

Argentina, one year on

Anarcho

2003

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It has been a year since the people of Argentina took to the streets to protest yet more iniquitous government responses to the deepening economic crisis. Once hailed as a model for neo-liberalism, the popular uprising exposed the human results of over 20 long years of structural adjustment plans and “free-market reforms.” The economy is a mess, with poverty and unemployment at disgusting levels. In the past four years of recession, the poverty rate has ballooned from 31 to 53 percent of the population of 37 million, and unemployment has climbed from 14 to 21.4 percent, according to official figures.

The revolt reached massive levels. Seven million workers took part in a general strike. The president declared a state of emergency when, soon after, hungry people began looting shops and supermarkets so they could feed their families. However, Argentineans had had enough. In Buenos Aires alone, over a million people voiced their anger and disgust at the discredited political elite by defying the state of emergency and taking to the streets. Since then, protests have continued.

But what is significant about this revolt is that, as well as taking to the streets in protest, people have started to organise themselves to manage their affairs. Seeing the results of leaving it to politicians to act for them, more and more Argentineans have decided to take their fates into their own hands, to organise together to try make real changes to improve their situation. And, in so doing, the basic ideas of anarchism have been confirmed.

Anarchy in Action?

The first development in popular self-management came in the form of neighbourhood assemblies. After the December protests, the protesters brought the revolt back home with them. Neighbourhood assemblies quickly multiplied (for example, by February there were over 50 of them in Buenos Aires alone). Moreover, they started to federate together to co-ordinate joint activity. In Buenos Aires, an inter-neighbourhood assembly meets once a week and has an average of 3000 local co-ordinators from all the city’s neighbourhoods participating in it. The local assemblies, however, are still autonomous, rotating the work of organising and co-ordinating the inter-neighbourhood ones.

These assemblies are organised non-hierarchically and are open to almost everyone. People get a chance to discuss the problems they are facing and to organise effective ways of dealing with them. Over time, the assemblies moved beyond discussing and protesting to more direct forms of action, such as occupying houses, abandoned hospitals and banks, using them as meeting places, social centres, places for the homeless to stay, organising alternative schools and cheap health care. For example, one neighbourhood has transformed a supermarket into a cultural centre and meeting place, a popular supermarket where they sell, among other things, the pasta produced in a nearby factory occupied by the workers. The next stage is to open a theatre in the basement.

The creative potential of people crushed under hierarchy is being expressed in thousands of ways. Everywhere sees the same determination to build from the ruins of the crisis a new, better, society. They are creating new ways of thinking about politics and economics, one based on direct action and self-management which has nothing to do with parties or the state. The basic idea of anarchism, self-management, is gaining support. The idea that “the people must govern through its assemblies” is being discussed and practised.

Industrial Anarchy?

Significantly, popular anger is not just turned against the politicians, but also against their cronies in industry and banks (the capitalist class). Another direct challenge to the capitalist system is appearing — the occupation of factories by their workers.

Faced with the closure of their workplaces in the face of the deepening economic crisis, workers have started to occupy and run them themselves. Workers have seized control of scores of foundering factories across Argentina. In some cases, they are doing even better than their previous owners. It is still early days, with over 100 factories and other businesses nationwide being taken over. Most of the takeovers have been of factories, but they have also included a supermarket, a medical clinic, a Patagonian mine and a Buenos Aires shipyard. Most of the occupied factories, have introduced an egalitarian pay scale. Equality is also applied in terms of power, with decisions being made by direct vote in regular assemblies, with shop stewards and co-ordinators subject to carrying out the grassroots' mandate.

Moreover, most of the workplaces have been turned into co-operatives, rather than socialised (which is to be expected as the movement has just began). These new co-operatives have survived in the economic crisis for many reasons. The elimination of the owners' cut and the higher wages paid to managerial staff have helped, as has the replacement of a few minds with that of the whole workforce. Apart from saving thousands of jobs and softening the precipitous decline of the nation's once formidable industrial production, the factory takeovers are showing that the relationship between capital and labour need not exist. By restarting production in the occupied factories, the workers have shown that a class of owners and order givers are not required, that working people can manage their own productive activity. They have set an example to the working class that there is an alternative way out of economic crisis, one which working class people can create by their own self-activity and self-organisation.

While many of the occupations have been occurring within a legal framework, with some even renting the factory, the movement has the potential of being more widespread and becoming more revolutionary. The danger is that these new worker-owned workplaces become an end in themselves, with the revolution stopping at the factory doors. Either the co-operatives will co-operate between themselves and federate together into worker's councils or they will slowly but surely degenerate back towards capitalism. Moreover, they seem limited (just now!) to expropriating closed workplaces. The next step has to be the expropriation of all capital by workers' associations.

Needless to say, have begun to alarm conservatives, who (correctly) view them as a threat to private property rights. But in an economy that has so long placed profit above people, these occupations have popular support and are spreading.

Co-ordination is, correctly, viewed as essential. The workers in the occupied Zanón ceramics factory in Neuquén, have already convened two National meetings of occupied factories. 40 neighbourhood assemblies were also involved in this meeting. Thus links between workplace and community assemblies are being forged. For example, in March, about 200 people from neighbourhood assemblies and human rights groups converged on the worker-controlled Brukman textile factory, forcing the retreat of 70 riot police who were acting on a judge's order to reclaim the property. The workers of the occupied factories are also raising the need for a National Congress convened by the assemblies, the picketers and the occupied factories.

The occupied factories are part of a general tendency for the direct expropriation of capital by the people. As well as factories, occupations of houses, supermarkets and hospitals are also occurring. One anarchist has termed this process as the first time that Zapatismo has been applied in the cities.

Self-management as both means and ends

As one young Argentinean woman put it, *“I dream of this, that my children and the children of my comrades could discover this, could find a way of life here, leave the vices outside. Leave becoming depressive, turning to the alcohol and the vagrancy that the system gives us and that they could find this new form of making politics, without political parties.”*

She is a member of the Solano **piqueteros**. Solano is a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The **piqueteros** are groups of unemployed workers who are using their unemployment as a basis for organising and struggling for a better society. They predate the current revolt by about 6 years and have developed a new form of struggle — the road block. They go out en masse and block the main roads and refuse to move until the government gives in to their demands. In Solano, a thousand of them take to the streets — and this is just one neighbourhood in the city.

Just as their tactics are original, so are their ideas. They do not demand money. Nor do they demand to become mindless wage slaves, doing boring, meaningless jobs. They want to do work that they want to do, that they consider important, *“genuine work”* as they call it. Nor do they simply want to empower the state to act for them. Just as they take their own struggle into their own hands, they also take their lives. It took them a year of struggle to win the right to decide themselves what should be done any money and work they manage to extract from the state. They meet and decide what the priorities are for the neighbourhood — keeping it clean, repairing the schools, running local services and industry. They do not wait for the state or capital to solve their problems, because they know that that will not happen.

While the piqueteros are unemployed, they do not think of that as a bad thing. They do not want to go back to being exploited. They like to think of themselves not as unemployed workers but as autonomous workers. They do not want to restore capitalism but to create something new. In the words of another woman Solano piquetero: *“from this absolute poverty in which they have submerged us, from this taking away of our dignity that they tried to impose on all the workers, what we are doing is building from this poverty the bases perhaps — and perhaps it sounds very fancy — the bases of a new society. Of a society which is being born and which can grow with dignity from below. From poverty, but with dignity, free, independent.”*

Where now?

Where can the Argentinean revolt go now? There are two basic options.

The left will see new elections as the way forward. With a left government, they argue, different policies could be followed and open repression of the movement could be prevented. The net effect of this would be the handing over the movement to new politicians, of transferring the struggle from the streets and workplaces into capitalist institutions. The focus of struggle will be placed on a few leaders, not on the mass of the population.

The only other way is to recognise that the elections are not relevant, that the struggle is not to win the elections, but to strengthen and develop all the autonomous struggles and organisations that are taking place. To build, in other words, a real power in society, a popular power based on direct democracy, self-organisation and direct action.

This is, after all, the logical implication of "*Que se vayan todos!*," the great slogan of the Argentinean uprising — "*Out with them all!*" And this slogan is being extended, acquiring a deeper meaning. Political, social and economic power is being questioned, being fought and undetermined by popular power, self-organised and self-managed in both workplace and community.

Whether they know it or not, the Argentinean people, like thousands of other working class people across the world, are applying the principles of anarchism within and by their struggles. They are showing that another world is possible and, moreover, creating it in the here and now. This explains why what is happening in Argentina is important not just for Argentina. They are applying the same ideas raised by the Zapatistas when they rose up in Chiapas in 1994, saying "*Ya basta!* (Enough!). Like that revolt, the one in Argentina is providing inspiration for struggle against capitalism throughout the world.

No revolt lasts indefinitely. Either it will go the whole hog and replace the state and capital by community and workplace assemblies and their federation (i.e. generalised self-management) or the powers that be will regain control and the Argentinean people will be made to pay for the fear they are inspiring in the ruling class. That is why the "Days of Disobedience" called for the anniversary of the revolt is so important. We need to show that while Argentinean may be out the news, but we are still watching and supporting them.

Ultimately, of course, the best support we can give them is to promote class revolt here.

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