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Titulo: Beyond strategy? The social construction of precarious workers organising in the city
of Buenos Aires

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Abstract/Resumen simple

Beyond strategy? The social construction of precarious workers organising in the city of Buenos Aires

The paper presents preliminary findings of an ongoing, case studies based, qualitative, research on the organization and collective mobilization of precarious workers in the city of Buenos Aires. The aim of the paper is to show empirically how specific factors structuring workers' social reality create material opportunities and circumstances that can favourably or unfavourably influence workers' attempts at organising. Rather than looking at unions, NGO and/or other labour friendly institutions strategies for organising precarious workers and at workers' responses to these, the paper starts from a bottom up approach at organising centred on workers' self-activity. This is mediated by a complex set of factors, which include the labour process, the institutional and legal framework, the socio-political context and the role of the informal/precarious sector within the overall economy.

This approach helps to raise fundamental questions about the structuring of workers' collective interests, solidarity and democracy and overall to frame precarious workers' organising within debates on class and movement.

Theoretical framework and aims of the research

The emergence, in the recent decades, of neo-liberalism as the political economic model of the world order, associated with the technological development in the transport and communication systems promoted by the process of globalisation have had important repercussions on the world of work. Processes of labour flexibility, outsourcing, subcontracting, privatization of public services and reforms of the welfare promoted under neoliberalism have put into question the economical sustainability of previously existing structures of employment, work organization and the validity of social compacts while at the same time reinforcing this with an hegemonic discourse which saw market reforms as common sense (Harvey 2005).

The structure of work and employment has changed so dramatically in recent years that it does even make sense to talk about the emergence of a new class of workers: the precariat (Standing 2011). While the extent to which this is really a new class are highly debatable, the reality is that today, across the world, previously accepted differences between formal and informal work, precarious and stable working conditions and between North and South are now blurring.

These overall changes in the employment structure have clearly imposed, within the field of the sociology of work and labour relations, a reflection on the validity of existing theoretical paradigms about work, centred fundamentally on study of the social relations and regulation of work in the waged, protected and male dominated industrial factory.

Research on work in the service sector (Korczynski and MacDonald 2008), on creative labour (Smith and McKinlay 2009), on migrants working conditions (Wills et al 2010), on call centres (Taylor and Bain 2005), on the variable forms of the so called atypical work (De la Garza Toledo 2011) are just few of the examples of recent research streams additions to the field of employment relations. Other studies, particularly by social anthropologists have highlighted the interaction between work and formal/informal social spaces in urban contexts (Mollona 2009, Lazar 2012), have reflected on debates on the nature and origin of the informal sector of the economies (Fernandez-Kelly and Shefner 2006), proposed interdisciplinary approaches to community based workers' organization (Mcbride and

Greenwood 2009) and reflected on the relation between precariousness and citizenship (Barchiesi 2011)

While these examples seem to suggest that previous paradigms about work have been updated to include recent changes in the structure of work, once we direct our focus of attention specifically to the literature on workers organizing and representation in the precarious/informal sector we have to notice that there is still a tendency to concentrate on institutions, formal regulations and strategies for inclusion, almost replicating the 'old' scheme of union representation and collective bargaining so much centred on the post world development of the industrialised countries (Schurman, S. and Eaton, A. 2011). More in general, progressive research about workers, either when discussing about organizing strategy (Simms, Holgate and Heery 2012), social movement unionism and renewal (Fairbrother 2008) or mobilization theory (Kelly 1998), at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, it is rarely disconnected from the presence or reference to a union actor. Overall this tendency to concentrate on institutions (unions but to the same extent also NGO or advocacy groups) has, on the one hand, left apart the study of workers' self-activity and, on the other hand, has reduced the subject of study to work relations in formal employment contexts.

Particularly for those interested to explain workers' resistance and organization, workers thus matter in explaining the social processes conducive to collective action only as far as they are represented by a trade union that engage in a formal struggle with a formal employer in an environment regulated by legislation (Atzeni 2010). While research on the role of these institutions and their organizing strategies remain important in perspective to improve the daily reality of precarious workers, the point of view expressed in this paper is that this research approach does not account for the complex social dynamics in which workers' organizing is embedded. The proposed research aims thus to show that, especially in the informal/precarious sector of the economy, where almost by definition workers are unorganised and need to build from scratch, workers' self-activity rather than institutions matters in building workers' resistance and mobilization and how alternative forms of organization and representation of workers' interests emerge from the conditions of precariousness and informality specific of the sector.

Workers' self-activity is however conditioned by the combination of multiple structural factors. The type of labour process can foster cooperation and enlarge the scope for the establishment of solidarity among workers or by the contrary increase their level of

atomization; the strategic location of the economic activity can give workers more chances to make their complains visible and legitimize their organization or by the contrary make any forms of organization risky; the kind of remuneration workers receive and the employer for whom they are working (a private, the state or both) is another of the factors setting possibilities for action; The political context and the institutional framework can favour strategic alliances with other social movements, promote wider mobilisation and provide the exit from precariousness by framing grievances of specific groups of workers within more general political claims for change.

Understanding thus the dynamics through which these factors structure the daily reality of precarious workers, to see how material circumstances and concrete possibilities affect workers' action can give insights more in general on workers organising and collective action in a class and movement perspective (Cohen 2006)

Specific aims

- Analyse the internal decision making processes and the role of leadership in strengthening organizing
- Describe and discuss the role of the labour process in fostering solidarity
- Map out the process through which workers develop a collective consciousness, a need to organize and the forms this can take
- Consider the role of institutions, their strategies and how these relate to workers' self-activity
- Discuss the role of the political context in shaping workers' action or in promoting alliances
- Analyse the role of the State (power, legislation, relevance of the informal sector economy compared to the rest)
- Compare findings from the cases

Methodology

The research on which this paper is based is part of a three years fellowship project that started in July 2012, aiming at offering new insights into precarious workers' self-organising

and collective resistance under globalised capitalism, using case studies from the informal sector economy of the city of Buenos Aires. The methodological approach used in the overall research is ethnographic. This approach has been used widely in social anthropology but also in labour studies (Burawoy 2009) since is the method that best fits to understand the dynamics of social processes. Techniques of data collection for this research will include: observation of assemblies, meetings, events, collective mobilizations, short contextual interviews, longer interviews with leaders or with key informant not part of the study population, historical and media archives, contextual information, statistical data, secondary sources.

Three cases will be considered in this paper and in the overall research: migrants workers in textile workshops; mail and small goods delivery workers (motoqueros); subcontracted technicians working for telephone companies. The cases are very different in terms of productive contexts, labour process and employment relationship, level of collective organization, strategies and political alliances. Thus in this sense are not fully comparable, at least in the traditional terms of a paired comparison. But this diversity it is seen as essential to provide insights into the different combination of factors contributing to the social construction of workers' organizing in the precarious sector. Considering the overall and specific aims of the research three clusters of analysis common to the cases can be identified: a) the formation of collective identity and solidarity; b) forms of collective action; c) internal decision making process and their relation with the consolidation of the organization; d) strategies and alliances

Expected results

Propose and substantiate a bottom up approach to the study of workers' organizing in the precarious sector.

Highlight the role played by the factors composing the social structure in which workers' action and behaviours are inserted. Not all precarious workers are free to organise, material circumstances and concrete possibilities influence their choices. Thus strategies for organising need to consider this.

Provide insights into the internal dynamics of the organization, how decisions are taken, how the organisations are consolidated, how interests become collective, what is the role played by leaders. This inside view of the *modus operandi* of the organizations can be useful to

engage with existing debates in the literature on the use and practice of democracy and, more in general, on workers' organizing and unions renewal.

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