

INTRODUCTION

I think the first time I really understood what it meant to have nothing left to lose was when Cándido, a mild-mannered printer from the Chilavert Cooperative, described to me in his own words his decision and determination to go right to the bitter end. He said, "When I saw the police coming in, I thought, 'if it's not going to be ours, it's not going to be anybody's,' and I prepared a Molotov cocktail to destroy all our equipment." I told Cándido he would have ended up in prison. "So? Being out on the street, unemployed, is the same thing at my age." It's true: for this 59-year-old man, as for so many others, the only alternative to ending up penniless or with a pittance from a Work Plan [a make-work project] was to go out and put his life on the line. When these workers finally got the equipment working again, they discovered that they were no longer the same people. A change had occurred within them, a transformation that took place somewhere beyond the clamor of the struggle, beyond the anxiety of waiting for another negotiation or figuring out how to get a power supply. A silent change has transformed them and their surroundings. It's allowed them to quiet the voice within that had been telling them their only option was to look out for their individual interests. With no need for speeches or theories, they've managed to build the basis for a profound political change which is being woven by them and among them, day by day, and which will ultimately weave in all of society. Even now, it renews hope for the rest of us.

There's an old saying that "politics abhors a vacuum." Maybe that's why the seeds of something new are taking root in the political and economic rubble left by 30 years of neo-liberalism, seeds of something Argentines couldn't imagine only five years ago, when they drifted among consumerist dreams and pasteurized desires. When the crash came, some decided to stop wasting their time on idle accusations against anonymous people and start trying to change the atmosphere asphyxiating their minds. They were determined to create, out of nothing, a space that would let them grow and approach what was once unimaginable. On December 19 and 20, 2001, after the social explosion, people seemed ready to take the reins of the future through assemblies, mobilization, demands, recovered factories, pickets and a thousand other ways that don't have names yet.

Today, many of these forms of organization have proved to be ephemeral, but thanks to the social explosion, there are some that have survived. It's hard to imagine evolution without diversity. Without the vacuum left by what came before, what's growing and developing today would have been much more unlikely. Power is once again settling in, though it's hard to say just where. One of things to happen to this devastated and seemingly sterile country is the appearance of a group of people who are not only making change, but living it, and making a living from it. They ask nothing from anyone. In the worker-controlled enterprises, there is a new way of organizing work, the axis on which the whole social order turns.

Paradoxical as it might seem, the people most opposed the growth of this force are the very ones who caused the conditions that made it necessary. If they hadn't been so insatiable, the workers wouldn't have gambled the only thing remaining to them -- their own lives -- to fight to the end in a struggle that seemed suicidal. Thanks to this effort, it's now easier to imagine an alternative to going home empty-handed and unemployed. There are even those who dare to dream greater dreams and imagine a better society. The struggle for work and against unemployment, which fills hundreds of charts and graphs in the media, becomes real when you get to know the life experiences behind the numbers. Sometimes, it's

hard to find words to convey the anxiety, the doubts, the injustices and the hunger facing the worker who wants to reclaim a job. Sometimes words are not up to the task any more than grandiose intellectual constructs are.

If you haven't been through the kind of exploitation described in this book, it's an intellectual and sensory challenge to step into this other mindset, where each day might end up in a battle in which you risk falling across the line, where you're not likely to get back up. For almost eight months, I lived with one foot in my own profession, which is made up of words, and the other in the factories, in demonstrations, in discussions with *mate* (invariably sweet) being passed around, running away from tear gas, and in suffocating boredom as we waited for a Deputy or Senator to raise their manicured hand. Only there could I begin to construct a narrative that could provide an intense understanding of workers who were confronting a system based on their own oppression, and which, to add insult to injury, is justified in the talk that circulates in our society and is lazily accepted by most. The workers this book is about, however, decided to punch a hole in this system. As they crawled through the hole, they made it wider for those who followed. Together, they stretched the space they had created, little by little, giving themselves more room and more pride.

This story is made up of many fragments, and in it, I've discovered the courage of people are fighting their last battle, spending the last of their energy fighting against a more powerful enemy, and above all, against a generalized sense that utopias have gone out of style. They face a severe shortage of options, and the recovered factories, for all their limitations and failings, are their last hope for something more than mere survival. The factories are also probably one of the last hopes for a society desperate to chart its own destiny, even though it hasn't found a way to manage that. It might or might not seem like a big deal, but 15,000 workers managed to stop clinging to Work Plans and even make progress, in spite of resistance from business, the judiciary, economic structures and even prejudice. Thanks to that decision, they've been able to make these factories grow, create new jobs, and distribute profits equitably in way that no other famous, sustainable effort has managed. It's hard to imagine turning back now. This movement seeks to put the workers back in abandoned factories where the equipment will otherwise continue to sit idle or else be sold to the lowest bidder for scrap. If the State and society at large gave it more support, thousands of jobs could be created annually.

Some people argue that these factories have owners, that private property still exists in Argentina, but there's also a counterargument that most of bankrupt businesses owe money to their workers, to the State for tax evasion, to banks, and to their suppliers. Who should own these idle factories? Those who hold the deed, or the workers who weren't paid their salaries? Or maybe the State, which didn't make the proprietors pay taxes, making them even richer. Or perhaps the banks that gave loans to build the factories, or the citizens who paid taxes that vanished into fraudulent bankruptcies. In this nation devastated by three decades of neoliberalism and an unprecedented economic crisis, the answer should be clear, even to the capital-less capitalists who don't respect the very rules of the game they try to impose on others.

When you look at it this way, trying to recover jobs seems like a way of keeping the system going with self-organized workers in place of corrupt capitalists. It may still work out that way, but the more-or-less explicit goal of a good portion of the people who are reopening factories is to create the material conditions for a change in consciousness to bring about a deeper social change. It's hard to say whether or not they'll reach this goal, because the workers are the ones who are taking power, and they're the

ones who will (eventually) have to decide to dedicate the same kind of energy that they devoted to the task of reopening factories towards building a new society.

At any rate, the struggle itself is bringing about a silent change in these men and women who are realizing what they can do, and becoming more ambitious. If they've been able to fill their own plates, why not try to fill the neighbors' plates, too? The new way of organizing work in assemblies and being in charge of their own destinies have made it hard for them look on injustice in the old, passive way without feeling complicit. Those who watch them achieve the impossible are inspired by their struggle.

These workers rarely have friends in the press; nor are they likely to go to parties that judges attend, or go to bars and chat with the country's intellectuals, or get together in some exclusive, high-society restaurant. That is why I wrote this book. That is why I tried to amplify their voice, a voice that journalists rarely record except to fill a column or two worth of space. In his last book, López Echagüe speaks bitterly of...

...that flock of journalists and communicators with a propensity for intellectual laziness, for chopping up reality and using the bits and pieces for whatever ends best suit their purpose...¹

There's a whole different reality in San Martín, in Valentín Alsina, in Neuquén (heading towards Centenario) or in the Once neighborhood in the capital. To reach it, however, you have to get past the prejudices your own co-workers have built, and break down the barriers imposed by a society shaped by selfishness and hardened by dictatorships, which violated our bodies, and by President Menem's rule, which poisoned our spirit. Having crossed these barriers, I feel obliged to try to balance the scale, to open the windows, so more people can peer in, to let those on the outside meet the gaze of those on the inside, and to re-weave the fabric of a society torn apart by fear, prejudice, and the need to avoid blame. The truth is simpler. It may be that these realities are different, or at least seem like it, but there's a lot to be learned from those who fight with no fear because they have nothing left to lose. More and more people imagine alternatives, and even depend on them to live.

I wrote this book for all these reasons. It's an attempt to capture with pen and ink a piece of the living, breathing history of Argentina, a story that can be read in the hands of the workers. But it can only really be understood up close and personally. In my research, I collected fragments of a story that has yet to come into focus. Even its own main characters can't agree on how to read it. Many of these fragments exist only in the memories of the participants, in notes in diaries (which can differ or even contradict each other), in some pamphlet, in a meeting captured on film, or just floating for a brief moment on the air. We'll look for the common threads that can be woven into a general picture, but for whatever reason -- the newness of all this, the diversity of circumstances, or the inexperience of the researcher -- the larger tendencies continue to hide behind a curtain of exceptions, making it difficult to draw more definitive conclusions. With all that in mind, this book will be a rough draft for future works that draw on much broader experience, almost a mythology, ready to fight the social imagery of politicians who talk a lot and say little, and of television programs that measure personal success in cars and clothes.

1 López Echagüe, 2002.

I hope the result will be a puzzle, an eye-opener that will (with a little luck) plant doubts in the reader's mind. Hopefully, you will go out and do your own research in the only way some things can be understood -- putting your own body on the line.

1.1. Possible viewpoints

The phenomenon of recovered factories (like any phenomenon, really) can be seen from countless perspectives. From a short-term historical perspective, for example, it can be analyzed as a kind of "miracle," coming after ten years of Menem's presidency, which left the earth scorched of combativeness, creativity, and any sense of solidarity and struggle. Or, it can be seen in the historical context of several decades of Peronista resistance, which provided experience to the most combative sectors of society.

Another possible perspective is the internationalist view (which colors a good part of the creation of this book) brought here by visitors speaking a nearly indecipherable Spanish as they file through the recovered factories, to the surprise, delight, and sometimes exhaustion of the workers. With one foot still in their home country, these visitors usually come looking for something genuine, fleeing the suffocation of desires imposed by advertising and the fleeting pleasures of wealthier consumer societies. In the general worldwide crisis of legitimacy capitalism is going through, Argentina -- once a pioneer in a neo-liberal experiment that brushed aside legitimacy and consensus -- is now spearheading a much-needed change that could be considered a test case for the rest of the world.

Closely connected to what foreign writers often come looking for is that great question mark, representative democracy. It's been called into question in this country, with good reason -- especially after the events of December 19 and 20 -- and there's a need to demonstrate that another, more horizontal, form of democracy is possible. It's interesting to note that, while representative democracy is being questioned in many societies -- as a result of repression, corruption, injustice, blatant crimes, and human suffering -- direct democracy still needs to demonstrate its utility and effectiveness.

It seems like a hundred times I've described to a friend or acquaintance that the cooperatives make their decisions in assemblies, only to hear, "Yeah, but somebody has to be in charge..." or, "Who's really managing the whole thing?" or, "Somebody's going to come along and gobble them up!" and so on. Anyone who's been to assemblies knows that, while there are natural leaders, the practice of holding assemblies gives people the ability to say "no," to express dissent, and to promote their opinion through conviction, not coercion. In those situations in which a small group makes the decisions, there's a tendency to gravitate towards the same dynamics that caused the crisis in the first place, and the survival rate goes back to what it was under earlier model. On the other hand, the co-ops that adapt to the complexity of direct democracy seem to show signs of development.

As we walk the path of possible viewpoints, the next step is to look interpersonal relationships. These infinite encounters can only be classified and described at the risk of stripping them of their very essence: their diversity and individuality. Often, a literary take on things captures this in a way that remains elusive to the academic style. In a meeting in a recovered factory, Osvaldo Bayer said, "What unity, what a sense of poetry, what a sense of beauty, what a sense of the struggle! Let's follow their

example and fight!"² This spirit pervades the factories, where it faces cynicism, but never romanticism. Here, being up-front is a right.

What the academic style can do is give us tools to think things that have never been thought before. On occasion, however, academics deconstruct an idea until there's nothing left of it, leaving us perplexed and empty-handed. Today, there are some intellectuals who have said "mea culpa" and stopped going on about how things should be. For the first time in their lives, they're actually listening to the social classes they've always claimed to defend.

As Naomi Klein said in May 2002, sitting across from the Brukman factory that the workers had been evicted from,

The idea of this round-table, that so-called intellectuals and journalists should offer theories about how the working class should organize and fight, is both offensive and dangerous. This idea is responsible for a lot of what's dysfunctional about the Left today. If there's anything to be learned from these surprising Brukman women, it's that the working class already knows how to organize and fight. In Argentina and around the world, original, creative, effective direct action is way ahead of intellectual leftist theory.

There's also a romantic view that sees steps toward utopia in something that's really nothing more than an attempt to keep a job and keep personal, private consumption going. Not all the workers have the class consciousness or romanticism -- sometimes mixed with a vulgar traditionalism -- which journalists and other analysts insist on reading into this phenomenon. There are workers who experienced the consequences of neo-liberalism up close and personal, and still voted for Menem. Others refuse to share their meager unemployment benefits with *compañeros* in need, and still others who think about sub-contracting as soon as the cooperative gets going. Of course, there are also workers who dream of a socialist Argentina, but they're not necessarily the majority. To the extent that it's possible to detect a common tendency in such diversity, the cases analyzed below show that the struggle is born of the desire to hold on to possessions and the fear of the worst fate of all: unemployment.

This fear is a powerful motivation, and we shouldn't underestimate it. Class consciousness comes later -- in the best of cases -- along with a deeper transformation, thanks to the daily practices in a worker-controlled factory, as we'll see later.

All these viewpoints will make appearances in this book, and the reader will have plenty of raw material to come up with even more. In spite of this variety, the story is tied together with an idea which can be summed up in phrase borrowed from Marxism: You have to go from earth to heaven, not heaven to earth.

That means that we don't begin with what a person says, imagines, or thinks, nor with what is said, imagined or thought about them to find the flesh-and-blood person. We start from the real, active person in their everyday life, and from there, we follow the development of their ideology and the echoes of their life.³

2 "Nuestra lucha", No. 129, 4/2002

3 Marx, Karl, 1968

To put it painfully briefly, Marx insists that social relations are ultimately determined by material conditions. While the autonomy of social relations is debatable (and the debates could fill a bibliography thousands of pages long), we will accept the idea in this book, and hope to strengthen it with practical examples. Each page of this book hinges on the idea that social discourse and practices (legal, economic, interpersonal, etc.) cannot remain untouched by the changes in the way people survive, which is to say, the changes in the way people work. With a change in work -- one of most essential activities in life -- there's also change in the way the way workers relate to each other, construct their lives, and understand and face the world. Obviously, the "ideological" result of being able to make decisions about one's own work will vary. It's true that work is not the only determining factor in a person's worldview, but it's also true that it's one of the essential activities of daily life, and at least for the working class, it provides a structure that sustains all other activities -- family life, recreation, culture, etc.

The effect of restructuring work to be more horizontal ranges from a lukewarm feeling of community with other members of a cooperative to a personal conviction that we are all equal and need to fight for a better world. These individual transformations can eventually bring about deeper changes in the social sphere. "Power is not possessed, it is exercised in different places through social relations,"⁴ and these social relations are transforming themselves -- and power -- to eventually distribute it more equitably. In a social climate where it's been accepted that, most of the time, those who hold of power use it against the people, we shouldn't underestimate the power for change in a successful self-managed project.

As this book is being finished, and the number of workers who have recovered their jobs is still tiny compared to the number of employees, we can already see some effects on society. Even in a stingy evaluation of these changes, we can still say that when business goes bankrupt, there are employees who see worker control as a viable alternative to unemployment, and they inform themselves on how to accomplish it. There are business owners who see that workers don't depend on them for the privilege of working. There's a possibility of changes in the bankruptcy laws to facilitate worker control in the future (the very fact that this is being discussed can be considered a result of the phenomenon). There are workers in these cooperatives who are sharing their fates with their co-workers -- they've stopped relating through competition and started feeling the power of solidarity. All these changes may seem unimpressive, but the dynamics being set up (factories opening almost daily, thanks to the workers) lead us to expect that the temperature will continue rise as more examples come along.

The daily practice of self-managed work control changes the way people see the world, and may also explain the different ways that different participants in this phenomenon approach the world. Each one -- workers, judges, neighbors, assembly members, police, and strikers -- has tools and personal experiences that allow them to see some things, but not others. In fact, what's at stake in this great struggle for social change is precisely the ability to name things that currently have no names, tools, or spaces in which to think about them in our society. Private property itself, the basis of all capitalist construction, is in question.

Here's just one example, which was given to me by Diego Kravetz, lawyer for the National Movement of Recovered Businesses: for a while now, the law has been out of touch with reality and doesn't know what to do many of the situations it faces. The same thing happens in other social spheres -- journalism,

⁴ 4 Chavez, María, et al., 2002.

economy, and morality give answers that are meant to calm their own consciences and fool themselves in the face of evidence that some things are no longer working, which makes it reactionary to keep believing in them.

This book will try to name some of the things that seek to be taken into account. In a best case scenario, they will let us think about society in ways that are more realistic and fruitful than terminology that has lost its meaning and connection to the world around us.

1.2 The conditions of production

"This country...!"

-Avi Lewis, repeatedly, during the first half of 2003, in Argentina.

Much of the material in this book is the result of an investigation carried out over six months for a documentary directed by Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein, two Canadian journalists and analysts who criticize capitalism and the injustices committed by those who follow its logic. Naomi Klein is the author of *No Logo*, one of the most important works on the consequences of neoliberal capitalism, not only at the economic level, but cultural as well. This has earned her highly inaccurate label "leader of the globalphobes." Avi Lewis, for his part, is well-known in Canada as the host of some 500 political debates over three years for the program "Counterspin" over a period of three years.

The couple (they're married) visited Argentina in 2002, and after several months, were struck by the number of new forms of social organization that were emerging. They returned at the end of the year, and for much of 2003, they filmed picket lines, recovered factories, assemblies and all kinds of organizations and people in an attempt to discover an alternative to savage capitalism.

Near the end of my work with them, I talked to them about my interest in writing a book which would include some of material we'd gathered, and however much more was necessary. The other choice, I told them, was to let all the interesting material we'd compiled, but that wouldn't fit in a documentary of less than two hours, disappear without a trace. To my delight, they said that they didn't consider the information their property, and supported my idea of a book.

Because Naomi and Avi did many of the interviews that appear in this book, it seemed only fair to name them. In a lot of cases, I was actually their interpreter, and we often talked about our impressions. Most of the ideas in this book came out of the exchanges among the the 15 or so members of the team.

The point of this clarification is not to exploit their names, but rather to explain as clearly as possible the production conditions under which the interviews were done -- often in English and then translated into Spanish -- and above all, to honor Avi for being an extraordinary interviewer. It was surprising to watch how, despite the language barrier, his sensitivity and charisma brought out the best in every interviewee. His way of smiling and nodding at each answer could soften anybody up -- even the "bad guys" in the film. Both Naomi and Avi have shown that if you know how to listen, you can understand a reality that seems distant and foreign. And in a country like Argentina, where everyone likes to talk, listening is not as simple as it sounds.

1.3 Structure of the book

To develop the subject as well as possible, and to facilitate understanding of a phenomenon with many facets, this book is structured to present a partial but representative view. First, as we have seen, there is an overview of the topic and the decision to take a multi-disciplinary perspective, then an explanation of the conditions of production of this book, and, finally, this summary of what reader will find inside it.

Once this basis is established, we'll move on to the second part. The first chapter provides some background on worker control at different points in history and in different countries. The goal here is simply to give the reader some idea where to look for parallels that are beyond the scope of this book. This will also provide a better understanding of the novel idea of worker control as the ultimate goal of worker struggle.

The next chapter talks about the first moments and early growth of what would become a broader movement. This section includes data on the two most institutionalized currents of the phenomenon: the National Movement of Factories Recovered by Workers, led by Luis Caro, and the National Movement of Recovered Businesses, whose president is Eduardo Murúa. The choice of these two currents and their leaders doesn't mean they're in charge of the movement, but rather that they've participated in so many struggles that they're probably the two people who have seen the most, right up close. That's why a lengthy interview of each is included (in the case of Murúa, lawyer Diego Kravetz⁵ was also there), with the objective of getting their perspective on the phenomenon and their role in it.

In the next section, questions that were hinted at in the first section are discussed in more depth with special attention to some of the social, economic and legal implications of this phenomenon. First, we'll look at it from a social point of view, and try to describe it where it has the greatest power and highest hopes for growth: everyday practice. The central hypothesis of the chapter is that the dynamic the workers live in is a moving target, and that it moves them -- if not always smoothly -- towards a class consciousness (loosely defined) that most of them didn't have before. The workers' assemblies, the growing awareness of their decision-making ability, the awakening of creativity at the service of work, participation -- all the things businesspeople dream about their employees doing -- really do happen. Not when company communication consists of empty slogans, though, but when the workers have real and unlimited participation in decision-making.

The next subject will be legal considerations, a highly complex field for a neophyte, but one that proves decisive when the time comes to formalize a successful factory occupation. The intention is for this chapter to be a sort of introduction to the legal steps to follow and the choices the workers face in their struggle. It's an open question which is the best way, and only the workers themselves can answer for their particular case. The basic hypothesis that runs through this chapter is that the law can't respond to a new social reality with tools that have long since been left behind by practice and social necessity. It's even less able to give satisfactory answers without profound changes in legislation. The law can be considered the institutionalization of an arrangement of forces used to legitimize the status quo. In Argentina, the rule of law has been overwhelmed overtaken by reality. In this context, recovered factories use the law in a particular way to reach a socially necessary goal -- namely, work.

⁵ Dr. Diego Kravetz was also elected to the legislature in the election held on 7/24/03, just as the final version of this book was being finished.

When it comes to economics, the intent is to show that the businesses in the hands of the workers are far from being doomed to fail, as certain businesspeople, journalists, and "common sense" have repeatedly said. On the contrary, these enterprises have several advantages over old-style management. In the first place, the workers' commitment is different. They no longer work for the boss' benefit -- now they control the fruits of their labor. In some cases, this can lead to a more relaxed and healthy attitude toward work, but even if that happens, each worker's effectiveness still improves. No longer do they take unnecessary sick days, or exaggerate accidents, or goof off when the foreman isn't looking. On the contrary, they make more efficient use of materials they themselves decided to buy, and more humane use of the work day, because they know better than anyone the importance and cost of each hour.

You don't need to be a romantic to believe in this. In each factory, you can see the pride the workers take in doing the jobs they fought so hard for. Above all, worker-run businesses are more efficient because one ingredient has been taken out of the mix: the owner cost. The pressure on the owner to make a profit at all costs (even pushing the business into bankruptcy), was really a obstacle to the success of the business. Now, in contrast, that profit might not be there, or it might be re-invested, directed to social causes, divided up among the workers, or whatever's decided in the assembly.

Finally, it should be clarified that the primary goal of workers in control of their job is not necessarily economic. In other words, if productivity falls at some point but the quality of the work and the quality of life of the workers improves, they come out ahead, because that's how they've chosen to enjoy their work. It is revolutionary and qualitatively innovative for a factory to have other criteria that challenge efficiency and productivity for supremacy, even though the business still depends on them for survival.

In the third part of the book, five individual cases are analyzed. We try to keep the information as raw as possible, so each reader can observe them with the tools provided in the previous part, or with others the reader may want to try. In none of the cases has there been an attempt to compile all the information (which would be impossible anyway). Rather, the idea is to pull out whatever is most distinctive about each factory: an especially good interview, an experience from the struggle, a failure, or the details of the workers' day in given factory. The results may be somewhat arbitrary, but the intent is to provide details on what it's like to live through these experiences without belaboring repeated themes. The cases that have been selected are Zanón, the Chilavert Cooperative, the Unión y Fuerza Cooperative, Brukman, and the Communications Institute Cooperative.

So, I invite the reader to plunge into this new understanding of work, which is built on the ruins of prejudice, and which opens up hope for change from the very roots of society: the productive forces. It would be dangerous, however, to fall into a romantic view that ignores the existing limitations. Beyond the stories in here, there is enough material and enough viewpoints out there for readers to find a wealth of information and frameworks that escaped this researcher. Anyway, I hope you enjoy the journey.