

Piqueteros after the Hype: Unemployed Movements in Argentina, 2008-2015

Fynn Kaese

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich

Jonas Wolff

Peace Research Institute Frankfurt

Abstract

The Argentine unemployed movement of the piqueteros was a key socio-political player in the early 2000s. Although public and academic attention paid to these piqueteros has decreased notably since 2010, they continue to be active. This article provides an empirical update to the existing research on Argentina's unemployed movement by analysing how distinct piquetero organizations have adapted to evolving political and socioeconomic changes during the presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2008-2015). In drawing on social movement research, we suggest a number of mechanisms that can help to explain the continuing existence of the piqueteros. While a persistent focus on grassroots work has been identified as key to their existence, adaptation to the changing political and socioeconomic context has meant that core claims related to the very issue of (un-)employment, including the demand for dignified work, have largely been dropped from the political agenda of various piquetero organizations. *Keywords:* Argentina, unemployed movement, piqueteros, social movements, social protest, social policies, cooperatives, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

Resumen: Los piqueteros después del auge: Los movimientos de desocupados en Argentina, 2008-2015

A comienzos del siglo el movimiento de desocupados de Argentina era un actor sociopolítico clave, pero desde 2010 ha decrecido notablemente el interés público y académico en los denominados piqueteros. Los piqueteros, sin embargo, siguen existiendo. Este artículo ofrece una actualización de la investigación existente sobre el movimiento de desocupados en Argentina. Se analiza cómo las distintas organizaciones piqueteras han adaptado a los cambios políticos y socioeconómicos durante la presidencia de Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2008-2015). Basándonos en la investigación sobre movimientos sociales, sugerimos una serie de mecanismos que contribuyen a entender la persistencia de los piqueteros. Por un lado, un continuo enfoque en el trabajo territorial ha sido clave para tal persistencia. Por otro, la adaptación al nuevo contexto ha llevado a que reivindicaciones importantes relacio-

nadas justamente al tema del (des-)empleo, como la demanda por un trabajo digno, hayan perdido relevancia en la agenda política de las distintas organizaciones piqueteras. *Palabras clave:* Argentina, movimiento de desocupados, piqueteros, movimientos sociales, protesta social, política social, cooperativas, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

Following the remarkable spread of organizations of unemployed workers throughout Argentina since the late 1990s and the dramatic increase of their protests in the early 2000s, a whole series of scholars began to investigate what Pierre Bourdieu would have called a ‘social miracle’ (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 88-90).¹ However, since 2010, public and academic attention paid to these piqueteros has decreased notably.² By the end of the Néstor Kirchner presidency, in 2007, observers had already noted what appeared to be an overall decline of unemployed movements since Kirchner took office in 2003 (Epstein, 2009; Svampa, 2009; Wolff, 2007a). In this sense, the decrease in scholarly attention reflected the reduced presence and political relevance of the piqueteros. Nevertheless, the broad and diverse range of organizations that came into being in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as we will show in this article, continue to be active. This raises the question of how these unemployed movements have managed to persist. We will provide an empirical update on the existing research on Argentina’s unemployed movements by tracing their development during the two governments of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2008-2015), and analyse how the various organizations have adapted to the evolving political and socioeconomic context in order to explain their continuing existence.

Social movement studies have identified a series of mechanisms that characterize and shape the trajectory of social movements at later stages of cycles or waves of contention. According to Sidney Tarrow (2011, p. 190), the phase of social movement demobilization is driven by five mechanisms: repression, facilitation, exhaustion, radicalization, and institutionalization. With a view to the social movement itself, either success (combining facilitation and institutionalization) or failure (combining repression and exhaustion), but also ambivalent outcomes (that may combine any of the mechanisms mentioned) can result in the decline and, ultimately, the disappearance of the movement (see Klandermans & van Stralen, 2015, pp. 1-2; Tarrow, 2011, chapter 10). Nevertheless, the disengagement of activists and the disappearance of a movement is only one possible outcome: In some cases, social movements have managed to persist even after a specific cycle of contention has ended (see Bunnage, 2014; Corrigan-Brown, 2012; Taylor, 1989). In a recent review article, Leslie Bunnage (2014) identified the key mechanisms that shape the retention of activists and, thereby, the persistence of social movements: These include a) individual resources and biographical availability at the level of the individual activist; b) collective identities and social networks at the social level of analysis; and c) organizational characteristics and capacity at the organizational level. In trying

to make sense of the persistence of Argentina's unemployed movements, we will draw on these different mechanisms. This said, in the context of this paper, we can neither provide an in-depth process tracing of the working of these causal mechanisms nor systematically test them in terms of competing explanations for movement persistence.

Methodologically, in addition to the existing scholarship that reasonably covers developments until 2009, this study draws on a detailed content analysis of all articles on unemployed movements published in the online versions of three Argentine newspapers between January 2010 and May 2015.³ In addition to Argentina's two main dailies *Clarín* and *La Nación*, which both had an explicitly oppositional stance toward the Kirchner governments, we also included the much smaller *Página 12* with a centre-left and generally pro-Kirchnerist orientation as a control for a potential political bias in the reporting by the former two. Of course, these three newspapers only offer a mediated, and thus distorted, view on the activities and claims of the different piquetero organizations. We, therefore, amend the content analysis with a study of websites and social network presence (Facebook, Twitter) of the different organizations. We also draw on the existing research by one of us including an in-depth study of the unemployed movements conducted between 2003 and 2007 based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with a series of representatives of the piqueteros (Wolff, 2007a, 2007b). This being said, our analysis of recent developments during the Fernández government is based solely on publicly available primary and secondary sources. Our focus on the public appearance of the individual organizations – in newspapers or through their own channels of communication – also implies that we have concentrated on statements of official representatives, and thus cannot account for the internal diversity of these organizations or the complex motivations that ethnographic studies have revealed in their rank and file.⁴ Finally, while our coverage of organizations is, in principle, national, the reliance on reports in the national media might also *de facto* result in a bias in favour of events from the Greater Buenos Aires region.

A brief history of the piqueteros

The Argentine unemployed movements emerged during the 1990s in the context of a fairly radical programme of monetary stabilization and neoliberal reforms and became a mass phenomenon in the early 2000s, when Argentina's economic model openly collapsed into a deep economic crisis.⁵ More specifically, the paradigmatic experiences of what was to become known as the *piquetero* (picketer) movement took place in the mid-1990s in marginal urban areas in Cutral-Có/Plaza Huincul (province of Neuquén) and General Mosconi/Tartagal (Salta), oil towns in which the privatization of the state petroleum company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF) implied not only the dramatic loss of jobs, but the dismantling of an entire parallel welfare state (Benclowicz, 2015, p. 131; Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 103-151). After massive

roadblocks (*piquetes*) had forced state representatives to negotiate with, and concede to, the demands of the unemployed, this model of contentious action quickly spread across the country and, in particular, into the de-industrialized suburbs of Buenos Aires. In 1997, there were already 140 *piquetes* across the country, escalating to 252 (1999), 514 (2000), 1,383 (2001), and 2,336 (2002) roadblocks (Nueva Mayoría, 2015, p. 5). In 2003, between 200,000 and 360,000 of roughly 2.3 million unemployed were organized in a broad and heterogeneous set of unemployed organizations (Wolff, 2007b, p. 146). Given their preferred mode of contention, the *piquete*, they became to be called (and called themselves) *piqueteros* (Rossi, 2015, p. 117).

Svampa and Pereyra (2004, p. 55) have identified two factors that jointly enabled the rise of the *piqueteros*: ‘the adoption of roadblocks as the generalized technique of struggle’ and ‘the rapid institutionalization of a response by the state via the *planes sociales*’.⁶ The latter refers to social cash transfers to unemployed households granted by the federal and provincial governments since the mid-1990s; the recipients, in return, had to participate in municipal work or local development projects. In 1999, the new government headed by Fernando de la Rúa allowed the *piquetero* organizations to autonomously manage part of the social subsidies and the corresponding local development projects. The granting of new, and the perpetuation of existing, ‘social plans’ provided the unemployed movements with a tangible, feasible and unifying aim (see also Quirós, 2008, p. 123; 2011, p. 78). The massive increase in unemployed organizations and roadblocks in 2000 and 2001 prepared the ground for the mass protests of December 2001 that prompted the ousting of President De la Rúa – even if the latter were largely a spontaneous ‘social explosion’ where organized societal forces played minor roles only (Wolff, 2007a, p. 8). In 2002, in light of the experience of December 2001 and confronted with a weak transition government headed by interim president Eduardo Duhalde, the *piquetero* movement only gained in momentum. Duhalde, in response to the severe socio-political crisis, introduced a new social plan, the *Plan Jefas y Jefes de Hogar*, which came to support some two million households (CELS, 2003). The unemployed organizations, through continuous roadblocks, secured the granting of such social plans (and food aid etc.) and, in nearly 10 per cent of the cases, even the right to fully manage the corresponding funds and projects.

From the very beginning, the *piqueteros* were a heterogeneous and internally diverse set of organizations, even when, in the context of the escalating crisis in 2000 and 2001, they increasingly coordinated their activities, recognized themselves as being part of one overarching movement and publicly appeared as a relatively homogenous phenomenon (see Benclowicz, 2015, pp. 131-133; Quirós, 2011, p. 21; Rossi, 2015, pp. 123-124; Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 55-102). Since Duhalde’s interim presidency, the main political line dividing the unemployed movements has been their relationship with the state, with one group of organizations entering into what Federico Rossi (2015, p. 124) has called ‘agreements for the sustainability of governability’, and a second group

rejecting such agreements. This division further deepened during the government of Néstor Kirchner who initiated a post-neoliberal turn in economic policies, presided over a remarkable economic recovery, and actively aimed at incorporating the unemployed movement into his government coalition (see Rossi, 2015, pp. 124-125; Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 211-218). Roughly speaking, this has meant the consolidation of two politically opposed wings of the overall unemployed movement: a group of reformist, dialogue-oriented organizations that were adhering to a national-popular discourse saw the changes initiated by Kirchner as a promising start and were willing to negotiate, if not openly cooperate with the government; and a group of contestatory organizations that were either close to traditional parties of the radical left or adhered to an autonomist discourse and took a much more confrontational, if not revolutionary, stance towards the government. While in the years since 2003 some individual organizations changed allegiances and the entire movement of unemployed organizations significantly lost strength, this basic distinction persisted throughout the Fernández de Kirchner presidencies (Le Borgne de Boisriou, 2014; Natalucci, 2011; Pérez & Natalucci, 2010; Svampa, 2011). The most important organization representing the former wing is the *Federación Tierra y Vivienda* (FTV), the largest nation-wide piquetero organization that has been allied to the dissident labour confederation *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA); it is characterized by a trade-unionist and left-Peronist orientation, and has openly supported both the government of Kirchner (2003-2007) and that of his wife and then widow Cristina Fernández (2008-2015) (Serdar, 2015; Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 58-63). Another staunch ally of the Kirchners was the *Movimiento Evita* that emerged from a series of local unemployed movements, including the *MTD Evita*, and has grown basically due to its direct links to the government (Rossi, 2015, p. 125). *Barrios de Pie*, a movement that initially emerged in close relation with FTV and CTA, supported President Kirchner during the first years of his government, but later joined the group of oppositional forces (Svampa, 2009; Wolff, 2007b, p. 194). This latter group – which in December 2001 formed the National Piquetero Bloc – unified organizations led by small parties of the traditional radical left like the Trotskyist *Polo Obrero* and various, usually small groups of autonomist unemployed movements (*Movimientos de Trabajadores Desocupados* – MTDs) that are largely based in local communities in the Greater Buenos Aires area (Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 239-242). The *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* (CCC), a major piquetero movement that emerged as part of a Maoist-led trade union confederation, in 2002 and 2003 was one of the main unemployed movements that were willing to enter into an official dialogue with Duhalde and then Kirchner. However, in contrast to the FTV, the CCC always maintained a radical, anti-capitalist rhetoric, kept distance from the Kirchner government, and in 2004 started to coordinate its activities with the National Piquetero Bloc (see Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 58-63, p. 213; Wolff, 2007b, pp. 197-199).

After peaking at more than 2,000 roadblocks in 2002, the number of piquetero protests has decreased almost continuously.⁷ From 2003 onwards, dialogue-oriented unemployed organizations such as the FTV openly supported President Kirchner, with piquetero leaders even taking up posts in the government. In a context of political and economic re-stabilization, the more radical groups saw themselves increasingly marginalized, which led many of them to focus on local community work. This retreat to the local level was generally supported by the Kirchner governments which have increased social programmes to subsidize small ‘productive enterprises’ and cooperatives (in part) organized by the unemployed organizations (Le Borgne de Boisriou, 2014; Natalucci, 2011; Svampa, 2011; Wolff, 2007a, p. 24). When, in 2008, the number of roadblocks again escalated to unprecedented heights, it was the agricultural associations that used this technique of contentious action in its resistance against an increase in the export duties on agricultural products (Svampa, 2014, pp. 162-163). With the economic situation worsening and criticism of the government on the rise, however, the oppositional piquetero organizations demonstrated that they have retained a certain capacity to mobilize and act collectively (see Fraga, 2014). For the years 2013 and 2014, protest data shows a significant re-increase in roadblocks by piquetero organizations, even if still only a small share (18 per cent in 2014) of all roadblocks observed in the country was organized by ‘piqueteros and social organizations’ (*Diagnóstico Político*, 2015a). In addition, preliminary data for 2015 suggests that the number of piquetero protests, once again, declined at the end of the Fernández de Kirchner presidency (*Diagnóstico Político*, 2015b).

The persistence of Argentina’s unemployed movements: A comparative analysis

The relationship between the Argentine unemployment movements and the government of Cristina Fernández since 2008 has been characterized by increasing polarization – reflecting the overall political dynamics in contemporary Argentina (see De Luca & Malamud, 2010). On one hand, the Kirchnerist organizations, namely the two biggest piquetero movements FTV and *Movimiento Evita*, have remained staunch allies of the government and the governing *Frente para la Victoria*. The remaining organizations, which include CCC, *Barrios de Pie* and *Polo Obrero* as well as a range of smaller MTDs, have increasingly adopted a united oppositional position towards President Fernández (see Fraga, 2014).

Crucial for the dynamics of the different piquetero groups since 2008 in general, and for the divisions between them and their relations with the government in particular, is the *Plan Argentina Trabaja* (PAT). This new social plan was introduced by President Fernández and, together with other social assistance programmes, replaced the former *Plan Jefas y Jefes del Hogar* (Svampa, 2015). Established by the Ministry of Social Development in 2009,

the PAT aims at creating 'genuine jobs' for former unemployed on the basis of the construction of worker cooperatives (MDS, 2009, Art. 2), thereby addressing a historical demand of the *piqueteros*. For each cooperative, the plan provides work 'of low complexity' for 60 members that is mainly related to maintaining/improving the local infrastructure in a given district (MDS, n.d., p. 5). In 2015, PAT's budget was approximately 6.67 billion Argentine pesos (*La Nación*, 2015, April 17), which served to pay a monthly wage of 2,600 pesos to 250,000 cooperative workers (*La Nación*, 2014, December 2).⁸

The piquetero organizations are able to manage a cooperative of the PAT on their own. Before that, however, they were required to become certified by the governmental *Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social (INAES)* (Lo Vuolo, 2010, p. 5). This created the possibility of favouring Kirchnerist piquetero organizations and discriminating against oppositional ones, as the criteria for the admission of new cooperatives are diffuse, and local party officials, called *punteros*, have an important say in the selection of the beneficiaries (De Sena & Chahbenderian, 2012; *La Nación*, 2014, November 30). As will be seen below, politicization of the PAT has contributed to the increasing polarization of the unemployed movements during the Fernández government and has intensified contention on the part of those oppositional organizations that feel discriminated against.

In the following analysis, we distinguish between government allies and oppositional organizations, on the one hand, and between mass organizations and (small) autonomous groups, on the other. The first distinction is crucial when it comes to assessing the persistence of the piqueteros under the Fernández government, because the political context to which the unemployed organizations had to adapt obviously differed significantly for those allied with and those opposed to the government. With a view to the latter group of oppositional organizations, we follow existing analyses of the piqueteros and treat the small, autonomous movements separately, precisely because of their small-scale and autonomous character (see Delamata, 2004, pp. 13-14; Garay, 2007, p. 316; Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 69-72).

Staunch allies of the government

Immediately after being elected president, Néstor Kirchner began to systematically ally with the set of dialogue-oriented piquetero organizations, incorporating important representatives from FTV, *Barrios de Pie* and *Movimiento Evita* into his government and binding the very organizations to his political movement *Frente para la Victoria* (Dinerstein, 2014; Svampa, 2009, 2014; Wolff, 2007b, pp. 193-194).⁹ In contrast to *Barrios de Pie* (see below), FTV and *Movimiento Evita* have retained their close links to the government to this day. While FTV leader Luis D'Elía lost his position in the *Subsecretaría de Tierras y Viviendas* in 2006 (Svampa, 2009, p. 225), he was replaced by FTV member Rubén Pascolini who has since directed the *Comisión Nacional de Tierras para*

el Hábitat Social (later renamed *Secretaría Nacional de Acceso al Hábitat*), which is responsible for the urbanization of marginalized urban districts (*villas*) and the allocation of territorial titles (*Clarín*, 2014, October 1). Emilio Pér-sico, historical leader of the *Movimiento Evita*, runs the *Secretaría de Agricultura Familiar de la Nación* (*La Nación*, 2015, March 3), and another movement leader, Javier Ruiz, is *Secretario de Participación Ciudadana* in the provincial government of Buenos Aires (Gobierno de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 2015; *La Nación*, 2012, January 17). As the latter is responsible for the supervision of the worker cooperatives in the province, Ruiz holds a particularly important position.

When looking at the evolution of the FTV since 2008, our analysis shows two trends which seem increasingly disconnected. On the one hand, as a social organization the FTV continues to run social projects and manages worker cooperatives.¹⁰ In general, rather than the issue of unemployed, topics such as land rights and territorial disputes increasingly dominate the agenda. In this area, the organization is also active in international networks and cooperates, for instance, with other Latin American land rights organizations (FTV, 2014). At the national level, the FTV maintains close relations with the pro-government wing of the CTA (Serdar, 2015). On the other hand, the FTV's political role has largely been taken over by the *Movimiento de Integración Latinoamericana de Expresión Social* (MILES), a political party established in 2011 as the 'political arm' of the FTV, led by D'Elia and directly allied with the government (Dobruskin & Garay, 2012, p. 4). An analysis of the FTV's twitter account shows that the great majority of the tweets were linked either to MILES or the person of D'Elia.¹¹ In line with these developments, the FTV has almost stopped engaging in contentious action. Between 2010 and 2015, only one public protest could be identified – a demonstration in July 2014 protesting against the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip that also featured the participation of the *Movimiento Evita* (*Clarín*, 2014, July 16).

As in the case of the FTV, the origins of the *Movimiento Evita* lie with 'territorial work', with self-help and self-organization activities of unemployed at the local level (Natalucci, 2011, p. 204). When the organization was effectively established in 2005, however, this largely followed a political logic: With the *Movimiento Evita*, a series of left-Peronist unemployed movements essentially built a political organization with the aim to support, and participate in, the Kirchner government and its political movement (see Pérez & Natalucci, 2010). According to Rossi (2015, p. 125), the Kirchner government in effect 'created' the *Movimiento Evita*. The trajectory of this organization is fairly similar to the FTV's development. Social work at the grassroots level continues to play an important role. In fact, reflecting the movement's influence on the implementation of the PAT, the *Movimiento Evita* is the organization with the biggest share of cooperatives and, in early 2012, employed 14,000 cooperative workers (*La Nación*, 2012, January 17). Above the local level, however, the focus mainly lies on political militancy within the Kirchnerist movement.

At the same time, the focus on the unemployed seems largely gone,¹² as is the recourse to contentious action. Besides the above-mentioned protest against Israel, the *Movimiento Evita* joined other social movements in the year 2014, including the autonomous piquetero organizations (see below), in demanding the official recognition of the *Confederación de los Trabajadores de la Economía Popular* (CTEP) (Grabois, 2015). The support of the CTEP, a newly formed trade union federation that organizes some 90,000 informal and cooperative workers, is one of the very few issues on which the Kirchnerist *Movimiento Evita* and oppositional piqueteros agree and work together (see Grabois, 2015; *Movimiento Evita*, 2014).

In sum, both the FTV and *Movimiento Evita* largely exist as organizations that serve the interests of their members by organizing grassroots work at the level of local territories (*trabajo territorial*) and managing state-funded cooperatives, while also operating as political machines in line with the specific political ambitions of their leaders as well as of the broader Kirchnerist movement. The successful persistence of these organizations can be plausibly explained by the positive interplay between these two logics: the widespread local activities guarantee their subsistence as mass organizations, which makes them important political allies of the government; in return, the close link with the government helps secure the resources through which the grassroots work is funded. While our research does not enable us to assess the motivation of individual members, it is at least plausible that the two organizations' local work, and the worker cooperatives in particular, provide them with the key mechanisms of retention that have been identified in social movement research (Bunnage, 2014): At the individual level, they guarantee a minimum level of resources and biographical availability (most importantly, because the members' very employment is directly related to their participation in the movement); at the collective level, continuous activities in the local community help reproduce the collective identity and the social networks on which the organizations are based, while the state-funded cooperatives guarantee a persisting level of organizational capacity and activity.

As a consequence, however, the focus on (organizing) the unemployed has faded into the background. More specifically, the participation in the framework of PAT has meant that the aim to manage one's own worker cooperatives has largely replaced the original demand for 'dignified work' that had been one of the core claims of the piquetero movement (Dinerstein, 2014) and that is hardly fulfilled by the precarious low-wage jobs in the context of PAT. In terms of Tarrow's mechanisms of movement demobilization, therefore, one could also argue that 'facilitation' (by the government) and 'institutionalization' (of the movements) have led to an effective transformation of the Kirchnerist unemployed movements (see Tarrow, 2011, p. 190). While enabling the persistence of the organizations, this transformation implies their disappearance as piqueteros in the narrow sense. In fact, to the extent that a social movement is usually defined as being involved in a sustained practice of con-

tentious claim-making, the organizations at hand have largely lost – or, at least for the time being, suspended – their movement-like properties .

Oppositional mass organizations

Since 2009, the group of oppositional piquetero movements has been dominated by four mass organizations: *Barrios de Pie*, CCC, *Polo Obrero* and the *Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Desocupados* (MIJD). During the presidency of Néstor Kirchner, *Barrios de Pie* was closely allied with both the government and the Kirchnerist organizations FTV and *Movimiento Evita*. In fact, it followed a quite similar logic combining a personal presence in the government (in the Ministry of Social Development) that supported the organization's grassroots work with an attempt to establish a Kirchnerist, yet formally independent political movement, *Libres del Sur* (Pérez & Natalucci, 2010; Svampa, 2009; Wolff, 2007b, p. 194). This changed, however, in the context of the increasing political polarization that was driven by the 2008 conflict between the Argentine government and the agricultural producers about export duties as well by the 2009 dispute about the Media Law (Svampa, 2014). Criticizing strategic errors by the government of Cristina Fernández as well as the Kirchners' decision to once again approach the Peronist party, including its right-wing, *Libres del Sur* decided to leave the government (*Página 12*, 2008, December 6; Svampa, 2009). The CCC, which had never openly supported the Kirchner government, had already become an official part of the opposition when it decided to support the agricultural sector during the 2008 protests (*La Nación*, 2009, December 13).

Besides the CCC and *Barrios de Pie*, *Polo Obrero* and MIJD constitute the organizations which most frequently appeared in the media during the period of analysis. The majority of their protests concerned the PAT, but recent years have seen a noticeable shift in this regard. Between 2010 and 2012, the oppositional unemployed movements mainly criticized the selection of beneficiaries and the implementation of the PAT, complaining about clientelist and politicized logics (*La Nación*, 2011, April 12; 2012, March 16). Since 2012, the organizations have shifted their focus and have increasingly demanded wage raises for the cooperative workers (*Clarín*, 2013, January 16; 2014, August 20; *La Nación*, 2014, January 29; 2014, April 24; 2015, March 3; *Página 12*, 2014, May 29). In August 2014, for instance, members of a *Barrios de Pie*-run cooperative from Greater Buenos Aires blocked the important freeway Camino del Buen Ayre to demand the preservation of their jobs and higher wages (*Clarín*, 2014, August 20). In December of the same year, *Barrios de Pie* and *Polo Obrero*, together with the smaller organization MST Teresa Vive, carried out a series of protests in Buenos Aires to demand the payment of a Christmas bonus for the cooperative workers (*Clarín*, 2014a, December 10; *La Nación*, 2014, December 2).

These PAT-related claims suggest that the piqueteros no longer see work in the cooperatives as a transitory phase, but as a regular job funded by the state. Rather than articulating demands for structural change, including 'dignified work', the oppositional movements focus on limited improvements within the state-run system of small local cooperatives. The predominant claims in the period under study include criticism of the administration of the PAT (*Clarín*, 2014, August 20), the lack of wage raises in line with inflation (*Clarín*, 2014, September 11; *Infobae*, 2015; *La Nación*, 2014, April 24; 2015, March 3; PIMSA, 2014, p.10) and the influence of the punteros on the programme (*La Nación*, 2012, March 16; 2014, August 7).¹³ The demand for higher wages also connects the oppositional piqueteros with the respective oppositional wings of the two Argentine trade union federations, CTA and *Confederación General de Trabajo de la República Argentina* (CGT). Between 2012 and 2015, *Polo Obrero*, CCC and *Barrios de Pie* in many occasions joined CTA and CGT in the demand for wage increases, also for regular employees (*La Nación*, 2012, October 11; 2013, December 17; PIMSA, 2014a, p. 10). In 2013, CCC and *Barrios de Pie* even participated in a one-week strike of both trade unions (*La Nación*, 2013, December 17). This trend, which makes the oppositional *piquetero* organizations increasingly behave like quasi trade unions, is not entirely new. In fact, from the very beginning, many unemployed movements have been led by (former) workers with a trade-union background and consciously appropriated classical labour movement tactics, while important organizations (such as the CCC or the FTV) have emerged in close relation with labour confederations (see Benclowicz, 2015; Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 58-63).

A second development that characterizes the oppositional mass organizations is related to their activities at the local level. *Barrios de Pie*, for instance, runs various popular kitchens (*Barrios de Pie*, 2012) and so-called *Bachilleros Populares*, a state independent educational system which provides higher education to adolescents and adults (see Svampa, 2011). Several protests on the part of *Barrios de Pie* were driven by the demand of increased state support for these popular kitchens (*Clarín*, 2012, April 5; *Corrientes Hoy*, 2015).¹⁴ The MIJD, on its part, has established a 'Popular University' in 15 Argentine provinces which operates independently from the state as well (*Diario Norte*, 2013). Here, the MIJD's demand for official recognition of this university led to conflicts with the Fernández government.¹⁵ Furthermore, the MIJD has supported the demands of indigenous groups like the *Qom* and *Wichi* for land rights (PIMSA, 2014a, p. 8), a matter which is also part of the agenda of the *Polo Obrero*¹⁶ and the CCC (PCR, 2015). In addition, in recent years, the CCC has been involved in land disputes. In 2011, for instance, the organization occupied the sugar factory Ledesma in the northern province of Salta to demand the assignment of the territory to the inhabitants of the region (*La Nación*, 2011, July 29).

All major *piquetero* organizations, finally, continue to be closely related to an individual political party (see Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 64-66). The

relation between *Barrios de Pie* and *Libres del Sur* has already been mentioned. The general secretary of this party in the province of Buenos Aires, Jorge Ceballos, was previously national coordinator of *Barrios de Pie* (Wolff, 2007b, p. 194). The same holds for the MIJD. While *Barrios de Pie* was originally initiated by a small leftist party (*Patria Libre*), the MIJD emerged as an independent *piquetero* organization and only later developed into a political party, strongly influenced and guided by Raúl Castells. Despite the project of the ‘Popular University’ and the existence of a few worker cooperatives which are led by the organization, the agenda of the MIJD is mainly a political one which is determined by its president (see *La Política Online*, 2015a, 2015b). Just like FTV and *Movimiento Evita*, *Barrios de Pie* and MIJD have thus established ‘political arms’ through which the movements (and their leaders, in particular) are able to participate in official politics. This is different in the cases of CCC and *Polo Obrero*. Ideologically and personally, these two organizations are still led by those small political parties – the *Partido Comunista Revolucionario* (PCR) and the Trotskyist *Partido Obrero* – that originally initiated the movements (Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 56-57; Wolff, 2007b, pp. 197-199). Interestingly, however, in the latter two cases the political party connection is much less visible than in the cases of the former. While *Barrios de Pie* and MIJD are strategically using their political parties to increase their presence in broader political debates, in the cases of *Polo Obrero* and CCC it is the other way round. Here, minor parties use social mass organizations in order to gain public attention for their cause.

In sum, as was to be expected, the oppositional mass organizations continue to make use of contentious strategies, if at a level that is much lower than during the heights of the Argentine crisis. Most importantly, the kinds of claims have undergone a significant shift, with protests largely focusing on the distribution and implementation of the PAT. This suggests that, just as in the case of the Kirchnerist organizations, the state-funded cooperatives have become a crucial mechanism to guarantee the retention of the members and, thus, the persistence of the movements on the ground. While the actual availability of state support is certainly lower in the case of the oppositional mass organizations, the protests against a government that is seen as unfairly favouring its allies plausibly strengthens the collective identity of the movements and, hence, to a certain extent compensates for the relative lack of material resources (see Bunnage 2014, p. 438). With a view to retaining a certain political relevance in a context in which the demands and protests of the unemployed find ever less public resonance (see *Diagnóstico Político*, 2014), the usage of parties as ‘political arms’ is accompanied by a growing cooperation with (oppositional) trade union federations as well as with land rights and indigenous organizations.

The group of autonomous movements

The third group of *piquetero* organizations is constituted by a wide range of smaller unemployed movements that have emphasized their political autonomy (from the government, but also from trade unions and political parties) as well as their embeddedness in a particular local context. Most of these MTDs can be found in the southern areas of Greater Buenos Aires, but some have also spread to other parts of the country (*Página 12*, 2012, June 24; Svampa, 2015; Torres, 2011, p. 140). While some of these autonomous groups have almost entirely retreated to the grassroots level,¹⁷ an important number of organizations keeps on protesting, including by blocking roads. This latter group includes the *Frente Popular Darío Santillán* (FPDS), *MTD Teresa Rodríguez* (MTR), *MTD Aníbal Verón* and the *Coordinadora Aníbal Verón*, all of which have continued to carry out protests, sometimes in cooperation with bigger organizations like the CCC, *Barrios de Pie* or the oppositional trade union wings (*Clarín*, 2013, October 23; *La Nación*, 2014, April 24; 2014, November 27; PIMSA, 2014b, p. 11). Again, the focus of their demands has been on the functioning of the PAT and on wage increases. In addition, as mentioned above, the FPDS, the *Coordinadora Aníbal Verón* and the *MTD Aníbal Verón* supported the recognition of the CTEP.

At the same time, the main concern of the autonomous organizations continues to be with their grassroots work at the level of local communities. Besides the management of cooperatives they conduct smaller projects in areas such as community development, education, food and health. The FPDS, for instance, runs five *Bachilleratos Populares* across the country (FPDS Rosario, 2013), and its regional cooperatives provide various popular kitchens, bakeries and kindergartens (FPDS, 2015). The *Coordinadora Aníbal Verón*, which unites a multitude of MTDs from southern Buenos Aires (Le Borgne de Boisriou, 2014, p. 129), supports its members in areas such as healthcare, self-employment possibilities and domestic violence (Torres, 2011, p. 142). Crucial for the MTDs' persistence are, again, the members' identification with the local organizations and with tangible, local problems (Torres, 2011, p.145) and, thus, with social ties, identities and needs at the community level (see Bunage, 2014, p. 435).

In the case of the *MTD Teresa Rodríguez*, our research suggests that the organization has increasingly tackled the issue of land rights, focusing on the inhabitants of the *villas*, on the one hand, and on the consequences of resource exploitation in the interior of Argentina, on the other. Furthermore, the organization criticizes the current Argentine educational system and demands an increase of food donations to the *piquetero*-run popular kitchens (*Clarín* 2011, August 12; 2014b, December 10; *La Nación*, 2013, March 12; PIMSA, 2014b, p.11).

In sum, the autonomous movements have preserved their most distinctive features: their independence from established political forces; their focus on

grassroots work at the local level; and their emphasis on bottom-up and horizontal decision-making processes (see Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, pp. 69-72). These features arguably make these movements relatively independent from national politics and overall macroeconomic developments, even if their reliance and focus on the PAT (see Torres, 2011, pp. 139, 141) shows that they have also adapted to the changing political context. At the same time, however, the very nature of the autonomous, local movements requires a nucleus of activists that remains strongly committed in ideological terms.

Conclusion

The persistence of the Argentine unemployed movements is remarkable. The cycle of contention – from the rapid diffusion of unemployed protests (1997-2001) to the peak of contentious action (2002) to a period of demobilization (2003-2007) – has long ended. The same applies to the dramatic situation of mass unemployment and severe poverty that fuelled these protests.¹⁸ And yet, virtually all the different movement organizations that were established during this cycle continue to exist, even if with a relatively low level of contentious activity and, correspondingly, at a lower level of public attention.

The comparative analysis of Argentina's unemployed movements presented in this article is certainly but a first step towards a thorough understanding of the ways and mechanisms by which they have managed to persist and retain their members since 2008. What emerges from this study is a set of three common features that are arguably crucial in this regard and are, in fact, shared by all piquetero organizations no matter their historic trajectory, organizational characteristics or political orientation. First, continuing with a logic of organizing that has characterized the Argentine unemployed movement from its very beginning (Svampa & Pereyra, 2004), all organizations reproduce their embeddedness in local networks and the corresponding social ties by conducting grassroots work that directly serves their members and the communities and neighbourhoods they are a part of. In theoretical terms, this directly corresponds to key requirements for activist retention identified by the literature (Bunnage, 2014): at the individual level, the focus on local community work enables and commits members to continue participating; at the collective level, it reproduces social networks, social ties and collective identities as well as organizational capacities. In combination with an overall reduction in contentious activity that, sooner or later, leads to weariness, this local focus has arguably prevented the unemployed movements from experiencing exhaustion, one of the typical mechanisms of demobilization (see Tarrow, 2011, p. 206).

Second, the reference to a common identity as unemployed workers and the making of specific unemployment-related claims that were crucial elements of the piqueteros' collective action frame in previous years have all but disappeared – at least, as far as public statements are concerned. This shift, clearly, responds to a changing context in which unemployment is no longer a major

issue in the public debate and protests by the unemployed meet with much less positive resonance than during the years of political and economic crisis. Third, the governmental programme *Plan Argentina Trabaja* (PAT) has taken centre stage in the agenda of all unemployed movements. In the case of the Kirchnerist organizations, the worker cooperatives funded by the PAT seem to constitute the core mechanism through which these mass organizations reproduce themselves at the grassroots level. For the oppositional groups, the mass organizations and the smaller autonomous movements, the PAT is also relevant in terms of the resources it provides. But it has also become the main target of continued contentious action: Claim making on the part of the oppositional unemployed organizations has increasingly focused on criticizing the clientelist implementation of, and the low wages provided by, the PAT.

A final observation calls for further investigation. All unemployed organizations continue to pursue an explicit political agenda, and mass organizations – both pro-government and oppositional – have their own respective political arms. However, this political dimension seems quite unrelated to the actual grassroots work done at the local level. In the case of the Kirchnerist movements, the political organizations serve to maintain the links with the government and are, therefore, crucial for guaranteeing the resources that support their territorial work; yet the role of political ideology and activities is far less clear in the case of the oppositional movements. More in-depth research at the local and activist level is needed in order to understand the mechanisms of movement reproduction and/or transformation.

* * *

Fynn Kaese <fynn.kaese@studio-radeloff.de> is currently enrolled in the M.A. programme Intercultural Communication at LMU Munich. His research interests include social movements, intercultural communication and postcolonial theories. He recently published a KAS country report on Argentina's presidential primaries ('Argentinien nach den Präsidentschaftsvorwahlen', 2015, co-authored with K. Wesemann & S. Volk).

Jonas Wolff <wolff@hsfk.de> is head of the research department and executive board member of the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) in Frankfurt, Germany. He teaches at Goethe University Frankfurt and Kassel University. His research focuses on Latin American politics, social movements, and international democracy promotion. Recent publications include 'Business Power and the Politics of Postneoliberalism: Relations Between Governments and Economic Elites in Bolivia and Ecuador' (*Latin American Politics and Society*, 2016) and 'Towards Post-Liberal Democracy in Latin America? A Conceptual Framework Applied to Bolivia' (*Journal of Latin American Studies*, 2013).

Fynn Kaese
Lindenstraße 29
25421 Pinneberg
Germany

Jonas Wolff
Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
60329 Frankfurt
Germany

Notes

1. To only mention but a small selection of contributions on the Argentine unemployed movements, see Bukstein (2008), Delamata (2004), Dinerstein (2003), Epstein (2006), Garay (2007), Quirós (2008), Svampa & Pereyra (2004), and Wolff (2007a).
2. See Abal Medina (2011), Benclowicz (2011, 2015), Boyanovsky (2010), Dinerstein (2014), Farias, Nardin & Santana (2013), Firchow (2015), Natalucci (2011), Pérez Álvarez (2015), Pérez & Natalucci (2010), Quirós (2011), Rossi (2015), Svampa (2011, 2014), and Torres (2011).
3. Altogether we examined 82 newspaper articles about piquetero organizations for the extent and type of contentious action as well as for the claims made. The categories for the qualitative content analysis were developed inductively. In the case of the claims, the main categories included demands for government support, claims for improving the working conditions of regular employees, criticism of clientelism/corruption, claims for recognizing land rights, and demands for the incorporation of more workers into the piquetero-run cooperatives.
4. See, for instance, the in-depth studies on individual unemployed movements by Julieta Quirós (2011) and Fernanda Torres (2011) as well as the overview of this research in Rossi (2015, pp. 118-122).
5. The following section draws on Wolff (2007, pp. 6-9).
6. All English translations of quotations are the authors'.
7. See the annual data on social conflict collected by Diagnóstico Político (2015a) and Nueva Mayoría (2015).
8. The Argentine minimum wage is 4.716 pesos (*La Nación*, 2014, September 2), whereas the poverty line is at 6.384 pesos monthly (*La Nación*, 2015, April 17). 30 per cent of PAT's budget goes to the respective municipality in order to finance the purchase and management of the materials required for the cooperatives (*La Nación*, 2014, November 30).
9. Svampa (2014, p. 167) describes the relation between the *piqueteros* and the Kirchner government as follows: 'Néstor Kirchner proposed a viable and attractive formula that combined contemporary Latin American progressivism with traditional appeals to political pragmatism, a concentration of power, cooption, clientelism, and subordination of key actors to the leader, among others'. As a consequence, unemployed movements such as FTV, Barrios de Pie and Movimiento Evita saw the Kirchner government as a 'historic opportunity' (Pérez & Natalucci, 2010, p. 102).
10. A case in point is the FTV cooperative 'El Tambo' in Isidro Casanova (FTV Buenos Aires, 2010).
11. Between April and May 2015, 32 tweets of altogether 117 tweets were linked to MILES, whereas Luis D'Elía was represented by more than 55 tweets or retweets (FTV, 2015).

12. According to the organization's website, the Movimiento Evita no longer has an organizational subunit (*frente*) for unemployed, but 'only' subunits for pensioners, trade unionists, informal workers, women and students. (Movimiento Evita Capital, 2015)
13. An exception is one roadblock by the Polo Obrero on 31 March 2015 at Puente Pueyrredón: On this occasion, the protesters criticized the casualization of labor relations (Polo Obrero, 2015, March 31).
14. See also the Facebook page of *Libres del Sur Barrios de Pie La Matanza* for an overview about other social activities of Barrios de Pie: <https://www.facebook.com/carmen.caceres.564>.
15. This conflict converted the MIJD into one of the harshest critics of the government. In fact, MIJD leader Raúl Castells posted tweets such as: 'I always told you, the K are Nazis', 'enough of Kirchnerism' or 'enough of the repression K' (Raúl Castells, n.d.). Raúl Castells personally carried out hunger strikes in order to force the recognition of the university as well as in support of indigenous matters (*Clarín*, 2014, January 7, 2014, January 16). Overall, however, the MIJD is the oppositional organization that has appeared least in the media in the last few years.
16. On its Facebook page the organization explains: 'Since the foundation of our Polo Obrero we consider strategic the goal of unity between workers, unemployed and brothers of the indigenous nations....' (Polo Obrero, 2015, February 20).
17. The *MTD La Juanita* in La Matanza (Gran Buenos Aires) is probably the best example for this development (see Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, p. 44; Wolff, 2007b, pp. 204-206). Rejecting all kind of state subsidies, this MTD was essentially transformed into an NGO (Rossi, 2015, p. 126). At the time of writing, the cooperative La Juanita was running a privately funded textile factory, a bakery, a computer repair centre and a kindergarten (La Juanita, 2015). While its founder, Hector 'Toty' Flores, was elected to the national parliament for the party alliance *Coalición Cívica-Alianza por una República de Iguales* (2007-2011) and later established his own party, the organization itself has in recent years not played any observable political role beyond the local sphere.
18. Since the peak of the economic crisis in 2002, the official unemployment rate has gone down from 19.7 per cent to around 7.2 per cent between 2011 and 2014. Urban poverty rates have been reduced from 45.3 per cent (2002) to 4.3 per cent (2012). Data taken from CEPAL (2015).

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