The Economic Accomplices to the Argentine Dictatorship

Outstanding Debts

Edited by

Horacio Verbitsky
Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky

Verbitsky and Bohoslavsky The Economic Accomplices to the Argentine Dictatorship

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Contributions to the Analysis of the Role of Labor Leadership in Worker Repression in the 1970s

Victoria Basualdo

INTRODUCTION

Studies on Argentina's last military dictatorship have evolved over the past decades, accompanying structural, political, intellectual, and disciplinary changes. The analyses of the brutal human rights abuses that dominated interpretations during and immediately following the dictatorship gave way, gradually and from different perspectives, to approaches that addressed a number of changes and economic, political, and social impacts that had taken place in that stage of local history. In particular, in the past decade, various lines of research have highlighted the need to study that period taking into account the role and responsibilities not only of the armed forces, but also of the other actors and sectors that participated in an intricate web that sustained the dictatorship, which would, therefore, not be merely a military dictatorship, but a civilian-military dictatorship.

In this framework, the aim of this chapter is to contribute to the analysis of the relationship between trade unionism and dictatorship, with a special focus on the role played by some sectors of top union leadership in the repression of the combative sectors during the 1970s.

This study is part of a long-term line of research that deals with the history of labor organization in Argentina, which draws on a range of primary and secondary sources, and suggests that the dictatorship constituted an attempt to refound economic and social relations in a context of strong economic, political, and social confrontations that were aggravated in the first half of the 1970s. This approach requires that we look further back, to the previous period, to explore these confrontations, in which there was a major involvement of the labor movement.

Although there is a vast and rich literature on workers and unionism from 1973 through 1976, these works have been dominated by analyses of the Peronist government, its leader, and the movement as a whole, and this has often tended to shift the focus of study and blur the specific issues of the working class and the

labor movement. Another issue to be considered is that the history of the labor movement in the periods before and after the coup d'état has been explored by different currents of thought and authors, and in most cases in isolation from each other, which makes it difficult to visualize the continuities and ruptures between the pre- and post-1976 periods.

Lastly, even the most recent bibliography has generally ignored the revisionist views of the dictatorship and the role of the labor movement in that process, so that these studies do not provide direct information on this aspect. For all these reasons, this chapter proposes a few possible lines of approach to address the subject more thoroughly.

There is general agreement that Argentina's labor movement was nowhere close to achieving unity in the period prior to the dictatorship – that is, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s – and that the confrontation of "orthodox" and "combative" sectors became more acute and vicious as of 1973.[1] A clear example of the level of confrontation and the link between the labor and political struggles is the incident that took place on June 20, 1973, a major episode during those years that is known as the Ezeiza Massacre and which crystallized a violent confrontation at the heart of the Peronist movement. The various labor factions played a central role, as José Ignacio Rucci, general secretary of the General Confederation of Labor (Confederación General del Trabajo, CGT) and head of orthodox unionism, was one of the leading instigators of the repression of the radicalized sectors, and given that the "assault forces" drew their members from the right-wing factions of several unions. The confrontation between the various factions of the labor movement from 1973 to 1976 was closely linked to the repressive processes that disarticulated the various attempts at organization and mobilization by the combative sectors, a factor that played a relevant role in the historical process that culminated in the military dictatorship. As it would be impossible to review that history in its entirety here, I focus on the evidence available in one case in particular, that of the Union of Automotive Transport Mechanics and Related Workers (Sindicato de Mecánicos y Afines del Transporte Automotor, SMATA).

[1] "Orthodox" and "combative" sectors opposed each other in two leading fronts. With respect to the internal dynamics of labor organization, the former supported vertical and hierarchical structures (a preference that earned the members of this sector the label of "bureaucratic"), whereas the latter favored democratic union practices and ongoing contact with and engagement of the rank-and-file. In terms of the objectives pursued by union activity and the definitions adopted, the orthodox line privileged negotiation over conflict and believed that the ultimate goal of labor organizations was to achieve improved conditions for workers without questioning the basis of the system or the authority of management; combative groups, instead, adhered to a range of radical political ideologies and, without abandoning demands for partial economic improvements, they also sought, in the vast majority of cases, to promote radical social and economic changes.

This example is relevant and interesting for several reasons. First, because the automobile industry was strategically important for the second stage of import substitution industrialization, a factor that is without a doubt crucial for explaining the power, presence, and influence of a union that in the mid-1960s had some 120,000 members and aspired to successfully challenge the position of the Metal Workers' Union (Unión Obrera Metalúrgica, UOM) as leader of the industrial labor movement. Second, in the first half of the 1970s, there were interesting processes of combative unionism and activism in factories, which were opposed by the national steering committee of SMATA and its top leader, José Rodríguez. This was the case, for example, of two large corporations, Ford and Mercedes Benz,[2] whose workers denounced the union's involvement in the persecution of workers and combative delegates. Moreover, SMATA participated in the repressive crackdown on the Córdoba division, which began in 1974 and culminated in the dismantling of a combatant group that was key at the national level. Even though a brief analysis of these processes is not enough to draw general conclusions on labor leadership and unionism during this period, it can at least help us visualize a pattern of operation.

THE SMATA CÓRDOBA DIVISION

René Salamanca, a worker at IKA-Renault and an activist of the Revolutionary Communist Party (Partido Comunista Revolucionario, PCR), became the face of a major victory in April 1972, when in an election of authorities in the Córdoba division of SMATA the Brown Ballot defeated the traditional leadership represented by the Green and Blue Ballot, headed by Elpidio Torres. With Roque Romero, who defined himself as *clasista* (or class-based, in reference to a focus on the defense of class interests), as candidate for assistant secretary, the Brown Ballot obtained 3,089 votes, against 2,804 votes of the Green and Blue Ballot. This victory had a huge impact, both locally and nationally, in terms of strengthening the combative union line, which had had a major milestone in 1968 with the forming of the CGT offshoot, the Argentine CGT (CGT de los Argentinos, CGTA). During that period, SMATA-Córdoba secured local alliances with other combative leaders, such as Agustín Tosco, of the union of electricity workers (Luz y Fuerza), and Atilio López, of the Automotive Tramway Workers' Union (Unión Tranviarios Automotor, UTA), with whom it formed the Combative Labor Movement (Movimiento Sindical Combativo), which had a profound influence on combative union sectors across the country. Under the direction of Salamanca, the Córdoba division also introduced big changes in the union's organization and internal dynamics: it turned for support to the delegates and internal commissions of the leading plants, viewed rank-and-file

[2] See Chapter 11 in this book.

assemblies as key discussion and decision making instances, and established a system of rotation for the members of the steering committee.

Because of all of these factors, the *clasista* victory met with growing opposition from the two major figures in the union at the national level, the general secretary, Dirk Kloosterman, and José Rodríguez, who headed the Buenos Aires division. On May 22, 1973, Kloosterman was murdered, joining a number of orthodox union leaders who had been "executed," starting with Augusto Timoteo Vandor, on June 30, 1969. José Rodríguez took his place at the head of the national steering committee of SMATA, and from his position there he maintained a firm confrontation with the Córdoba division, in the framework of the increasing growth of right-wing groups in the province, which culminated in February 1974 with a coup staged by the former chief of the provincial police, Antonio Navarro, who ousted the constitutionally elected governor, Ricardo Obregón Cano, and his assistant governor, Atilio López.

The conflict between the Córdoba division and the national steering committee of SMATA was aggravated when Salamanca was reelected that same year. This time, the Brown Ballot obtained a resounding victory, with 4,027 votes against the 2,770 obtained by the ballot formed by Rodríguez supporters.

Finally, a union action questioned by the Ministry of Labor, and to which Renault responded by suspending more than 3,000 workers, gave Rodríguez and the national division of SMATA the opportunity to neutralize the Córdoba union. On August 6, 1974, Salamanca spoke to an open assembly of 6,000 workers from the sector, rejecting the mandatory conciliation, and was supported by the vast majority of the workers, who voted to continue with the strike. Two days later, SMATA expelled him, along with twenty-two other members of the Córdoba steering committee, and decreed the suspension of the division, appointing a monitoring committee from Buenos Aires to take control of the division.

Following government orders, the Central Bank froze all union funds deposited in national accounts. At the same time, the Labor Ministry of Córdoba ignored the petitions to have the measures adopted by the central division of SMATA revoked. Rodríguez moved swiftly to legitimize the central union's control over the Córdoba division. That same day, the central division of SMATA took out full-page ads in Córdoba and Buenos Aires newspapers denouncing the *clasistas*, characterizing the strike as proof of their "defense of foreign ideologies," and accusing them of involving the entire labor movement of Córdoba in a "conspiracy of the mercenary Left" at the service of the great corporations.[3] This offensive escalated further after the murder of Atilio López at the hands of the Triple A (the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance), on September 16, 1974, which was followed by a wave of murders in the province.

[3] *La Voz del Interior*, August 8, 1974, quoted in J. Brennan, *El Cordobazo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1996), p. 364.

When, on October 10, the recently appointed Federal Interventor of Córdoba, Raúl Oscar Lacabanne, visited the central headquarters of SMATA, he was applauded by José Rodríguez for "getting rid of the image of a Marxist Córdoba, which is actually a Peronist province through and through." Lacabanne, in turn, expressed his thanks and admitted that they "could not have achieved anything were it not for the support of the sixty-two organizations and the local CGT," and he assured them that they were "cleaning up the city, removing what little is left."[4]

These events marked the end of the class-based union experience in SMATA-Córdoba, as Lacabanne banned union assemblies, allowed the raiding of the union's files and library, and supervised the suspension of all union activities, including social-welfare-related activities. After being expelled from the union and forced to go underground, from 1974 to 1976 Salamanca denounced the coup preparations underway and called to defend the government of Isabel Martínez de Perón, while maintaining contact with workers through any means available to him. In the early hours of March 24, 1976, right before the coup, Salamanca was kidnapped by the armed forces and disappeared.

The SMATA-Córdoba case is one of the leading events that underscore the fact that the repression of workers, and particularly of its combative groups, did not begin with the military coup, but instead existed and had been growing in intensity since 1974. After the division came under the control of SMATA-Buenos Aires, and as Agustín Tosco was trying to regroup his supporters and join forces with other unions across the country, the Tucumán Sugar Industry Workers' Federation (Federación Obrera Tucumana de la Industria del Azúcar, FOTIA) was banned by the government, its top leaders were arrested, and Tosco himself was persecuted. These developments were accompanied by a crackdown on several focal points of labor mobilization and radicalization, which were quashed by police and military forces, while some of their organizations were taken over by the government and their leaders persecuted and jailed.[5] This offensive of the security forces reached its height with the "occupation" of the city of Villa Constitución on March 20, 1975 and the detention of almost all the union leaders of the area. This was followed by murders and disappearances after the military coup.[6]

[4] "SMATA recibió la visita del gobernador interventor de Córdoba, compañero brigadier mayor Raúl Oscar Lacabanne," *Avance* no. 30, October 1974, pp. 40–41, quoted in Brennan, *El Cordobazo*, p. 370.

[5] For a list of the leading union organizations that came under government control before the coup, see A. Fernández, *Las prácticas sociales del sindicalismo (1976–1982)* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1985), p. 135.

[6] That day the city was "invaded" by what eyewitnesses described as an endless convoy of vehicles of the security forces, whose aim was to stop an alleged conspiracy of "industrial guerrilla groups" that supposedly sought to overthrow Isabel Martínez de Perón. The accusations were completely unfounded, but the repression claimed dozens of arrests and various acts of violence against workers and their families. See, for example, V. Paulón and others (comp.), *El villazo. La experiencia de una ciudad y su movimiento obrero* (Villa Constitución: Revista Historia Regional Libros, 1999).

THE CASES OF FORD AND MERCEDES BENZ

In this context, the experiences of Ford Motor Company and Mercedes Benz serve to illustrate how, immediately after these events, Rodríguez dealt with other worker attempts to organize at the rank-and-file level. At these factories, the more significant processes took place in 1975, with the consolidation of dissident groups that began to forge ties with other combative sectors and make demands on the national leadership of SMATA. This process took a major turn on October 6, 1975 when then Labor Minister Carlos Ruckauf promoted and signed a decree to "wipe out subversion in industrial centers," whereby all worker struggles were equated with industrial guerrilla activity.[7]

SMATA's support to the policy imposed by the government was evidenced in the signing of an agreement with the automotive companies, under which one percent of the price of every vehicle sold would go to a special fund for the "eradication of negative elements" from the plants. This fund was to be managed by the union steering committee, and would not be subject to audits, and in exchange the union, which supposedly represented the interests of workers, would guarantee that they were effectively repressed.

The period between late 1975 and early 1976 saw a deterioration in the situation of workers and activists who had succeeded in consolidating their presence in the plants, promoting democratic union practices, forging ties with radicalized sectors, and participating in mobilizations and significant processes, such as the meetings held in June and July 1975 to protest the adjustment plan furthered by Economy Minister Celestino Rodrigo. At Ford, where nearly 5,000 workers were represented by some 200 delegates, repression was particularly harsh. Ford employees have given valuable testimony on how José Rodríguez and the national leadership of SMATA kept up their part of the bargain with the government and zealously combated the so-called industrial or factory guerrillas. The union's steering committee even appealed to the Green Ballot delegates to do away with the new opposing rank-and-file leaders. Pedro Troiani, one of the delegates who survived, explained this as follows:

> One time, they called all the members of the internal commission and the better-known delegates ... they called us all in to the union, and José Rodríguez started talking to us about the leftist groups; he wanted us to mark them. He said: "The leftist groups are gaining ground here and they want to take over the union; what we need to do here is defend the union, and we're not going to let them have it."... And at one point, still talking about this, he says: "Alright, let's see who has the guts to defend the union." And they took us down to the basement, where they showed us a pile of weapons they had.... I believe the union collaborated with the Triple A.[8]

[7] The decree was signed by Ítalo Argentino Luder (provisional president of the National Senate, acting as head of the Executive Branch), seconded by Ministers Manuel Arauz Castex (Foreign Affairs and Worship), Tomás Vottero (Defense), Carlos Ruckauf (Labor), Carlos A. Emery (Social Welfare), Antonio Cafiero (Economy), and Ángel Federico Robledo (Interior). It read: "In view of the need to address the activity of subversive elements that have been disturbing the country's peace and stability with their actions.... The Interior Security Council is hereby mandated with: a) Conducting national efforts to combat subversion."

Other testimonies, such as that given by former plant delegate Luis Degiusti, describe the impact that the union's campaign had on combative activists, as it limited enormously their capacity for action and organization in the plant and even outside it. Referring to how they were seen by their superiors, Degiusti said: "There, at Ford, we were [seen] as rapists are now, we were the bomb-throwing terrorists, we were against work, against everything."[9] The testimonies refer to the weight of that discourse, which twisted any labor demands that could interfere with company production, turning them into subversive actions. Guerrillas and organized workers, armed groups and rank-and-file delegates were thus confused and presented as one and the same and accused of undermining the foundations of the social structure, hence legitimizing the repression carried out by the state in conjunction with business.

This concern over "industrial guerrillas" was so widespread that the issue was studied and monitored by the U.S. Embassy, at the request of the Defense Department. In this respect, a December 2, 1975 document notes:

> Terrorism is a fact and a way of life in Argentina. The guerrilla activities in the rural areas of Tucumán and the urban areas of Córdoba and Buenos Aires have been the subject of world-wide comment and endless analysis. However, another and possibly even more insidious form of guerrilla warfare, to which little attention has heretofore been paid, is in full operation in Argentina. It is the war being carried out by the industrial guerrilla, who operates on the factory floor, in the union hall.... He aims to radicalize the workers, alienate them from their legitimate leaders and their government, and win their sympathy so that they become his willing accomplices or docile followers.[10]

[8] Interview with Pedro Troiani, conducted by Marina Lascano, quoted in M. Lascano, *Cambios y continuidades en la clase obrera argentina (1973–1983). El caso Ford*, Master's thesis, Universidad Nacional de Sarmiento, Buenos Aires (2013).

[9] Interview with Luis Degiusti, conducted by Marina Lascano, February 2012, in Lascano, *Cambios y continuidades*.

[10] "Industrial Terrorism: Guerrilla Warfare on the Factory Floor," extracts from a document issued by the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires, on December 2, 1975, for the Defense Department and diplomatic posts in Latin American countries. Available at www.nosdigital.com.ar/2011/11/docqhicieronhistoriaii (accessed February 3, 2013), quoted in Lascano, *Cambios y continuidades*.

The document also stressed the radicalization of broad sectors of the rank-and-file and the difficulties encountered by several orthodox leaders to contain their actions and conflicts:

> Embassy reporting has consistently pointed out the increasing alienation of the Argentine organized labor leadership from its rank-and-file. With the exception of only a handful of unions, the current national union leaders are now virtually divorced from the workers they represent. Their authority has eroded to the point that rank-and-file parallel unions, usually called plant "Struggle Committees" or "Coordinating Committees," have virtually replaced elected union delegates in negotiations at the plant level. Invariably, these grass-roots committees are far more militant than their legitimate leaders.... Their only suggested "solution" is for the police and military forces to suppress any "unauthorized" act of the workers. While the Military is not yet prepared to enforce trade union discipline, it is becoming increasingly concerned with the subversive aspects of the problem. But, as with all the other sectors, the Military also has difficulties distinguishing between real subversion and more legitimate workers militancy.[11]

The offensive against "industrial guerrillas" was, in fact, greatly intensified after the 1976 military coup, with the wave of kidnappings of workers and activists that followed in Ford and Mercedes Benz, which were, nonetheless, only a portion of such crimes in the country. In Ford's case, between March and May 1976, twenty-five workers were kidnapped and "disappeared" for thirty to sixty days. Half of them were picked up in their homes and taken to the Tigre police station, which operated as a clandestine detention center, while the other half was detained directly at the General Pacheco plant, which for a long time housed a First Army Corps garrison.[12]

Some testimonies highlight how repression was stepped up at the plant after the coup: "The Ford plant was surrounded by trucks and jeeps, [with men] armed to the teeth; they frisked us one by one, and they arrested a lot of our fellow workers. They would go through our lockers, the changing rooms, they were constantly conducting searches." Others recount how "they took the delegates, sub-delegates, and activists away. They decimated the body of delegates, and, shortly before the coup, or during the coup itself, many were pressured by the company into resigning"; "we'd be working and there'd be a soldier next to us with a rifle."[13]

The investigation of the company's actions during the last dictatorship gave way to a criminal proceeding and to a civil lawsuit against its executives, furthered by some surviving workers, in particular by Pedro Norberto Troiani, as is analyzed in Chapter 11 in this book.

[11] Lascano, *Cambios y continuidades*.
[12] Á. Abós, *Las organizaciones sindicales y el poder militar (1976–1983)* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1984), p. 12.
[13] Ibid., p. 43.

The role played by SMATA was also denounced by Mercedes Benz workers.[14] Similar to what was happening in other plants, in October 1975 4,000 workers mobilized and, gathered in an assembly, they questioned the union leadership and elected a new internal commission, formed by nine representatives, which became known as the "group of nine." SMATA denied the validity of the election and the internal commission, and the company fired more than 100 workers (including the workers who would later be kidnapped under the dictatorship) with the support of the union and its secretary general, José Rodríguez.

In contrast to statements by Rodríguez, who in the framework of the Truth Trials claimed that that strike had been "a conflict in one of the many factories represented by SMATA" and that "the union had nothing to do with the dismissals," the group of surviving workers declared instead that it was "a conflict with the union over the discussion in the joint assembly and over internal elections, as SMATA had taken control of the internal commission more than a year earlier, and had filled the plant with thugs." They maintain that what Rodríguez described as "a conflict artificially promoted by agents of chaos and subversion" was actually "such a unique experience in union democracy that just remembering any aspect of it, any gesture, stirs the heart":

> Like what happened on October 8, 1975, when news of the dismissals spread and 4,000 workers marched out of the plant shouting "All 4,000 in or all 4,000 out"; or the workers at the thermal power plant, whose collective bargaining agreement prevented them from striking, but who donated their entire salary to the strike fund; or the solidarity shown [to the workers] when the union reacted by leaving all Mercedes Benz workers without healthcare program; or the thousands of signatures that accompanied every effort to find our disappeared fellow workers throughout the dictatorship.[15]

These workers and survivors also pointed out that José Rodríguez used the involvement of the Montoneros in the conflict to report workers, accusing them of being guerrillas. On October 24, 1975, the Montoneros kidnapped the plant's head of production, Heinrich Metz, demanding the reinstatement of the dismissed workers and payment of a ransom, to which the company ultimately agreed. In this context, on November 5, 1975, Rodríguez sent a letter to Minister of Justice

[14] This case was researched extensively by Gabriela Weber, who wrote two books with her findings: *Die Verschwundenen von Mercedez-Benz* (Hamburg: Assoziation A, 2001) and *El lavado del dinero nazi en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2005), and produced the documentary *Milagros no hay. Los desaparecidos de Mercedes Benz* (color, 113 min., 2003; there is an updated version: 85 min., 2005).
[15] Ex Trabajadores de Mercedes Benz por la Memoria y la Justicia (Former Mercedes Benz Workers for Memory and Justice), "José Rodríguez y los desaparecidos de Mercedes Benz," document signed by Ricardo Hoffmann, Eduardo Olasiregui, Héctor A. Ratto, Ramón Segovia, and Daniel Suárez. Available at labournet.de/branchen/auto/dc/ar/ehemal-s.html (accessed February 3, 2013).

Corvalán Nanclares requesting that the government take control of Mercedes Benz on account of the company's payment of the ransom to the Montoneros, and describing the workers as a "group of agitators allied with subversion," the internal commission as a "commission alien to the union and fostered by subversion," the actions conducted by the workers as a "strike without cause; a provocation whose sole aim was to use workers as guinea pigs in a seditious experience," or a "strike with subversive motivations," "a typical act of the industrial guerrillas," furthered by "mercenaries of enslaving Marxism."[16] Very similar expressions were used in the two ads taken out in the newspaper *Clarín* on October 22, 1975, signed by the steering committee of SMATA and the Green Ballot, associated with José Rodríguez.

The March 24, 1976 coup triggered successive waves of repression at the plant. In April, Juan José Martín was kidnapped from his place of work and was only released after some 1,000 workers mobilized and protested at La Tablada barracks. A second repressive stage began in December 1976, when Miguel Griecco, José Vizzini, and Alfredo Martín were kidnapped. In January 1977, after a bargaining process with management, Esteban Reimer and Hugo Ventura were kidnapped; and in August 1977 the abductions of Héctor Ratto and Diego Núñez were perpetrated, along with other workers (including Gigena, Mosquera, Arenas, Leichner, and Delcontte, in addition to Juan José Ratto, who was taken by mistake). Most of them had been on the lists of "radical elements" and had been fired by the company in 1975.

During these years, when increasing numbers of workers from major factories were being disappeared, and despite the fact that SMATA was under military control, José Rodríguez continued living in Argentina and even sat on the Executive Committee of the International Metalworkers' Federation. In his statement to the Federal Court, Rodríguez claimed he "honestly, only found out about what happened in Mercedes Benz with CONADEP" in 1984. Moreover, he said that after the coup d'état the military controllers "decided everything" in the unions and "there was nothing [he] could do," a claim that stands in stark contradiction to the importance of the position he occupied, which went beyond national borders.

Recent research into organization and resistance attempts in Mercedes Benz during the military dictatorship, based on documents of the Intelligence Division of the Buenos Aires Province Police (Dirección de Inteligencia de la Policía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, DIPBA), sheds light on the role played by SMATA:

> The files not only reveal the collusion of union bureaucracy with management, in this case Mercedes Benz' executives – a phenomenon that was also established in the cases of Volkswagen and Ford – they also evidence their favorable position toward military authorities with the aim of preventing the growth of opposition groups within the labor movement.... Considered from this perspective, it is not surprising to find the regional direction of SMATA repeatedly mentioned in police records as confronting the Internal Demands Commission and workers in general in assemblies held at the factory after the former's intention to suspend union actions or temper the methods used to protest.[17]

[16] Ex Trabajadores de Mercedes Benz por la Memoria y la Justicia, "José Rodríguez y los desaparecidos."

The evidence available suggests, then, that the collusion with management and the confrontation of part of the leadership of SMATA with rank-and-file delegates was not limited to the early days of the dictatorship, but instead continued throughout it.

TOP UNION LEADERSHIP AND DICTATORSHIP: ELEMENTS FOR A DISCUSSION OF THE "SOCIAL CONSENSUS" VIEW

This brief review of some of the cases connected with SMATA suggests that the repressive process of the mid-1970s was not carried out against a unified labor movement, which jointly resisted the onslaught from government, corporate management, and repressive forces, but instead, on the contrary, both before and after the March 24, 1976 coup d'état, sectors of the "orthodox" union leadership supported, legitimized, and actively collaborated with the repression of combative groups. Although there are no systematic and comprehensive studies yet to enable an analysis of this phenomenon in all its complexity and across the entire period, the evidence gathered with respect to the national leadership of SMATA and, in particular, to the actions of José Rodríguez as general secretary exposes the existence, at least among some sectors of top union leadership, of a policy of collaboration with management and the repressive forces in their efforts to discipline and control workers and rank-and-file union delegates.

Still pending, however, is a discussion of what this line of analysis can contribute in terms of the interpretation of the dictatorship and the intricate web of social, political, and economic relations that supported it. In this sense, I want to focus here, in particular, on the corollaries and implications of Hugo Vezzetti's book *Pasado y presente. Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina*, published in 2002, which has become a reference work for the movement that over the past decade has undertaken the revision of the history of the dictatorship. The central hypothesis of this work is that Argentina's last military dictatorship "put leaderships, the state, and the country's institutions to the test, and, in general, brought to light the very worst of society." From this perspective, that "acute episode of political barbarization and state degradation would not have been possible without the commitment, the support, the agreement of many," so that Vezzetti proposes analyzing "the responsibilities of society."[18] He posits that "the image of a society predominantly and permanently

[17] H. Barbero, "La resistencia obrera en los anales de la Policía Bonaerense. El caso Mercedes Benz Argentina," Buenos Aires, Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, 2006, pp. 37–38.

[18] H. Vezzetti, *Pasado y presente. Guerra, dictadura y sociedad en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002), pp. 12–13.

terrorized by widespread violence present in everyday life" is erroneous, and puts forward instead the idea that "a majority accompanied or contributed through passive conformity to the actions of the dictatorship."[19] In this respect, he says:

> A society must take responsibility not only for what it actively promoted and supported but also for what it failed to prevent.... Moreover, if we look at the conditions under which the dictatorship was established, we cannot but recognize that it was furthered by an escalation of illegal violence, factionalism, and anti-institutional exaltation that involved a broad spectrum of civil and political society, both to the right and left.

This book, which in the words of its author "is not a work of historical research, in the sense of a systematic investigation of political, economic, and military events of that period," but "a study of social memory"[20] (and in fact draws little explicit support from primary or secondary sources), operated as a call to steer history and memory studies on the dictatorship in that direction, and was echoed enthusiastically by a wide scope of productions on the subject in the field of history and the social sciences.

This line, which holds all of society accountable for what happened during that period, analyzes its behavior, makeup, and history with a strong tendency toward generalization and a notable disregard for basic structural dimensions. In particular, the resistance to incorporate the links between political history and the transformations in the economic and social structure are especially negative. Vezzetti argues, for example, that "when it is said and repeated that the massacre in Argentina was necessary to implement an economic model that required wiping out, exactly in that manner, any opposition, no real evidence is given for that assertion."[21]

As the facts and events analyzed here could be interpreted along such lines, I propose a different reading, highlighting two main issues. First, with respect to disregarding the importance of structural factors, it is important to analyze the complicity of a sector of union leadership with the repression within the context of the central division of this period, which is essential to understand the causes of the dictatorship and its main policy lines – that is, the high level of confrontation between capital and labor, which peaked at historical levels in the mid-1970s. Second, with respect to holding all of society responsible for the origin and development of the Process of National Reorganization, as the dictatorship called itself, it is essential to underline that, in addition to expressions of complicity, there were also strong movements that opposed, questioned, and resisted the dictatorship.

[19] Ibid., p. 43.
[20] Ibid., p. 12.
[21] Ibid., pp. 161–162.

The SMATA case revealed the existence of divisions and clashes between different factions within trade unions, which not only had different approaches to union activity, they had different political goals. However, it should be recalled that the working class as a whole – which during the Peronist decade had succeeded in consolidated a far-reaching union structure and a prominent position in the economy and in society – far from being marginal during this period, as the excessive emphasis placed on political conflict and armed struggle could sometimes suggest, played a key role as labor unrest increased in line with political conflict.

The strength of the working class – even with its acute internal divisions and confrontations – is evidenced, for example, by the fact that in 1974 wages represented about 47 percent of the total national income. This strength was rooted not only in the characteristics of the industrialization model and in the role played by workers in the production and consumption of goods, but also in the mechanisms of representation and organizations available to it. As of its – partial, contradictory, conflictive, but critical – association with a range of political organizations closely connected with the process of radicalization in Latin America and the Third World, and with significant developments in the central countries, the labor movement set out to fight to improve the conditions of the working class, and, in many cases, supported projects that called for radical transformation. This was influenced by the vitality of union delegates and internal commissions during the second stage of import substitution. The high degree of organization at the rank-and-file level is a decisive factor that explains the roots of that strength of labor vis-à-vis capital, which was translated both in economic terms in the struggles in the sphere of production, and in the great confrontations at the political and social levels.

The measures introduced as of the mid-1970s, although marked by multiple contradictions and tensions among the various actors and social forces that were directly or indirectly involved in the dictatorial government, were clearly aimed at overcoming the challenge posed by the convergence of the process of political and social radicalization and the strength of the working class. In contrast to the types of solutions attempted during the second import substitution stage, which had been implemented against a backdrop of the persisting model of industrialization and its structural relations, the various policies deployed as of March 1976 not only made it possible to attack the forms of organization of the working class and its political ties, they also simultaneously promoted economic transformations that deeply altered the structural foundations of labor strength.

In this sense, it is essential to bear in mind that, in the context of a profound restructuring of global capitalism and the crisis of the Fordist paradigm, the dictatorship introduced major changes in the country's economy and altered the foundations of the strategic power that the industrial working class had had in previous decades. The process of industrial restructuring and deindustrialization

was accompanied by an exponential growth of the external debt, which, in contrast to what had happened in previous stages, did not finance productive activities but was used increasingly for financial valorization.[22] At the same time that the wage and employment policy of Economy Minister José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz entailed in just a few months a 40 percent drop in wages as compared to 1974 levels, basic labor rights were severely curtailed, including the right to collective agreements, the right to bargaining, and the right to protest.

With respect to labor policies, the military dictatorship promoted a series of laws aimed at legalizing repressive actions and government control in the sphere of union organization, which constituted a major turning point in the history of labor.[23] These laws were accompanied by the government's control over most of the large trade unions and federations, starting with the CGT and followed by the leading second-tier union organizations, which represented 50 percent of the working class, thus fracturing the centralized national structure of the labor movement.[24]

Lastly, in terms of repression, the military coup imposed a new scheme, which was characterized by the existence of detention camps and the disappearance of persons, combined with the murdering and jailing of political opponents, and which penetrated deep into the workplace, through the presence of police officers, the control of all political and union activities, different forms of repression and disciplining, the control of the recruitment process, and political and ideological surveillance.[25] A favorite target of this repression were union delegates and members of the internal commissions – that is, the rank-and-file representatives of workers, who for decades had played a very important role in the defense of labor rights and in organizing and furthering actions to achieve gains and negotiate with management.[26]

At the same time, while repression was led and carried out primarily by the armed forces, it enjoyed not only the connivance but also the active support of large corporations, which reported their workers to the police, supplied funds to the repressive forces, and, in the cases of Ford and the steel company Acindar,

[22] For a thorough analysis of the economic context, see E. Basualdo, *Estudios de historia económica argentina. Desde mediados del siglo XX hasta la actualidad* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2006).

[23] B. Gallitelli and A. Thompson, "La política laboral en la Argentina del Proceso," in M. Barrera and G. Fallabella (comps.), *Sindicatos bajo regímenes militares. Argentina, Brasil, Chile* (Santiago, Chile: CES-Naciones Unidas), 1990, pp. 28–30. See also Chapter 15 in this book.

[24] For a list of the leading trade union organizations that came under government control after March 24, 1976, see Fernández, *Las prácticas sociales*, pp. 135–137.

[25] F. Delich, "Después del diluvio, la clase obrera," in A. Rouquié (comp.), *Argentina, hoy* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1982), p. 140.

[26] For a synthesis of the history of delegates and internal commissions, see D. Azpiazu, V. Basualdo, and M. Schorr, *La industria y el sindicalismo de base en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Cara o Ceca, 2010).

for example, authorized the establishment of clandestine detention centers in the premises of their factories.[27] This repressive policy spread across all economic activities, but it focused particularly on industrial activities (and within industry, the metal and mechanical workers' unions were especially persecuted) and essential public services (transportation, railroads, energy) – that is, on strategic sectors that had, in addition, been pillars of labor organization.

It was in the framework of enormous transformations and confrontations that the repressive processes, the murders, and disappearances in SMATA-Córdoba, Ford, and Mercedes Benz occurred. The labor movement was, thus, critically remapped. Leaders and workers of the combative factions were among the main targets of dictatorial repression and most of them were jailed, disappeared, or forced into internal or external exile. However, even in this context of brutal repression and changes in working and organizational conditions, there were strong movements that resisted, opposed, and questioned the dictatorship, with different approaches and perspectives within the working class, strongly impacting this historical period and the definition of the transition to democracy. Therefore, during the dictatorship the tendency toward "participation," dialogue, or agreement with the regime on the part of one sector of the union spectrum coexisted with another, "confrontational" tendency in the heart of the labor movement, although, owing to the impact of repression, it was furthered by union lines different from those that had been predominant before 1976.[28] From this perspective, the support and involvement of unionists in the repressive process should not be seen as additional proof of a supposedly widespread social support to the policies of the dictatorship, but instead as examples of complicity of sectors of the leadership with a regressive model of social, political, and economic transformation that ultimately, in many cases, also affected their own position. The analysis of the role of the labor leaders who collaborated in the repression of workers must be conducted, then, through interdisciplinary research and a careful historical contextualization that will make it possible to show the different dimensions and conflicts, and the forms they took on before and after the military coup. This is important so that the focus on certain union leaders and structures that betrayed their mandate and position and repressed those they were

[27] V. Basualdo, "Complicidad patronal-militar en la última dictadura argentina. Los casos de Acindar, Astarsa, Dalmine-Siderca, Ford, Ledesma y Mercedes Benz," *Engranajes*, special supplement on the thirtieth anniversary of the coup, FETIA-CTA, March 2006, available at comisionporlamemoria.net/bibliografia2012/dictadura/Basualdo.pdf (accessed February 3, 2013).

[28] For an analysis of the various union sectors and the different lines of action during the dictatorship, see V. Basualdo (with the collaboration of I. Barragán and F. Rodríguez), "La clase trabajadora durante la última dictadura militar argentina (1976–1983): apuntes para una discusión sobre la resistencia obrera," Dossier no. 13, Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, 2011, available at www.comisionporlamemoria.org/investigacionyensenanza/dossiers/con%20issn/dossier14versionfinal.pdf (accessed February 3, 2013).

supposed to represent will not obscure, confuse, or blur the major role played in this history by the dispute between capital and labor, or that of the repressive forces and of important fractions of economic power, or the role of significant sectors of the working class and the labor movement that defied the alliance woven around state terrorism and its attempt to refound the country's economic and social structure.