

**The ultimate power** of global capital is its threat to leave, to move somewhere else, saying: "If you don't accept lower wages, if you force environmental legislation on us, we will go somewhere else, you will be left without jobs or money". As the economy collapsed in Argentina, capital acted on that threat, and fled. Businesses closed down, unemployment soared from 6.5 per cent in 1990 to over 40 per cent in 2002 and half the country's population, once comfortably well off in Latin America's largest middle class, fell below the poverty line. Many Argentinean workers, in the face of such statistics and the threat of capital flight, have simply replied, "Fine, leave us alone and we will run the factories ourselves, just don't take the machinery!"

Over 150 businesses, bankrupt and abandoned by their owners, have been taken over by their workers and turned into co-operatives or collectives. At tractor plants, supermarkets, ceramics factories, textile manufacturers, bakeries, and pizza parlours, decisions about company policy are now voted on in open assemblies, and profits are split equally among the workers. Owners' attempts to evict the workers are often unsuccessful because members of local neighbourhood assemblies show up en masse to support the workers and prevent the evictions.

The idea is contagious and is spreading to schools, soda plants, public transport companies, and even a hotel. A 'solidarity economy' is developing – for example, an occupied health clinic set up to treat workers from the occupied factories is having its sheets sewn by garment workers from an occupied textile plant. A supermarket turned into a workers' cooperative sells pasta from an occupied pasta factory; occupied bakeries are building ovens with tiles from an occupied ceramic plant. On their own, these occupations are not necessarily a threat to capital, however, as they link up, they begin to create the possibility of an autonomous network working on an unprecedented national scale.

## We're Nothing; We Want To Be Everything

by Pamela Colombo and Tomás Bril Mascarenhas

Argentina in the 1990s was a land which worshiped individualism, where the success of neoliberal 'culture' was esteemed so highly it made you want to retch. In this ocean of egos, this frenetic society with its alienated people, there began to arise, catalyzed by the events of 19 and 20 December, a counter-culture of solidarity – not charity, but solidarity. Now everyone smells the stench of a rotting Argentina, but we know how to let some fresh air in.

"Our bosses didn't take into account the way we might react if we were fired. Our response was to turn the tables. Take what was theirs and become the owners!"

Eight workers have been holding out in the Chilavert printing press, which for more than a month has been occupied to prevent its assets from being auctioned off. Outside, the number of police is much larger. Eight armoured cars stand by as assembly members, workers from other occupied factories, and neighbours gather at the entrance of the printing press. They've come to resist. They block the entry with trucks and put up barricades.

Meanwhile, inside the factory walls, a new book is being printed, born out of the ongoing struggle, entitled *What are the Neighbourhood Assemblies?* The printers work with the looming threat of the police breaking in, evicting them, and closing down the factory. You know the police are going to come

and beat you. The judge issued a ruling that forbade starting production, but orders in a corrupt country are not binding; and the workers aren't going to stop. The presses were set in motion; there was a book to be finished in time for delivery the next morning, even if it had to be done in clandestinity.

The atmosphere is tense, the factory doors could be broken down at any minute, they could be evicted and the book confiscated. A few bricks are removed from the factory wall. A hole is opened up. Through it pass the books as they're finished. And a neighbour piles them up in his patio. They've defied the prohibition.

The workers in the Chilavert printing press have demolished more than just a wall. When you begin to make holes in the walls that mark the limits of the system, you have to rethink everything. Outside there's no longer a fatherly guide, beyond the hole there's freedom but there's also a void – a void which fills with actions, enabling creativity. Today the hole at Chilavert has been covered with bricks again. But inside a new reality is being created. *"The reaction was and is spontaneous. Anger unites and moves us."* Strangers, neighbours in the *barrio*, people who only learned

about the eight workers because of their struggle defended them and prevented the press from being shut down. Without the support of those new radical participants, the struggle would have been so unevenly matched that it would have quickly ended.

*"We share what we earn. We take over, we hold out, and now we produce. And to think the boss said to me: "Do you lazy slobs really think you can run a company?"*

Today voices have broken the silence, echoing through the empty factory, and they are joined by over ten thousand mouths shouting, "An injury to one is an injury to all." Liberated voices, with the right to speak. They've decided to defend their space, they have succeeded in ending their suffering, they have decided to begin living.

*"I was crying inside, but outside I didn't cry. I never thought I'd want to enter this factory again."*

Centralized power hates horizontal organizing; it knows it's contagious. Horizontality wins the struggle against the system, and once it spreads, can only be stopped by force, if at all. One Sunday in November, at six-thirty in the morning (Buenos Aires sleeps) a group of policemen break

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blocking runways with burning tyres. Days later, as protests continue to spread and tanks roll in Lima, the President cancels the sale, promising that the companies will remain in state hands after all.

**>> June 20 >>** Coinciding with the EU summit, undocumented North African immigrants occupy several buildings at the Pablo Olavide University in Seville, Spain, demanding regularization papers and job security. The 400

immigrants represent 5,000-6,000 strawberry pickers who have worked for years in the region's fields, have made significant organizing efforts, and have garnered local support for their struggle. This year anti-Arab discrimination has combined with corporate profit-seeking and led to the contract going to Polish workers, who have virtually no knowledge of local conditions, nor likelihood to attract local support. The North Africans are allowed

only to work during breaks, and not provided with food, housing, or health care. Half of the occupying workers are given papers, the other half is evicted after two months, and 128 immigrants are locked in a detention in Ceuta, Spain, on the North African coast.

**>> June 25 >>** The head of the IMF's delegation to Argentina is cornered outside his Buenos Aires hotel room by television reporters. They hand him a set of large,



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Marina Sitrin



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Self-management and direct democracy in Argentina's occupied factories

into one of the bastions of the democracy built with our own hands, democracy that abhors representation. The operation attempts to destroy the eleven month occupation of the Brukman clothes factory, run by its fifty workers.

*“The management thought that if they gave each of us two suits we'd accept being sacked.”*

Sewing machines and seamstresses are attacked; a little girl is arrested. The web pages of Indymedia Argentina fills with messages calling for support and resistance, “All assemblies, go at once to Brukman.”

The police follow their orders and try to break up Argentina's icons of collectivity. They destroy Brukman, smash everything. Politics should go on appearing to be out of reach to ordinary people (the great achievement of neoliberalism). Politics is made by a few and it's done in a palace, not in a factory, or a square, or a blockade. That's what they say as yet another truncheon strikes, and they arrest six workers on that unprepared Sunday morning. Politics should be, for the ordinary person, a dirty word, something distant, done by others; something reduced to the ballot box alone.

The police can act each time with less impunity, as they're surrounded by people who are joining forces. The leisurely weekend, sipping *mate* and watching Sunday morning television can wait. People gather under the shadow of the traditional left parties flags, new politics and old politics merge on the crowded Jujuy Street. Together, from the street and inside the factory, Brukman is taken by the workers once again. Following hours of panic and tension, check to the factory owner, though he has yet to be checkmated.

*“Now, we all know how it all works.”*

“Struggle, Work and Culture” can be read on a piece of pottery surrounded by many other works of art in the culture centre, in the attic of the labyrinthine IMPA building. It's no ordinary factory. Inside, there's the smell of melting plastic and the sound of machines repeating their blows again and again; it's a confusing experience, as if two eras have been fused together in the heart of Buenos Aires. One carries the memory of the old industry from the days of import substitution; the other is unlike anything ever experienced. The unknown factor is the mixture of

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plastic Halloween vampire teeth. “We found these lodged in President Duhalde's neck,” they tell him, “and wanted to return them to you.”

**>> June 26-27 >>** The G8 retreat to the remote mountainous resort of Kananaskis, Alberta, Canada, protected by \$300-400 million worth of security measures. Meanwhile, in the nearby city of Calgary, activists challenge the police to a soccer match. The police

forfeit, but refuse to fulfill conditions of forfeiture which includes handing over their expensive bicycles and arresting the eight heads of state at their meeting.

**>> June 28 >>** The largest strike by city workers in Canada begins, with a walkout by 23,500 municipal workers, paralyzing Toronto. After nine days, piles of rotting rubbish line the streets and the strike is joined by Toronto's indoor municipal workers. Fearful of losing jobs

if the city privatizes public services, the workers are striking over job security, not money. After 16 days, the strikers are forced to return to their jobs, due to newly passed national back-to-work legislation. The city's Mayor predictably asks, “Where are we going to get the money to meet their demands?” Maybe he's unaware of the expenses of the G8 summit in Kananaskis....

**>> July 8-18 >>** Women in Ugborodo, Escravos, Nigeria

three words, never found together, yet now so close together: struggle, work, and culture.

*Struggle.* Over a hundred workers try to avoid joining the ranks of the newly unemployed, and regressing to the years of top-down Mafia authority. *Work.* They recycle aluminium, something almost revolutionary in a country where aluminium, like so much else, is a monopoly. *Culture.* Surrounded by the sound of machines in the workshop, is created by artists making new images that transform the workplace. The untidy workshop inspires creativity, almost begs for it. Ceramics, paintings, drawings and nearby, a photo lab, and a portrait that takes you by surprise, inviting you to vote for Perón in 1952. You can inhale the sense of pride that emanates from the workers and artists here, different, but not really. Both fighting, both working.

Before, the factory had places which were out of bounds, restricted, these no-go zones led to rivalry, servility, blackmail – no-go zones, like the executive offices reclaimed by the workers who divide their time between producing doorknobs and making decisions concerning over a hundred of their *compañeros* who work in the factory.

In IMPA, production continues being alienating, the assembly lines haven't disappeared. Yet the workers have disappeared fear, idleness, and individualism; this gives the assembly line new meaning, as they know that beneath this job lies their latent struggle to work. This is clearly not part of some superficial struggle; they're not fighting out of selfless devotion to a political party. The movement is born of something much deeper, it sets out to defend what

**Those who are still alive should never  
say never.**

**The inevitable is not inevitable,  
The way things are won't last.  
When those who govern have spoken,  
The governed will speak out.**

**Who dares to say never?**

**On whom does continued  
oppression depend?  
On us.**

**On whom does breaking it depend?  
Once more, on us.**

**If you are knocked down, get up,  
If you are lost, fight.**

**How can those who understand their own  
situation ever be stopped?**

**The defeated of today**

**Will be the defeaters of tomorrow  
And 'never' will be 'now'.**

**– poetry found on the walls of Brukman factory**

belongs to us: work and its product. A factory is occupied because of the explicit need to survive. The only way to maintain the struggle was by getting back to production. If not, hunger would go on killing us.

The workers intend for this movement to grow; they can't conceive of the changes they've wrought disappearing. That would require keeping quiet about what they already know – that they can do it themselves and they are many. Now, we're dangerous workers.

The struggle never slackens; if it did everything would collapse quite easily. That's why they put their bodies on the line. The end is always uncertain, and the fear is tangible. They know that the old structures are corroded. In an Argentina where one-fourth of the population is unemployed, struggling to work is revolutionary; it's asking the powers-that-be for something everyone knows they can't give. The workers won't wait for a response. The struggle continues, day after day, tearing down hierarchies, evading repression.

*“Look after yourself, Daddy, my children in Bolivia beg me. And I, in my letters, tell them I'm struggling for my compañeros.”*

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take control of the Chevron/Texaco oil terminal and threaten to remove their clothes – a traditional shaming gesture aimed at humiliating the company. The 600 women from villages around the terminal block access to the helipad, airstrip, and docks. They are demanding that the transnational invest some of its riches in development of water supply, schools, electricity hookups, and clinics, as well as reparation of mass erosion damage from dredging.

Seven hundred company employees – Nigerians, Americans, Britons, and Canadians – are trapped in the terminal while negotiations are held between a representative of the village chief and an oil executive. Meanwhile, in the air-field, two dozen women dance in the rain alongside four helicopters and a plane, singing “This is our land!” After 11 days, the company concedes to their demands, and the occupation ends.

**Update:** In April 2003 the Bruckman workers were evicted from their factory. Thousands came to the factory to support the workers returning to their jobs and reclaiming their work place. An attempt to take back the factory was violently repressed. Despite this setback, the occupied factory movement continues to grow across Argentina.

**Pamela Colombo studies sociology, plays the sax and writes. Tomás Bril Mascarenhas studies political science and, from time to time, writes and breathes. Both live in Buenos Aires.**

English translation by Julian Cooper

All quotes are statements by workers interviewed

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**Resources:**

» **Reports direct from the streets:** [www.argentina.indymedia.org](http://www.argentina.indymedia.org)  
» *Que Se Vayan Todos: an eyewitness report of the rebellion:* [www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/aggp/free/imf/argentina/txt/2002/0918que\\_se\\_vayan.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/aggp/free/imf/argentina/txt/2002/0918que_se_vayan.htm)

>> **July 11-16** >> Peasant farmers of San Salvador Atenco, Mexico demonstrate against government plans to build a new international airport on top of their farmland on the outskirts of Mexico City. Rejecting an insulting offer to buy the farmland for about .60¢ per square yard, the community blockades highways and use machetes and Molotovs to fend off more than 10,000 riot police, who kill one protester and injure countless others. The