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The Struggle of Recyclable Waste Pickers in
Uruguay and Brazil

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Across South America there is a growing movement – assuming different forms and characteristics, but with similar origins, demands and objectives – that, despite it being located at a strategically important intersection between two critical social issues – class struggle and ecology – seems to me to have received little attention in South African academic and activist circles. And this is true despite the fact that the social and economic conditions that gave rise to this movement prevail in South Africa, as they did – and continue to – in many South American countries. Perhaps this is due to the fact that this movement concerns people largely marginalised by industrial society and so-called ‘brown’ ecological issues – such as the pollution and contamination of rivers and dams surrounding poor communities, most acutely effecting the workers and poor – as opposed to the much more sanitary ‘green’ ecolog-

ical issues – such as conservation and animal welfare – often associated, in South Africa at least, with liberal white activists from the middle and upper classes¹.

This is the movement of the *catadores*, as they are known in Brazil, and *clasificadores* in Uruguay; the recyclable waste pickers and sorters who, similarly to South Africa, constitute a growing informal sector in the industrial production cycle. This includes all people – not formally employed by public or private waste management services – who collect, transport, classify and sell recyclable waste for a living – or ‘work with scrap’ – thus “reducing demand for natural resources and reducing greenhouse gas emissions”². A category of work which, according to the World Bank, is performed by 15 million people globally – or one percent of the world population³ – and has become increasingly common in South Africa in recent years.

Brought about by an increasing loss of employment opportunities and growing precarity of work caused by the deindustrialisation associated with the implementation of a neoliberal economic model, and their subsequent displacement from the productive cycle, an ever-growing number of the unemployed, often retrenched workers, are turning to the category of recyclable waste pickers and sorters to earn a living and sustain themselves and their families. In so doing they play an important, if neglected role – often very consciously – in the struggle to combat the ecologically and socially disastrous effects of the capitalist mode of production and distribution, and put a halt to climate change.

In their refusal to be completely marginalised from the global economy, and the subsequent struggle to reclaim their

solidarity and class independence; as well as their goal of the “construction of a ‘realisable utopia’, that is, ‘a new way of being and living in the world in collectivity’, free from all oppression and exploitation of capitalist society.”

What is also important to remember is that the conquests *catadores* and *clasificadores* have won, such as the formal recognition of Ucrus as a workers union, did not come through voting for independent candidates nor for a green or left government, but through struggle. Similarly, the important contribution *catadores* make to fighting climate change and poverty and reducing ecological degradation, and the examples they provide as to possible alternative models of waste management are not the result of policies implemented by eco-socialists in local government. They are the result of the intense hard work – and blood, sweat and tears – of thousands of people physically transporting and sorting through millions of tons of recyclable waste and reintegrating it into the production cycle, thus countering over-exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation, while struggling to claim their rightful place in the management of this process. The conquests that the *clasificadores* and *catadores* have won, however limited, are the result of nothing other than an accumulation of collective struggles by the *clasificadores* and *catadores* themselves – with the support of their allies who do not perform this work themselves, but recognise the importance of this struggle. Similarly, in South Africa, any conquests for recyclable waste pickers – and the struggle against climate change and the destruction of working class and poor communities, through the capitalist mode of production and distribution – can come from nothing but struggle and organisation – independent and from below.

¹ For more on the distinction between ‘brown’ and ‘green’ ecological issues see: ‘Class Struggle and the Environmental Crisis’, ZACF, zabnew.wordpress.com

² frontlineagainstclimatechange.inclusivocities.org

³ www.mnrc.org.br 4. *Declaração de Princípios e Objectivos do MNCR*, in *Cartilha de Formação*, MNCR

could form the basis for a federation of workers' committees across sectors. Imagine the implications of self-managed waste picking and recycling cooperatives supplying recyclable materials directly to worker-run industry.

In conclusion we can say that recyclable waste pickers and sorters represent a socially important – yet extremely exploited, oppressed and marginalised – sector of the working class, that “as well as its ecological contribution, contributes to local economies, both individually and socially, generating large amounts of employment”. In addition to combatting poverty, unemployment and climate change etc., by physically contributing to recycling waste – instead of it being buried or incinerated as discussed above – waste picking also carries other social benefits, such as combatting the spread of respiratory and skin diseases, for example, common among children in poor communities – caused by their exposure to toxic chemicals that contaminate the ground, air and water due to inadequate waste management systems. By doing this they are, in effect, pointing towards the opportunity for developing a working class counter-power; by the popular classes relying on themselves to carry out preventative health measures, as one aspect, instead of waiting for the state or local government to intervene.

Working class militants, socialist revolutionaries and climate justice activists should be working with waste pickers and sorters in South Africa – bring together and drawing from the experiences of any initiatives to organise waste pickers already underway – with the objective of building a regional movement of waste pickers and their allies to articulate and mobilise around a set of demands to defend their social and economic rights, improve their working conditions and demand respect and recognition for the important work they do. In so doing, it would be instructive to remember the guiding principles of our Brazilian comrades; mutual aid, self-management, direct democracy, direct action, class

place in the productive cycle, unemployed workers in the category of recyclable waste pickers and sorters have and continue to wage important and courageous struggles – from which we can learn in South Africa – in order to defend their rights and interests; thus reclaiming their dignity as productive workers actively contributing both to their communities and the broader struggle for positive social change and ecological sustainability. In Brazil this struggle has led to the formation of the *Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis* (MNCR – National Movement of Recyclable Material Collectors) and, in Uruguay, the *Unión de Clasificadores de Residuos Urbanos Sólidos* (Solid Urban-Waste Classifiers Union), or Ucrus. Founded in Brazil's capital city, Brasília, in June 2001, the MNCR is a popular social movement of national dimension united by a set of common demands, such as fair payment for their services, control over the production chain of recyclable materials, access to housing, health care and education for their families and other (unorganised) catadores; and common principles, such as mutual aid, self-management, direct democracy, direct action, class solidarity and class independence (independence of working class organisations and struggles from political parties and electoral politics) [4].

Ucrus was founded in April 2002 in Montevideo, Uruguay. It was the product of a series of struggles and demonstrations waged by *clasificadores* struggling to be recognised as organised workers (with access to the same rights and benefits as formally employed workers), and for the role they play in the productive cycle and their contribution to the ecological struggle. Ucrus – unlike MNCR – is a trade union, affiliated to the National Confederation of Labour (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* – CNT). Much like the MNCR, Ucrus struggles to improve the working conditions, hygiene and living standards of its members; for the recognition, on the part of society, of *clasificadores* in their role as primary ecological agents; to move

from the informal to the formal category of labour, and thus to be protected by the same social laws; and for access to housing, health care (including clinics for horses used to draw the wagons on which recyclable waste is often transported) and education, amongst others.

Both organisations are made up of a number of grassroots associations, workers' cooperatives and groups that are comprised and driven by recyclable waste pickers and sorters – united to defend their collective interests. United by material necessity as they may be, however, many of these workers are very aware of the devastating effects of industrial capitalism on the environment. Indeed, it is very often marginalised poor communities, like those from which *catadores* often come, that are most affected by the pollution and environmental degradation caused by surrounding industry; and this has led to a recognition of the important role that they as *catadores* play in struggling to develop sustainable industrial and economic practices, and combat environmental degradation and climate change.

A look at some of the documents produced by these two movements gives us a clear understanding of the role *clasificadores* and *catadores* see themselves as playing both as agents of social transformation and as 'primary ecological agents' in the production cycle, and are worth quoting at some length:

“Strugglers of the people as we are, and part of the population that is increasingly poorer, more marginalised and excluded, we have nothing to lose and could want nothing less than to radically modify the structure of society [...] our elders [...] with their living testament of suffering, injustice and much hard work, contributed in the streets and in the dumps of Brazil to the true preservation of the environment. Very differently to the inflamed discourses of some practice-less

to increasing poverty and unemployment etc. And, as such – and as previously highlighted – there is awareness of the fact that the very structure of society needs to change in order to defend their livelihood, prevent further marginalisation of the poor, combat ecological destruction and climate change etc. Indeed, this ecological class consciousness – of some of those most marginalised by capitalist society – and the role of social protagonist some of these comrades see for themselves is evident in the names of some of the *clasificadores*' cooperatives, such as *Cooperativa 'La Resistencia'* (the Resistance Cooperative), and *Cooperativa 'La Lucha'* (the Struggle Cooperative).

Whether or not they see their role as protagonists of social transformation, as do *La Lucha* and *La Resistencia*, or simply one of material necessity, the example of these cooperatives is important in the sense that they enable workers to improve their working conditions and earning capacity, and to manage their work in a more democratic way. In this sense they could even be considered small-scale training grounds in workers self-management. It is important to stress, however, that due to the very nature and structure of capitalist society they are continually under threat of losing the gains, independence and, indeed, the very existence for which they fought; or of being 'corrupted' by the need to be competitive on the capitalist market. As such it is necessary for these cooperatives to unite, in struggle, in order to defend and advance their collective interests; recognising also that, ultimately, this struggle necessitates the complete restructuring and reorganisation of society, its relations of production, distribution, power etc.

Through the struggle for their rightful place in the production cycle, under the collective self-management of workers cooperatives, the case of the Ucrus *clasificadores* already points towards an alternative way in which the relations of power and production – in this case in the waste management and recycling sector – could, potentially, be organised: through the federation of directly democratic, worker run associations which

atives⁹ – these cooperatives, which make up the base of Ucrus, perhaps warrant further attention.

Across South America, rather than work alone, many of the people working in the category of recyclable waste pickers and sorters have formed or joined workers' associations and cooperatives in order to enable them to collect more recyclable waste than they would otherwise be able to, and sell it in larger quantities directly to the industrial mouth, thus receiving a better price per kilogram. Amongst the many cooperatives and workers groups that make up Ucrus is the biggest workers cooperative in Uruguay; *Cooperativa 'Felipe Cardozo'* from La Cruz.

Through struggle, Ucrus workers cooperatives have gained access to municipal waste dumps and recycling depots where – sometimes under the collective self-management of the different cooperatives, in conjunction with municipal workers – workers are able to earn a living sorting and recycling waste in far safer and more hygienic conditions, with better opportunities to sell it directly to industry without having to go through middlemen.

However, these cooperatives should not be seen as an end in themselves, as islands of worker self-management in a capitalist economy. Instead, united in struggle by collective interests as they are, they should be understood as but one tool to be used towards a desired end. While being organised in one of these workers cooperatives brings direct immediate material benefits to the *clasificadores*, many workers in this sector are also aware of the fact that this is not enough: that there is an ongoing struggle against attacks from the state, police harassment, attempts to privatise the sector, challenges arising from a surge in the number of people doing this work due

⁹ See *Worker Co-operatives, Markets and the South African State: an Analysis from an Anarchist Perspective* by Oliver Nathan in *Zabalaza: A Journal of Southern African Revolutionary Anarchism*, issue 12, page 39.

ecologists, but with life, legs, arms and hands they recovered thousands of tons of recyclable raw materials and destined them for recycling, keeping thousands of cubic meters of nature clean. This is land that was left to be polluted, land that our indian ancestors, in the past, free, lived from by 'gathering' that which this same nature we are preserving offered in abundance for all. Today, consciously or instinctively we continue reproducing that which is oldest in our culture; picking. Indians, blacks, poor immigrants and a mixture of all races, cultures and experiences of struggle; we make the MNCR the meeting space of all, for the construction of our utopia [...] We have as our objective the construction of a 'realisable utopia', that is, 'a new way of being and living in the world in collectivity', free from all oppression and exploitation of capitalist society."⁴

This reference to indigenous 'gatherer' lifestyles should not be confused with a desire to return to a romanticised notion of a pre-industrial past, and it is safe to say that social development and access to things like housing, sanitation and so on – for which the MNCR is struggling now – would be realised in their utopia. Indeed, one of the MNCR's objectives is to "develop solidarity practices, incentivising the exchange of experiences relating to forms of production (...), *technology*, etc. [...]" (my emphasis).

On their role as primary ecological agents and the importance of waste classification and recycling Ucrus says,

"Our work of waste classification is of singular importance since this work of recovering raw material from the garbage, and the recycling process

⁴ *Cartilha de Formação*, MNCR

represent something important and necessary, not only because it generates jobs, but because it acts in defense of the environment as this process helps to avoid over-exploitation of natural resources.

[...]

Garbage pollutes the environment and harms human health. So when garbage is buried it contaminates the groundwater that goes directly into the rivers and oceans, and when burned in incinerators it pollutes the air. Thus our task reduces the amount of garbage and prevents materials that could be recycled from being buried or incinerated. Thus avoiding disease and environmental pollution.

[...]

We are *Clasificadores*, who must be recognised as the main link in this chain of the sorting, recycling and reuse of recyclable materials. That is why we demand a policy of comprehensive waste management.”⁵

It is precisely this demand – for recognition of the important role they play and to be fully integrated into the production chain and waste management process, coupled with the need to defend their collective material interests – that led and *catadores* to begin to organise themselves, as workers, and to mobilise in struggle.

One such mobilisation was in Montevideo, on February 13, 2008 where, in response to ongoing police harassment of *clasificadores* and the illegal confiscation of their carts and horses in order to deprive them of their tools to work, and in

⁵ *La Necesidad de la Clasificación de Residuos y el Reciclaje*, in *Compendio 2010*, Ucrus

response to attempts by the government to completely privatise municipal waste management services, over 2 000 people went out in protest in the biggest demonstration of *clasificadores* in Uruguayan history. It was becoming increasingly clear to the *clasificadores* that, in order to win a permanent and integral place in the chain of production and in the waste management process, they needed to be organised as a sector, and to formalise their work and the way it was managed.

To this end, Ucrus undertook to consolidate the union by means of strengthening the groupings that make up its base;

“It is clear that, starting with the demonstration of 13 February, a new stage has been opening for Ucrus in the struggle we have been developing. A stage in which, while discussing proposals for vehicle regulation, the criteria for movement in the streets, and alternatives to requisition (this time at the hands of the Ministry of the Interior), we have undertaken the organisation of our base (grassroots), starting with the strengthening of *cantons* and cooperatives where they are, and to create them where none exist. Present in this struggle is Ucrus, which today consists of several cooperative centers [...].”⁶

In the context of the *Mineline*⁷ struggle and the ten year anniversary of the 2001 uprising in Argentina⁸ – which contributed towards popularising the concept of workers cooper-

⁶ *Se Logra Frenar la Requisa y Abrir Negociación*, in *Compendio 2010*, Ucrus

⁷ zabnew.wordpress.com

⁸ See *Without Bosses: the Process of Recovering Companies by their Workers in Argentina, 2001–2009* by Red Libertaria de Buenos Aires, in *Zabalaza: A Journal of Southern African Revolutionary Anarchism*, issue 12, page 19.