

**One of the most** powerful catalysts for Argentina's uprising of 19–20 December 2001 was the piquetero movement – a radical mobilization of unemployed workers which erupted across the country in the mid 1990s and grew to become the world's largest movement of the unemployed. The piqueteros' tactic of blockading major highways – sometimes for days – has proved extraordinarily successful. Whole families take part in the roadblocks, setting up collective kitchens and tents in the middle of the street barricaded with burning tyres. Many of the participants are young, and over 60 per cent are women. Over the years this loosely federated autonomous movement based in local neighbourhoods has forced concessions from local and state governments, in the form of welfare payments, food packages, and part-time job allocations.

*With a practice founded on direct democracy and the desire to create social change in the present, the piqueteros use their welfare payments to develop alternative structures in their neighbourhoods, building community kitchens, bakeries, popular education workshops, libraries, vegetable gardens, and more – all part of what they call “the solidarity economy”. Beyond building solutions to material problems, the piquetero movement also works towards the creation of a new kind of dignity, as they believe that people who are actors in their own lives are key to building power in the neighbourhoods.*

*There are hundreds of different piquetero groups and networks across the country, some with affiliations to unions and left wing parties, and others which follow more independent tendencies. The following interviews were with members of the MTD (movement of unemployed workers) based in three different neighbourhoods in the southern part of greater Buenos Aires: Solano, Almiralte Brown, and Lanus. The MTDs are part of the Anibal Veron network, which is explicitly anticapitalist and autonomous, and is developing new forms of struggle with links to movements such as the MST and the Zapatistas.*

## The Power of the *Piqueteros*

**an interview with members of Argentina's movement of unemployed workers, by Marina Sitrin with Notes from Nowhere**

### **MTD Lanus**

**Marina Sitrin:** Can you explain the *piquetero* movement?

**Pablo:** Unemployment skyrocketed following the devastating neoliberal reforms in Argentina in the mid 1990s. Across the country the newly privatized factories cut jobs and civil servants were fired. In the interior of the country, some towns, especially those that depended on the state oil company (now privatized), were gutted, the population was completely marginalized and excluded by mass unemployment and that's when the first *piquetes*, or roadblocks occurred.

So, these were the first roadblocks, the first *piquetes*, in the interior towns that were left practically abandoned by the withdrawal of the state-run companies. The *piquete* was an old tactic for the workers to protest at the gates of the factories, to bring attention to a strike or consolidate a struggle. Now these tactics were brought to the highways where that oil was transported or the merchandise from those companies was transported. So the unemployed workers, the abandoned townspeople, began to find a way on the highways to bring attention to their cause and protest against the government.

There was strong state repression, but despite this the

struggle continued and in 1997 the government was forced to agree to a small welfare subsidy to unemployed workers. So in the places where there were large numbers of unemployed people, those that struggled continued to be recipients of this state subsidy. And the *piquetero* movement grew by using that method of roadblocks. We analyzed this and we said well, even if capitalism has changed and you need less people in the factories, you still need the goods to be transported. Since we were left without work in the factories, we sought a way to block the transportation of those goods. That's how the class struggle began and that's how the different *piquetero* movements began.

Now the *piquetero* groups are growing tremendously and becoming much more established, and this has been our vision. At first the struggles were much more spontaneous and self-organized. For example, we would decide that the negotiations with the government [for the subsidy] hadn't advanced in the meetings or petitions. So in the neighbourhoods we would take 15 days to quietly plan an action, without anyone knowing what highway we would block or when. And then we would go organized, we would

**“When women no longer have the resources to feed their children, the government is coming down, no matter what type of government it is.” – Rosa, MTD**

get there before the police and then we would have to stand firm despite the police pressure. This meant burning tyres, making some sort of barricade, and keeping our families safe in the middle of the *piquete* and protected by the *compañeros* that would stand in the front in case of police repression. That's where the image of young people with bandanas masking their faces and holding sticks as tools of self-defence, came from. This became a symbol of the *piquetero* struggle against the police.

**MTD Solano**

**MS:** The *piqueteros* talk about another way of thinking about work, can you tell us about that?

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Colombia stage a national strike against the new President's adherence to IMF economic policies, and against the violent intimidation campaign against trade unions.

**>> September 10 >>** Months after forcing the government to abandon airport construction plans, the radical farmers of San Salvador Atenco, Mexico declare the town to be autonomous. It is one of the first autonomous municipalities outside of the southern state of Chiapas,

where Zapatistas run some towns. “We are aware that the Government will not recognize this action by the people, but they have no choice but to respect our decision,” a new, 14-member People's Council said in a statement read at their swearing-in ceremony. Council members said Tuesday's declaration, developed through neighbourhood assembly meetings, meant that police and government officials would no longer be allowed to enter the town so

that villagers could decide for themselves how to meet their community's needs.

**>> September 16 >>** Dawn breaks on Mexico City, 192 years after Mexicans declared their independence from Spain, and reveals a redecoration campaign throughout the capital. Over 30 statues of the heroes of the independence struggle have flowers at their bases and are dressed in black balaclavas, red bandanas, and are draped with the

**Magda:** For us in the MTD it's about staying on the sidelines of the consumption system, the capitalist system, it started to generate this feeling that, well, we're not interested in going back, really, to a capitalist system, we want to generate something different. We don't want them to open the factories and incorporate us just to be exploited again, we want other things.

**MS:** Can you explain what other things you are creating?

**Magda:** The slogans we're organized under are Work, Dignity, and Social Change. In respect to work, dignified work is not going back to a factory to work 16 hours and be exploited. We want to generate different projects, projects without bosses, where the workers themselves, the same *compañeros* decide what to do with the production. We think that dignity as well as social change has to be built by us. It's not something we demand from the government. We think that we have to build that up and they have to allow us to do so.

**Orlando:** We are regaining dignity from having organized ourselves, from fighting capitalism. But what do we want to be? I mean, we don't want to make their mistakes but put together a new society, to build a more fair society where there would be neither oppressors nor oppressed, a society where there wouldn't be exploiters and exploited. It's hard for us because we live inside this system they call 'democracy', supposedly we live in a democratic country, and if democracy means to starve, if democracy means that they beat you down every time you go out to protest, or that children are dying every day at Solano's hospital

because there are no sterile bandages, that democracy makes me think that, actually we have a stronger dictatorship today than before.

#### **MTD Lanus**

**Notes from Nowhere:** How did the emergence of the *piquetero* movement change the communities, change people's sense of themselves and their future?

**Pablo:** It happened to us in the neighbourhoods. So many years of a politics with state control over the people, over modest people, generated a lack of self-esteem in us. Our neighbours, our *compañeros* – we didn't feel it was possible for us to fight the politicians. The *piquete* kind of broke that passivity and people are able to recover their self-esteem. It demonstrated through those struggles that it is possible to face the whole government machine, the repressive machine, with our organized forces, and without depending on the old structures – such as unions – that didn't have an answer to this problem. Or the traditional parties, including the left, that for many years didn't understand this phenomenon. And all these movements began growing by themselves from the neighbourhoods and always with some people that had some previous experience with unions or militancy. But we wanted to create something new that is based primarily on our strength as neighbours. And the first subjective change is that change of mood, recovering that confidence in ourselves that we can change things – at least the small things – that we couldn't resolve in an office but we can resolve in a *piquete*.

**Notes from Nowhere:** Being a *piquetero* implies more than just blocking a road. What does it mean for you to be a *piquetero*?

**Pablo:** For us, the identity that we began forming as *piqueteros* has primarily to do with dignity. And dignity is built in the neighbourhoods, not just during a roadblock fighting for the work subsidies, but also by trying to solve community problems.

It's the idea of strength, of dignity, and a capacity for transformation of the small things that today are in our reach. We are a grassroots movement organized in the neighbourhoods and there are things that perhaps we can't change today, but the immediate challenge is this: fighting for dignity, conquering some spaces of justice in this fucked up social situation that we are living in.

**Notes from Nowhere:** How do you understand horizontality and autonomy? What do they mean to you in practice?

**Pablo:** We started to shape the unemployed movement in such a way that it didn't reproduce certain things from other social organizations. I mentioned before that some *compañeros* or militants had union or political experience. But the

structure was always hierarchical. It was years and years of frustration, of deception and experiences that didn't end well. So beginning with the idea that we wanted to avoid that entirely, we started looking for a neighbourhood organization that had very basic principles. We hadn't read about autonomous experiences, but we did want our grassroots organization, our neighbourhood force not be subordinated by partisans or unions or be subordinated by the logic proposed by the state. And that's how we started organizing, with the idea of that the assembly should be the place where decisions are made. This logic was carried out to the *piquetes* as well. And that's how we started to learn. And soon after, we started seeing different experiences and seeing that other sectors valued us because of the way we were organized. And today we can say that with regards to horizontality and autonomy there is a conceptual framework that maintains our criteria of organization.

It sort of marks our path, because although we don't have a clear path of how we are going to advance, we are sure of the way we do not want to advance. We are not going to advance by generating centralized organizations or forms

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flag of the Zapatista Army. Several streets bearing the names of the independence fighters are also bedecked with Zapatista flags and stickers. Several other municipalities also report particularly well-dressed statues and a surge in pro-EZLN graffiti.

>> **October** >> Over 240,000 teachers in Kenya go on strike for four weeks, demanding that the Government pay a salary increase agreed upon in 1997.

>> **October 2** >> University professors at the only public university in Angola go on strike demanding an increase in wages and payment of salary arrears. Four days later, students take to the streets in an attempt to pressure the Ministry of Education into meeting their teachers' demands.

>> **October 12** >> Global Day of Action, Américas

>> **October 24** >> A massive crowd of over 15,000 protest in Colombo, Sri Lanka against the passage of 36 bills

passed by Parliament which will expedite privatization of state institutions and natural resources, believed to be directly legislating IMF-recommended structural adjustment programmes. It is the first time that a large protest against capitalist globalization has happened in the nation.

>> **October 26** >> About one million people around the planet demonstrate against the US plans to attack Iraq. With nearly 100,000 in San Francisco, US, tens of

of interaction that exclude the people from making decisions. We prefer to continue to support our assemblies and to continue generating organizations that don't depend on other structures that create subordination.

**Notes from Nowhere:** Continuing with that idea, how do you make decisions, how do the assemblies work?

**Pablo:** It's pretty simple: a group of neighbours has a weekly assembly; the discussion that needs to happen, the information that needs to be shared, and the decisions that need to be made are all done at the assembly. It's that simple and direct, it's the way that democracy works in the neighbourhood. When we have to co-ordinate various neighbourhoods and when the organization grows, it becomes a bit more complex and debates are held on how to co-ordinate in a way that doesn't create an atmosphere of centralized decision making. Within that debate we discuss the election of delegates and the way that they rotate, it's a way we found so that it's not always the same people playing the same role.

Often passivity, and all those years of a culture where others make the decisions for you generates a feeling where you don't care that other groups are making the decisions for you. So when we develop autonomy and the capacity to make decisions in our assemblies, we have to make damn sure that we keep the decision-making there and not have it expand to other places, because that's when centralized forces – even if we don't want them to – start to make the decisions for us.

**“The biggest change was the relationship with other people in the neighbourhood, the development of friendship and the possibility of sharing... When you're on a roadblock and you have nothing to eat, the people next to you share their food. Now I feel I'm living in a large family, my neighbours are my family.”** – Marta, MTD Darío Santillán

**MTD Darío Santillán**

**MS:** Why a horizontal movement, using direct democracy? This is something new here in Argentina. It is very inspiring. How did it get to be that way?

**Daniela:** It seems to me that history and experience have shown us many different organizations that function in a vertical [top-down] way, which is also the way this system and government work, and we are breaking with that and we're basically starting from scratch. That's how we came about, from concrete necessities – that's our reality. To me it seems like we are tired of people coming around and telling us what needs to be done and then leaving and then us doing things ourselves. So, it's breaking away from that and beginning to create new things, the collective decision, the

participation of everyone, direct democracy. Here everyone has a voice and a vote, everyone can express their opinion, it's not like no-one knows anything but that we all know something. And it's not easy, I tell you, it's very hard, because in the assemblies it's hard for the *compañeros* to speak, for everyone to express themselves. Many participants don't realize what it is they are creating, how new this way of working is for us, this is a completely new chapter in the history of Argentina.

**MS:** How has your life changed since you started participating in an MTD?

**Daniela:** Before I got involved I was really shy, much too shy, and it was hard for me to interact with people. That has changed a lot. I've changed 'cause in the day-to-day you have to talk to people, all kinds of different people, you're never really quiet at anytime. Now I'm chatting all the time.

I've grown in every aspect. I'm 19 years old now, and I was 16 when I entered the MTD. At first you change what you talk about, the concept of values and the relationships with the people around you and you just grow in every way

– on an activist level and on a personal level because you learn to deal with things and you get to know new things. You start to see life in a different way, you see the reality, you become more realistic, more conscious of everything. And on top of that I met a lot of people, a lot of really amazing people. Eventually I brought my dad and my sister to the MTD. I believe it changed my life, it changed a lot. I believe that from here on out the things that I do will always be put in perspective; I will never abandon the struggle, I'm always going to be doing this.

**MS:** It seems that many women are at the forefront of the *piquetero* movement?

**Daniela:** Yes, it seems to me that within society, in this system the woman is subjected to all kinds of things, but in our organizations, the woman is the protagonist, because when the movements begin they are made up of *compañeras* more than anyone. Because it's the women who go out and put everything on the line to get food for their children. The husband stays home because he's getting depressed due to lack of work. All their lives the men have gone out and

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thousands in Zaragoza, Spain, Berlin, Germany, Washington, US, and thousands more from Seattle to São Paulo, people around the globe make it clear that they are organized and strongly opposed to war.

>> **October 31** >> Thirty badgers armed with water pistols storm a Starbucks in London, UK, claiming it as their ancestral home. Using the logic of Israeli settlers the badgers evict some of the customers and erect the first

badger settlement in London. With placards proclaiming "If it works in Palestine why not here" and "It's ours because we say so" the self-styled Badger Defence Force set up checkpoints to inspect shoppers and tourists for concealed weapons. "If they're not a badger, they could be a terrorist" a spokesbadger said. The badgers have selected the store for their settlement because of the role of its CEO as a major supporter of the Israeli state.

>> **October 31-November** >> Ten thousand mostly indigenous activists converge on Quito, Ecuador to protest the FTAA meetings. A delegation of about 40 people manage to get in and directly address the hemisphere's trade delegates, who stared uncomfortably at their shoes while listening to the words of Leonidas Iza, the President of CONAIE (the Ecuadorian indigenous federation): "We are in desperate shape. You couldn't possibly understand,



Early morning at an MTD bakery. Buenos Aires, Argentina

MTD Anibal Veron

fought for work, to bring home the food, and suddenly when they are without work they fall into a depressive cycle and it's the women who then go out to fight. In Ariel's case his mother brought him to the MTD for the first time, then she got her husband involved. I believe that the women here have a fundamental role. The men also, of course, but the women are completely devoted, it's intense. Even more so with the girls. I don't say this 'cause I'm a woman but I believe that those that have ovaries tend to put themselves in front and say what has to be done. We all do it and there is so much energy, tonnes. They know that it's not just their life and future which is at risk, but also that of their children, their entire family, and that is very important.

The system tells you that women will submit to anything. You have to be home and take charge of the kitchen and the kids and don't leave there, your role is that of housewife, you can't think, you don't have an opinion ... As things change in these movements it comes out that the woman begins to have a voice that can express what she feels. I believe that it radically changes her whole quality of life, because a woman, a *compañera* from the MTD, is not the same as a woman who is not within the movement, and those outside are going to notice the differences.

I believe this is really new, brand new. You go to the movement and you see that it's filled with women. And the MTD woman feels good because it's like she found her place where she can be herself, where she can say what she feels and that is incredible, to find one's place.

**Ariel:** Yeah, I recently told Dani that in my house, when I



Piqueteros transform their neighbourhood. Buenos Aires, Argentina

MTD Anibal Veron

had a job, I would get home from work and I'd find all these things done... there was the food, my clothes, I went to the bathroom and my shirt was hanging and now I get home and I don't have any of that [he laughs].

Sometimes it happens that I get home and my partner says, "You're here, good because I have to go out." My wife is active in another *barrio* called Don Orione. I come here more than anywhere; I was born here in this neighbourhood, in Cerrito. I lived here 26 years, I have been in Don Orione for five years and my wife is active in the MTD in Don Orione. Sometimes I get home and she says- "I'm going to work at the *Copa de Leche* [children's milk distribution] afternoon shift."

I'm here in the morning and I'd like to go out but I have to stay with the kids and now that I'm here I have to see if there are clothes to be washed, I have to lend a hand, then maybe I'm told that she left the *Copa de Leche* and she's going to the MTD bakery to make some sweet bread because tomorrow there is an event and they are going to try raise funds for the community kitchen. She has other activities; on Tuesday there is the assembly, since that's today I had to go to pick up the kids at school.

**MS:** A little personal question – has involvement in the MTD therefore made your relationship better?

**Ariel:** Yes, of course, because my partner now feels really good about herself.

**MS:** One of the things I want to ask is about the dreams for the future, for the *barrio*, for your children.

**Daniela:** More than anything I think that I want to have children and I want my children to have a future with dignity. That is why I have taken on this struggle and believe that dignity has to be fought for – to be able to live in dignity, with work. And with a more just society, one that is equal for everyone.

**Ariel:** Yes, I agree with Dani. I hope that in the future my children don't have to go to the hospital with a stick in their hands and a mask on their face and say to them: "Attend to my children." That they don't have to go to some health ministry and make them understand that it is our right, and that this thing about being masked and grabbing a stick has to continue to implement these necessities. I hope that in the future those that are on top use their

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you who were born in golden cradles and have never suffered. But we don't have food to feed our children... We have no way to live, and the FTAA will only make it worse. When we complain, the US government calls us terrorists. We are not threatening anything, but we are hungry and tired and things have to change."

>> **November 4-5** >> Over 30,000 members of the Korean Government Employees Union hold a public rally,

opposing proposed legislation which would deny all civil service workers the name and status of a trade union as well as the right to organize. Twenty-seven leaders of the union were pre-emptively arrested days prior to the rally, which is violently attacked by the police, injuring many unionists, and resulting in the arrest of thousands. The police then surround the union headquarters, block the entrances, and raid the place, confiscating documents.

>> **November 6-10** >> A European Social Forum takes place in Florence, Italy with hundreds of activists gathering for in-depth reflection, democratic debate, free exchange of experiences, and planning of actions leading towards building a better world. The Forum culminates in a march against the looming US war on Iraq, with half a million people participating.

>> **November 7** >> In Minsk, Belarus a peaceful

conscience, stop stealing, and stop screwing us over. And if they don't gain consciousness and keep doing it, they are always going to find resistance everywhere. I am going to stay in this for however old I become, for my grandchildren and for everyone.

**Daniela:** And it's a long road.

**Ariel:** The road is long.

**Daniela:** And there are lots of hold-ups along the way.

**MS:** How is building a community kitchen, a bakery, organic gardens, and popular libraries and so on a threat to the state?

**Daniela:** In some ways it seems so insignificant, but for them it's a lot, because they see that the people are suddenly organizing and acquiring new skills, other ways of thinking and are saying "Enough of this!" Very young people begin to gain consciousness from the neighbourhood; they stand up to the state and say, "We don't want any more of this! We have come to demand what belongs to us by right," and we confront them, we stop being dominated and break out. I believe that is what they are afraid of, of people with a conscience, of people that think, of people that get together and fight. The state is very afraid. And that's why they first dominate you on an ideological level and then they repress you and beat you down in the street. On 26 June last year, we lost two *compañeros*, and the 19 and 20 of December 2001 were terrible, and not long ago they repressed those of us that went to support the occupied Brukman factory. That's the way it is, the government clubs you but at the same time

it sees more resistance on our side, and it's afraid of that. And here in the neighbourhood it's very hard because the concept of repression is obviously very deep and it's something the people are scared of.

On 26 June it was proven. We lost a *compañero* that was very close to us, Darío Santillán, and he is very alive within us now. That's why we also try to work on a neighbourhood level, more than anything, because it's harder for the people to mobilize in the streets, but we try to work on the neighbourhood level and make sure that this work is not in vain, not lost.

**Ariel:** Yeah, we are a zit on the state's ass, and it really bothers them. So they portray us in the media as violent, saying that all we do is block traffic. We know that we are a minority, but at the same time we get them to listen to us and it worries them. The presidential candidates in the last elections emphasized that they were going to impose order, that they weren't going let any more road blockades take place, but I don't know how they will ever stop this. Nothing changes, they don't provide anything for people, no education – nothing. And here we are at the base, in the neighbourhoods, guaranteeing at least the basic needs, such as food and education. The movements have libraries, popular education workshops, everything. It's the bare minimum, but we are doing it ourselves. It bothers them that the local political party bosses who used to say: "I'll give you a bag of groceries if you go to this support rally," or: "I'll give you this welfare payment but you have to go around wearing this political shirt all day," no longer control us.

Since we threw the political bosses out of the neighbourhoods, we know that they send people to spy on us during our open assemblies but when they talk we all realize who they are, especially when they try to lay down a party line. We don't accept any politicians. And now even during the electoral campaigns, they are respecting our space and are not coming too close to us because they know we're not going to cut a deal with them. We don't cut deals. Not even if they win, not for subsidies, not for anything.

There is a song about a rebel Argentina, the song begins: "Argentina is rebellious, it has guts. We are all rebels because hunger is violence, and if today's hunger is the law, then rebellion is justice."

**Pablo Solana is an unemployed electrician and works with MTD Lanus. Daniela works in the community kitchen and does security in MTD Darío Santillán, Almirante Brown. Ariel works in the bakery and as a group facilitator with MTD Darío Santillán, Almirante Brown. Magda and Orlando work in MTD Solano.**

**Interviews by Marina Sitrin and Notes from Nowhere / John Jordan (with help from Naomi Klein and Graciela Monteagudo)**

**Marina Sitrin has been an anticapitalist activist for the last fifteen years, most recently working with the Direct Action Network and People's Law Collective in New York. She is currently in Argentina working on a book of interviews with autonomous social movements.**

These interviews were transcribed and translated by Roberto Litzenger, Irina Brunetti, and Paula Talesnik

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#### Resources:

»MTD: [www24.brinkster.com/movtd/escritos/pariendo.htm](http://www24.brinkster.com/movtd/escritos/pariendo.htm)

»Excellent and constantly updated site on radical struggles in Latin America: [www.rebellion.org](http://www.rebellion.org)

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demonstration against the war takes place, organized by the Belarussian Anarchist Federation.

**>> November 11 >>** Three hundred people march through the streets of downtown Montreal, Canada demanding an immediate regularization of the status of the more than 1,000 non-status Algerians living in Canada. Stressing that the situation for Algerians is one of asylum and protection, not immigration, the march is

comprised of First Nations activists, members of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, and students, and points out the contradiction of deporting asylum seekers to a nation under a Canadian travel advisory warning due to the ongoing civil war.

**>> November 12 >>** Hundreds of nurses and hospital workers go on strike in Wrocław, Poland, occupying a hospital and demanding payment of the nurses' back

wages. A broad coalition of supporters come out in support, Food Not Bombs serves food at the hospital, neighbours help blockade a major street, and local anarchists help defend nurses' homes under threat of eviction. Police attack the street action and send 11 people to the hospital, two of whom are arrested for throwing potatoes and eggs at the police. Meanwhile, the Polish government knows where its priorities lie as it hems and haws over which war planes to