

***Autogestión* and the Worker-Recuperated Enterprises in Argentina**

The Potential for Reconstituting Work and Recomposing Life

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Abstract

The Argentine worker-recuperated enterprises (*empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores*, or ERT) are direct, diverse, and non-traditional union aligned responses by roughly 10,000 urban-based workers to recent socio-economic crises. Over ten years since the first workplace occupations and their recoveries as self-managed workers-cooperatives, this latest wave of workers’ struggle in Argentina has shown promising alternatives to capital-labour relations and the neoliberal enclosures of life.

But why were almost 200 failing, closed, or bankrupted small- and medium-sized businesses spanning the entire urban economic base subsequently occupied and reopened as self-managed workplaces by former employees in Argentina since at least 1997? Why do most ERTs decide to reorganize themselves as workers’ cooperatives? Why do many of them also decide to open up the shop floor to the diverse communities surrounding them, symbolically and practically tearing down factory walls by sharing their workplaces with community centres and dining halls, free clinics, popular education programmes, alternative radio and media centres, and art studios? Finally, why Argentina?

To begin to answer these questions, I first explore some of Argentina’s key socio-economic and historical conjunctures motivating workspace occupations and the formation of self-managed workers’ cooperatives. Second, I begin to theorize the concept of *autogestión* (self-management) as it tends to be practiced by Argentina’s ERTs. Third, I sketch out some of the ERTs’ most common micro-economic and organizational successes and challenges, exploring how the struggle to reconstitute a once capitalist workplace as a self-managed workers’ coop interplays with an ERT’s reconstituted labour processes. I conclude by appraising the future possibilities of ERTs for social transformation in Argentina by mapping out four “social innovations” being spearheaded by the phenomenon.

“But now I know, looking back on our struggle three years on. Now I can see where the change in me started, because it begins during your struggles. First, you fight for not being left out on the street with nothing. And then, suddenly, you see that you’ve formed a cooperative and you start getting involved in the struggle of other ERTs. You don’t realize at the time but within your own self there’s a change that’s taking place.... You realize it afterwards, when time has transpired.... Then, suddenly, you find yourself... influencing change... something that you would never imagine yourself doing.”

~ Cándido González, on La Tribu 88.7 FM’s *La cuadrilla*,
Buenos Aires, August 2, 2005

Introduction

Argentine labour researcher Hectór Palomino (2003) writes that the political and economic impacts of Argentina’s *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker-recuperated enterprises, or ERTs) are more “related to its symbolic dimension” than to the strength of its size. To date, the ERT phenomenon involves roughly 180-200 mostly small- and medium-sized enterprises estimated to include between 8,000 and 10,000 workers (Ruggeri, Martinez & Trincherro 2005), which represents between 0.55% and 0.62% of Argentina’s approximately 14.3 million officially active participants in the urban-based economy (Ministerio de Trabajo 2005).¹ As Palomino points out, however, while it is true that this reflects only a fraction of the economic output of the country, the ERTs have nevertheless inspired “new expectations for social change” in Argentina since they especially show *an innovative and viable alternative* to chronic unemployment and underemployment (72) and the “institutionalized system of labour relations” (88).

I would add they also more fundamentally show *innovative alternatives for reorganizing productive life* itself in the aftermath of Argentina’s recent crisis of neoliberal finance capital. The team of activist anthropologists at the University of Buenos Aires working with a number of Argentina’s ERTs calls the innovative alternatives experimented by the ERTs their *social innovations* (Ruggeri *et al.* 2005; Ruggeri 2006).

Broadly, in this paper I specifically explore some of these *social innovations* in light of the tensions and challenges of self-managing formerly capitalist small- and medium-sized firms in Argentina—innovations that tend towards the communitarian, cooperativist, and directly democratic values and practices that ground the concept of *autogestión* (self-management) throughout many of the country’s ERTs.²

More specifically, in the following pages I begin to answer several complex and interrelated questions: Why did these new expressions of workers’ self-management take off in Argentina in the past decade? Why is it that they have survived as long as they have

¹ The Argentine Ministry of Labours’ statistics are based on May 2003 figures, which included fully employed and underemployed persons living in urban centres. It excludes those persons not actively looking for work or living in rural areas.

² According to the team of activist anthropologists researching and working with Argentina’s ERTs led by the University of Buenos Aires’s Andrés Ruggeri, 94% of ERTs organize under the legal rubric of a workers’ cooperative (Ruggeri *et al.* 2005: 67). Moreover, 71% engage in some form of egalitarian remuneration scheme (Fajn 2003: 161). My own *in situ* research thus far in several ERTs in the city and province of Buenos Aires confirms these findings, together with my additional observations regarding particular practices of directly democratic and horizontal workspaces that I make in part IV of this paper.

within and despite a stubbornly ever-present neoliberalist national economy? Indeed, if, as Croatian self-management economist Branko Horvat has asserted, “producer cooperatives, in a capitalist environment, [have historically] turned out to be a failure” on the path towards “socialist development” (1982: 128), how is it that Argentina’s ERTs have survived for so long when compared to other self-management movements in other conjunctures?³ Furthermore, how is it that they have forged several innovative and non-capitalist production processes and schemas—such as horizontalized labour processes, factories and shop floors opening up to the community, and incipient experiments with economies of solidarity—given the micro-economic and -political difficulties they continue to face? How do these challenges shape the less hierarchical labour processes and divisions of labour that emerge within each ERT? And, finally, how are the ERTs prefigurative of other potentialities for restructuring productive life outside of the enclosures of capital-labour relations?

With the aim of beginning to answer these questions and, in the process, report on some of my ongoing research findings to date, in this paper I specifically:

1. point out some of the conjunctural factors that have contributed to the rise of worker-recuperated enterprises in Argentina since at least 1997-98 and that came to a head in the financial crisis years of 2001-03,
2. describe and begin to theorize the concept of *autogestión* as it tends to be practiced by Argentina’s ERTs,
3. map out several of the challenges that arise out of ERTs practices of *autogestión* and their workers’ direct action tactics adopted to defend their jobs and recover their workspaces, and
4. explore four *social innovations* that subsequently emerge immanently and within ongoing crisis moments in the lives of ERT protagonists as responses to the challenges of *autogestión* in a continually intransigent environment of market capitalism.

³ While in this paper space and thematic structure will not permit me to get into the differences between the ERT phenomenon as a self-managed, worker-led, bottom-up movement and other bottom-up workers’ movements in other conjunctures (such as Paris 1871, Turin 1919, Spain 1936, Hungary 1956, France 1968, and earlier historical situations of workspace occupations in Latin America), I pick up these themes explicitly in a forthcoming book chapter I co-wrote with Andrés Ruggeri (Vieta & Ruggeri 2009). I briefly lay out the five characteristics that underscore the uniqueness of the ERT movement within the broader and historical workers’ movements against capital in footnote 18.

I. The Conjunctural and Phenomenological Factors that Impel Argentina's ERTs

From my political economic and *in situ* qualitative and participant observation research thus far, six conjunctural factors seem to have contributed to Argentina's modest but promising surge in worker-recuperated workers' coops over the past decade⁴:

1. **Conjunctures of need:** Workspace occupations and their subsequent self-management under the legal rubric of a workers' coop have not been, of course, about a national revolutionary cause or the total "civilizational" change, (as Marcuse would say) of Argentina's socio-economic system by its working class. They are, rather, risky practices of localized workspace occupations and situational worker resistances that immanently lead to the subsequent worker self-management of once-at-risk capitalist firms. ERT protagonists take on the challenges of self-management in order to feed families, keep jobs, and safeguard workers' self-dignity in the face of a collapsing neoliberal system. In other words, the formation of most ERTs were *first* impelled by pragmatic factors: ERT protagonists' deep need to protect their jobs, hold on to their dignity, and provide for their families' necessities in light of a temporarily disintegrating economic model, the growing wave of bankruptcies and business closures that had peaked at

⁴ According to Gramsci (2000), the conjuncture is "defined as the set of circumstances which determine the market in a given phase, provided that these are conceived of as being in the moment, i.e. as constituting a process of ever-changing combinations, a process which is the economic cycle...." (201). For Gramsci, the base's economic and "organic...situation" was intimately connected to the superstructure's conjunctural moments (201). Immanent to a given moment, the conjuncture emerges out of the inevitability of capitalist economic crisis and may potentially open up the "terrain [for] the forces of opposition to organize" (201). "The conjuncture," in other words, "is a set of immediate and ephemeral characteristics of the economic situation," Gramsci explains (2003: 177). Furthermore, "[the] study of the conjuncture is thus more closely linked to [bottom-up] immediate politics, to 'tactics' and agitation, while the situation relates to [top-down] 'strategy' and propaganda...." (177). In a similar vein, Italian radical social theorist Maurizio Lazzarato (2005) asserts that the "political event" organically emerges out of crisis moments, coalescing individuals and collectivities via creative and life-affirming actions spurred on by the realization of what is intolerable with the historical conjuncture they live in. From within benchmark political-historical moments of crisis and conflict "new possibilities for living" get articulated through the "event" (1), such as Argentina's mass protests of Dec. 19-20, 2001. More ethico-politically charged and immanently bottom-up than Gramsci's analysis of the conjuncture, for Lazzarato, the political event may not only place capital's contradictions into sharp relief, it may also reveal openings for recomposing life for those of us oppressed by constituted power. Crisis moments that reverberate into and inspire events such as "The Battle for Seattle" in 1999, Quebec City 2001, and the *Argentinazo* of Dec. 19/20 should not be understood as merely momentary and fleeting reactions to the inevitable glitches and cracks present in constituted power. Rather, the event is the intensified and collective eruption of alternative actions, images, and statements within an ongoing social struggle against established forms of power. It is the creative climax in the long narrative of the class-based conflicts instigated by the preponderance of the commodity form and the political-economic structures that uphold the circuits and logics of exchange and accumulation and that entrench the social divisions of labour with their inherent inequalities. Hence, the event that emerges out of these conjunctural crisis moments begins to rouse the questioning of dominant values and of constituted power and articulates other possibilities for life.

the rate of over 2600 firms per month by late-2001 (Magnani 2003: 37),⁵ and the callous anti-labour climate of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Ruggeri 2006).⁶

2. ***Conjunctures of precariousness in everyday life:*** The majority of these risky workplace occupations and struggles to make recovered enterprises economically viable—risky because of the continued threat of repression from returning owners and the state—were situated within a backdrop of the temporary implosion of the neoliberal model of the 1990s, propagated as it was by the multinationalization and privatization of the Argentine economy under the regime of President Carlos Menem. This neoliberalization ultimately led to a national export deficit, high rates of under and unemployment, high rates of bankruptcies of small- and medium-sized firms, high levels of homelessness, increased poverty, and little job security amongst Argentina's once-strong working classes.⁷
3. ***Conjunctures of deep class divisions:*** Everywhere in Argentina conspicuous consumption continues to intermingle with still high levels of poverty, albeit at lower rates compared the middle class's high consumption rates and the high rates of indigence and poverty of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In other words, deeply structured economic and social divisions still etch everyday life in Argentina, with continued social tensions between the haves and have-nots.⁸
4. ***Conjunctures of horizontalism and resistive subjectivities:*** Between 1995 and 2005, and especially between the years 2001-03, Argentina witnessed a deep radicalization of marginalized groups. The *contagion of bottom-up popular*

⁵ Beginning around 1995, thousands of smaller- and medium-sized businesses in Argentina began to lose market share and amassed unwieldy debt loads due, in part, to the drying up of export markets during Argentina's economic liberalizations of the 1990s and, in particular, to the after-effects of President Carlos Menem's (1989-1999) "dollarization" of the peso and the sell-off of over 150 once-nationalized firms. By the mid-1990s it was clear that these neo-liberal policies were affecting the competitive advantage of Argentine products in foreign markets (Damill 2005). Moreover, the large wave of privatization schemes, company downsizings, and the foreign capitalization of large portions of Argentina's industrial base further compromised the competitiveness of thousands of small- and medium-sized firms, eventually causing a growing number of them to declare bankruptcy at unprecedented rates starting around 1995 (Boron & Thwaites Ray 2004). By 2001, the national month-over-month business bankruptcy rate had reached its highest point in Argentina's modern history: During the Menem/de la Rúa presidencies (1989-2001), bankruptcies soared from an average of 772 per month in 1991 to over 2,600 per month by 2001 (Magnani 2003: 37).

⁶ Argentina's historically strong collective agreements that were formalized in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, as well as national economic policies guided by import substitution initiatives, were slowly dismantled throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the introduction of a neoliberalized economy and its inherent discourse of less meddlesome government, anti-union labour legislation, more entrepreneurialism, and lean business models. In the years after the financial crisis of 2001, strikes, demands for better work conditions, and struggles for union representation—representation that hundreds of thousands of Argentine workers lost during the anti-labour and privatization years of the 1990s—have returned (CTA 2006). ERT workers were, in many ways, a vanguard within this new antagonistic labour landscape. Indeed, the new imaginary of worker agency ERTs helped carve out has assisted in reviving the active and grassroots political participation of workers in Argentina.

⁷ For a detailed account of the political economy of this period in Argentine history in light of workers' struggles, see Vieta (2006).

⁸ For a phenomenological account of these deep class divisions inspired by a piece I wrote while on an afternoon of *flaneuring* on the streets of downtown Buenos Aires, see Vieta (2005).

resistance and *horizontalism*⁹ among Argentina's marginal sectors throughout this period intermingled with a long history of working class militancy and workers' collective imaginary of Argentina's Peronist-led "golden years" of a nationalized and self-sustaining economy. Consequently, by the early years of the new millennium there was much socio-political cross-pollination between grassroots social justice groups, witnessed in myriad informal networks of solidarity and affinity that continue to crisscross Argentina's social sectors. Much of the routines of daily life in Argentina were, up until 2005 and the relative recomposition of Argentina's economy under Nestor Kirchner's administration, peppered by constant protests, the occupation of land by the dispossessed, workplace takeovers, and road stoppages by myriad marginalized groups demanding political voice or social change.¹⁰

5. ***Conjunctures of community:*** The ERT movement tends to be situated deep within the community each enterprise finds itself in. There is a spatio-temporal reality to the impetus for *autogestión* in Argentina. For example, networks of solidarity between the recovered enterprise and the greater community and with other local ERTs have in some cases emerged into neighbourhood links of mutual aid. This is further driven by the fact that most workers live in the neighbourhoods where the enterprises are located. Moreover, neighbours were often also active in and supportive of the various stages of recuperation of workplaces by their workers. Consequently, neighbourhood cultural centres and other community services tend to organically emerge within many recovered enterprises themselves as a way of giving back to the neighbourhoods that supported them and as a way of further valorizing and, thus, protect the ERT from repression and closure via the bonds of solidarity formed within these interlaced communities of mutual assistance.¹¹
6. ***Conjunctures of cooperativism:*** The practices and legal framework of cooperativism have a long tradition in Argentina extending as far back as the early waves of European immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the traditions of anarchism and socialism that they brought to their new country and that guided labour movements in the early part of the 20th century (Munck, Falcon & Galitelli 1987). Subsequently practiced in myriad economic sectors and entrenched in national business legislation, co-operativism serves as an important

⁹ Horizontalism is a concept that has historical roots in the practices of autonomist and anarchist collectives. Popularized in particular by the daily organizational practices of grassroots activist and neighbourhood groups that formed in Argentina during and since the 2001-2002 economic crisis, horizontalism espouses an egalitarian (re)distribution of economic and political power. More specifically, it is both a theory and a practice, mapping out, immanently rather than in a predetermined way, how the ongoing participation of all individuals in the decision-making of a particular collective and between collectives can be facilitated. Moreover, horizontality points to the conscious attempt by individuals of a collective to lessen the coercive force of obligation by rallying around a more inclusive force of mutual commitments and consensus (Sitrin 2006).

¹⁰ It is important to note here that since roughly 2005 (but even visible by mid-2002), many of the groups that composed these popular movements—most poignantly exemplified by the current state of the *piquetero* movement of the unemployed—have been coopted back into the patriarchal and clientelist capital-state system under the regimes of Eduardo Duhalde and the Kirchners.

¹¹ See my discussion of ERTs' fourth social innovation in part IV of this paper.

legal organizational model for the country's ERTs in light of the paucity of other legal frameworks for these former owner-managed recovered enterprises.

Five Direct Micro-Political and Micro-Economic Influences on Workplace Takeovers

Emerging out of these six broad conjunctural factors, ERT protagonists consistently mention five direct micro-economic and micro-political experiences that influence their desire for and practices of *autogestión* (Ruggeri *et al.* 2005: 66):

1. the practices of illegally “emptying” the factory of its assets and inventory by owners once bankruptcy is declared (called *vaciamiento*) (28% of cases studied);
2. employees' perceived imminence of bankruptcy or closure of the plant (27% of cases);
3. employees not getting paid salaries, wages, and benefits for weeks or months (21% of cases);
4. actual layoffs and firings (28% of cases); or
5. lockout and other mistreatment (21% of cases).

Two Further Phenomenological Influences on Workplace Takeovers

In light of these precarious micro-economic and -political experiences, workers across the urban economic sectors began to take the drastic action of either occupying workspaces or beginning self-managed production starting around 1997-98.¹² In addition to these five experiences, ERT protagonists tend to give two related and overarching phenomenological reasons for attempting the risky occupations of workplaces and their stubborn resistance against state power and owner repression (Fajn 2003; Ruggeri *et al.* 2005).

First, workers' initial actions involving the seizure of deteriorating, bankrupted, or failed companies from former owners, their potential occupation of them for weeks or months, and their desire to put them into operation once again under *autogestión*, arise out of *fear* and *anger*. That is, most ERTs originate as direct and immanent responses to their

¹² The two earliest cases of the current ERT phenomenon are the Yaguané meat-packing plant in the Buenos Aires suburb of La Matanza and the IMPA metallurgic plant in the city of Buenos Aires. Their occupation and reopening as ERTs coincided with the most impact-filled years of the neoliberal collapse—1996-2002. In addition, the period that saw the surge in ERTs (2001-03) was also a period of much labour turmoil in Argentina, witnessed in the escalation of strikes, lockouts, public protests, and road blockages during these years (Vieta & Ruggeri 2009). It is no surprise, therefore, that during these three years Argentina saw the most conflictive factory occupations. It is also not coincidental that these years of heightened labour strife and factory occupations also happened to be the years with the highest rates of unemployment and bankruptcies in modern Argentine history. By 2003-04 and the beginning of the relative recomposition of the Argentine economy workspace recuperations continued to occur but in less conflictive settings as the strategies and tactics of workspace takeovers began to formalize and legal outlets such as temporary legal expropriation and cooperativism became more accessible to embattled workers (Ruggeri *et al.* 2005: 55; Vieta & Ruggeri 2009).

worker-protagonists' *deep worries about becoming structurally unemployed*, a life situation that Argentine workers term "death in life" (Vieta 2006).

Second, most ERTs reorganize themselves within the legal rubric of a workers' cooperative only *after* workers gain control of the plant—and usually after many weeks if not months of struggle—*not* because the recovered firm's workers come to the struggle with a vision of becoming cooperativists, nor because they possess presupposed political ambitions or clearly-defined working class identities. Rather, workers turn to cooperativism as a legal and pragmatically defensive strategy that emerged in the early years of the movement and that become known to them during or after their own struggle to occupy or seize their workplaces. This cooperativist strategy is passed on to new ERTs through informal networks of solidarity where the experiences acquired by older and supportive ERTs are shared through the facilitation of various ERT lobby groups, social organizations, and even sympathetic university student groups.

A Three-Stage Struggle on the Road to Autogestión, or "Occupy, Resist, Produce"

Theorizing these micro-political, micro-economic, and phenomenological motivators, Palomino (2003) identifies three stages on the long road to workers' self-management in Argentina:

1. The *recognition and genesis of conflict* with former bosses and/or the state,
2. the *transformation of workers' perceptions of their capacity to change their situation and shift the terrain of conflict* from their workspaces onto the streets and the houses of power, and
3. the struggle to *regulate and normalize their work* once again.¹³

The National Movement of Recovered Enterprises (or MNER), the first and most influential of the ERT lobby groups between 2001-05, evocatively captures this three-staged struggle towards *autogestión* in the following slogan borrowed from Brazil's landless peasant movements: "*occupy, resist, produce.*"

In sum, the micro-political and micro-economic strategies and tactics of occupation, resistance, and self-managed production under the legal framework of a workers' coop have become important *defensive maneuvers* for the ERT movement. These maneuvers serve to: 1) counteract and struggle against the very real threat of repression on the part of the state and returning owners and bosses, 2) address the indifference of traditional

¹³ Lack of space prevents me from describing and analyzing the specific political and legal strategies taken on by ERTs in order to secure their places of work as self-managed workers' coops. For an analysis of these stages and strategies, see Vieta (2006) and Vieta & Ruggeri (2009).

unions to the plight of the ERTs,¹⁴ and 3) directly challenge the roadblocks to *autogestión* put up by Argentina's recalcitrant capitalist establishment.

It is from out of these initial phenomenological experiences and micro-political and micro-economic realities that the subsequent restructuring of workplaces as self-managed firms most immediately emerge. And as I will explore in parts III and IV of this paper, these experiences also shape the labour processes, divisions of labour, and solidarity economies being forged by ERT protagonists.¹⁵

II. Cooperative Production Under *Autogestión*

Conceptualizing Autogestión

According to Paul Farmer (1979) the word *autogestión* has a Greek and Latin etymology. The word *auto* comes from the Greek “*autós* (self, same)” (59). *Gestión* comes from the Latin “*gestio* (managing),” which in turn comes from “*gerere* (to bear, carry, manage)” (59). More evocatively, one can conceptualize it as “self-gestation”—to self-create, self-control, self-provision, and, ultimately, self-produce; in other words, to practice *autogestión* means to be self-reliant. Tellingly, the English words “gestate” and “gestation” have evolved from the word *gestio*. Taken together, *autogestión* alludes to an organic, biological, and processual movement of creation and conception, having social political relevance in its implicit notion of immanence, becoming, and potentiality. Together, the words *auto* and *gestión* yield the perhaps inadequate English term “self-management.”

In critical theory, the concept of *autogestión* is rooted in a sense of workers' bottom-up agency, human autopoiesis, and anthropogenesis even within the tendency for capital to want to capture all of life. In this sense, one is reminded of Max Horkheimer's continued hopes for human agency, where “the good society [is] one in which [humans are] free to act as a subject rather than be acted upon as a contingent predicate” (Jay 1973: 57). One is also reminded of the classical anarchist desire to balance individual freedom and voluntary participation in economic life with the ethico-political commitments of communal life reflected in the well-known anarchist and socialist maxim “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” In this sense, *autogestión* is ultimately rooted in the desire for individual freedom via self-control, self-reliance, and collective and cooperative production in provisioning for the realm of necessity—what André Gorz called the “heteronomous spheres” of life—via the maximization of the “autonomous spheres” underprivileged by the productivist-capitalist paradigm (Little 1996: 41).

¹⁴ With the exception of a few supportive unions such as the Quilmes branch of UOM (Union of Metallurgic Workers), established Argentine labour unions have been, on the whole, either only tentatively supportive, indifferent, or outright hostile to ERTs, usually choosing instead to side with ERTs that have been returned to former or new proprietors. One reason for the inertia of traditional unions regarding ERTs is linked to the fact that, used to limiting themselves to the usual reform-minded and wage-based demands of traditional unions, there is widespread bafflement amongst union leaders and organizers with regards to how to deal with workers that do not work for bosses and report to managers.

¹⁵ For a further analysis of these *defensive maneuvers* and the subsequent organizational and alternative economic structures that emerge within and between ERTs, see Vieta (2006), Vieta & Ruggeri (2009), and Atzeni & Ghigliani (2007).

For worker liberation from the exploitation and alienation inherent to capitalist labour relations, divisions of labour, and modes of production, *autogestión* was first articulated in Europe in the 19th century. First, by the utopian socialists in, for example, Robert Owen's concept of and experiments with "federations of cooperative communities" (Horvat 1982: 112) and Charles Fourier's theories of self-governing productive social communities he termed *phalanstrères* (114). Second, by classical anarchists in, for example, Pierre Joseph Proudhon's writings on *mutuellisme* and its equitable systems of exchange, popular banks, small private possessions, and larger "collective properties of workers' associations" (118), or in Peter Kropotkin's notions of the predominance of "mutual aid" rather than detailed divisions of labour within the evolutionary process and traditional human societies (Kropotkin 1989). And, finally, indirectly by Marx's mostly favourable views of worker-producer cooperatives (Jossa 2005), "labour in common or directly associated labour" (Marx 1967: 77), "living labour" (167-169), and the potential he envisioned for working class agency more generally.

As economic potential, from a workerist and reformist standpoint, *autogestión* has, since the late 1960s and 1970s, come to denote "a modernizing form of industrial democracy... in which administrative councils of workers, technicians, and managers engage in cooperative decision making, over-seeing all the aspects of industrial life" (*New Republic*, June 18, 1977: 20, quoted in Farmer, 1979: 59). Historical and theoretical examples from this standpoint that come to mind are council communism, anarcho-syndicalism, development theory, workers' control in Yugoslavia, European works councils, traditional producer and workers' coops, proposals for self-management in the production of socially useful products,¹⁶ and other experiences with self-managed work teams and enterprises in industrial settings. Limiting the definition of *autogestión* only to workerist, reformist, or development agendas, however, elides the capacity for the concept to overflow the self-management of life outside of the factory and beyond the point of production.

Inspired by the writings of Marcuse, Castoriadis, Gorz, and the Situationists, amongst others, eventually the students and militant union protagonists of the May 1968 events in France, the May-June 1969 events in Córdoba, Argentina, and similar late-1960s movements throughout the world adopted the concept of *autogestión* as a key demand and desire. By the late 1960s, the desire for *autogestión* for these militant students and workers was not only a struggle for more democratic workplaces, less alienated and exploitative labour processes at the point of production, and a return of the means of production to the producers. It was also characterized by a demand for the self-management of life itself. The changes in capitalist modes of production that were emerging with post-Fordism at the time meant that, increasingly in developed countries, workers were experiencing domination not only via control at the point of production but outside of the workplace, as well. Indeed, the individual within post-Fordism was being integrated more and more within the capitalist modes of reproduction itself (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007). This more total integration of the individual within the circuits of capital pointed to the increased futility of the free development of human beings outside of the established spheres of production, consumption, and leisure (Marcuse 1964; Littek & Charles 1996; Little 1996). Now, even "the intervals between the buying and the selling,"

¹⁶ For example, the experiments with self-managed workteams at GE in the early 1970s and the UK's Lucas Industries in the mid 1970s (Cooley 1980; Noble 1984).

to quote Marx (1967: 155), were the domains of capitalist technological reason. As such, the desire for *autogestión* was felt by an increasing number of workers, students, and activists to be one where life itself had to be reclaimed from the ideologies and practices of workerism, productivism, and consumerism.

Arising as a direct reaction against the spiral of greed, exploitation, and consumerism of the 1990s and the eventual implosion of the Argentine economy, currently in Argentina *autogestión* means, most directly and in everyday practice, to self-manage work cooperatively as an alternative to capitalist and owner-managed work organization. For a not insignificant group of Argentines engaging in *autogestión*, the practice has also made them increasingly aware that, on the one hand, any stark separation between work life and the rest of life is a fantasy—sociality overflows the divisions between private life and public work. On the other hand, there is also an increasing awareness that the post-Fordist and neoliberal desire to merge capitalist production with the reproduction of life is a move by contemporary forms of capital to capture even the moments and spaces of “unproductive consumption” for the project of accumulation (Marx 1967: 573). It is, they realize, an ideological move by contemporary capital—its attempt at pacifying worker resistance while, at the same time, continuing to maximize surplus value and profits. In sum, for many protagonists of the ERTs and other self-managed workers collectives, *autogestión* means to *self-constitute social and productive lives* while minimizing the intrusive mediation of free markets, traditional bureaucracies, hierarchical organization, or the state.

In Latin America, myriad social justice groups are increasingly using the concept to articulate how the (re)invention and (re)construction of labour and social relations can take place. To *autogestionar* is the verb that drives how more and more groups are democratically and ethically reconstituting productive life.

In Argentina, especially since the socio-economic crisis years of 2001 and 2002, countless grassroots groups have been experimenting with and concretely practicing forms of *autogestión* that, as Richard Day (2005) points out regarding the newest alter-globalization social movements, both contests the neoliberal enclosures of life while, at the same time, moving beyond them by prefiguring other modes to productive life. In the process, they are inventing new horizons beyond socio-economic crises by forging new and particular social and solidarity economies. In Argentina’s recent history, such groups have included not only the ERTs but also the movements of the unemployed (the *piqueteros*), the surging networks of solidarity spearheaded by self-managed microenterprises, affordable housing activists, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and other human rights groups, popular education initiatives, and environmental and rural groups.

The Possibilities for Autogestión in Argentina

Under the auspices of *autogestión*, the ERT movement in many cases and in numerous ways problematizes the very practices of wage-labour and the capitalist privileging of private property—i.e., the privileging of property rights over not only the right to work, but also the right to self-manage one’s capacities to labour and the products of one’s labour—especially in the neoliberal capitalist paradigm that Argentina still finds itself in (see section IV). What some of the protagonists of the ERT movement in Argentina are fundamentally challenging is, in Marxian terms, the proprietors’ practices of extracting

and exploiting the surplus value of workers' expended labour-power over and above the right of the worker to live un-alienated lives—that is, to own the products of his or her labour, to control the means of production, and for workers to ultimately self-direct their own productive lives.

One of the major breakthroughs of workers' self-management in Argentina is that it begins to open up the social divisions of labour enclosed within capitalist logics of production to other values and practices that lie outside of the profit motive, the pursuit of accumulation, and the incessant drive towards surplus-value. It is a reclaimed drive towards self-production. In this respect, the ERTs share many of the values and practices of the world-wide co-operative movement, social and solidarity economies, participatory economic's theories of work sharing, Kropotkin's mutual aid, and the everyday bottom-up practices of the alter-globalization social justice movement.¹⁷

The *social, political and economic conjunctures* that ERT protagonists struggled through, the *daily challenges* they face to protect their livelihoods and self-manage their work, plus the *collective memory of working class struggles* in Argentina's recent and more distant past, all contribute to shaping the innovations, new organizational structures, and the co-operative practices ERT protagonists engage in (Atzeni & Ghigliani 2007; Vieta & Ruggeri 2009). The tensions between their social innovations and the challenges of practicing *autogestión* in Argentina's obstinate neoliberal model get played out in each ERT on a daily basis. These tensions influence the unique organizational makeup of each ERT and the self-management strategies across the movement. In the next two sections I describe these tensions and the ERTs' responses to them in their practices of *autogestión*.

III. The Challenges to *Autogestión* in Argentina's ERTs

Despite the promises of *autogestión* for Argentina's workers, and the incipient economies of solidarity forming between ERTs and other microenterprises and social groups, there is no doubt that a continued over-reliance on the capitalist economic system and markets forces some ERT cooperatives to be tempted to return to competitive business practices and even practices of "cooperative capitalism." These realities risk pushing the ERT into situations of "self-bureaucratization" and "self-exploitation" (Fajn & Rebón 2005: 7).

Before discussing the social innovations of the ERTs that directly and indirectly respond to the challenges they face as a result of producing for a capitalist marketplace, I should first briefly mention a few of the specific micro-economic realities that tend to push some ERTs towards capitalistic practices once again (i.e., more capitalist modes of production and management styles). The reasons for these tensions are multifold, reminding us of Marx and Engel's measured support of workers' coops as an important but incomplete forms of organization for the formation of a new and more egalitarian society where workers own and run the means of production. Some of these difficulties that may even lead to the closure of the ERT once again, include:

¹⁷ See footnote 18 for a brief description of what distinguishes the ERT movement from other bottom-up workers' movements in other conjunctures.

1. loss of customers due to their lack of confidence in the ability of workers to self-manage the firm and deliver goods;
2. capitalization issues (i.e., lack of regular funds for re-reinvesting into the firm);
3. out-of-date or inadequate machinery and the lack of capital or cash sources for technological renewal;
4. the perception by private investors and traditional financial institutions that ERTs are very risky enterprises and, thus, not viable investments;
5. lack of sources for short-term and long-term loans;
6. lack of support from national and local governments, most unions, and traditional cooperative sectors;
7. the fact that national and local governments are caught between recognizing ERTs as legitimate methods of saving jobs and their commitments to traditional capitalist business models and private property;
8. chronic underproduction when compared to original production levels under owner management;
9. lack of adequate and reliable sources of raw materials;
10. difficulties in accessing new markets due to distribution issues;
11. a stubborn endurance of worker individualism amongst some ERTs;
12. a lack of understanding of the major tenets of cooperativism by some workers;
13. the need for continued educational opportunities for workers in the movement and the paucity of such opportunities;
14. the risk of taking on new workers and losing the cooperative values that founded the ERT; and
15. the risk of self-exploitation due to the continued presence of the commodity form (i.e., producing for persistent and highly competitive capitalist markets).

The challenges many ERTs face when they need to take on new workers serves as an illustrative case in point regarding ERTs' ongoing challenges with self-managing their cooperatives. In addition to the market and financial challenges that confound their situation, one of the first barriers ERTs must face when attempting to bring on new worker-members is Argentina's legislation for cooperatives, which stipulates that a coop's full-time "hires" must be eventually incorporated as members. By legislation, this requires probationary periods not to exceed six months. Once a potentially new member has become a *socio* (associate) of the cooperative, any subsequent decision to exclude

him or her from the coop involves a long and complicated process. As such, the decision to incorporate new workers takes on a level of gravity and consideration not experienced by private companies in Argentina, which have benefited since the Menem years from lax labour laws. In other words, ERTs that decide to incorporate new worker-members must be very sure that these workers will be able to execute and maintain a level and quality of work that will justify their remuneration. Indeed, a bad decision by the workers' assembly in their incorporation of new members could, for example, cause its already tight bottom line to suffer, possibly taking the ERT into a crisis situation once again. Moreover, the question of how much decision-making capacity the ERT co-operative should vest on new workers, as well as how much they should be remunerated, remain crucial points of debate within many ERTs' workers' assemblies. This is in no small part related to the uncertainty that incumbent workers have concerning a newer worker's level of commitment to the ideals of cooperativism and horizontal work processes that, for many of the ERT's founding workers, were formed during the long months of occupation and struggle. Hence, new hires add to the co-operative's uncertainty concerning the future "returns" on their hiring "investment."

Furthermore, the period of worker-member expansion adds an additional long-term worry for the ERT: If the number of "new" associates supersedes the number of "founding" members of the coop, could the cooperative be voted out of existence one day and become, once again, a capitalist firm if the latter form is perceived by newer members to be a much more efficient model for securing their jobs and tackling capitalist markets?

Due to these risks some ERT coops have decided to incorporate new workers as temporary contract workers without making them members of the co-operative. At times these contracts are renewed far beyond the six-month probationary period that they would have had to respect had they taken on these contract workers as outright members of the co-operative, replicating the nefarious common practice of work flexibilization and hiring contract labour amongst private firms in Argentina. Ironically, these situations tend to reproduce the very capitalist practices that led to the labour instability that ERT protagonists were contesting in the first place. In some ERTs, however, there is a marked preoccupation with balancing the equitable treatment of *all* its worker-members—new and established—with the ERT's cooperativist organizational and production processes and the long-term viability of the coop. In these cases the balance seems to be maintained by hiring strategies that look to their immediate communities and solidarity networks: hiring family members, ex-workers of the cooperative (including retired workers), or workers recommended to them by the ERT's incumbent members, other ERTs, or friends (Vieta & Ruggeri 2009).

IV. Four Social Innovations as Responses to the Challenges of *Autogestión* in Argentina's ERTs

In this last section, I will discuss the four major social innovations being spearheaded by ERTs as a direct response to the challenges I just mentioned.¹⁸ These four social innovations are:

1. the *commitment to democratize and cooperativize the labour processes and the division of labour* amongst the ERT's worker-members;
2. *creative responses to intensifying market competition* and financial and production challenges;
3. *redefining notions of social production* by reclaiming substantial degrees of workers' surpluses and, ultimately, contesting notions of surplus-value and surplus-labour, even as they produce in part for capitalist markets; and
4. *rediscovering notions of social wealth* by opening up workplaces to the community, thus strengthening the social value of the new worker self-managed workspaces.

1. First Social Innovation: Cooperativizing the Divisions of Labour, Horizontal Work Structures, and Equal Distribution of Revenues

Ninety four percent of ERTs reorganize production under the legal rubric of workers' cooperatives (Fajn 2003; Ruggeri *et al.* 2005). Part of this almost universal adoption of cooperativism amongst ERTs has to do with the fact that it is the only readily available legal framework from which to reconstitute a workspace controlled by a collective of workers in Argentina. Furthermore, legal recognition is important for ERTs for their potential stability and longevity: First, it is an already tested and sound model for organizing workers' desires for *autogestión*; regular workers' assemblies and direct democratic decision-making processes are integral principles guiding the day-to-day and

¹⁸ These four social innovations are linked to five broader socio-political and socio-economic features that, taken together, distinguish the ERT movement from other contemporary or historical bottom-up workers' movements. One of the most outstanding aspect of these features is their consistency in almost all cases of ERTs in the country, especially given the fact that the "movement" is in actuality a loosely collective expression of very localized struggles that tends to begin and end initially at the factory door. In other words, the history of each ERT is thoroughly ensconced within the particular micro-political and micro-economic particularities of each workspace. Nevertheless, the five distinguishing characteristics that tend to distinguish most ERTs in Argentina are: 1) Almost all ERTs were taken over or reopened by embattled former employees in either risky occupations or confrontations with former owners or with Argentina's juridical-political establishment out of fear and desperation at having to face the closure of their workplace and thus enter the ranks of the structurally unemployed. 2) Most ERTs endeavour not to replicate the management hierarchy and exploitative practices of the former company, hence the fit with traditional cooperativist principles. 3) As such, many ERTs adopt extremely flat self-management structures and almost all to some degree engage in one worker, one vote direct-democracy (i.e., workers' councils, workers' assemblies) adopted not necessarily from the values of cooperativism per se but, rather, from the anti-capitalist "contagion" of horizontalism in Argentina's anti-neoliberal social movements. 4) Unlike most other cooperative experiences, many ERT workers' coops are distinguished by a predominance of near across-the-board egalitarian pay schemes despite variations in worker seniority or skill-sets. 5) Finally, these four factors emerge *out of* and *because of* ERTs' long road in the struggle to reclaim their workspaces as viable self-managed cooperatives. Of course, while it cannot be claimed that other workers' cooperatives in other conjunctures have not encompassed one or more of these distinguishing marks, I do make the argument in a forthcoming book chapter I co-wrote with Andrés Ruggeri that the pervasiveness of these tendencies in most of Argentina's ERTs are, taken together, unique experiences in the history of workers' struggles against capital in Argentina and perhaps also beyond its borders (see: Vieta & Ruggeri 2009).

month-by-month running of most workers' cooperatives. Second, it is a viable and legally recognized business model that goes a long way to showing the state and potential customers that the workers' collective is serious about its commitment to running its own affairs. Third, due to Argentine cooperative law, becoming a workers' cooperative rather than another form of entity protects the worker-members from the seizure of their personal property should the coop fail while also ensuring that the ERT does not have to pay taxes on revenues (Fajn 2003: 105-106). Fourth, as legal cooperatives, ERTs may qualify for subsidies and loans from national cooperative associations and the state. And finally, it is an acceptable framework for ERT protagonists to contrast the exploitative business practices of former owners and begin to explore viable ways of experimenting with how to self-manage their labour processes and collective working lives.

Tellingly, more than 71% of ERTs also practice egalitarian or almost egalitarian remuneration schemes (Fajn 2003), a practice, incidentally, that is not necessarily common amongst traditional workers' coops in Argentina or in other conjunctures (Vieta & Ruggeri 2009). Interestingly, egalitarian pay schemes and the degree to which directly democratic decision-making structures are implemented and practiced are related to the age of the ERT, the political turmoil the collective of workers had to traverse during the firm's most turbulent economic years, and its size. Older ERTs that had to traverse more intensive struggles of occupation, resistance, and the commencement of self-managed production are 60-70% more likely to practice egalitarian pay schemes and directly democratic decision-making when compared to newer ERTs. Also, 64% of smaller ERTs (usually 20 workers or less) practice egalitarian pay schemes and tend to respect more directly democratic decision-making processes compared to 47% of firms having between 20-50 workers that do so, and 54% of firms with more than 50 workers that do so (Ruggeri *et al.* 2005).

From the perspective of these tendencies, perhaps Argentina's ERT movement is showing how it is that an imminent form of workers' collective consciousness gets sketched out in lived experience. Between ERT protagonists, a collective consciousness and more egalitarian values seem to be forged by the solidarity and camaraderie that emerge out of the cooperative efforts of workers within tumultuous times (Rebón 2005). Rather than being predetermined by hierarchical unions, vanguardist parties, or the influence of organic intellectuals, the collective experiences of ERT protagonists show us that a collective working class consciousness—if I can be allowed the luxury for the moment to presume one can exist—is not fixed or a predetermined state to be achieved, but rather multilayered, in an already-always state of becoming, provisional. That is, the (re)formation of what might loosely be called a working class consciousness amongst the collectivity of workers that make up the ERT movement is not, hearkening back to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's words in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), predetermined by an "idea" of what "the working class" should be. Rather, something resembling a collective class consciousness that might be undergirding the forms of productive practices being experimented with by the ERT movement and its protagonists' desires for *autogestión* emerges *intersubjectively* from the entanglement of ERT protagonists' emergent and multidimensional subjectivities that "co-exist in the same situation and feel alike, not in virtue of some comparison, as if each one of [them] lived primarily within [themselves], but on the basis of [their] tasks and gestures" (444). In

other words, as individuals whose lives are “synchronized” together and that “share a common lot” within a particular socio-economic conjuncture (444).

2. Second Social Innovation: Creative Responses to Production and Financial Challenges

Most ERTs are currently operating at between 20-60% of production capacity when compared to their production runs when they were capitalist firms (Ruggeri *et al.* 2005: 52). This is primarily due to six factors (74):

1. lack of adequate machinery,
2. lack of sufficient labour capital,
3. lack of specialized workers,
4. an aging workforce,
5. difficulties in accessing markets, or
6. lack of investment capital.

Moreover, the three post-2001 Peronist regimes have, to date, refused to subscribe to an official national policy for Argentina’s ERTs. Instead, as confirmed to me by a senior bureaucrat in the national Ministry of Labour, the state, ever committed to its capitalist inheritance and dependence on the business establishment, treats each ERT on a case-by-case basis, gingerly maneuvering through the contradictory needs, agendas, and desires of workers, the unemployed, social welfare plans, and capitalist commitments. Moreover, because ERT cooperatives are viewed by financial institutions as risky investments and fledgling entrepreneurial initiatives, most ERTs find it hard to secure loans from banks (now all mostly foreign-owned after the market liberalizations of the 1990s) or private investors, or to receive subsidies from government programs geared towards small- and medium-sized business start ups. As such, ERTs are constantly challenged in their pursuit of funds for upgrading or buying new machinery, to assist with wages and benefits, or otherwise help in market expansion. Given this lack of governmental or institutional support, it is perhaps even more remarkable, and a testament to their social innovations as well as the potentiality of self-determination for Argentina’s working class, that ERTs have survived as long as they have.

Innovative labour process responses to these production challenges by ERTs include:

1. job sharing amongst and ERT’s workers;s
2. a desire to re-skill or learn new trades by many ERT protagonists (e.g., from shop floor work to administrative work);
3. the problematization of worker individualism by the workers’ collective;
4. practices of recycling materials for economic and ecological purposes;

5. “day-to-day” or “just-in-time” production runs (i.e., the reappropriation of Japanese-style and post-Fordist production models);
6. asking customers to pay for the cost of raw materials when purchase orders are made (called working *al faon*);
7. horizontal organizational structures framed within workers’ councils and assemblies that tend towards infinitely more transparent administrative and self-managerial methods than when ERT firms operated under owners,
8. ad-hoc work committees that are integrated into actual production and decision-making processes and within the shop floor itself;
9. looser and more horizontal communicational structures fostering continuously flexible and open dialogue between workers on shop floors (again, taking the form of ad hoc practices);
10. worker-members eating and playing together regularly and taking many breaks throughout the day;
11. building networks of solidarity amongst similar ERTs (i.e., practicing the sixth principle of cooperativism: cooperation between cooperatives),
 - a. the sharing of machinery, production processes, and even customers (i.e., sharing of the means of production and distribution),
 - b. the sharing of inventory and production inputs,
 - c. the establishment of networks of experts within the ERT movement facilitated by supportive university programs and technicians in order to aid in administrative tasks and technological repair and upgrading;
12. affiliations with foreign aid initiatives, local and international universities and research projects, and internship initiatives with social justice groups; and
13. a nascent initiative by some ERT protagonists to brand products produced by the movement “fair work,” emulating the “fair trade” model.

3. Third Social Innovation: Creative Responses to Capital-Labour Relations

Fundamentally, many ERTs engage in production practices that aspire to minimize capitalist forms of surplus value, capital-labour relations, and wealth accumulation, even as they face the challenges imposed by an intensifying capitalist marketplace. For example, although not always possible, many ERTs try to first distribute the major part of their revenues equally between workers’ salaries, the material needs of workers that periodically arise, and pensions for retired members of the co-operative *before* allocating remaining revenues to the production needs of the firm. That is, the preference for most ERT co-operatives is to redirect any remaining revenues into the needs of production and the maintenance of the firm *after* individual workers’ remuneration and other needs are met. This is possible because, as in other workers’ cooperatives around the world, in ERTs labour hires capital and not vice-versa. In other words, it is the workers’ assembly

that tend to decide how remuneration is to be distributed, not a boss, commodity prices, or the market price of wages.

4. Fourth Social Innovation: Opening Up Workspaces to the Community, Reclaiming More than Surplus

Jobs, of course, are not the only things recovered by ERTs, we can now see. New forms of social production and the sharing of social wealth are being experimented with, as well. For example, researchers and journalists are placing much weight on how ERTs tend to engrain themselves in the communities and neighbourhoods that surround them. What is not commented on by these writers is that this is partially to do with the fact that, due to the organic evolution of industrial capital spread across Argentina's half-dozen or so major cities in addition to the wave of migrations from the countryside and from other countries to its urban centres over the span of the 20th century, many industrial workplaces in Argentina are located within actual neighbourhoods and are close to where workers live. As such, the opening up of the factory doors to the community is perhaps much easier in Argentina than in other conjunctures

Also, as I have already mentioned, neighbours contribute much support to local ERTs in the stages of occupation and when starting production by, for example, providing clothing, bedding, and money; distributing products for the workers; militating in solidarity with ERT workers; etc. Pragmatically, opening up the recovered workspace to the community by allowing myriad social, health, educational, and cultural programs to be located within the recovered firm's walls serves to not only give back to the communities that helped them, it also increases an ERT's social value within the community while, at the same time, protecting the ERT from closure by the state. If the state, for example, were to consider closing the ERT or returning it to private hands once more (as has happened in some cases), elected officials and the courts have to contend with the wrath of not only the ERT's workers, but the potential mobilization of the surrounding communities, as well. Thus, the social capital of ERTs exponentially grows with the opening up of the coop to the community, beyond a capitalist business's usual connections with the world beyond its walls at the point of production or as customers of raw materials and labour-power. One can say that this self-valorization increases the ERTs social value within the community in ways not accounted for by the capitalist's focused pursuit of surplus value and profits. As such, more than a factory or a print shop or medical clinic or a hotel or metal shop is recovered in the process. ERTs also tend to recuperate and reinvent values and practices of social production that move beyond mere economic and instrumental rationalities and exchange value.

Thus, since ERTs tend to, on the whole, privilege workers' necessities and the necessities of the communities within which they find themselves in over the logics of capitalist accumulation and the profit motive, their practices of egalitarian remuneration and horizontalized labour processes can be seen as experiments in forms of organizing work that move beyond some of the exploitative practices intrinsic to capital-labour relations.

Concluding Thoughts

On the whole, the ERTs' experiences with workers' self-management provide suggestive and viable alternatives for the transformation of traditional capital-labour relations in

Argentina and beyond. In particular, the ERT phenomenon seems to be questioning the neoclassical political economic privileging of property rights over the right to work while also experimenting with the practices of *autogestión*. In the process, the ERTs are pointing to viable ways workers can seek to take control of their own skills, means of production, labour-power, surpluses, and time. Most inspirational are the many personal testimonies I had the privilege of hearing in myriad conversations I engaged in with self-managed workers over the past two years. Their everyday practices of *autogestión* are, while emergent and always in tension with capitalist values, living testimonies of a commitment to another mode of productive life. Indeed, most ERT protagonists that I spoke with told me they would not go back to the exploitative and alienating work conditions they previously experienced under managers and business owners despite the long struggles needed to achieve *autogestión* in Argentina. This is the case, they insisted, even if their salaries or wages were to increase with an employer and, most surprising to me, despite the long road to material security that worker self-management entails in Argentina's current historical conjuncture. And while most ERT cooperatives constantly live within a tension between the desire for total self-management and a return to more capitalist ways of doing business, these tensions are tempered by the myriad ways that ERT workers seem to ground themselves in a different set of values than those offered by competition and the capitalist market, fostered within their emerging practices of *autogestión*. As movingly articulated by Cándido González, a long-time worker at the ERT print house Gráfico Chilavert and an ERT activist whom I spent much time with over the past three years: "If you want to protect your job, you have to protect the job of the other. If you want to ensure you have a meal, you have to make sure the other has a meal" (Lavaca 2004: 62).

Specifically, the unique form of workers' cooperativism under the auspices of *autogestión* being spearheaded by Argentina's ERTs—fledgling as it is—could be paving new paths towards changing the country's "institutionalized system of labour relations" (Palomino 2003: 88) because ERTs are beginning to exemplify new forms of organizing work outside of traditional unions and capitalist enclosures. They also offer viable and community-based alternatives to welfare plans, government make-work projects, assistentialism, clientilism, unemployment, and underemployment. Moreover, I understand ERTs to be articulating new ways of critically thinking about the power of employers to determine the working conditions of employees. The ERT movement is also modeling for Argentina's still brittle and foreign debt-beholden economy alternative forms of economic relations. Examples of these alternative economic models include the common practices of inter-ERT solidarity networks, with their sharing of customers, orders, prime materials, technological know-how, administrative duties, legal assistance, and even machinery and labour processes within infinitely more horizontalized and egalitarian workspaces. Most importantly, these alternative economic models are pointing to viable alternative paths leading towards greater social transformation that are rooted deeply in the neighbourhoods and communities that surround them.

Out of crisis, then, it can be said that Argentine workers involved in the ERT movement are beginning to forge new and promising roads out of situations of exploitation, alienation, and immiseration. Rather than fall prey to poverty and despair, ERT protagonists decide instead to re-organize their world around more humane, more socially aware, and more democratic forms of work and life. It is the possibilities that these

experiments with *autogestión* have opened up for Argentina's workers that are inspiring similar movements across Latin America and around the world.

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