

Piqueteros: The unemployed movement in Argentina. An interview with Nicolás Iñigo Carrera and Maria Celia Cotarelo¹

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ABSTRACT

In this interview from October 2012, we cover the origins of the picketers' (*piqueteros*) movement in Argentina, its social composition and its forms of collective action until the present. We also discuss the research methodology of these two researchers from PIMSA as well as the database that their team has constructed for almost two decades on Argentinian social movements that has already registered around 30,000 conflicts.

KEYWORDS

Piqueteros, Argentina, Large database of social conflicts

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How did the picketers' movement arise?

Nicolás Iñigo Carrera (NIC): The first thing you need to take into account is that in Argentina the workers' and popular movements have been very strong since the beginning of the twentieth century. When the recession began at the end of the 1990s, more or less 1998, and then exploded in 2000 and 2001, thousands of unemployed workers began to appear, many of whom had union experience that they transmitted to these unemployed organizations. The unemployed organizations are led by the same people who had been union representatives or on workers' commission before and included in some cases union leaders. This is one dimension that I should emphasize. That is, the picketers' movement had substantial previous experience of union organization.

The other dimension is the organization of the residents of poor neighbourhoods, the "tin can neighbourhoods", that also had a long tradition since the 1970s. These neighbourhoods were severely repressed by the dictatorship from 1976 onwards. More or less from the start of the 1980s, a phenomenon began which may be called land occupations – people who had no home to live in began to occupy empty lots. Nowadays these areas are not exactly "tin can neighbourhoods", but brick houses, even though they are very poor. In this social fraction, unemployment was always high with much precariousness, much instability.

Maria Celia Cotarelo (MCC): I should add something: the organization of the homeless began exactly in 1998, 1999 and 2000. This relates to what Nicolas just affirmed, the experience of union organization as much as the organization of poor peoples' movements, but it was also due to certain processes of collective action, street mobilizations, which initially consisted of road blocks, which would act as triggers. Take for example the roadblocks in the province of Neuquén, in the city of Cutral Có, in 1996 and 1997.

But how did the first actions arise?

MCC: Cutral Có, in 1996, was the first roadblock with a national impact (there were others before, but they remained local). It began with a complaint about the installation of a foreign company, Agrium, in the Cutral Có zone. The installation was delayed by political questions with the provincial government and it was hoped that it would be a source of work for all the workers who had become unemployed after the privatization of the oil company YPF. In the protest, the unemployed and teachers participated as well as businesspersons who also hoped for the reactivation of activity after the installation of the company. There were up to 20, 000 people on the roadblock. Police were mobilized, but the mobilization was so massive that they retreated. The judge who ordered the dispersal said that it was too much, a riot, a crime against the security of the state. So they made an agreement with the provincial government, that included: the sending of clothes and food; the reestablishment of gas and electricity for those who had it cut because they couldn't pay; the installation of companies that would generate employment; the creation of schools and a hospital; paving of the street, credit for local businesspeople.

But how did this first protest get started?

NIC: I think that the case of Cutral Có is exemplary and similar to what occurred in other places. The people were unemployed, a commission was formed by the unemployed (which could be with the support of a union or not). In Salta, in the Mosconi-Tartagal zone, the protest was very radical with a massive roadblock. There were also ex-oil workers who organized because they were left unemployed, promised severance payments and, in some cases received severance. But later they realized they had no work.

In this case, the leading core had previous experience – the oil workers – but spontaneous leaders also arose, natural leaders. In Cutral Có there was a professor and a worker who had no previous experience. Afterwards, left-wing parties also intervened.

The case of Jujuy is different because there were two unions: the municipal employees' union, who had a left-wing leadership, and the state workers' union who had a left-wing Peronist leadership. In this case, it was the unions who convoked the unemployed to the marches.

There is another case in the province of Jujuy, in a city called Libertador General San Martín, where there is a sugar-cane mill. There were also many unemployed there and a small group of militants and the unemployed initiated a roadblock. The police attacked us, even houses, neighborhoods, but instead of retreating, fleeing, the majority of the city joined the mobilization.

How was this constructed? There was a very great transformation in Argentina from a European welfare state, which gave support to people, to a situation increasingly worse after the 1976 coup and afterwards with the return of a democratic regime this was not resolved. There was much lingering anger, we believe. And people protested because really there was no other alternative. Historically, the rate of unemployment, since statistics began (in the 1960s) was between 3 and 6% (the historical maximum). In 2000, in an economically active population of 10 or 11 million, unemployment was 12% and then increased to 22%. In the middle of the 1990s, when neoliberal politics began to be strongly felt, unemployment was 16, 17, 18%, and declined afterwards to 12% - even so, it was double the previous historical maximum (6%). When the 2001 crisis blew up, it reached 22%.

The emblematic tactic of the picketers is the roadblock. Has this tactic damaged the public image of these groups in relation to other sectors of the population? Have other forms of action arisen?

NIC: Let me make a correction. Roadblocks are instruments that everybody uses. Not only the unemployed or the picketers, but also employed workers. There is a tradition of roadblocks. Also small rural proprietors, who are small capitalists, truck drivers, students. For students, the roadblock is banal. That is, the roadblock is an old Argentinian tradition. In the database that we constructed, from December 1993 until today, employed workers most used the roadblocks before 2001.

How is the labour force composed?

Currently the active population reaches approximately 46% of the population of 14 years or older. The population employed in an informal manner (work without rights and/or taxes) is around 36% of the active population, but during the crisis reached 50%. During the crisis, unemployment reached an historical high of 22% and for the underemployed was around 20%; it began to fall after 2003 and today the unemployment rate as well as underemployment is in the order of 7% each. But, it must be taken into account that an important volume of the population that appears as employed is in fact in social programs

financed by the government or occupies posts in the state apparatus doing unnecessary work and there are even those who are employed in private companies, but receive salaries from the state. But what appears more important to us than the unemployment rate is the existence of a relative super population, that is, the population who are in excess for capital, that could appear as employed, but for capital are superfluous. It is also important to note that a part of salaried employees, since the neoliberal politics of the 1990s, have become contracted out, that is, employed in subcontracted companies of big companies, in worse conditions. As a result, for the same task, there could be two workers with different conditions and salaries.

How do the unemployed live? Do they have some type of support?

NIC: At the beginning no. In Argentina, there is unemployment insurance that practically nobody uses, or before nobody used, because there was no tradition of using it.

MCC: Because it was for workers with a certain seniority, and for formal work, and therefore there were few with the conditions to receive it.

NIC: And therefore, when they organized roadblocks, they begin to demand some type of assistance, for support from the national, provincial or municipal government.

MCC: Actually, in the beginning they demanded jobs...

NIC: Yes, that's true.

MCC: The demand for assistance came later, around 2000, 2001.

NIC: First, the demand was "we want work". Then it went jointly with "we want state support". When the protests in the form of roadblocks began, in 2000, in Buenos Aires, South Zone, which is the most popular, poorest, and they organized a big roadblock, then they began to give support. But in exchange for work, that is, they had to do some kind of work to receive support. In reality, this work ended up being for the municipality and, many times, it was never even done.

But was there an obligation to work a certain number of hours?

NIC: Theoretically yes. In practice, no.

MCC: What happened is that the question of the demand for work began to be organized within the unemployed organizations, as they consolidated. In the micro-businesses that were developing, which is the case of community

canteens, in seamstress' shops, in bakeries, everything that they were developing as a source of autonomous work.

For subsistence...

MCC: Exactly.

NIC: For subsistence and sometimes to sell. Why? Responding to the question "How did people come together? People joined together to protest, even before support existed. And afterwards they began to organize themselves.

In the case of Jujuy, there is an organization that began as the unemployed and at that moment had 70 thousand members, and it is the third largest employer in the province: the first is the provincial state, the second a very large private company, which we already referred to, which has the sugarcane mill, and then there is this organization called TupacAmaru.

How do they organize themselves? They did something called "cup of milk". They went to shop owners or others who had a bit of money, asked for donations of milk and organized a canteen for the children, to which they gave milk and bread. This kept growing and the "cup of milk" was converted into a restaurant and then they served lunch and dinner. Another thing that they did was the "clothers": they asked for used and old clothing which they then fixed up and then sold cheap after. This was another form of getting people together.

All this happened simultaneously with political formation. This generated a great discussion. The groups affirm that political formation was a success, but this seems very relative to me.

Why do you think the success was relative?

NIC: Because several of these same organizers told us that the majority went for food. But that doesn't mean that it was not also for political formation.

Which political organizations were involved in this movement?

NIC: At the national level, there were dozens of organizations. In general, they were from the Marxist left or the Peronist left. In Argentina, there are dozens of left-wing organizations. Almost all the political organizations that were in the picketers' movement were divided, whether around the polemics in the face of the Kirchner government or because the local government favored one group in detriment to another.

With all these tendencies, how did they organize themselves?

NIC: In some cases, they made agreements. In many cases, leaders arose from the same mobilization and they became close to some political organizations. But in general one organization predominated in a determined place. For example, in Jujuy, at the beginning of the picketers' movement, the CCC, the Classist and Combative Current, which was Maoist, predominated, that is, the leaders came from Maoism. After the first stage, with much support of the government to TupacAmaru, which comes from a more nationalist, indigenous and Peronist current, the CTA arose, the Argentinian Workers' Central, which is a progressive version of Peronism. They were linked through their ideological origins to social Christianity, to social democracy, which afterwards took on an indigenous character since there are many indigenous people in Jujuy. At this moment, the CCC and the TupacAmaru began to function as allies. They mobilized together. But there was always one that predominated.

MCC: For example, in Greater Buenos Aires, there are different organizations in the same neighborhoods, or different organizations in contiguous neighborhoods, each one with its own members and they have never been able to construct a general organization with different groupings. But there are moments, which I believe came from the increase in struggle, where they were able to achieve unity in action. And then they had assemblies with representatives from different organizations where they discussed documents or types of protests. Generally they live in harmony in the neighborhoods. To the contrary to what happens in the union movement where this is an intense internal struggle, very strong, this never happened in the picketers' movement.

NIC: But there is an interesting thing: as the Kirchner government was advancing, there were more and more organizations linked to the politics of the government. However, every time there was an attack on the picketers' movement (for example, from the police), they always agreed to respond collectively, which is still maintained. As much as they fight amongst themselves, when it's necessary, they united to fight attacks against the picketers. We have tried to confirm if there is some form of perceiving the differences in the structural position of the distinct actors mobilized by the different movements. That is, if it was possible to see if one determined organization mobilized a particular type of unemployed, and if another mobilized another type. But we didn't identify anything. They're very homogenous.

MCC: We would even have to see if we can talk of 10% of the unemployed organized in this form. The majority are not organized and there is an enormous quantity that are organized by the church, in parochial canteens, and other who are organized by political leaders, particularly from the Peronist party, and from the right-wing.

NIC: Yes, when we speak of the picketer's movement, it is important to understand that we are talking of 10% of the unemployed.

MCC: But they have acquired a very important political weight, which doesn't happen when they are organized by the church or by the parties, by the parties of the regime.

So what distinguishes the picketers from other unemployed people?

MCC: Their form of organization, their appeal to mobilization and the street actions that achieve their objectives. Even those linked to the government can sometimes do these. The unemployed who receive aid or food from the church and the political chiefs do not mobilize on the streets. Also in their discourse: the militants of the unemployed organizations defend social emancipation and in some organizations they support the installation of new social and human relations, demand more horizontal decision-making in assemblies, not vertical as in the church and with the politicians. That is, there is a possible, different, construction.

What were politics that the picketers had in terms of the question of public debt?

NIC: This was a common flag of all the organizations. Now our doubt is how many people mobilized against payment of the debt and how many mobilized for a cup of milk or a plate of food. In confidence, the leaders recognized that many people – but not all – came for the food. However, this was creating a reserve of anti-imperialist struggle, which the discourse of Kirchner later took on as its own.

What was the educational level of picketers?

NIC: Among the militants there are some with university origins and others from working-class backgrounds, but not from the poorest sections. In some exceptional cases, there are priests. The base is more heterogeneous and could have elementary school and, less, secondary education. In general, they were poor, very poor. The example of the TupacAmaru organization is impressive,

some come from a lumpen origin, young, poor, thieves and drug addicts, who left these activities to become militants.

Are there middle-class sectors involved with the picketers?

NIC: At the moment of the gravest part of the crisis, there was sympathy. But this only lasted 6 months...

MCC: In 2002, after the fall of the government in 2001, in summer, there was a slogan: "picket and casserole: it's one struggle only". The pickets were an instrument of the unemployed, the casseroles of the middle class [protests where participants bang pots and pans]. They mobilized together. Unemployed marches came from greater Buenos Aires to the center, and the casserole protesters received us with breakfast since we arrived really tired. There were various shows of solidarity. In the neighborhood, vicinity and popular assemblies (the three different names because they were known as such), integrated by the middle class, they discussed the politics of job creation and approximated the unemployed. But in June 2002, when an incident happened at Puente Pueyrredón where the police killed 2 picketers, Kosteki and Santillán, the fracture increased between the picketers and the middle class. At this point, a climate of isolation of the picketers had already been created which made repression possible. Even if in the following days there was a great repudiation of the repression, their paths had already diverged.

Why did the "middle class" and the picketers split?

NIC: I think there are two elements. One is historical: the fear of the poor on the part of the middle class. The other is that there was a very strong campaign by the means of communication, from the government, from all the organizations of the establishment against the roadblock as an instrument. They said they were poor, that they didn't want to work and they wanted assistance to not work. Or they said that the demands were legitimate, but the methods were wrong because they shouldn't block roads.

But did the government, in some form, privilege the middle class?

NIC: It doesn't appear to me. After getting out of the crisis, the middle class quickly found themselves in a better situation than the poor. In addition to government policies, you have to take into account economic cycles. At the worst moment of the crisis, everybody was bad off. But when the recovery

began, those who had some property, some business, quickly began to orient themselves. However, the poorest, if they had no assistance or the cooperatives that they constructed, really had no place to go. I believe that it is similar to what happens in Europe today. It's that a great part of the population has no part in the capitalist economy. It doesn't matter what they do. They say that they have to invest more. But more investment implies more technology. But more technology expels workers. So more capitalist investment implies less work. So, this mass of poor people has no other choice if not assistance, state employment as a public servant with nothing to do. In Argentina, there are folkloric examples such as the health clinic that has one nurse and eighteen other staff, in which it is clear that the eighteen workers don't work because they don't even go to the workplace. In Chaco province, where we also went to research, one day, a person from the unemployed movement had calculated how many workers appeared as employed people in the central building of the provincial government...and they said that if one day all of them arrived to work, on this same day the building would collapse...because it could not stand such weight. These are also hidden forms of a relative excess population, an industrial reserve army.

In your opinion, does the mobilization of the population depend more on the efforts of the population that is furious or more on the social assistance programs of the picketers' movement?

NIC: It's a combination of these two things. It begins with revolt. It begins with rebellion because at this moment there is no support. In the first roadblocks in 1996, 1997 and 1998, the response was repression. In 1997, the first concessions began, which were not effectively delivered. When state intervention increased through social assistance, the picketer's movement increased.

Because people see in the movement a form of social assistance...

NIC: Of course. And it's this that demobilizes the picketers' movement. Because in relation to the Kirchner government, the organizations that established a good relationship with the government received much assistance, while the organizations that, for ideological or political reasons, did not want to negotiate with the government or did not want to establish a relationship of support for the government, began to lose people since people go where there is assistance. All the organizations of the left that didn't negotiate with the government said that, in any case, they won and grew. It's possible. But they grew up to a certain point.

Let's return to the demands: when were they advanced? What were the demands?

NIC: Initially, they demanded work. Later, assistance (or plans for assistance) and food packages. They also demanded materials to build houses. Sometimes, land so that they could build houses.

MCC: Later, more political demands: non-payment of the external debt, rupture with the IMF, which unified all groups. In 2002, during the Duhalde government, and even later during the Kirchner government, there were differences that led to fragmentation, initially between the two big groups: those who supported the government and those that didn't. And in this situation there was no possibility of consensus. There was a group of organizations that were interested in considering social assistance, which we referred to, and another group, that in general was linked to a left-wing party, that included demands against the government.

Before receiving social assistance from the government, how did they organize? Where did the money from the first actions come from? How did they begin?

NIC: They functioned almost without money. They functioned with donations. Depending on the place, they functioned with some sector of the church. Sometimes, with the support of some political sector.

MCC: Depends on the place. For example, in Jujuy, when there was no social assistance, they were sustained by the Union of Municipal Workers and the Union of State Workers. In Cutral C6, the first roadblock had the support of a sector of the government party, of their provincial party, from the Neuquin Popular Movement and they were on the side of the opposition to the government. But gradually this support was withdrawn as the protest radicalized, especially with the intervention of adolescents, of young people considered marginal.

NIC: But it's what they used to say before. There is an old tradition [in Argentina]. You go to the baker and say to him: "tomorrow you won't be able to sell the bread that you have tonight, why don't you give it to me because we have none."

The picketers have had a great political impact in the principal countries of Latin America. How did they achieve such a dynamic that resulted in four presidents resigning in such a short period?

NIC: They had the help of the presidents! And you can't just reduce this to the picketers' movement. It was a much, much wider mobilization. Various things came together. The fall of De La Rúa expressed the great general discontent with his politics that had been carried over from the discontent with the politics of Menem, neoliberal politics. When elections were held in 1999 and De La Rúa won, the three most voted candidates (who together obtained 90% of votes) said that they wanted to maintain the economic plan of Cavallo and Menem (convertibility of the *peso*). At this moment, there was discontentment with the results, but there were still no roadblocks. Moreover, De La Rúa presented himself as one who proceed with the same politics, but with honesty, without corruption. But the first thing he did was bribe senators so that they would vote for a work flexibilization law. This produced a very rapid loss of prestige. It's clear that he was an incapable politician!

But to this generalized discontent it must be added the fact that the Justicialist Party (JP), Peronist, had decided to put an end to his mandate and so there was a plot. They also had a network that participated in the 2001 mobilizations. What was said, and it's true, is that Duhalde, who was the president who succeeded him, was involved in the plot to remove De La Rúa. The sequence was: De La Rúa fell due to discontentment and the plot; Rodriguez Saa fell because he was not able to gain the support of the JP since there was an internal struggle within the JP to see who could take the reins and who led this was Duhalde; Duhalde appears with the idea of achieving what was lacking in De La Rúa's mandate, but begins to perceive when he can repress, because since December, or a little before, since July 2001 until March 2002, there were demonstrations every day for different motives with people banging on pots, people marching, in the morning, afternoon, night...the banks were boarded up with metal protectors because if not people would destroy them. Politicians could not go out in the streets. If they saw a known politician on the street, they would beat them. Because of this they began to see how to disarticulate this pressure. Sometimes, giving concessions, other times, repressing.

How did governments act with the leaders of the picketers? Was there the classic tactic of cooptation of the leaders?

NIC: This also happened. But there was so much mobilization on the streets that there was little space for this. This was clear in some of the roadblocks in Jujuy. In the assemblies of the unemployed, they elected a representative

who went to negotiate with the government who ended up giving him a series of things but when he returned, they threw him out and put in another because they were not happy with what they had been given. This happened a lot. Now when the street mobilizations were at their peak, between July 2001 and March 2002, the government began, on the one hand, to give assistance, and, on the other, to repress. In June 2002, there was a roadblock which cut off all access to the capital. And in one of the access routes, Puente Pueyrredón, which runs all the way from the south, which is the poorest and most popular zone, they sent police, gendarmes and federal police to repress it. In the repression, they killed two picketers from the Movement of Unemployed Workers (MTD) and tried to manipulate and hide the fact that they had killed them. This was denounced in photographs. With the appearance of these photographs, the lack of credibility was so great that it generated a mobilization of 50 thousand people. And it was then that Duhalde said he would call elections and so did not achieve his project which would have to wait until the end of 2003.

We're dealing here with a moment of very great mobilizations. But even so there were two things which were missing, I believe: the first is a political strategy (not even revolutionary because in this case we have to compare the world and Argentina as it was 40 years ago...there was an abyss since 40 years ago questions of revolutionary strategy were on the table whereas today nobody sees this possibility since it is absolutely out of the question). The other is that the regime of domination – liberal democracy – reacts with plasticity: they concede on some points, call elections and receive the support of the political parties, of the business organizations, of the union movement, of human rights organizations, of the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish churches, of consumer organizations, that is, from the trenches of the regime. They activated an Argentinian Dialogue Forum in which all organizations participated.

What are the factors that determined the retreat of the movement?

Argentina has a tradition of street mobilization that shows signs of insurrection. And in 2001 this is what happened. And, in fact, with the Kirchner government, they were able to neutralize in great part many of these movements, accepting the demands of the picketers' movement and putting them in practice: reactivation of the economy, a great cut in the debt payment, and plenty of social assistance. Unemployment was reduced from 22% in 2001 to 7% today. Even if this includes the employed with government assistance (2%). There is economic activity. The country recovered. It

recuperated with a policy of job creation, a more protectionist trade policy, the obligation to produce determined products in Argentina. On the other hand, the relation that the Kirchner government established with the most important unemployed organizations resulted in almost all of them ending up supporting the government. In the same way as almost the whole union movement, the human rights movement.

What were the methods you used in your research?

NIC: At PIMSA we investigated two large areas, totally interlinked: the movement of the economic structures of society (understood as a relation of objective forces with a disposition of forces) and social conflict, that brought on shifts in these structures. Specifically about the conflicts of the 1990s and the beginning of the next decade, we investigated each of the most important events (vulgarly known as the *Santiagazo*, *Cutralcazo*, *Jujeñazo*, Plaza de la Dignidad en Corrientes and general strikes) culminating in the investigation of the insurrection of December 2001, which some call the *Argentinazo*. Our method consisted of a minute description of the facts to analyze them in terms of the confrontation of social forces (alliances), aiming to construct periodizations from the indicators of unity or fracture of political cadres and of classes and of degrees of alliance or separation. These investigations of concrete cases were carried out with information collected from our database.

Tell us a little about your database

MCC: Since the end of 1993, we have registered in a systematic and standardized form (through a code) all the “facts of rebellion”, that is, every fact that implies a retreat from an existing situation, realized by a collective subject (in the sense of the demands that they made and not the quantity of people) published in the four principal national daily papers (even though they are edited in Buenos Aires). The variables we used are: place, date, fact, who organized it, type of organization, who they organized against, their objectives, the support they received, the duration, the intervention or not of the police and other opponents, if there was a street action or not, number of deaths, number of wounded or arrested the immediate result (triumph or defeat). Up until now we have registered more than 30 thousand acts of rebellion.

With this data we analyzed the tendencies of the period, above all in relation to those who were the principal subjects of the rebellion, what instruments of struggle they used, what type of organization they built and what were the

objectives. Some of the results are available on the site of PIMSA
www.pimsa.secyt.gov.ar

Thanks!

