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Gender Dynamics Among the Organized Unemployed: "We are not *Piqueteros*."

By Martha Farmelo

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina – On Wednesday, June 26, 2002, Buenos Aires provincial police allegedly shot to death two young men and wounded 90 when unemployed protestors known as *piqueteros* blocked access to the city of Buenos Aires at the Puerreydón Bridge in Avellaneda, a small city just outside the capital. Immediately, the media pulsated with reporting and analysis of these events and members of society—both individuals and organizations—resonated with outrage.

That evening, after more than eight hours of silence, President Eduardo Duhalde's administration blamed the killings on *piquetero* infighting. That night a couple of thousand people from neighborhood assemblies (see MJF-9) and leftist parties marched to the Plaza de Mayo to protest the killings. The next day, Thursday, tens of thousands of demonstrators—*piqueteros,* neighborhood assemblies, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, political groupings and others—again marched to the Plaza de Mayo to repudiate the repression.

Also on Thursday, a combination of photographs, video footage and eye-witness testimony provided apparently irrefutable evidence that the police had gunned down the protestors in an illegal, unilateral attack. President Duhalde then changed his line, calling the events "*una cacería atroz*" (literally, an atrocious hunt).

Early Friday morning, I took the subway to the Retiro train station and caught

A piquete *just outside Tilcara in the Argentine northwest.*

a bus that took me across the city, over the Puerreydón Bridge and past the Fiorito Hospital that on Wednesday had been overrun by wounded protestors and scurrying police officers. The bus continued out into the province of Buenos Aires where, coincidentally, I had arranged a meeting with a group of *piqueteros*.

After well over an hour, I got off at the last stop along a wide, quiet road in the outskirts of San Francisco Solano—one of the more impoverished suburbs of Buenos Aires. After turning off the paved road, I carefully walked down dirt streets with deep, criss-crossing ruts, making sure not to twist an ankle. At each intersection I hopped over little streams that emitted a nasty stench.

On a previous visit a couple of weeks earlier, I had been escorted by a young lawyer named Marcela. This time Cristino Rodas greeted me with a surprised smile followed by a hand on my left shoulder and a kiss on my right cheek.

"Hello. I didn't think you'd make it alone," he said. I sensed that given the killings two days before, he hadn't expected me to come at all.

Who are the *piqueteros*?

In MJF-8 (*Beyond Buenos Aires: Tripping Over the Crisis in the Patagonia and Gender Lessons in the Argentine Northwest*) I reported being delayed last November near Tilcara in the country's far northwest by a roadblock made of huge branches, a bunch of people, a small tent and a burning tire. Some of the men had on shirts with three large C's painted across the front, representing the *Corriente Clasista y Combativa* (literally, the Classist and Combative Current).

The CCC is one of Argentina's largest groups of *piqueteros*—working-class, now-unemployed men and women who have become political players through their well-organized roadblocks. Like the *piquete* in Tilcara, these protests are commonly used to demand that the government provide emergency food aid and *Planes Trabajar* ("work plans," from "plan" and "to work"). These *Planes* are workfare positions that pay a monthly 150 LECOP (national bonds that operate as currency parallel to the peso) in exchange for 20 hours of work per week.

At the Tilcara *piquete* in November, a male CCC-activist told me that the majority of the CCC-Tilcara commission members are women, for two main reasons. First, the women tend to function as a shield against violence by police during roadblocks. Second, in their meetings, the men tend to be hotheaded while the women are far more level-headed (a real gender-bender). The men rely on the women to help them make better, more strategic decisions, he said.

As a result of that encounter, I decided to look further into gender dynamics in the *piquetero* movement—

MAPA POLITICO DE LOS PIQUETEROS

Luis D'Elía (FTV)

J. C. Alderete (CCC)

Roberto Martino (MTR)

Bloque	Agrupación	Filiación política
CTA (Confederación de Trabajadores Argentinos)	Federación de Tierra y Vivienda (FTV)	Frente para el Cambio (ex Frepaso)
	Movimiento Barrios de Pie	Patria Libre
CCC (Corriente Clasista y Combativa)	Corriente Clasista y Combativa (CCC)	Partido Comunista Revolucionario
Bloque Piquetero y afines	Polo Obrero (PO)	Partido Obrero
	Movimiento Teresa Rodríguez (MTR)	Independiente
	Frente Unico de Trabajadores Desocupados (Futrade)	Partido Obrero
	Movimiento Territorial de Liberación (MTL)	Partido Comunista - FJC
	Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Pensionados (MIJP)	Ex CCC, con lazos con PO, MST y PTS
	Agrupación Tendencia Clasista 29 de Mayo	Partido de la Liberación
	Movimiento Sin Trabajo Teresa Vive	Mov. Soc. de Trabajadores (MST)
	CTD - Coordinadora Aníbal Verón	Independiente

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which is diverse and divided. The protestors killed on June 26 belonged to the *Coordinadora de Trabajadores Desocupados Aníbal Verón* (Coordinator of Unemployed Workers *Aníbal Verón*, named after a *piquetero* who was assassinated by a gunshot to the face at a roadblock in Tartagal in the northwest in November 2000). The National Piquetero Block includes a number of smaller, more radical entities, mostly linked to leftist parties such as the *Partido Obrero*, or Workers Party. At least one of these entities supports the idea of overthrowing the government through armed struggle.

The group I met with in San Francisco Solano is part of the *Federación de Tierra, Vivienda y Hábitat* (Federation of Land, Housing and Habitat, FTV) which is member of the *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA), a progressive, non-partisan labor confederation. FTV-Solano and CTA-Solano work hand-in-hand, and at times seem interchangeable. "Here the CTA and the FTV are the same thing," Cristino told me.

The CTA works closely with the CCC, which has connections to the Revolutionary Communist Party. Both are harshly criticized by most other *piquetero* groups for being in dialogue with the government, even though they have been extremely critical of President Duhalde and of former President Fernando de la Rúa. They are also divided for ideological and strategic reasons. For example, unlike the *Coordinadora Aníbal Verón*, when the CCC and CTA put up a roadblock they either let people through periodically, as in Tilcara, or make sure there are alternative routes of travel available.

The Killings Reverberate

Despite many people's dislike of *piqueteros*, the massive police operation that left Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki dead and 90 others wounded shocked and outraged countless Argentines. A few days later I told a child psychologist who lives in a well-to-do northern suburb that I was feeling particularly upset about these killings and worried about my inability to temper my sadness and anger. "I understand," she said. "This was really intense and hard for all of us."

The collective outrage intensified when it became clear that the police had shot directly into the crowd with lead and rubber bullets and that armed, undercover police had infiltrated the crowd and tried to pass themselves off as *piqueteros*. Furthermore, the dead men were unarmed and shot at close range, one allegedly by Chief Inspector Alfredo Franchiotti, the chief of the operation.

There are competing theories regarding who in the political hierarchy ultimately authorized the repression. Many fingers point toward President Duhalde, since the events took place right in his "back yard." The police who participated in the repression are accountable to superiors based in Lomas de Zamora, his home town and power base. Before becoming President, he was mayor of Lomas,

This series of photos appeared in Pagina/12 on Friday, June 28, 2002:

1. Darío Santillán (in white hat) assists Maximiliano Kosteki.

2. Santillán, shot.

3. The officer with the blue hat is Chief Inspector Alfredo Franchiotti.

4. Unidentified male lifts Kosteki's legs (perhaps to help him, so the blood would go to his head, though many believed this was a police officer intending to make him bleed to death more quickly).

5. A Lomas police officer kneeling over the body of Kosteki (personally, this photo upset me the most of all).

6. Officers remove Santillán from the train station.

7. Idem 6.

8. Franchiotti (gun in hand) and Santillán before taking Santillán to Fiorito Hospital. He reportedly died on the way to the hospital.

Photos 1-6 by Sergio Kowalewski. Photos 7-8 by INFOSIC/Mariano Espinosa

Governor of the province of Buenos Aires and Senator of the same. Others argue that former President Carlos Menem was behind the killings in an attempt to destabilize President Duhalde, his fellow Peronist but arch-rival.

The night of the killings, people from the CTA-Solano held a meeting with their members to talk about what had happened and about participation in the march to the Plaza de Mayo scheduled for the following day. "People were scared," they told me. "Our organizing work is slow and laborious. [These killings] set back our work by at least two years."

The killings took place in a climate of what many Argentines refer to as *la criminalización de la protesta*, or the criminalization of protest. Horacio Meguide, director of the CTA's legal department, told me that as early as 1994, then-President Menem made an open plea to public prosecutors to pursue charges against those who participated in roadblocks.

"There is a law against blocking off a road for personal reasons, but not as a protest," said Meguide. " [What's at play is] the right of transit *vs*. the right to protest." He told me that thousands of unemployed workers throughout Argentina, many of whom are jailed, are facing charges for having participated in roadblocks. Nonetheless, the daily *La Nacion* reported that in the first six months of this year protestors mounted an average of 544 roadblocks every month.

In the week before the killings, Secretary of Internal Security Juan José Alvarez had asserted that "it will not be permitted that the city of Buenos Aires be made incommunicado with roadblocks in all of its access routes." Moreover, just two days before the killings, Foreign Minister Carlos Ruckauf told Air Force officials he was proud of signing decree 261 in 1975, the year before the last military coup, when he was Labor Minister under then-President Isabel Perón. This decree authorized the Armed Forces to participate in matters of internal security and set in motion the systematic detentions and disappearances that became the hallmark of the grisly last dictatorship. In addition, he suggested that "difficult times" are coming and, if necessary, he would do the same "*sin vacilar,*" without hesitating.

About two weeks before the killings, the CTA-Solano people and I discussed a chilling incident that had just occurred. A Buenos Aires high-school activist who is part of a student group fighting to improve their transportation subsidies was kidnapped briefly by men who threatened him and carved "AAA" into his chest. Known as "the Triple A," the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance was a 1970s death squad created under President Isabel Perón, coordinated by the Ministry of Social Welfare, and

A group of demonstrators from the CTA in San Francisco Solano. Jorge is on the far left. María Itatí is second from the right.

responsible for the murder and disappearance of many activists.

Graciela Rivarola of CTA-Solano's education department told me, "[What we're seeing] is just the repressive apparatus [of the dictatorship] that has been intact all this time." She should know. She used to be married to Argentino Cabral, a now-unemployed metalworker and CTA-Solano's union secretary. Argentino was a political prisoner throughout the last dictatorship, and was detained and tortured again at the beginning of the Menem administration.

"One night in 1990 well-dressed guys came to our door," she said. "I thought they were professionals. I was such an idiot. When they asked for Argentino I opened the door to them. They showed me police badges and a search warrant from a judge. Argentino was holding our baby son, and they told him, 'Let go of the kid.'"

She told me they took him to the local intelligence headquarters and other places and tortured him for two days before letting him go. "When he was released his neck was totally black and blue from the hood [covering his head and face, generally to impede breathing, a form of torture], and his back was covered with cigarette burns."

As she told this story, Argentino moved around the table pouring *yerba* (a loose tea) into a gourd, and preparing the hot water and silver straw for us to have some *mate.* His nonchalance threw me for a loop, and I asked twice if she was really talking about him.

Several days after the killings of the two *piqueteros,* San Francisco Solano members told me, "We were just saying, 'Poor Martha, having to deal with this just now,'" referring to my having begun spending time among *piqueteros*. Suffice it to say, I had been saying the same words to myself about them.

"We are not *piqueteros.* We Are Unemployed Workers."

One afternoon in San Francisco Solano, I was drinking *mate* with a group including Graciela, Argentino, Jorge Valles, who works in CTA-Solano's administration, and María Itatí Gómez, who works in the social-action department.

Jorge is an electrician. "When I first went job hunting, I tried to get what I was paid before. When they offered me less, I turned them down. It was really stupid," he said with a smile. I told him I thought it was natural.

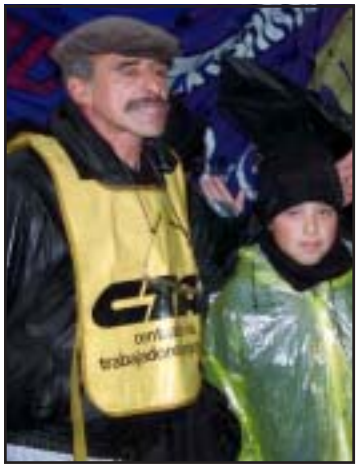
With a serious expression, he said, "We insist that we are unemployed workers. We use *piquetes* as a means of protest but we are not *piqueteros.* The enemy and the government like to brand us *piqueteros.* We do not consider ourselves *piqueteros.*"

I asked, "Do other groups consider themselves *piqueteros*?"

Jorge answered, "I think yes. It's an identity for them. Sometimes our own [national] leader [Luis D'Elía] uses '*piqueteros,*' no? You see D'Elía and [Juan Carlos] Alderete [of the CCC] talking of *piqueteros.*"

"I hear them use the term *piqueteros* with pride," said I.

"For my personal way of being and that of many *compañeros* from here, for us it is not [a source of] pride for them to brand us *piqueteros.* As Argentino has told you, to call us *piqueteros* is to call us beggars for *Planes Trabajar,* for this and that." Graciela told me that those who believe that the *piquetero* movement has restored dignity to unemployed workers are wrong. The others in the room shook their heads energetically in agreement with her.



Argentino and his son, Alejo.

I added, "If I'm understanding correctly, there are two parts that go together, the positive side of demonstrating and…"

María Itatí interrupted gently but firmly. "Yes, not only does it help us emotionally, you have a space where you can express your anger. But in the other sense it is not a source

of dignity. We do not like to go to block off a road. We do not feel that this gives us a power. We do it out of necessity. People do not say, 'Ay, I feel dignified because I blocked off a road.' We do it because it is necessary because we are not heard. What we need is a job, one that is dignified."

Jorge added, "We don't have any alternative. For us, in the 1980s, when they began to close factory after factory, as a means of protest we would organize soup kitchens at the factory gates when the workers would take over the factories [to continue operating them as cooperatives]. But today, the factories no longer exist. They are all closed. The workers are in the neighborhoods. For this reason we say that the neighborhood is the big factory and the road would be the factory gate. So we protest and set up soup kitchens on the road."

"This is why we say we are unemployed workers that take as an option the *piquete,* so that our protest is heard. That is our feeling, our particular situation," he said.

As Jorge mentioned, Argentino had repeatedly emphasized to me the problem of *piquetes* being seen as "asking for alms." His ex-wife, Graciela, reiterated that the press is seeking to make *piqueteros* out to be beggars looking for handouts. "For many who participate in *piquetes*, that is the perception they have of themselves," she said.

Argentino told me, "The government treats *Planes Trabajar* like a *chupetín en la boca* [a lollypop in the mouth]. They manipulate organizations up and down by giving out fewer *Planes* than needed, and also by how they give them out, and to whom."

CTA-Solano receives and distributes 200 *Planes Trabajar* through a program established by seven-day president Adolfo Rodríquez Saá last December, and another 400 from President Duhalde's program for unemployed heads of household. Other organizations in San Francisco Solano receive and distribute *Planes* as well.

From A Garbage Dump to Five Neighborhoods

During our first meeting, six members of the CTA-Solano and I sat on uncomfortable plastic chairs around a rickety wooden table in a cold, unheated cement room. Their organizing history goes back 20 years to 1981, well before the creation of the FTV and CTA in the 1990s. In just one night right in the middle of the last, ghastly repressive dictatorship, with active help from the local priest and the quiet support of Archbishop Jaime Novak, 3,000 persons occupied 200 hectares of abandoned private land. Over time, 20,000 persons slowly converted a garbage dump into five orderly neighborhoods.

Participants in the occupation were home renters buckling under policies implemented during the dictatorship that caused rents to shoot skyward, or people who had lost their homes and lived under bridges or wherever they could manage. As Jorge walked me to the bus stop one dark, starless night, he told me that the occupation took place the same day he was married. That day his wife skipped work and together they gathered enough stray materials to make a little shelter for their wedding night.

I was surprised that they had been successful in seizing land in the middle of the dictatorship. They said cold, hunger, lack of resources and repression made it difficult, but they did manage to organize at three levels: each block elected a delegate, each neighborhood's delegates elected a governing board, and the five governing boards in turn elected an umbrella Coordinating Commission. The real problems came after the return to civilian government in 1983 when the political parties came back to life, entered their neighborhoods and effectively divided and destroyed all but one of the five neighborhood organizations, called El Tala.

Still, their continued advocacy (and tenacity) led to a crucial victory in 1984 when the provincial legislature approved a law that authorized the government to ex-

The far end of the neighborhood of El Tala, San Francisco Solano. El Tala's neighborhood association was the only one of the five to survive the return to civilian democracy in 1983.

The CTA-Solano organizes neighborhood development projects including this organic garden in the back yard of Mónica, right. María, left, confessed that her stomach clutched when she learned I was from the U.S. "When we think of the U.S. we think that they want to dominate us and take everything from us they can," said another CTA-Solano member.

propriate the land from its former owners and allowed the families to buy the property from the government. A second organizational rift occurred later, when the government had given land titles to half of the families, who then essentially abandoned the collective struggle.

El Tala's neighborhood organization has continued operating all the way up to the present. Meanwhile, the national CTA was created in 1992 by a group of union leaders who wanted to create a non-partisan, non-traditional labor federation that would oppose then-President Menem's structural-adjustment policies. (At that time most labor groups were affiliated with the Peronist party.) However, CTA-Solano didn't come into existence until 1998, and the national and local FTV a few years after that. CTA-Solano was organized by Juan Carlos Sánchez, a tireless and low-profile community leader. Perhaps "tireless" is an understatement: he works non-stop despite two herniated disks, a one-year-old kid and a wife who just gave birth to their second child.

Today, the CTA-Solano organizes development projects in eight neighborhoods as well as carrying out political advocacy, such as fighting illegal municipal taxes. The level of activity is astonishing, in fact, given its scarce resources. For example, Cristino is a tailor who worked in a number of clothing factories in and around Buenos Aires. He has trained a group of women to confect inexpensive but well-made clothing, rag dolls and other items. These women are now organized in a sewing cooperative that sells its goods in the neighborhood, and charges just enough to cover the raw materials to continue working.

In response to increasing levels of hunger and malnutrition, men and women donate their labor to the cultivation of five organic gardens that produce food for needy families, four on small plots of land loaned by CTA-Solano members and one at a school. They have a community library and organize tutoring and other activities for children. They also collaborate with a variety of other neighborhood organizations.

CTA members who receive *Planes Trabajar* have contributed their weekly 20 hours of labor to neighborhood projects like construction of a small but spiffy new health clinic. CTA-Solano collaborates with a pre-school and a neighborhood soup kitchen that feeds school-children breakfast, lunch and snacks. They also work with a center where the elderly come to eat, attend mass and craft woodwork, which they then sell.

Perhaps most importantly, with funds from the municipality and a local foundation, they have built 46 homes and made improvements to many more via a system called *construcción por ayuda mutua,* or "construction by mutual help." "This method of collective work has helped rebuild the relationships that were broken in 1983," Cristino told me.

The Gender Dynamics of Discussing Gender

During our first meeting, when I turned the conversation toward gender dynamics within the organization, the women simply smiled while the men giggled and squirmed in their chairs. One man made a joke about how lucky he was to be seated close to the door. In that mo-

Members of the CTA-Solano's sewing cooperative

These men receive Planes Trabajar *through the CTA-Solano and are contributing their labor for repairs and improvements to this home.*

ment I was eminently aware that discussing gender dynamics in a mixed-gender group had limitations, but could be revealing as well.

To move the discussion forward, I asked how many members of the governing body of the CTA-Solano were women. "For every ten CTA members in the neighborhoods, we have one delegate. Our group of delegates is about half women," said María Itatí. Yet out of eight board members, only two are women.

María Itatí went on. "There is plenty of room for women in the CTA to be protagonists. The problem is with the women, more than the men. They still visualize themselves and identify themselves exclusively in the role of mother and homemaker. Many women do not want to be protagonists in the organization.

A woman named Norma explained that in addition to having departments such as administration, finance, health and social action, they need a department devoted to women. "We convoked a women's area just like the ones for social action and health, but the only two women that showed up were me and María Itatí.

"Take the issue of abortion," she went on, "which is ultimately about getting men to use condoms, about preventing pregnancy. Around here, women pay five pesos for an [illegal, unprofessional] abortion, which is often done by women in the neighborhood who insert a catheter into the uterus. Most of those who seek abortions are minors. They end up with terrible infections. At the municipal hospital, to teach them a lesson, the doctors leave them there suffering until the very last minute," she said.

"This issue goes way beyond health," she said. "This is a women's issue. It requires a women's department. But women just say their men won't wear a condom, that they don't like how it feels."

Argentino chimed in, "We recognize that women, too, used to work and lost their jobs. When we look in that mirror, men and women, we all feel like trash."

He went on to talk about very valuable women in Argentine popular struggles, and mentioned with particular reverence the Madres of Plaza de Mayo, who boldly confronted the last military dictatorship. But he told me that in San Francisco Solano, the women delegates who attend the delegates' meetings often do not speak up. They are just too shy, and when they do speak, they lower their voices rather than speaking out with strength.

In fact, the moment that our conversation had turned to gender, one of the young female delegates got up from the corner farthest from the door, made her way around the table and left. We all laughed, quietly and ironically. María Itatí explained that she is shy and didn't want to talk.

Looking More Deeply Into Gender Issues

On a subsequent visit, we sat in a large concrete room with a glass picture window facing the street. When buses lurched by, the drone of their motors drowned out our conversation.

I asked if men and women experience the hardship of unemployment differently. María Itatí told me, "Many of the men are depressed. They stay in bed all day, or they take up drinking. Older men are hard hit as well," she said.

Are the men harder hit than the women? "Yes," she said. "I don't know if this is common to all women, but

Norma raised the issues of abortion and prevention of pregnancy to illustrate the need for a women's department within the CTA-Solano.

women come out, when they see their husbands in that state, they have no other choice but to come out. They also come out because of their children."

Jorge said, "The men feel hard hit. It happened to me. I had to go out for days and days, walking and walking and coming home without having found even one short-term job. One feels impotent, useless," he said. "Supposedly the man is the provider for his home and when he sees that today he can not fulfill that role, that is when he feels hard hit. He feels subjugated by it all."

I then asked if unemployed men help out at home. Jorge began to answer along the lines of "yes and no," but was quickly interrupted by María Itatí's quiet but clear voice. "They don't contribute. They are without work but they don't contribute. Even when the woman goes out and works, they don't contribute."

Jorge then said, "I don't agree with what she says. It may be that the majority of men are the way she says. Those are the ones that really feel the blow [of unemployment]. Those who become aware of what is happening, no, because there are men that you see go outside and hang up their kids' clothes, who take their kids to school."

Do they care if other men see them doing that? Jorge said, "How are they going to care if that's they way to help the woman?"

María Itatí said, "But there are very few that have *conciencia* [awareness], so the only thing they do is climb in bed…There are concrete cases in our organization. [Women] are coming here, they are giving their time and trying to take something back to their homes, yet when they arrive home their husbands make a stink about this and that. We know that the base is the problem of unemployment. [The man] is broken as a person and his machismo is bruised…And the woman has to understand that, because if not, the couple and the family are in crisis. For the majority, this is the situation that we are living."

Jorge added, "Or the man becomes a hard-core drinker, he becomes a man who is physically abusive, he abandons his home, his kids, or he shoots himself."

I said, "So your task involves dealing with depression, so that you can then incorporate them into your work."

Cristino said, "We have heard from our own *compañeros* what depression is like, and many times for us doing a roadblock is like therapy. The therapy is to get them out to the road, so that they express themselves and demonstrate."

Jorge added, "A woman came here from the UBA

Cristino (center) works in the CTA-Solano's finance department. The first time I traveled to San Francisco Solano by myself, he told me, "I didn't think you'd make it alone."

[University of Buenos Aires]…and I made a joke to her I said, 'As you can see, we are not only a confederation of workers, we also provide group therapy.'"

María Itatí then added, "We become a *grupo de contención* [a group that provides emotional support]. Because people feel badly when they are not supported. They feel alone. They are isolated. When you remove them from their isolation, you get together, you see that there are others experiencing the same problems as you."

I asked, "Don't the women have the same needs? Perhaps they don't stay in bed all day, but I imagine that they must experience a lot of stress."

María Itatí's answer was immediate and succinct. "Yes, of course," she said. "Double."

"My Life Has Changed Totally."

One afternoon I sat with a group of women in the small, cold, crowded room that houses the community library. They were trying to figure out how to pull off a celebration for Children's Day on August 11 with virtually no money. At one point, I asked if they would be willing to share with me what has changed for them personally as a result of their involvement with the CTA.

One young woman spoke up right away saying, "My personal life changed because as a housewife, I didn't think that I could do things for others. I'm contributing something to an end, for my family, too."

Another blurted out as she slipped out the door, "I separated from my partner as a result," which produced several giggles.

An articulate, self-assured woman named Rosa told me, "My life has changed totally since my being here in the CTA. Before I didn't relate to people. I lived closed

up in my house. By coming here—I came by way of María Itatí—I changed totally. I grew up in this neighborhood and I didn't know the people around me. I arrived here out of the need for a *Plan* [*Trabajar*], to be honest. But I became more and more integrated."

"Besides meeting more people, do you feel different?," I asked.

"I feel different. I feel totally new as a woman. I'm useful. I discovered this only recently, only gradually over the last seven months."

Fifteen-year old Perla told me, "I, too, changed a lot because I'm young, and they invited me to a course on health, and I came and began to perceive myself [differently], and now I'm better off. Before I was only with kids my age. I'm learning a lot of new things."

A 27-year-old with four kids said, "I, too, was closed

Similar Echoes in the CCC

Several things I heard in San Francisco Solano echoed an earlier visit to the CCC headquarters in La Matanza, also in the province of Buenos Aires. That day some US trade unionists and I met with Juan Carlos Alderete, CCC's national leader.

CCC neighborhood delegates meeting in La Matanza.

Alderete said that many unemployed men become depressed, abandon their families and even commit suicide. I asked about women's roles in his organization. Echoing the CCC leader I spoke with in Tilcara in the far northwest of Argentina, Alderete told me that women are stronger in confrontations with police and other conflict situations.

"We used to see working women as our competition, but not any more. The women have helped us understand [that that is not so]." He said that they tend to be elected as local delegates in part because their neighbors trust them.

That day, a group of several hundred neighborhood delegates were meeting at the CCC headquarters. I noticed immediately that the group was about 50 percent female. Alderete introduced us to the delegates, mentioned my interest in the participation of women and opened up the floor for comments.

Juan Carlos Alderete, CCC national leader, at their headquarters in La Matanza.

The first person to stand and speak was a woman they call "the grandmother of the [CCC] movement." She told me that she used to work at Pepsi-Cola and distrusted the *piqueteros.* Later she decided that rather than stay at home crying, she wanted to fight. She has 21 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Another woman stood up and said, "There are some people who do not have even a coin to buy food. We go into the street desperate. Our kids can't get the health care they need. When our kids die, they stay in the morgue because we don't have any money to get them out and nowhere to bury them," she said, choked up with emotion.

"We know that the [foreign] debt is paid at our expense," she said. "At whose expense is the US debt paid?" Her comment led to a series of questions about joblessness, poverty and unemployment insurance in the US.

When I told Alderete of my interest in learning more about the *piquetero* movement, he invited me to return and gave me his cell-phone number. Before calling him, I decided to visit Mabel Gabarra, head of the gender secretariat at the national CTA office, and ask her for some orientation.

When I told her I wanted to explore gender issues in the *piquetero* movement, she laughed and made a face that combined incredulousness and mockery. When I asked for clarification, she told me that while women play an enormous role in the struggles and in the *piquetes* themselves, they are not represented in governing bodies or in decision-making processes. She also advised me to avoid talking to the top leaders, and offered instead to put me in contact with Marcela, the young lawyer who took me on my first visit to San Francisco Solano.

up in my house, closed up with the kids. I began to come here, and you begin to feel a bit freer. I have a problem with my husband. '*Estás más suelta*,' he says. [You're less inhibited, or even 'looser.'] But I feel better, more useful."

Another young woman added, "What we're all doing here is social work. At the same time, the way things are, one feels useful among the *porquerías* [crap or bullshit] that we're seeing. That, too, is a satisfaction, to do something for someone."

"Have your relationships with your partners changed?," I asked.

The response was a chorus of giggles and, "They complain."

"They complain that it takes up a lot of our time, that we're neglecting our homes, which isn't true, because one finds the time. For example, I get up early and do the [chores], then I come here, then I return home. I have a baby but I'm giving some time, too. For me, too, not just for other people."

A woman standing in the doorway said, "My life with my partner is the same. Both of us work, and there haven't been conflicts." She seemed to be a minority. "I just want to add that what I found in the CTA is friendships, with my *compañeras*, with all the women. They are strong."

Marches Are Therapeutic, Too

On July 3, 2002, just as most people in the US were preparing for cookouts and fireworks, hosts of Argentines marked the one-week anniversary of the two *piquetero* deaths with a massive mobilization in repudiation of the repression and to protest hunger.

This woman cleans the streets in La Matanza as part of the 20-hour work commitment required for her Plan Trabajar.

In the capital it was about 48 degrees Fahrenheit and rainy, a totally crappy day for a march. Although I had a lingering cold, I headed toward the Plaza de Mayo, planning to search the columns of *piquetero* marchers until I found the people from San Francisco Solano. Around 3:30 p.m., I hopped a bus, took a seat in the last row over the motor and enjoyed the toasty warmth.

A few minutes later my well-charged cell phone rang (we always charge the phone before a demonstration, just in case). It was my partner, Alan, calling to relay a message that the group had set out from the Puerreydón Bridge in Avellaneda at around 2:00, had just reached the Constitución train station and were headed up the wide 9 de Julio Avenue on their way to the Plaza de Mayo. Other groups were marching from the Congress and the Retiro train station.

As I put my cell phone away I felt self-conscious, not about receiving a call but about revealing my destination to about half of my fellow passengers. A few moments later, the bus driver announced that he would have to take an alternative route because of the protest. With an irritated look and tone of voice, the guy next to me told me, "I'm tired of blocked streets all the time. The other day I could hardly get home from work."

I got off the bus near the Plaza de Mayo and walked along 9 de Julio for about ten blocks until I could hear drums and see marchers advancing in my direction. At the head of these groups were members of the *Coordinadora Aníbal Verón* shouting the names of the dead young men and carrying banners with their pictures. I carefully picked my way along the curb against the tide of marchers, careful not to penetrate the different groups' security lines crafted with long bamboo poles or simply by a chain of people holding hands. About seven blocks later, I came upon a long, low banner representing the FTV-San Francisco Solano.

I was greeted with huge smiles and hugs from a number of the men and women I had met the previous Friday. Finally I found María Itatí who was nearly soaked and cold. "Do you want to say hello to Jorge?," she asked. "Here comes the machista man," she said to me, grinning.

Jorge asked me, "How are you?" I told him I was fine, that my journey had been much shorter than his and that I had got a seat on the bus, perhaps because the camera under my coat made me look a few months pregnant. "A-ha!," he laughed, "taking advantage of our machismo."

"You're right," I said. "I'll give you one point for that one."

Later, he told me that one of the women who works in the soup kitchen in San Francisco Solano had asked him, "How can you march in this rain? You'll get pneumonia." His answer: "I'd rather die of pneumonia than hunger."

They were buoyed by the massive turnout despite the rain and cold. It was nearly impossible to overlook the diversity of groups present. The killings had spurred an unusual degree of unity in word and action among a variety of groups, such as *piquetero* organizations that are

The banner reads: FTV Solano, Civil Association, Workers' Strength for Land, Housing and Habitat.

entirely at odds with each other, neighborhood assemblies, left and center-left political parties, various types of human-rights organizations and progressive labor unions.

FTV-Solano had planned on bringing 400 marchers. With the rain and flooding in the neighborhoods they managed to bring only 300, but still were pleased with their turnout. As we walked, Jorge said with obvious pride that not one of their people had come out of fear of losing their workfare position. Back in San Francisco Solano, he had said that some *piqueteros* are forced by their organization to participate in the *piquetes* or lose their *Plan Trabajar*. The CTA-Solano rejects such manipulation. "People lose their dignity," he said.

Once we had reached the Plaza de Mayo and were no longer marching, Graciela and I talked about the *Coordinadora Aníbal Verón*. "They're totally infiltrated. They're idiots," she said scornfully. "How could they go the Puerreydón Bridge that day?"

A bit later and a few yards away, Jorge asked me, "See how we're different [from *Aníbal Verón*]? See how we're pacific? We believe that power needs to be created, not taken," he told me.

"That's interesting," I told him. "That's the way I often think about the issue of men and women, which is also one reason I'm so interested in talking to men and learning their point of view."

"Of course," he said, perfectly naturally. "Men have to change."

"That's right," I echoed. "Of course."

Then he asked, "What did Maria Itatí say about me?" I suddenly felt like I was talking to a 14-year-old. "She really defends women," he said. "She always defends the woman."

A few minutes later I wandered over to Maria Itati and told her, "Jorge actually asked me what you said about him." She burst out laughing. "If he notices us talking about him, he'll die," I said. "Don't tell him I told you this or he'll never speak to me again." Now *I* felt like a 14-year-old. We had a great laugh.

A little later in a far more serious tone, I asked her and Graciela, "Is he really *that* machista?"

"Yes," they both said firmly. "He really is. He's really hard-headed."

Back in San Francisco Solano, Jorge had insisted he has both changed and washed diapers—"I have eleven kids!," he reminded me.

María Itatí and Norma laughed and said, "They never change a diaper. He's never changed a diaper." And speaking more generally, they insisted, "It's true, they really never do. And they don't take care of the kids. They may even stay home with them without taking care of them."

The march ended with tens of thousands of men and women belting out the Argentine national anthem, including the roving peanut vendor who stopped in our midst for those few minutes. When the anthem ended, the Solano folks began shouting, "Ar-gen-tina! Ar-gen-tina!" At first it sounded to me like a World Cup soccer chant. As it went on, although it may sound strange to say so, I felt as if they were crying out for the very survival of their country. Later, Argentino told me that for him, it was a call for unity, that in that moment what most salient was the common ground that unified the groups present in their various struggles.

"See How We Are Different?"

Jorge's comment about being peaceful and different echoed several remarks I heard out in San Francisco Solano. First, the FTV is a member of the CTA, which is expressly non-partisan in philosophy, identity and practice. Although the FTV's national leader, Luis D'Elía, has a seat in the provincial legislature belonging to a party called the *Frente Para El Cambio* (Front for Change), I was told that is his personal affiliation rather than the organization's.

(They told me that the FTV's political emphasis began to shift from land and housing to unemployment when Luis D'Elía emerged as a national figure in 2000.

He has been criticized by other *piquetero* groups for staying away from the Plaza de Mayo during the historic uprising of December 19 and 20, 2001 and the day after the deaths of Santillán and Kosteki. When I asked if they were happy with him, the room fell silent, though in other moments they defended these decisions.)

The CTA is an innovative and unusual labor confederation. Members include large, female-dominated unions such as those of teachers and public sector employees, plus some smaller and medium-sized unions such as those of aeronautic employees and sex workers. Members also include organizations of unemployed workers, civil-society organizations and individuals, whether independent or organized in neighborhoods.

One of the CTA's slogans has become "From the factory to the neighborhood," precisely because with so many factories closed, droves of workers are now at home. I believe their work with the unemployed is one of the principal reasons the CTA is unusual, visible and relevant.

Who decides when and where a *piquete* will take place? Generally, those decisions are made by the CTA governing board at the provincial level, where CTA-Solano used to have a representative. "Supposedly the local groups adhere to those decisions, since we are supposed to be a national group," said María Itatí.

Do you ever decide not to participate in a *piquete*? "Yes," she replied. "Our [local] governing board meets and decides whether or not to participate. Sometimes we say no because we are concerned about security or because we don't have the resources."

The CTA-Solano is very careful about what work activity is required of women who receive workfare positions. They spoke with disgust about organizations that send women who do not have a skill to sweep the streets (actually, I saw just that during my visit to the CCC in La Matanza). So if a woman does not have a profession or skill, she uses her 20 hours per week in training.

Many workfare recipients are required to work for the municipality or for local businesses. José Luis Mendoza, who was featured in MJF-7 (*Proving the World Bank's Gender Division Wrong: A Working-Class, Argentine House-Husband Bucks All the Stereotypes*), has a municipal job working in construction. The people in San Francisco Solano said this is exploitation, a subsidy for government and businesses, which also displaces other workers.)

In addition to setting themselves apart from other *piquetero* organizations, CTA-Solano even distinguishes itself from other CTA local branches. Jorge told me, "If you get to know the CTA in other places you will see that it is very different from here. The FTV-CTA [La] Matanza is not the same as the FTV-CTA-Solano."

Cristino added, "Their regional organization is more union-oriented. We don't have any unions in our organizations. We are very base-oriented."

Jorge added, laughing, "The only union here is the union of the unemployed." On a more serious note, he said, "It also has to do with our form of struggle, with the land settlements [meaning their invasion of the private lands that they turned into five neighborhoods]. We mark the difference, we know and we are grateful. If it hadn't been for the CTA I don't know if we would have come together. The CTA gave us the opportunity to join them and to develop our projects in the framework of the struggle we have taken forward."

Looking Into the Future

At one point I asked Cristino and Jorge how they visualize CTA-Solano's goal for the future. Jorge answered immediately: "To reindustrialize the country. There are many ways to do this." One of the workers at the local soup kitchen told me that if the government were willing to help with licenses and credit, there are small and medium-sized industries such as food production and processing that could begin functioning in Solano tomorrow. However, they compete with larger economic interests, he said, and as such are impeded by the government.

I asked Cristino and Jorge if they thought it possible to create the conditions necessary for reindustrialization under the current government or any of the political parties. In reply, the two of them wagged their heads no.

They then reminded me that at the end of last year—just before President De la Rúa fell from power on December 20—the CTA was an active participant in a popular vote organized by the non-partisan *Frente Nacional Contra la Pobreza* or National Front Against Poverty (FRENAPO). In just four days, FRENAPO mobilized three million Argentines across the country who voted overwhelmingly "Yes" to the creation of monthly unemployment insurance of $380 for heads of household, $60

Graciela and her son, Alejo.

for each of their children and $150 for senior citizens with no pension.

The CTA-Solano members are interested in how the CTA can capitalize on that vote, how they might organize those three million-plus Argentines who said "yes" to the FRENAPO's proposal. Many Argentines believe that the vote forced the government to create the current workfare plan of 150 LECOP per family per month. They reminded me that at one LECOP to one peso, this equals only about 40 dollars.

As we walked through San Francisco Solano, Cristino told me that the FTV and CTA were planning a series of meetings to decide their electoral strategy—a question that has the entire popular movement working to figure out how to respond, given changes in the political landscape in recent months. Coincidentally, seven days after the killings, President Duhalde announced that he was moving the presidential election up by six months to March 2003.

Echoing an earlier conversation, Cristino told me that it took 25 years to destroy the economy and the country (referring to free-market policies first implemented by the military dictatorship in 1976), and they expect it will take a long time to rebuild. They have started with workfare and emergency food aid because of an urgent need for both—countless families in Solano survive because of them—and because that is what they consider feasible.

"We are a long way from being able to do all we need and want to do," Cristino said. "We are starting out with our local organizing, which is hard and slow."

Argentino told me, "There is constant debate about how to define what we are fighting for, and about how to make the *Planes Trabajar* into an organizing tool, not just a handout. And how to recuperate dignity, how to make sure that those who receive the *Planes* don't feel like beggars. It's also a debate about the standpoint from which we make our demands: as workers, as unemployed workers, as *piqueteros*, or what?"

At the march, CTA-Solano's Ramón Charra steered me over to two of his teenage daughters, Elvia and Natalia, anxious for me to meet them. Back in San Francisco Solano, he had told me, "I try to do a political-social analysis at home with my family so that they won't say only, '*Papá* was in the CTA.' I want this work to continue, because it is going to be finished only by our kids, or our grandkids." ❑

(above) Ramón with his daughters.
(right) Ramón's grandson, Lautaro.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**
A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**
With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**
A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**
A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**
A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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