

**Democracy as strategy, ideal and practice in
organising and structuring workers
collective power: empirical cases from
contemporary Argentina**

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What is the research about?

- An ethnographic study of the practices and ideas about democracy in two grassroots experiences of workers' organising, in the informal and in the formal sector
- Want to demonstrate how the relation between the construction of effective workers power and democracy has been developed:
- What democracy is possible considering the limits imposed by the system in the specific situations?
- Look at the subtleties and intricacies of everyday struggle to re-emphasize the idea of union democracy as socially constructed

The context

- Trade unions growth but without much innovations
- But favourable grassroots mobilisations
- The system of workers' representation in Argentina: internal commissions and unions vertical structure

The cases

SIMECA:

- How neo-liberalism created informal work
- An organization built spontaneously at the heat of 2001 social mobilisations
- The difficulty to organize in the informal sector, the fight for recognition and the dissolution of the organization

SUBTE

- The recovery of visibility in a privatized company
- Major gains
- The creation of the independent union

SIMECA: Building democracy and grassroots organising in the informal sector

- The built in democracy of grassroots organizing

the sharing of exploitative material conditions and the solidarity this creates are expressed through informal democratic decision making processes

“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 tightens 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’

- The external context of social mobilization

Influence the adoption of horizontality, collective participation, emphasis on assemblies, direct action, character of the organization independent and anti-bureaucratic/anti-institutional

SIMECA 2

- Changing economic context

Need to move from the movement to the institutional sphere, adoption of more effective systems of decision making. Changes of the meaning of democracy from idealistic to pragmatist

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

- Labour process features

Distribution of roles activists/rest of workers, different decision making processes depending on targets and aims of the mobilization

SUBTE: The shifting meanings of union democracy

- Different ideas and ideological positions about democracy

Avoid bureaucratization: priority to the assembly, delegates voices of workers

Pragmatists: relative autonomy of the directive commission and of the delegates

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

The need to face multiple pressure impose the adoption of quick, tactical decisions

- *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*

SUBTE 2

- Relation of forces in historical conjunctions

How to combine open forms of democracy with the need to keep initial organizing invisible?

Activism has taken decisions on behalf of workers in several occasions to guarantee the success of mobilizations

Labour process and practical implementation of democracy: physical impossibility

The creation of the new union, real material participation is crucial to strengthen democracy

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

- In a way more than final conclusions the cases leave open deeply debated theoretical questions in unions' studies
- 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?
- We cannot approach democracy *per se* without considering this as part of the overall construction of workers' organizing power
- We should see union democracy as 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
- In this sense the approach used in the study of union democracy should be changed