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**TERROR AND THE HYDRA:
REPRESSION AND RESURGENCE
IN THE ARGENTINE WORKING CLASS**

James F. Petras

INTRODUCTION

In 1971 in the offices of the Argentine Industrialists Union (UIA), the organization of the largest industrial firms, I interviewed the head of the organization. We were discussing the political options most attractive to Argentine capitalists. When I asked what he thought of the Brazilian model, he looked ecstatic: "It's an industrialist's paradise." I then asked, "Why not in Argentina?" His brow furrowed and he replied in a measured tone: "The Argentine trade unions are too strong, they would resist, there might be a civil war and we don't know who would win, how it would come out." Faced with this uncertainty, he thought, in the circumstances, that it would be best for the military to return power to the civilian politicians, to defuse the polarization and tension racking Argentina at the time, and which the military was not in a position to control. What struck me at the time, but became more apparent in retrospect, was the fact that the business leaders' hesitation in accepting a terrorist regime and bloody repression was all contingent on the issue of the probability of success. There was not a moment's consideration of lives lost or democratic values, rather there was a fear that if the battle was engaged and lost, there would be an even greater degree of working class power. The implication was clear; if a Brazilian solution could be imposed through a successful civil war against the working class then by all means the big business community was all for it. Unquestionably what was a central concern to the most prominent and leading industrialists was the industrial paradise of Brazil of the late 1960's: no strikes, labor unions controlled by a police state, social security, and wage cuts imposed by the capitalist class, dismantling of the state sector, freeing of prices, etc. — the phrase "industrial paradise" signified the capacity of the industrialists to do whatever they wished without hindrance from workers' organizations and a

nationalist-populist state. But as the industrialists knew too well there were formidable obstacles to realizing their Molochian-erotic fantasies: the insurrectionary movements in Cordoba and Rosario, the incendiary uprising in Tucumán, the total shut-down of the economy resulting from the general strikes decreed by the C.G.T. Only a regime willing to take the most extreme measures in the most determined fashion was capable of paving the road to that "paradise." The industrialists were willing to support such a regime if and when it would emerge. . . The regime of March 1976 was up to its "historic task" set forth by the capitalist class — it proceeded to the most radical transformation of society in modern Argentine history as a means of realizing the industrialist's paradise. My discussion will focus on the uniqueness of this terrorist regime and its impact on Argentine society. The scope and depth of terror practiced by this government is inadequately described by terms such as "bureaucratic-authoritarian." Rather the scope and depth of repression suggest something akin to fascist terrorist regimes. My purpose, however, is to examine the impact of this terror and repression on the Argentine left and to examine the differential impact which it has had on formal and informal organization. My thesis is that while the repression has been successful in decimating the formal organizational apparatus of the 'left,' it has failed to destroy the informal popular movement. The other unique aspect of the Argentine situation is the massive resurgence of working class struggle — despite the fascist terror — on a scale and scope unheard of in any other country having a similar type of regime. Moreover, this working class resurgence occurs despite the inactivity of formal democratic political institutions, the illegalization of the Trade Unions, the murder, jailing and exile of practically all the known official leaders, especially those known at the national or regional level. Finally, the resurgence occurs despite the massive and continuing purges of grassroots leaders. The issue that I am centrally concerned with then is where does this "undirected" rank and file resurgence come from and what sustains it in the absence of official organization and in the face of an all pervasive terroristic police apparatus.

TERROR AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF ARGENTINA

Though Argentina has been ruled off and on by military dictators since the 1930's, the military regime of March 1976 represents an entirely new form of domination, both in terms of the scale, scope and duration of repression. Never has the Argentine working class been subject to the level of terror and sustained attack as it has experienced during the Videla regime. The singular effort by the military, para-military and police forces to abolish all forms of political opposition has produced an unprecedented level of political

assassinations, jailings and exiles: over 30,000 deaths and disappearances, thousands of jailings, hundreds of thousands of exiles, tens of thousands of tortured, mutilated and disfigured. Practically everyone in Argentina has direct personal ties with at least someone affected by the repression. Moreover, millions of Argentine workers and salaried employees have seen their political parties, trade unions, community and social service organizations intervened and/or closed down — thus eliminating all the organizations which were created over the past 50 years. The regime of 1976 has set in motion forces and policies which are uprooting institutions and relationships established through the greater part of the 20th century. In that precise historic context we cannot consider this a "conservative" or "traditional" dictatorship.

Previous dictatorships from the 1930's through the early 1970's (Aram-buro, Onganía, Lanusse, etc.) were either "caretaker" regimes — seizing power to displace a populist government and prepare conditions for the return of a civilian regime — or engaged in haphazard, limited assaults, selective assassinations and official imprisonment. In contrast, the neo-fascist regime engages in massive assassination, "disappearances" of political prisoners by para-military death-squads in a systematic and sustained fashion. The institutionalization of terror and the permanent purge mark a qualitatively different form of dictatorship. The needs of large-scale capital for long-term security and sweeping access to all sectors of the economy confronted the obstacle of a highly organized working class; the end result was the long-term, all pervasive police-state.

The central object of the state was the transformation of the major obstacle to capital expansion: the organized class conscious working class. The major goal of the terror was to transform the working class from an obstacle to capital accumulation to an instrument. The purpose of the terror was a sustained effort to systematically abolish the memory of solidarity, the social bonds within the working class, to atomize the class and inculcate the feelings of subordination, inferiority and servility characteristic of the pre-Peronist period: the ideal is to reproduce the docile *cabecitas negras* found in the past on the rural estates within the urban working class.

Much of the world's media has focused on the plight of the refugees, the regime's persecution of the intellectuals and professionals — the killing and torture of well-known personalities, guerrilla leaders, etc. But as Juan Carlos Marion has demonstrated, the great bulk of those murdered by the regime were rank and file workers.¹ The regime has launched wholesale attacks on militants in the factories — whole executive councils of locals have "disappeared" — and local officials: grassroots leaders, shop stewards, class oriented unionists and rank and file oriented Peronists have all been subject to one form or another of repression. Every major enterprise which has had "labor conflict" has been affected; in each case the regime intervenes on

the side of the owners, giving capital absolute control over its labor force. Never has the capitalist state acted in such an unconditional, unmediated fashion on behalf of capital.

Thus while the Videla regime represents a unique "break" with Argentina history, the reemergence of working class struggle on a massive scale in the face of terror represents a unique break-through for the working class movement in Latin America. Despite the continuing terror, thousands of strikes have taken place between November 1978 and January 1980, involving tens of thousands of workers. The Argentine working class has not been immobilized in the same fashion as has occurred in Chile and Uruguay. The explanations for this immobilization, which rely on repression, fail to explain why in Argentina, with similar or greater levels of repression, the struggle has broken out throughout the country and in a variety of industries and regions. Moreover, the level of formal organizations of the working class was higher in Argentina and the subsequent dismantlement of these organizations was greater — thus leaving few formal institutional forms of expression open. Finally, through the connivance of the great powers (U.S.A., Russia, China, etc.), the violations of human rights in Argentina have received far less attention than, say, Chile, and the struggle has certainly received far less outside support. The same can be said for the role of the Church, which has been critical of the regime in Chile but notably acquiescent in Argentina. The question that is posed is this: given the massive dismemberment of the formal organization of the working class movement, the lack of international and internal institutional support, what accounts for the resurgence of working class mass action?²

THE TWO FACES OF THE ARGENTINE LEFT

I would like to call attention to a fundamental division within the Argentine left that cuts across formal political, trade union and social organizations and ideology that is essential to understanding the process of class struggle emerging in the post-1976 period. There are essentially two Argentine 'lefts,' or popular movements, each with their own distinct political style, social position and structure. We may refer to one as the "political class" and the other as the "rank and file." The political class is composed of the leaders and organizers within the formal organizations, the professional politicians and trade union bureaucrats, the university intellectuals and professionals, the spokespeople for the Marxist and nationalist traditions who, in large part provide the apparatus for the formal organizations and formulate the program for political action at the national level. The political class has been in charge of organizing the general strikes, the election campaigns, the public demonstrations, the guerrilla raids, the signing of collective agreements, the

publication of journals, manifestos, etc. The political class has also received almost all the attention of the political and social analysts. When writing about the Argentine popular movement, most of the writing refers to the activities and policies of this group and the reactions of the rank and file to the activities organized by the formal organizations.

These analyses seem to me to be shortsighted and to overlook the fact that the "rank and file" working class have their own social, political, familial networks around which they organize a good part of their life; that these relations, activities, values and social position are distinct from those of the political class even as they share with the "political class" common organizational membership (though different positions in the organization), common electoral behavior and common opposition to the military, ruling class, etc. However, there is a common sub-culture that unites the working class independently of the formal organization which embraces kinship, neighborhood, workplace and social clubs. The common experiences shared within these settings sets off the working class from the political class. The differences manifest themselves in some cases in different forms of verbal expression, but most fundamentally in the notion of *compañerismo* (comradship) that comes from sharing the day to day hardships, social events, tragedies, sporting events. Moreover, there is even a "racial component" as the rank and file tend to be a "cabecita negras," while the political class is largely drawn from the "European" background.

In practice, in the pre-1976 period, the two levels, the political class and the rank and file, interacted in general strikes, demonstrations, elections, etc., but not on a day to day basis. There was a separation of class, life style and language. Thus there are two sets of class bonds that involve the working class: the vertical bonds manifested in their membership and activity in the impersonal national organization (Peronist movement, CGT, etc.), linking together the working class on a national level for political struggle; and the horizontal bonds found in the face to face relations in the neighborhood and workplace where the struggle is over immediate issues. This distinction within the Argentine popular movement between the "political class" and the "rank and file" is crucial to understanding how and why the Argentine working class struggle continues despite the savage repression of the formal organizations and the all pervasive activities of the secret police and the terroristic para-military forces. The capacity of the Argentine working class to sustain collective struggle for class demands is rooted in the distinctive features of the Argentine working class, features found in few other workers' movements in the world in the same degree.

DISTINCT FEATURES OF THE ARGENTINE WORKING CLASS

The most striking feature of the Argentine working class is the extraordinary degree of class solidarity and organization. This is manifested in its unique capacity to successfully execute massive general strikes on a nationwide basis with maximum success. I know of no country in the world where repeated general strikes of 24, 48 and 72 hours were called and supported by the entire class *voluntarily*, that is, with no effort to "coerce" the different class member into participation. Moreover, numerous strikes were called in the middle of workdays — say at 10 a.m. — and in impressive displays of class solidarity hundreds of thousands of workers "down their tools" in the presence of employers and, at times, in the face of military mobilizations. In 1971, I witnessed a massive walk-out of workers from an auto-plant, part of a general strike, in which the workers had to walk through a cordon of heavily armed troops. Not one worker remained in the plant. The class solidarity extended to other strata also, involving small business people, teachers, social workers, etc. I recall in Córdoba having my shoes shined when the whistle went off signalling the beginning of a general strike and the bootblack stopped working, leaving one shoe unpolished. When the strike was called even the streetwalkers disappeared.

The second feature of the Argentine working class was a general rejection of the state and ruling class domination and values. This is not to say that the workers did not demand services from the state, did not participate in national pastimes (soccer-matches), etc., but rather brought its own set of values and interests into play while engaging the adversary. Thus in extracting benefits from the state, the workers did not respond with "gratitude" but as something to which they were entitled and indeed *must receive*. The bourgeoisie was sick to death of this "prepotencia de clase" as it characterized the self-affirmation of the working class. Even when workers participated in 'national events,' such as soccer matches, which supposedly bring all classes together — the seating arrangements and form of involvement reflects class differences. Moreover, the "national unity" is rather a surface phenomenon. During the Copa Hemispheric that I witnessed in 1971 in Buenos Aires, a disputed play penalizing the Argentine team led to massive chants of "Argentina" — till the police came onto the field and pointed their riot guns at the vocal, but peaceful, galleries made up overwhelmingly of workers. Immediately the chant changed to *asesinos*, while the bourgeois Argentines occupying reserved and box seats were silent. The presence of state authorities clearly evoked the underlying class hostilities of the working class, even in this mixed cultural setting.

On a more general level, the notion of class interest is manifested in the intransigent insistence of the working class to not sacrifice their standard of

living for an illusory "national development" — capitalist accumulation. The level of mystification in this sense is very low. Even Perón was completely incapable of imposing any sacrifice of working class interests in the name of national capitalist growth. On the contrary, Peron's influence was totally dependent on his capacity to secure benefits for the working class and failing that his influences began to ebb. From this vantage point, working class support for Peronist politics was less a product of mystification and more the expression of the search for instrumental goals.

The fourth feature of the Argentine working class was powerful informal bonds, expressed through family, neighborhood and workplace that reinforced class bonds and links among the working class and against the ruling class. Family and kinship ties have frequently been described as "conservative" forces, limiting class consciousness, etc. This approach assumes what it needs to prove — that the family and kinship groups themselves contain and transmit alien conservative values. In the Argentine case, at least two generations (1940-1950 and 1960-1970) shared common experiences of class struggle and organization. They shared membership in the same class anchored social clubs, trade unions, *asados* (cook-outs), and therefore the primary group orientation reinforced class ties. Likewise, working and living place associations have been described as inculcating 'parochial,' 'local' outlooks which are supposedly incompatible with class consciousness. Once again, the argument assumes that the *content* of the local involvement is diffuse or devoid of class content — which is precisely not the point: the neighborhoods and workplaces in Argentina are preeminently class homogeneous, at least to the degree of containing predominantly working and lower salaried employees and petty vendors. The heavy arms and large contingents of police forces that were mobilized to make arrests in working class neighborhoods attests to the fear that state authorities had of neighborhood reactions. Likewise, most kidnappings of workers took place after working hours to avoid the collective wrath at the place of employment.

The fifth feature of the Argentine working class was the high levels of trust, confidence and mutual support within local working class communities. This factor is crucial in understanding why the secret police has been hardpressed to break locally organized strikes and protests. It is extremely difficult to crack the tight family, kinship and neighborhood ties. For a worker to become a police informer would not only label him a traitor to an "abstract" class but an enemy to his most basic and personal relations. It would lead to total ostracism from life-long companions, friends and, most important family members. The primary ties provide a security for local class organizations and activists that no formal organization can match and to which no police or par-military organization has been able to destroy. Within these networks all the prohibited activities take place — and the word hardly ever

leaks out. I recall viewing a prohibited Pro-Peronist film during the Lanusse period "*Ni Vencidos ni Vencedores*" in a Rosario working class house with 30 or 40 other people — essentially 3 or 4 families, including grandparents, parents and children without any sense of a security problem. Contrary to more conventional social scientists who speak of a "non-participatory," "alienated" or "non-integrated" working class I find a high degree of integration in working class sub-culture which coincides with a rejection or non-participation in the dominant or oppressor culture promoted by the ruling class. The working class participated in formal political and social organization of the class but also maintained its class autonomy exercised through its informal local organizational ties.

STATE REPRESSION: IMPACT ON THE POLITICAL CLASS AND THE RANK AND FILE

My central point is that state repression has had a differential effect on the "two faces" of the Argentine left. Essentially it was most successful in undermining the formally organized popular movement and least successful in destroying the rank and file basis of struggle — even though the brunt of the repression has been borne by the latter.

The political class has suffered massive destruction. Among the hundreds of thousands of Argentines in the diaspora are many of the intellectual, political and trade union leaders of the popular movement. The exiles are the relatively more fortunate victims — as the terror has taken a massive toll of victims through innumerable kidnappings and "disappearances." For those few political intellectuals and party people who have remained in Argentina and are not incarcerated, fear has largely paralyzed their public life: the main pre-occupation is survival.

Along with the physical decimation of the activist core, the terrorist regime has gone about systematically dismantling the trade union organizations intervening the universities and proscribing political parties — destroying all forms of autonomous political and social organization. The end result is that what is left of the formal organization is largely an empty and impotent husk, tightly controlled or totally destroyed by the regime. The traditional political leaders hover together, petitioning and protesting but incapable of defining any new political initiatives or mobilizing any significant popular support. For all intents and purposes the political class has been incapacitated.

REPRESSION AND THE RANK AND FILE

The regime did not confine itself to merely intervening at the apex of the hierarchical order of the political movement but aimed its principal blows at the middle and lower ranks among the militants of the popular movement: more than any other regime in Argentine history it acted to *uproot* the mass movement by a frontal assault on the main forces linked to the great mass of the wage labor force: the factory militants, the shop stewards, the local union leaders. The Videla dictatorship (unlike previous traditional leaders) did not believe that a "handful of foreign inspired agitators" were stirring up the otherwise complacent working class — nor did they act on that assumption. The dictatorship knew and acted on the assumption that the whole organized conscious working class was "responsible," for the strikes, wage demands and constraints on capital and therefore it extended a policy that would directly affect the class as a whole: mass terror without constraints against all working class militants, with or without Marxist, Peronist or syndicalist affiliations. For a brief conjuncture this massive bloody purge did arrest and perhaps intimidate the working class (April 7, 1976 till October 1978). Many of the known local militants and political cadres were wiped out. The disarticulation of the national networks and formal political structures did temporarily disorient the working class. The result however was not permanent atomization or massive paralysis as the regime had hoped, but a turning inward — the working class turned to the most elementary and secure forms of organization and struggle: to local activity organized around particular industries, factories or neighborhoods; to limited demands for immediate needs (wage increases). From within each locale new anonymous leaders emerged, collective spokespersons who negotiated contracts over the phone — the rank and file developed created forms of action to secure demands and avoid assassination. Local organizations were reconstituted based on primary and secondary groups — loyalties of kinship and friendship reinforced class ties and ensured security against the terrorist state. By September 1979 a whole wave of strikes had broken out throughout the metalurgical, transport and other industries. Hundreds of strikes in large and small plants became everyday occurrence. This massive upsurge occurred despite the continuing terror and in the absence of the formal trade union party and intellectual leadership. This resurgence of rank and file action can only be explained by the durability of the underlying class bonds located in the family, neighborhood and factory, reinforced by the popular culture and provoked by the severe decline in standard of living. Explanations that resort to "spontaneity" refuse to look behind the existence of formal organization. The autonomous working class rank and file of Argentine industrial capitalism activate themselves and sustain activity through long standing association in informal settings and

groupings. This informal Argentine left is today the most vital force in society. Yet it is the least discussed and understood since communication and interaction is largely within the working class and few intellectuals, foreign or Argentine have any substantial relationship with it. Indeed for too many years most intellectuals measured class consciousness among workers through questionnaires that evaluated verbal responses in terms of scales derived from abstract ideology. The conclusions usually found an ambiguity or low level of class consciousness — that was incomprehensible in terms of the actual levels of struggle. The high level of class consciousness of the Argentine working class was and is manifested through participation in collective class activity, and in the day to day inter-action in places and events which have a specific class character.

In summary, then, despite the massive repression and physical destruction of thousands of local leaders, the Argentine working class has generated new leaders, organizers and direct action because the neighborhood, the family and the rank and file in the factories have within themselves the capacity to reproduce themselves. Like Hydra, every time the regime cuts off one head, two take its place.

NOTAS

1. Juan Carlos Marín, *Argentina 1973-1976: La Democracia, esa superstición y los hechos armados* (cela, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Uruguay.)

2. There are two qualifications that should be stated: mass workers' action is usually plant, or at most, industry based and focused on immediate economic actions. Without formal organization, it is hard to visualize how national-political struggles could successfully be organized. Within the limitations of locally anchored, economically motivated actions, however, exist the embryos of a new national working class organization. As we shall discuss later, the units and basis of class action, family, etc., shape the form of action.