

Politics in the Peronist Unions (1946-1955)

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between peronism and the union movement determined the origins of this political movement and its subsequent power. Nowadays, in most of the new researches about the period which comprises the years between 1946 and 1955, and having overcome the traditional approaches which outlined the monolithic cooption of the working organizations by President Juan Domingo Perón, this bond is analyzed from a different angle: presupposing an active syndical actor with autonomous political practices. The opening of the Argentinian historiographic field makes it possible to analyze this political-syndical relationship from a “new” perspective.

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KEYWORDS

Argentina, peronism, union movement, CGT, metal workers

Unions and Politics

The relationship between peronism and the union movement determined the origins of this political movement and its subsequent power, it explained its survival to

a large extent during the years of political proscription, and in the end, it finally explained its return to power in 1973, almost two decades after being evicted from the presidency of the nation by a military coup. Even today, at the beginning of the 21st century, this bond is key to any sort of governability in Argentina. Since 2003 (though today to a lesser extent), unions have been among the main allays of the peronist governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner¹.

Nowadays, in most of the new researches about the period which comprises the years between 1946 and 1955, and having overcome the traditional approaches which outlined the monolithic cooption of the working organizations by President Juan Domingo Perón, this bond is analyzed from a different angle: presupposing an active syndical actor with autonomous political practices. The opening of the Argentinian historiographic field makes it possible to analyze this political-syndical relationship from a “new” perspective.

Today, we can ask ourselves about the nature of the political exchange between the unions and the government during the first years of peronism. Taking the proposals of the Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno² as a point of departure, it is possible to assert that the government was willing to exchange positions of power with the unions to obtain certain social consensus. Generally, when unions make political negotiations they must maintain a moderate behavior, applying certain subexploitation of the market power in the short term. In order to do this, the unions must convince their members that they will serve their interests better if they moderate their demands, or the organizations must be strong enough to face the pressure of the members and obtain more in an immediate way. This is what the peronist unions intended to do during the peronist years, though with different methods and levels of success, always depending on the specific political and economic circumstances.

In a classic paper, Deppe, Herding and Hoss³ consider that the relationship between basis, unions and parties (mostly when they are in the government) differs according to the cyclic changes of the different economies. They pose that during the periods of prosperity, when it is easier to obtain concessions from entrepreneurs; there is a greater probability of conflict between the parties which recommend wage moderation and the unions under the pressure of the basis, and between the union leadership and the

¹ Over the past two years this relationship has undergone an important crisis. Nowadays, the government is directly opposed to three of the five National Trade Union Centers existing in Argentina. The allies constitute the majority but are not hegemonic.

² Crouch, Colin & Pizzorno, Alessandro, (comp.) *El resurgimiento del conflicto de clases en Europa Occidental a partir de 1968*. Madrid, Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 1991.

³ *Idem*.

basis. By contrast, during the periods of economic decline, when the working class is forced to defend itself from the attacks towards their jobs and life conditions, there is hardly a chance of economic success at the level of the factory or through wage negotiations on a larger scale. That is when the commitment is moved towards the political sphere; the workers expect political measures which will protect their interests. Normally, the parties which lay their foundations in the unions adopt these expectations cooperating with more intensity in the political reform or at least in programs of estatal intervention. This outline can be observed in the Argentinian case (although not linearly), mainly during the first thirty months of the peronist government.

Peronism and unions

During its first ten years in the government, peronism reassured itself on a massive support which surpassed the 60% of the voters. This electoral power consisted of an immense majority of workers identified with the peronist movement and its leader. Nevertheless, that electoral framework was not channeled in a powerful political party. The peronist party as a structure was too weak. The unions, allies and pillars of the government, were the central axis of the two presidential campaigns won by Perón.

Throughout that entire decade, and despite the different attempts of the government in the opposite direction, peronism continued to politically depend on its alliance with the unions. Far from diminishing, this dependency increased. Outside the union movement, peronism was unable to obtain agreements and a stable support. In this context, and if we think about it in pragmatic terms, the government's desire to acutely control syndicalism, is understandable. The problems it had to achieve this are also understandable.

Generally, literature which dealt with this issue wondered about the degree of autonomy of the unions as regards their relationship with the government and their power of decision and real influence in the politic-economical level. Furthermore, this literature placed the union movement and its leadership at the same level, and particularly to the one of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT). In previous papers we emphasized the need to bring other tensions and actors to light, to broaden the horizon beyond the restricted political debate⁴. It was outlined that getting inside the dynamics of the relationship between capital and work was unavoidable during those

⁴ Schiavi, Marcos. *La resistencia antes de la resistencia: La huelga metalúrgica y las luchas obreras de 1954*. Buenos Aires, El Colectivo, 2008.

years, focusing, at the same time, on the unprecedented transformations which had occurred in the working places. In these same papers, the focus was placed on the syndical basis organizations, a fundamental part of the syndical-peronist model. That is to say, a *history from the bottom* was chosen, which would make it possible to understand the actions of the fundamental protagonists of Argentinian politics in a better way. In this particular paper, taking what has previously been done as a point of departure, we will focus our attention on the dynamics of the high syndical spheres and we will not inquire about its power. We suggest this, because we consider that the work which has been done so far (at the level of the basis) provides us with the necessary tools to go deeper into this aspect. In this sense, we will try to question the predominant visions about the role of the CGT during the peronist decade, applying them to particular circumstances and observing the dynamics between the head union and the other national based trade-unions, particularly the Metallurgical Industry Trade Union (UOM).

There are two questions which structure this paper: How powerful was the CGT within the syndical movement? And, how automatic was the support of the CGT and the national unions to the politic-economical measures dictated by the government? This modest presentation doesn't aim to answer these questions fully. However, it does wish to provide and promote new topics that might further new lines of research.

In order to do this exercise, we will first go through the main hypothesis about the peronist CGT. We will then, focus our attention in two key moments of the period: November, 1947 and June, 1954 (both strikes ordered by the UOM). In these moments, we will analyze the bond between the CGT and the main industrial union in Argentina during that period, the Metallurgical Industry Trade Union (UOM)⁵. Taking into account its political centrality we must avoid presenting a relationship which is unique as a generality. This does not mean that the case is meaningless and that it can not be projected into other relevant unions. The analysis of each circumstance will be presented in the following manner: First the politic-economical situation will be outlined after the proposals and governmental wishes and in a third step, the practices of the CGT will be observed, to finally show how the UOM operates and which are the

⁵ The Argentinian Textile Workers' Union (Asociación Obrera Textil) can also be considered as one of the main Argentinian industrial unions of the period. However, in our thesis we have demonstrated that both at the organizational level and at the level of collective negotiations, the UOM was the most powerful one during the entire peronist decade. Schiavi, Marcos. *La dinámica sindical durante los dos primeros gobiernos peronistas (1946-1955) El caso de las industrias metalúrgica y textil en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires y sus alrededores*. Tesis de doctorado Universidad de Buenos Aires – Université Paris 8, 2012

consequences, tensions and results of both actions.

Insights on the syndical leadership

The main exponent of the interpretations about the bond between the syndical movement and peronism is Gino Germani, founding father of Argentinian sociology. The central thesis of his researches, exposes the complete absence of autonomy of the workers in their relationship with the peronist government, absence which has its basis in the origins of the same bond. He begins by the premise that during this period there is, in Argentina, a transition from a traditional society to an industrial one. In this transition, two convergent processes are developed (an industrialization phase together with a massive migration from the interior, both a direct result of the world crisis of 1929) in harmony with a scenario permeated by the limited political turnout after the military coup of September 1930, in the setting of a fraudulent regime. Because of this, according to Germani, there is an “available mass” that politically speaking can not find the necessary institutional channels to blend into the system. Peronism, in this view, is the authoritative channel through which the new workers are politically integrated⁶.

In opposition to this interpretation of peronism as a pseudo totalitarianism, Juan Carlos Portantiero and Miguel Murmis are the biggest exponents of the perspective that values the rationality of the working movement. They assert, in opposition to the Italian intellectual, that in the emergence of peronism, between 1943 and 1946, there is an intense participation of organizations and syndical leaders which reaffirms a pragmatic continuity. Therefore, these authors pose the rejection of Germani’s perspective of the passive and heteronomous participation of workers⁷. Hugo Del Campo and Juan Carlos Torre follow the same interpretative line. They particularly focus their analysis on Union leader’s actions⁸. They highlight the support received by peronism in those initial years, from both old and new trade unionists and they demonstrate certain precedent tendencies in the unions which facilitate their connection to peronism: bureaucratization, reforming policies, pragmatism, appealing to state intervention and the mistrust and hostility towards the working class political parties. Nevertheless, this

⁶ Germani, Gino. *Política y sociedad en una época de transición: De la sociedad tradicional a la sociedad de masas*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Paidós, 1962.

⁷ Murmis, Miguel, & Portantiero, Juan Carlos. *Estudios sobre los orígenes del peronismo*. Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1972.

⁸ Torre, Juan Carlos. *La vieja guardia sindical y Perón: Sobre los orígenes del peronismo*. Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1990 y Del Campo, Hugo. *Sindicalismo y peronismo: Los comienzos de un vínculo perdurable*. Buenos Aires, Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 1983.

autonomy and political presence seems to vanish with the arrival of Perón to the presidency in June, 1946. This is what Murmis and Portantiero underwrite, when they pose that the dissolution of the autonomy in favor of the worker's heteronimy occurs since 1946-1947. At the same time, both Del Campo and Torre consider the dissolution of the "Partido Laborista" (created by the unions in November 1945, source of the 70% of the votes which lead Juan Perón to the presidency, and finally dissolved by his command in May, 1946.) and the ousting of Luis Gay from the direction of the CGT as inflection points. Del Campo states that these facts:

"... initiated a process of concentration of power which would make any vestige of autonomy disappear from the syndical movement, subordinating it to an increasingly authoritative political regime"⁹.

Torre, on his part, states that syndicalism, after these events, loses its character as an independent actor. The state imposes on it, subordinating it to the needs of the management of the new regime.

Classic historiography, despite its different temporalities and gradations, agrees that the syndical autonomy becomes a chimera during peronism, with more intensity during the second administration. This shade can be seen among those who perceive the whole working class without autonomy, as opposed to others who focus this description in the CGT and the national unions. Robert Alexander speaks about a complete state of submission on the part of the working movement. Milciades Peña shares the Germani's characterization of the working class as heterogeneous and heteronomous and states that, the CGT became a government agency from the beginning. Walter Little considers that until 1951 there is a process of expansion and consolidation of syndicalism dominated by the state and that afterwards, the government imposes a monolitical control where the unions are transformed into mere agents of governmental propaganda. One of the central hypotheses of Scott Mainwaring is that, between 1952 and 1955, on its highest levels, the workers' movement was virtually reduced to be an agent of the government, while certain autonomy was preserved at the level of the plant. For Louise Doyon, after the ousting of Luis Gay from the CGT, the latter ceased to aspire to be a representative of the workers' movement before the government, to start behaving more like a representative of the government in the workers' movement. That is to say, according to Doyon, at the beginning of 1947, the CGT becomes the government's

⁹ Del Campo, *op. cit.*, 16

delegate and spokesperson within syndicalism, facing the mobilized basis organizations¹⁰.

The authors we have mentioned are part of what we may call the historiographic canon of the subject. It is clear that there is certain consensus among them when they pose the absence of autonomy in the CGT syndical leadership. What does not appear to be analyzed in depth in these papers is the internal dynamics between the CGT and the union. Only Doyon pays attention to it in certain parts of his thesis. That is precisely what is intended to be observed. Because, regardless of whether the CGT was autonomous or not, what must be relected upon, is the power it had in a setting of open collective negotiations. Due to this, what this work is trying is to observe the CGT in action: seeing how mimetic was its policies with that of the government and, if necessary, how much power it had to discipline and control the ones it represented, the national unions. The next question to be made, is how autonomous they were and what its relationship with the basis was like.

This canon is up for discussion, we are living a change of paradigm in terms of the bond between the syndical movement and the peronist government. Over the last years, there has been a reawakening of the studies concerning the Argentinian workers' movement¹¹, a line which has been influenced theoretically, methodologically and conceptually by historical materialism, particularly by British and Northamerican Marxist authors. Within this reawakening, a particular growth of the researches focused on the first peronism has been observed¹². These papers nourish our research, both through their empirical contributions and their interesting ways of approaching the object and the renewed interpretations they make of a state of a matter

¹⁰ Alexander, Robert. *The Peron era*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1951; Peña, Milciades. *Masas, caudillos y elites: La dependencia argentina de Yrigoyen a Perón*. Buenos Aires, Ediciones Fichas, 1971; Little, Walter. *La organización obrera y el Estado peronista, 1943-1955*. *Desarrollo Económico*, 19, 75, 1979; Mainwaring, Scott. *El movimiento obrero y el peronismo, 1952-1955*. *Desarrollo Económico*, 21, 84, 1982; Doyon, Louise. *Perón y los trabajadores: Los orígenes del sindicalismo peronista, 1943-1955*. Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editora Iberoamericana, 2006.

¹¹ Véase Schneider, Alejandro, *Los compañeros: Trabajadores, izquierda y peronismo, 1955-1973*. Buenos Aires, Imago Mundi, 2005 y Camarero, Hernán, *A la conquista de la clase obrera: Los comunistas y el mundo del trabajo en la Argentina, 1920-1935*. Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno Editora Iberoamericana, 2007.

¹² Véase Acha Omar, *Las huelgas bancarias, de Perón a Frondizi, 1945-1962: Contribución a la historia de las clases sociales en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires, Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, 2008; Contreras Gustavo, *El peronismo obrero. La estrategia laborista de la clase obrera durante el gobierno peronista. Un análisis de la huelga de los trabajadores frigoríficos de 1950*. *PIMSA 2006*; Dicósimo, Daniel, *Más allá de la fábrica: Los trabajadores metalúrgicos, Tandil, 1955-1962*. Buenos Aires, La Colmena, 2000; Fernández, Fabián, *La huelga metalúrgica de 1954*. Buenos Aires, Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, 2005; Rubinstein, Gustavo, *Los sindicatos azucareros en los orígenes del peronismo tucumano*. San Miguel de Tucumán, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 2005; e Izquierdo, Roberto, *Tiempo de trabajadores: Los obreros del tabaco*. Buenos Aires, Imago Mundi, 2008.

which has been visited a thousand times, interpretations which are a consequence of the present social circumstances.

1947's conflicts and the CGT

During the first three years of the peronist government (1946-1948) there was a clear consolidation of the unions. According to the data presented by Louise Doyon, the number of members in the industry went from nearly 200,000 in 1945 to more than 700,000 in 1948, reaching a membership of 50% of the workers. The Textile Workers' Union went from having 60,099 members in 1946 to 100,899 two years later. Concurrently, the most important strike peak of the peronist decade took place. In this initial period, in the City of Buenos Aires only, there were nearly 300 strikes with more than one million strikers and eight million of working days lost. The strikes occurred frequently in the industry, were promoted and directed by the recognized syndical organizations and had as an objective to broaden the rights of the workers. This expansion was produced above all, through collective agreements and the establishment of basis syndical organizations, the internal commissions. It should be pointed out that all this was developed in the midst of a very favorable economic atmosphere and in the height of the establishment of the peronist power.¹³

In November 1946, despite the government's will to impose a candidate, Luis Gay, old leader of the Telephone Union, was elected as the new General Secretary of the CGT. Nevertheless, his appointment wouldn't last since only three months later, by virtue of a manoeuvre of the government, he was ousted. In his place, Aurelio Hernández took the position. It is from this moment on, that authors like Del Campo, Torre and Doyon herself, posit that the CGT loses its autonomy fully.

Within the first tumultuous peronist years, 1947 was the moment with the greatest level of conflict, a particular moment in which the important unions were taken over, diverse polemic workers' congresses and the anticommunist campaign was intensified in the world of work. It was during this year that there was the highest number of strikers and lost working days during the whole peronism. This wave of conflicts, as well as the decline in the workers' productivity, concerned the government and the management enormously. In mid November 1946, the "Secretaría de Trabajo y Previsión de la Nación" (STyP) in an announcement, reminded the unions and workers that it was going to make a strict implementation of the regulations regarding strikes in

¹³ Doyon, *op. cit.*, 242-252

order to stop a series of conflicts considered artificial. In July 1947, Perón made reference to the 40% fall in the production performance:

“Men which have contributed with their effort to the underpinning of the revolution, have serious concerns with respects to the announcement made; for they know the perils implied in that lack of productivity. The need of readjusting things to put them in place is evident. .”¹⁴

The arrival of Hernández avoided neither the proliferation of conflicts nor the fall of the workers’s productivity. The newspaper *La Época*, which has a peronist origin, defined strikes as threatens against public welfare and treason to the government. In October, in an act which took place in the new headquarters of the CGT Perón stated:

[...] We have come to our days giving everything that has been possible to give. We must now start to give with caution, because in order to give it is necessary to build first.”¹⁵

Aurelio Hernández was not a minor leader. Activist from the Wood Industry Union since he was very young, Hernández had been a distinguished *syndicalist* and communist leader. He had been a member of the Forum of the 9th Congress, of the Central Committee of the USA and General Secretary of the Local Communist Labor Union. In addition, he had been writer and director of several important syndical publications.

Just a few days after being elected General Secretary of the CGT he attracted attention towards the statements about the unauthorized strikes and conflicts that were being developed, without any reasons which justified them. He denounced a communist manoeuvre of sabotage by organizing workers’ strikes. The alignment with the government was direct. The CGT invoked the cease of conflicts. Nevertheless, this did not occur. In some cases, such as the textile workers, trade- unions’ headquarters were put under the control of the national leadership union. Notwithstanding, that measure, for it was illegitimate and illegal (it was not covered by the CGT statute¹⁶), could not be generalized. Control, hence, had to be drawn from another, more structural sources.

¹⁴*La Época*, 4/07/47

¹⁵*La Prensa*, 4/10/47

¹⁶ The statute was modified in 1950. The Central Confederal Committee (Comité Central Confederal), gathered in December 1949 had to write the project of a new statute to be dealt with at the National Congress of April, 1950. There, one of the most important news encouraged by the leadership was the granting to the CGT of the faculty to intervene the unions which were members. This generated a prolonged debate, in which the representatives of the most important unions demanded that article to be excluded, or the introduction of modifications which would limit that power. There was such a divergence that two projects had to be made: one which accepted the intervention in the unions and a second one which did not. In April 1950, after the voting which took place at the CGT National Congress (Congreso Nacional de la CGT), the article was imposed by the majority. In the voting, the number of members

Most syndical conflicts were developed in the midst of collective negotiations. The one which was initiated by the UOM was no exception. However, this was not the only important problem, since the union was strongly confronted to the industrialists of the branch due to the joint membership of employers and workers.

The UOM wanted to unionize workers and supervisors, chiefs and foremen. For capital, this would affect the performance of the plant, since it would have repercussions on the discipline and hierarchical respect. The union had to face more than just management's position. Within the same union, a competition arose when the "Unión de Empleados de la Industria Metalúrgica" (Employees of the Metallurgical Industry Union) was created. Founded in April 1947, in September of the same year it had almost six thousand members and it had been received by the president's wife in a ceremony which assigned syndical legitimacy *per se* to it. The fact that the CGT leadership not only did not try to work out this division, but in fact favored it going against the statutes, created a tense relationship between the leaderships of the UOM and the CGT. The support of the latter to the parallel union and its intentions to control the conflicts would constitute the two conflict axes between both organizations.

In mid May, the socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* stated that the division of the Metallurgical Union was explained in part by the election of the General Secretary of the CGT, since in it the metallurgical delegation had seemed "generous with Mr. Gay"¹⁷.

The opposing journal, *La Prensa*, in its article about the celebration which took place on 20 October, highlighted the way in which the column of the UOM had arrived to Plaza de Mayo in a truck with loud-speakers with which it requested the audience to allow the advance of the protest until the front of the Pink House since the aim was "to let general Perón know that Hernández was a traitor".¹⁸ One day before, the "Congreso Nacional Obrero de la CGT" (CGT National Labor Congress) had been inaugurated. There, the delegate of the Wood Industry Union, had read a jointly filled statement presented by his organisation together with the port workers, food workers, glass workers and the UOM. The statement expressed that the Congress had not been legally convened. At the end of October, in the face of an imminent metallurgical strike, by virtue of certain rumors in which there was an attempt to make the Workers' Central Union appear as opposed to the resolution of the conflict, the CGT expressed that these

represented by the different delegates was taken into account. The result was of 1, 530,429 positive votes and 1, 491,566 negative votes.

¹⁷ *La Vanguardia*, 13/5/47

¹⁸ *La Prensa*, 18/10/47

versions were inaccurate: *“The truth is that the CGT has not had and does not have any participation in the conflict, and that, on the other hand, the UOM has not requested it either.”*¹⁹

In these circumstances, in November 1947, after months of collective negotiations, the UOM ordered the cessation of the activities. In those days, it was a young union of barely a few years of life. The motivation adduced by those who created it was that the communist leadership of the “Sindicato Obrero de la Industria Metalúrgica” (SOIM), the biggest union of that branch at the time, had handed over the 1942 strike. With the support of the government, the UOM was quickly imposed as the prevailing organization. It was the one which signed the collective agreements and had more members; and even more after the communists had decided to dissolve the unions they runned in 1946, and integrate to the ones that were dominated by the peronists. By the end of 1945, the UOM had 80,000 members. In June 1946, after an intervention of the CGT, Hilario Salvo became its General Secretary.

Regardless of the position of the government and the CGT and after months of collective negotiations, the UOM declared the strike at the beginning of November. The strike came to an end after the intervention of the STyP in favor of the workers, and the imposition of a major part of their demands in the collective bargaining agreement. As regards the joint unionization, the stance of the UOM prevailed and the parallel union was dissolved. The troublesome relationship between this union (and not only this) and Hernández was settled in December of the same year when he and the other members of the CGT Management Committee resigned.

Twenty four hours later José G. Espejo was elected General Secretary. The CGT’s political line would not be modified with the change of names. Espejo would be a great exponent of the syndical leadership submissive to the government.

There were no official explanations as regards Hernández’s resignation. At first glance, the relevant reasons that can be assumed are the uneffectiveness of the CGT to stop the strikes and the internal tensions (at least as was showned by the UOM case). The fact is that the CGT was powerless in the resolution of conflicts in these particular circumstances and that in the confrontation with the UOM, the latter came out victorious.

¹⁹*El Líder*, 28/10/47

1954's conflicts and the CGT

The economic prosperity of the first years was short. Beyond the specific policies the government could apply, the model of economic growth depended centrally upon the foreign currency income through the exportation of agriculture and livestock products and its deviation to the major cities. The industry needed them to obtain raw material and machinery, and to be able to pay the high wages. The fall of the exportation volume, the deterioration of the terms of trade since 1949 and the harvest lost at the beginning of the new decade, derived in a decrease of foreign currency incomes and in a severe economic crisis which was manifested in the rise of inflation and the fall of the industrial activity.

The first important measure of the government to face the crisis (which peaked at the end of 1951 and during the following months) was the Plan de Emergencia Económica (Plan of Economic Emergency), initiated at the beginning of 1952 (once Perón was reelected as president). Its main purpose was to control the high inflation rate throughout restricting consumption and supporting the social productive forces. Therefore, the public works' plan was reduced, the granting of credits was restricted, the importations which were not indispensable were limited and both prices and salaries were frozen. The purpose of the project of economic growth which begins with the second peronist government was to change the stimulus from the production of consumer goods to the production of intermediate goods and the creation of a capital assets area. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to increase industrial productivity. According to the industrials, since there was a restriction on the importation of big amounts of capital goods, the only solution left to obtain this growth was to increase the work performance individually with the existent machinery. It was then necessary to diminish and control the working movements and to revoke the syndical movement some of their conquests obtained during the first years, mainly the ones which had disrupted the hierarchy in the factories.

Since 1949 the working conflicts had drastically diminished. Literature about this issue coincides when it points out, that from this moment on, the government's control over the CGT became stronger. It is still left to prove if one thing explains the other. The aim of the government was to remove the possibility of movement from syndicalism in order to gain it for itself, especially in economic terms. In a speech given in mid May 1950 Perón stated:

“How many times have we attended, in the economic level, to the spectacle of a syndical leader who has an exaggerated demand, who wants what we call ‘to keep the penny and the bun’? Conscious and responsible men are necessary in this action, men who don’t request more can be requested, because social possibilities end where economic impossibility begins.”²⁰

The fact that the biggest economic crisis in peronism, between 1949 and 1953, has been developed without major conflicts in the industry, makes us wonder if this happened due to a full control of syndicalism by the government or due to a political reading of the syndical leaders who, in the midst of the crisis, chose to sacrifice immediate economic interests in favor of a long term policy.

These sacrifice of economic interests, beyond its own reasons, had consequences on the leadership. José Espejo had to step aside at the end of 1952²¹. Before that, Hilario Salvo, General Secretary of the UOM since 1946, had walked the same path. In other important unions, such as the textile one, there was also a renewal of the leaders.

After the wage freeze stipulated in 1952, the opening in negotiations two years later, in 1954, was seen as highly difficult. Even more if it is taken into account that after years of crisis, the economic situation showed big improvements which resulted in a better position for workers to negotiate. The government, on its part, had seen how a large part of its political support was reduced. Only the syndical movement remained an unconditional ally. Because of this, collective negotiations of 1954 were seen as key ones. After years of economic sacrifices unions had to deal with the governmental intention to tie the increases in wages to rise in productivity. Increases it aimed to accomplish through the suppression of certain provisions in the collective agreements imposed between 1946 and 1948, provisions which had considerably limited management’s discretion of the. There was also an attempt to regulate, to be able to control the internal commissions. Nevertheless, the national unions were far from complying with this proposal to tie salaries to productivity. In 1954, only in the capital City of Buenos Aires there were more than 1,400,000 working days lost because of the strikes. During the three previous years, the 500,000 had barely been surpassed. Most conflict occurred during the first semester and in the midst of collective negotiations.

The new leadership of the CGT had tried, from the start, to stop these conflicts. Eduardo Vuletich, Espejo’s successor in the General Secretary of the CGT, had a

²⁰ *Democracia*, 16/5/50

²¹ This displacement is usually linked to the support given by Espejo to the vice presidential candidacy of Eva Duarte de Perón in 1951. To this matter it should be added the not so mentioned tensions generated by the intervention of the UOM in September, 1952.

meeting in May 1954 with some of the leaders and communicated them the order to normalize the labour, ceasing the strikes. The unions in conflict complied with this and declared the forceful measures finished but only for a few weeks, then they paralyzed the activities again. Regarding the negotiations, Vuletich combined strong critics towards management with callings to obey the presidential commands and increase productivity. In the midst of the metallurgic conflict, in the entries of the Central Committee of the CGT it can be read what these leaders expected the national unions to do:

“[...]vindication protests are justified, but also in the condition of leaders of the country, when their interests are at stake, they must also be concerned about them, since the welfare of the country will be welfare for the people, that is to say, for the workers.”²².

The CGT, despite having applied a number of interventions in specific unions, was not able to impose its political line. Even though they were aware of the political interests mentioned above, the national unions could not neglect the particular interests of their members. What was discussed was beyond de salary issue. The model the government sought to impose, undermined two pillars of peronist syndicalism: on the one hand, to tie the salaries to the performance that the industrial branch salaries implied, in both the short and long term, a hard blow to wage homogeneity of Argentinian urban workers. On the other hand, the improvements obtained in the working conditions and the power earned in the factory were an emblem of the syndical peronist movement. Loosing them to obtain productivity, did not seem to be an acceptable option.

In this situation the metallurgic strike took place, between 20 May and June, 1954. At the time, the UOM was directed by Abdala Baluch, after Hilario Salvo had been expelled from the union. Before the intransigence of the industrial area and the pressure of the working basis, channeled through the internal comissions, the leadership was forced to declare the strike. The internal comissions were the driving force of the conflict. More than the wage discussion, what was at stake was the power in the places of work. The industrials wanted to impose a regulation for the internal comissions, a stricter control of absenteeism and a modification of the 36th article of the agreement with the purpose of being able to penalize the staff delegates. None of these issues was dealt with; in that sense, the UOM was imposed. In the middle of negotiations, the Minister of Labor had manifested to the metallurgic industrials, that the regulation of the internal comissions would, in no way, be considered, since the UOM did not wish to be

²²*Actas Consejo Directivo. Confederación General del Trabajo, 05/06/54, folio 172*

responsible for the breaking of the dominant syndical practice. The strike concluded with the signing of the agreement which assigned a 25 % raise of the wage and maintained all the current work conditions.

The importance of the UOM made it a model, and because of this, it was not possible to impose meaningful modifications in most agreements. The government's proposal (to the reiterated demands of the industrials) to tie salaries to productivity, was frustrated. A year later, there was a new attempt. In March 1955, by initiative of the government, the "Congreso Nacional de la Productividad y el Bienestar Social" (National Congress of Productivity and Social Welfare) was organized. Unions and management participated in it and its aim was to reach to stable agreements, in order to obtain a higher level of productivity. Despite the explicit support issued by the CGT, the event turned out to be a failure. There was no come to a meaningful agreement and those few points which were signed could not be implemented because of the resistance of the national unions.

After almost ten years in the power, the government and the CGT could not impose their objectives. They could not carry out, when it was most necessary, what they had accomplished in the midst of the crisis. This reveals the limited capacity of control the Workers' Central Union had. Louise Doyon states, at the end of his thesis, that in these circumstances, the syndical leaders overlooked the consequences their attitude entailed to the government's viability. In another paper, Juan Carlos Torre assigned considerable weight to this failure as regards the fall of peronism in September, 1955. The question we should ask ourselves is whether they could have done something different or not.

To conclude

In 1947 and 1954 the UOM did not have the capacity or will to practise economic moderation in favor of a more general policy. The CGT tried, in both occasions to help the government's purposes, though with more variations in 1954 (strikingly when the government's control over the unions was supposedly higher). What both moments share is the impossibility of the CGT to impose conditions to such an important union as the UOM.

The UOM, on its part, despite its alignment to the government, has to respond to the interests of basis organizations, even when the levels of bureaucratization where high, like the ones of 1954. Nevertheless, what could not be done in these circumstances

was indeed done during the economic crisis. In the midst of the crisis, the levels of conflict dropt to risible numbers in the main Argentinian industries.

As was mentioned before in the introduction, this paper does not seek to provide immovable answers. It shows how classic arguments have been overcome and, it has actually the purpose to raise new questions. So, we can ask ourselves: Why was the CGT, under certain circumstances, unable control the actions of nationally based trade-unions such as the UOM? Why was the mid term political interest of government control undermined by immediate economic interest? Why did neither the CGT nor the UOM were able to do this in 1947 and 1954? Should we look for the causes in the grassroot movement? Or could it be found in the existing bond between social conflict and peronist identity?

As we have analyzed, the support of the CGT and the unions to the economic measures of the government was not the same in every situation. It was not the same in 1947 and 1954 to that at the beggining of the 1950s. The position of the CGT and the UOM was also not the same in both conflicts. During the crisis, did the CGT further a larger and broader control strategy or did the trade unions chose to moderate? How can we account for these variations;? What changed in this ecuation?

Finally, we have one question left to ask ourselves: How much did the opening of the collective negotiation affect the power of the CGT? Are the different political decisions only explained by means of the economic crisis? Or can we consider the syndical action as an autonomous policy with its own logic?

All of this constitutes only a few questions to go deeper into the research. This paper is not a conclusion, but rather the opening of an analysis. If this paper leaves us any conclusion is that in order to analyze the policies of the peronist unions, in adition to observe their discourse, it is necessary to know how capable they were to actually execute them.