as they consider there is a high risk of bureaucratization in any decision taken by the delegates committee without consultation. By the contrary, the leading group of radical independent activists considers that workers’ delegates lack of a clear plan of action is a signal of weakness in front of their fellow workers in the assemblies, thus advocate for a relative autonomy of the delegates from rank and file workers. They state that delegates must take on
collective responsibility and, in some occasions, decide on behalf of workmates, eventually defending and bearing the cost of a decision taken autonomously from the base.

_I think that if people do not agree with what a delegate did, this one has to bear the costs. Somebody needs to bear the costs for the decisions taken. That's the difference with union bureaucracy; bureaucrats do not bear costs_ (member of directive commission, interview with author).

However, a certain level of autonomy goes usually together with later consultation, in which workers could reject, when possible, the decisions.

_In the last decade we have created a situation in which comrades have get used to discuss everything, or almost everything. Of course there are specific moments in which the direction, for its own role, need to take decisions. I do not see this as necessarily a bad thing, clearly just if these decisions are not going to damage the other comrades_ (workers' delegate, interview with autor).

This approach rests on the understanding that a pure form of democracy in which all decisions are taken by assemblies it is hardly possible to achieve within the dynamics of class struggle and the power relations in which they are forced to act. Indeed, while the sector of the economy in which SUBTE's workers operate is economically strategic, giving them a great advantage at the time of discussing salary and working conditions with the company, it also expose them to political pressures and to bitter confrontation with the national and, especially, the city governments. The dispute with UTA for the representation of workers in the sector and the negotiation with the Ministry of Labour to obtain full recognition with the _personeria gremial_, further influence the collective decision making process of the union. These multiple pressures and exposure to different power forces, each with its own different logic, demand the predisposition of a wide array of tools to sustain the struggles on the different fronts and the adoption of tactical decisions which are, at times, taken at the heat of political events without widespread and open participation, as with the recent decision to join the CTA. When asked, workers repeatedly referred to events in which wider consultation was impossible, it would have prevented action or, simply, it would have forestalled surprise, compromising the success of the action.

_There are situations in which the difficulty lays in the urgency with which things need to be done. In these moments there is no alternative. There are also things that you cannot say openly otherwise you are making your enemy's life easy. The most important thing is the 'why'. On the 'why' everybody needs to know. But not on the 'how'. The 'how' no, as this has to do with the struggle_ (member directive commission, interview with author)

The relation of forces existing in specific historical conjunctures is also important when considering the issue of democracy. Differently with the experience of SIMECA's workers, who had no other choice for the consolidation of their organization than to make this visible since the beginning, SUBTE's grassroots organizing started clandestinely, with
wildcat strikes. As typical of other wildcat strikes experiences, a quick evaluation of the chances to obtain support from other workmates led a small group of workers/activists to take decisions which had to have profound influences on the rest of the collective in the years to come. This type of organization, which they would later call union foquismo, by reference to Che Guevara’s famous guerrilla strategies, precluded, almost by definition, the adoption of open and formal democratic procedures but it required however to keep a close attachment to fellow workers and fluid channels of informal communication, a condition that remained essential later on to form consensus among workers. This distance between the democratic ideal and the reality of struggle and thus the need to combine forms of governance that guarantee collective decision making while constructing workers’ power in adverse conditions, it goes however beyond this foundational moment. There have been indeed many crucial events in the history of SUBTE’s workers in which activists, particularly when embarking and sustaining collective action, have found ways of changing decisions previously taken by workers’ plenary assemblies, allocating sovereignty to workers’ delegates meetings. In 2003, after the 6 hours working-day had been granted to all workers working underground but with the exclusion of those in ticket offices and other personnel working on the surface (Premetro), workers’ delegates, against the view expressed by assemblies held in different sectors, decided to take industrial action to secure the 6 hours working-day to all workers. Similarly, in 2005 SUBTE’s workers, while morally backing the fight of cleaning workers to be part of Metrovías, because this would have equalized their working and contractual conditions to those enjoyed by core workers, voted however in an open mass meeting against taking industrial action. Again, in December 2008, three out of four SUBTE’s mechanical workshops voted to remain within UTA and to present candidates in internal elections, whereas the workers’ delegates committee campaigned to leave the union and create an independent one.

Decisions taken by workers’ delegates and activists without previous consultation with the base have been essential to guarantee the success of mobilizations in many occasions. In July 2003, the strike against the act signed by UTA with Metrovías was forced by leading activist as there were in some sectors different and dubious views about the action. In April 2004, the 80-hour strike, one of the longest in the history of the underground, had to be maintained by the occupation of the workplace, taking over the end of the lines to secure the effectiveness of the action in the midst of increasing threats of repression by police, some defections and growing demoralisation. Again, in October 2005, a relative small group of workers blocked the rails and fought back the police to secure a wildcat strike.

The way in which work is organised in the SUBTE also adds complexity to the practical implementation of democratic decisions. The six lines that constitute the underground transport network operate in relative autonomy from each other and have differences in terms of technology/automation installed in the trains. Workers work, according to the sector, on three to four shifts, are distributed in many different stations along the lines and are divided by the type of activity performed, which may be very different as is the work of sale attendants in ticket offices compared with that of train drivers. Similarly
there are sectors/stations (usually the end of lines) whose control by workers is fundamental during important mobilizations, thus making the formation of consensus and support of workers from these sectors of primary importance for the whole collective.

Overall these material conditions impinge upon the collective decision making process, creating situations in which democracy is almost physically impossible.

As a utopia it would be desirable to have somebody in every workshops, in every shifts informing comrades about what is happening. Unfortunately this is impossible to do and not for a political but for a physical reason. There is no way of doing it (member directive commission, interview with autor).

As outlined so far, material, institutional and context based factors deeply influence the ways in which, in the SUBTE’s experience, democracy has been implemented in practice. This, on the one hand, going beyond forms of procedural democracy, showed the contemporaneous existence of formal and informal channel of communications and decisions making, and, on the other hand, highlighted the role of activism in defending not just democracy per se but democracy as part of a more general attempt of building and defending workers’ organisational power.

The decision to abandon UTA, opting for the creation of a new independent union representing SUBTE’s workers, has re-opened the debate among workers on a whole range of practical aspects connected with guaranteeing an adequate, though necessarily imperfect, development of internal democracy and, more in general, with expanding and sustaining participation over time.

As to the first aspect, in coincidence with the adoption of the statute for the new union, there are ongoing discussions. For instance, on the instruments that should be used to guarantee within the union directive commission a voice and an active presence for opposition groups; or on the relation existing between the recently elected union directive commission and workers’ delegates, on their respective role and on how to establish forms of fluid communication between these two levels and their responsiveness to lay workers demands. Connected with these are also the discussions about the overall participation of workers in the internal life of the newly formed organization. It is felt by many that the organization, after years of successful struggles, is now experiencing a kind of “crisis of growth”. Conditions are good, wages high, and many workers are new entrants that have not experienced past struggles. It is not easy to find new demands to mobilize workers. This translates in a relative decline of participation which increases dependency on experienced delegates and in turn in a lack of leadership renewal.

The question about participation has been partly substantiated by involving and forming new workers in the role of delegate and partly by enlarging the union’s sphere of action to policies aimed at engaging workers in their leisure time, as these are thought to be crucial to maintain solidarity and identification over periods of relative industrial peace and are seen as an important aspect of a wider ideological struggle against dominant discourses. It is also a way to oppose the initiatives of Metrovías to conquer the souls and minds of
workers through employee involvement policies. These activities range from publishing books that aim at recovering and diffusing among workers historical experiences of other independent democratic unions in Argentina; the distribution of an internal magazine; the organization of training courses on many educational issues, including labour relations; the setting up of a radio completely run by workers or people invited by them, usually other activists; the publication of CDs and DVDs to communicate ideas in formats that can easily engage most workers; cultural activities for workers families and children.

While the need to keep salaries at the level of inflation and SUBTE’s union lack of full formal recognition continue to be sources of potential conflict, as the recent nine days strike, the longest in the SUBTE’s history, has emblematically shown, extending participation beyond moment of conflict and formal election is a crucial issue in constructing workers’ power and in re-signifying through this the meaning of democracy.

As an experienced delegate commented,

*Democracy has many aspects. One aspect is the issue of participation, to elect candidates for the role of workers’ delegates. The other aspect of workers’ democracy is again that of participation but not that of voting every two years. Rather participation in the construction of the union. There is now the possibility of another form of democracy, that of material participation, if we want to give a form, a name to it.*

**Conclusions**

The cases presented, tough different in many ways, help to put light on the approach that should be used when assessing the limits and possibilities of democracy and thus how to understand democracy itself within the context of union organizing. In both cases, workers have been building their organizations by emphasizing the idea of participation and collective decision making and by putting these ideas in practice in formal and informal ways. However in many occasions decisions have been taken by a small minority, workers’ delegates have sometime forced decision or ignited conflict and these actions have resulted decisive in more than one conflict in mobilizing people. Findings like these clearly leave open deeply debated theoretical questions in unions’ studies, about the right balance between democratic decision making and leadership, particularly in situation of conflict. Should leaders be just executors of the majority wishes or be able to play in a more independent way? Would this autonomy necessary lead to bureaucracy? Should democracy be ‘sacrificed’ in searching and consolidating effective workers’ power?

These questions are fundamental in any analysis but would probably remain meaningless approaching democracy *per se*, thus without considering how historic, material, ideological and institutional mediations shaped in the different cases the meanings and possibility of democracy in practice. In this sense, the atomization and precariousness of workers and the difficulty of defending them efficiently without protection and in a sector at the limits of legality, imposed to SIMECA the use of non-institutional organizing
practices and direct action that required, at time, a decentralized form of collective decision making and, at time, a centralization of decision in the hand of activists. This in turn demanded less reliance on procedural, formal democracy and more dependency on informal channels of consensus making. Similarly, the distribution of SUBTE’s workers in different lines, shifts and jobs, the strategic relevance certain sectors have in making effective a mobilization, the initial clandestine conditions and the constant exposure to political pressures have given, since the beginning, importance to informal communications among leading delegates as first step in the decision making process.

The evolving context of struggle has also imposed mediations. In the case of SIMECA, an organization born mobilizing workers in the streets, the state of social mobilization of the years 2000/3 left its non institutional/independency birthmarks heavily in the organizing structure of the union, making it a formidable machine in term of mobilizing power but, though certainly an example of open organization, far too dependent on a group of core activists and, at the end of the day, almost unsuitable to represent workers within the more formalized, institutional context of the post-crisis years. By the contrary, in the SUBTE’s case, the same favorable context found workers already engaged in a struggle against multiple forces but within the limits sets by existing rules and institutions. This institutional insertion, due to the high visibility of the sector and for the existence of an already recognized representation, helped to legitimize a step by step process in which the construction of democratic organizing went together with the strengthening of workers’ power, evolving from the level of clandestine activity of a small group to the establishment of an independent, effective and highly representative union.

What are then the perspectives for union democracy? The paper started from the assumption that workplace democracy is a social construction whose limits and possibilities are basically those set by the balance of class forces existing at a certain point in time and space within the development of capitalism. This context, while necessarily influencing practices and ideas about democracy, imposes a realistic approach. Questions concerning the relation of democracy with conflict, its sustainability over time, its compatibility with leadership and with processes of institutionalisation and bureaucratization, for the fluidity of the relations underpinning these, will thus necessarily remain open to multiple determinations.

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The two consecutive presidential victories of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner in 2007 and 2011 and the political consensus gained in these years through the implementation of progressive politics in both the economic and the social sphere, have produced fractures and re-alignment of unions within the major trade unions federations (CGT and CTA) depending on their attitude toward the government.