

LABOR STUDIES IN ARGENTINA

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- LOS ORIGENES DEL MOVIMIENTO OBRERO (1857–1899)*. By RICARDO FALCON. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984. Pp. 129.)
- LA SEMANA TRAGICA*. By EDGARDO BILSKY. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984. Pp. 161.)
- MOVIMIENTO OBRERO ARGENTINO, 1930–1945*. By HIROSHI MATSUSHITA. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Siglo Veinte, 1983. Pp. 347.)
- SINDICALISMO Y PERONISMO: LOS COMIENZOS DE UN VINCULO PERDURABLE*. By HUGO DEL CAMPO. (Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 1983. Pp. 273.)
- PARTIDO LABORISTA: ESTADO Y SINDICATOS*. By ELENA SUSANA PONT. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984. Pp. 157.)
- SINDICATOS Y POLITICA EN ARGENTINA*. By MARCELO CAVAROZZI. (Buenos Aires: CEDES, 1984. Pp. 176.)
- LOS SINDICATOS EN EL GOBIERNO, 1973–1976*. By JUAN CARLOS TORRE. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1983. Pp. 166.)
- LAS ORGANIZACIONES SINDICALES Y EL PODER MILITAR (1976–1983)*. By ALVARO ABOS. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984. Pp. 150.)
- DE VANDOR A UBALDINI*. By OSVALDO CALELLO and DANIEL PARCERO. 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1981. Pp. 259.)

The demilitarization process begun in Argentina in 1983 has occasioned a spate of publications on the labor movement. These works have been produced by both established writers in the field and newcomers, some of whom carried out their research abroad, while in exile. Argentina has always been better served by labor historians than other Latin American countries, but this new wave of publications has transformed the field. In studies ranging from the origins of the labor movement in the 1850s through the Peronist period, and up to the recent military regime, old assumptions and methods are questioned and new paths of research laid out. Essentially, labor studies of Argentina have broken definitively with the chronicling of events and the partisan political accounts that previously dominated the field. The new texts display instead meticulous, detached historical research and an attention

to nuances and contradictions that was hitherto lacking. Where these new studies are perhaps less innovative is in taking up the ongoing debate in this journal and others on the need for more social history and a history of the working class rather than just that of organized workers.¹ Nevertheless, once these texts are fully absorbed into the literature, they will fill many gaps and cause scholars to ask many new questions.

The formation of the working class and its early anarchist and socialist organizations is the subject of Ricardo Falcón's *Los orígenes del movimiento obrero (1857–1899)*. Falcón traces the process of proletarianization of the immigrant masses and how they established the first mutual-aid societies in the mid-1850s. In 1870 the typesetters of Argentina came into contact with the First International, and Falcón brings to light previously unknown correspondence between Marx and Engels and various militants in Argentina. In the 1880s, strikes became more frequent as the class struggle between capital and labor intensified. Falcón traces the various tendencies within the anarchist movement (which he argues has been overrated in importance) and the socialist and syndicalist movements. He ends his account with 1899, just when the period of massive general strikes began, a cutoff that is disappointing. Falcón is a traditional historian but one well aware of the broader "sociological" process, hence his meticulous account of how the working class was formed. He has broken consciously with the traditional political histories of the labor movement and their seemingly endless accounts of congresses and resolutions. At the same time, Falcón seems somewhat sceptical of the new social history that focuses on workers' lives and neglects the broader context of politics and the state setting the parameters for any labor movement. Also, a healthy tension exists in his account between the objective formation of the working class by the process of capital accumulation and the subjective process whereby a class becomes conscious of its objectives.

Edgardo Bilsky focuses on one of the most dramatic events in the early history of the working class in *La Semana Trágica*. He traces the background of this semispontaneous 1919 insurrection within the history of the labor movement, instead of isolating it as other historians have done. Bilsky documents the anarchists' loss of their preeminent role in the trade-union movement to the reformist syndicalists. This development coincided with a move by the state to incorporate the "respectable" elements of the working class into the political arena. In this instance, the leaders agreed on a compromise to end the bloody rioting following police repression of a strike, and they thus set a new pattern of more stable industrial relations. Bilsky notes that paradoxically, given the defeat of the strike, the anarchists received a boost and their fortunes recovered in the early 1920s. In fact, the decline of the

trade unions in the 1920s was matched by a radicalizing of labor's political expressions, resulting particularly from the influence of the Russian Revolution. Bilsky seems to have broken less completely from the "politician" tradition of labor history than Falcón, as demonstrated by his underlying attempt to see the events of 1919 as a forerunner of the Cordobazo of 1969. But like Falcón, Bilsky utilized the resources of the Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis in Amsterdam with verve and imagination.² The result is that the history of the labor movement in Argentina before 1930 is no longer as barren as it once was.

The 1920s remain a relatively understudied period, but new studies by Hugo Del Campo and Hiroshi Matsushita provide a thorough account of the process leading to the rise of Perón in the 1930s. The qualitative difference between pre- and post-Peronist trade unionism is obvious, yet the transition between the two is still only partially understood. In *Sindicalismo y peronismo: los comienzos de un vínculo perdurable*, Del Campo rejects the apocalyptic view of the transition in which Peronism represents either an anomaly or the true origins of the working class, according to one's viewpoint. Instead, Del Campo follows the earlier work of Murmis and Portantiero in arguing that continuity and the working class played important roles in "making" Peronism.³ Despite its use of interviews, *Sindicalismo y peronismo* remains largely within the political tradition of Argentine labor history by focusing on their previous bureaucratization, their pragmatic reformism, and their links with political power. These characteristics made the alliance with Perón (established around 1943) a much less dramatic departure in labor's history. Del Campo, who previously published popular histories of anarchism and the *Semana Trágica*,⁴ has now made a solid contribution to the "new" labor history.

Matsushita's *Movimiento obrero argentino, 1930–1945* deals with the origins of Peronism during the same period, but its tone is more detached. This work is not Marxist, as are most of the others reviewed here (whatever their nuances), which gives it a refreshing lack of preconceptions and theoretical baggage. It is marred, however, by such unexplicable statements as the conclusion that "evidently the workers did not support Perón due to agreement with his nationalist criteria" (p. 309). Can Peronism's self-definition as a nationalist movement be dismissed so lightly? Yet Matsushita's book is valuable in clarifying the debate on the origins of Peronist trade unionism and in providing a meticulous account of the period from 1930 to 1945. Contrary to Del Campo, Matsushita argues that the continuity between trade unionism before and after Peronism was broken in 1944, when the full implications of the Peronist project sunk in and the trade-union leadership experienced a major political crisis. Both Matsushita and Del Campo

relied mainly on the archives of the Departamento Nacional del Trabajo and the internal documents of the Central General de Trabajadores.

A more narrowly focused, but equally valuable, work is Elena Susana Pont's *Partido Laborista: estado y sindicatos*. The Partido Laborista was formed by the trade unions in 1945 and was dissolved subsequently by Perón. Pont argues that the initiative leading to the formation of a labor party based on the trade unions was a genuine expression of working-class autonomy. Although this party never achieved political or ideological stability, it nonetheless represents a unique expression of labor politics, one hitherto seriously neglected. But because its internal democracy conflicted with Perón's corporatist goals for labor, its life was short. Today, with Peronism in crisis, the formation of a new radical labor party is one possible outcome. Pont's study of the Partido Laborista, with its useful documentary appendix, is thus of more than historical interest.

Perón's overthrow in 1955 initiated the era of "Peronist resistance," in which the trade unions played a major role. Marcelo Cavarozzi's *Sindicatos y política en Argentina* covers the period between 1955 and 1960 that set the coordinates for the labor movement of the 1960s. The trade-union movement, directed by the leader of the metalworkers, Augusto Vandor, developed a particular style of labor politics. On the one hand, the unions sought state protection for the social gains of the Peronist period and for their own role, which was threatened by the decentralizing tendencies of trade unionism. On the other hand, the trade-union leaders found it necessary to oppose the income policies of successive governments. The trade unions developed a great defensive capacity for withstanding the onslaughts of capital and the state. But they did not develop an offensive political role in that they had no platform other than a vague support of "social justice" (*justicialismo*). Cavarozzi's work provides a detailed chronology of trade-union politics during this era, but despite the use of interviews, it lacks a feel for working-class life. In this respect, Daniel James's study of the labor process during this period and the role of the *comisiones internas* (shop steward committees) remains unequalled.⁵ Cavarozzi plans a sequel that will cover the key period of 1959 to 1966, with its factory occupations and other episodes of working-class resurgence.

Perón returned to Argentina in 1973, following a period of great upheaval that began with the Cordobazo of 1969 (events still requiring a definitive treatment). In *Los sindicatos en el Gobierno, 1973–1976*, Juan Carlos Torre deals superbly with the Peronist interlude that witnessed the death of the general in 1974, the succession of his wife Isabel, and her overthrow by the military in 1976. Trade-union leaders played a major role during this period, but they also faced serious unrest from

labor's grass roots. Torre first provides an overview of trade unionism in Argentina since 1955, focusing on the structural determinants of trade-union power. He then moves into a detailed account of the period between 1973 and 1976, starting with the Pacto Social that coopted the trade unions into a nationalist-developmental pact with employers and the government. Its failure has obvious implications for the current attempts by the Radical party administration of Raúl Alfonsín to create a system of "*concertación social*" (social contract). By 1975 the trade unions were confronting the Peronist government in a massive general strike, with the leadership striving to keep the membership in check. The economic and political decline that began at that point triggered a crisis in the Peronist movement, which has recently split openly into two factions. The period examined by Torre reveals the finite limits of the Peronist coalition: it was the failure of Peronism during this phase that set the scene for its defeat in the elections of 1983.

The armed forces returned to power in 1976 committed to restructuring Argentine society by weakening the power of the working class, which had counterbalanced bourgeois dominance for some thirty years. Labor lawyer Alvaro Abós was well placed to observe the devastating impact of the military's economic and political policies on the working class. He is equally attuned to the dilemmas of the trade-union leadership, who are often dismissed too hastily as a simple trade-union bureaucracy. *Las organizaciones sindicales y el poder militar (1976–1983)* provides a useful account of labor struggles during these years, but it should be supplemented by other more systematic accounts.⁶ The work is strengthened by a lengthy documentary appendix that provides most of the key trade-union statements of the period. *Las organizaciones sindicales* also highlights a crucial period when the Argentine working class came nearest to suffering a historic defeat. Abós plays down the role of the labor movement in the process of democratization in favor of the political parties. But he abundantly demonstrates that the piecemeal resistance of the trade unions and their growing offensive capacity after 1979 were the decisive factors in determining the fate of the military-monetarist project of 1976.

Taken collectively, the studies discussed above represent a "new departure" in Argentine labor history. Until the 1960s, labor historiography was dominated by the memoirs and polemics of the direct participants. Although still valuable sources, these works are politically "over-determined." In the 1970s, more pressing political concerns seemed to overtake labor history, although some researchers continued to use the same approaches. Now, in a new democratic interlude that many people view as a last chance for democratization in Argentina, labor studies are once again flourishing. The Centro Editor de América Latina has been in the forefront of publishing this new work, including six of the

nine titles under review here. The range of the recent works is remarkable—from the “making” of the working class to its recent setbacks under the military regime—and the quality is high.

Recent articles have directed attention to the social history of labor, a formerly neglected area according to Eugene Sofer. The work of Leandro Gutiérrez, for example, breaks with the previously dominant economic approach to the “standard of living” debate at the turn of the century by focusing instead on the quality of workers’ lives in terms of housing and nutrition.⁷ Literature on working-class culture is growing, although it seems to be subsumed within a sociological account of the “popular sectors.”⁸ Indeed, the new social history is not yet integrated within the broader political history of labor, but the groundwork is being laid.

Argentine labor history still lacks a sense of “history from below,” of workers speaking for themselves about their own concerns and hopes rather than those of the social researcher. A signal exception is the two-volume work compiled by Osvaldo Calello and Daniel Parcerro, *De Vandor a Ubaldini*. The authors provide a straightforward account of labor struggles from 1959 to 1983, but most of the work is devoted to interviews with key participants. Another work deserving mention in this respect is the recently published collection of the writings and speeches of Agustín Tosco, a leader of the Cordobazo and class-struggle unionism in Argentina.⁹ These works do not constitute a genuine “history from below,” being instead the testimony of leaders or, at best, of middle-level cadres of the movement. But they enrich labor history and undoubtedly will encourage more use of oral history in Argentina.¹⁰ Because oral history in Argentina apparently has not taken the antiquarian or populist direction that it has in some countries, it has immense potential as a research tool during the new democratic period opening up. The future task will be to move back toward constructing an all-encompassing account of the history of the working class in Argentina. Such a history will not be a dry political or institutional account but one enriched and indeed transformed by the works reviewed here and those yet to be published.

NOTES

1. See for example, P. Winn, “Oral History and the Factory Study: New Approaches to Labor History,” *LARR* 15, no. 2 (1979); and E. F. Sofer, “Recent Trends in Latin American Labor Historiography,” *LARR* 15, no. 1 (1980).
2. The institute’s resources are listed in E. Gordon, M. Hall, and H. Spalding, “A Survey of Brazilian and Argentine Materials at the International Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis in Amsterdam,” *LARR* 8, no. 3 (1973).
3. M. Murmis and J. C. Portantiero, *Estudios sobre los orígenes del Peronismo 1* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1971).

4. H. Del Campo, *Los anarquistas* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1971), and "La Semana Trágica," *Polémica*, 1972.
5. D. James, "Rationalization and Working Class Response: The Context and Limits of Factory Floor Activity in Argentina," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 13, no. 2 (1981).
6. See the contributions in *Sindicalismo y regímenes militares en Argentina y Chile*, edited by B. Galitelli and A. Thompson (Amsterdam: Centro de Estudios y Documentación Latinoamericanos, 1982).
7. L. Gutiérrez, "Condiciones de la vida material de los sectores populares en Buenos Aires, 1880–1914," *Revista de Indias* 41, nos. 163–64 (1981).
8. See PEHESA, "Organización y cultura de los sectores populares," *Punto de Vista* 15 (1982) and 18 (1983).
9. *Agustín Tosco: conducción de un dirigente obrero*, edited by J. Lannot, A. Amantea, and E. Sgniglia (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984).
10. The Di Tella Oral History Collection is described in P. Schlinger, "Oral History Projects in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Brazil," *International Journal of Oral History* 5, no. 3 (1984), and used in part in G. Di Tella, "Working-Class Organization and Politics in Argentina," *LARR* 16, no. 2 (1981).