INTRODUCTION

Neo-liberalism has imposed itself as a paradigm of the world economy through geographically and historically uneven processes, producing changes in the social milieu and institutional frameworks of nations in different forms and at different times. These variations in national contexts, important as they are to explain differences for instance in terms of trade unions’ opposition or accommodation to the system, cannot be grasped without considering both the economic and political aspects of neo-liberalism. The generalised implementation of market oriented economic policies, the liberalisation of labour markets, the commodification of the former public sector through privatisation, and the financialisation of the economy, should not be seen then as just changes in the economic sphere but as parts of a more general political project. As Harvey (2005) has argued, this project, starting as a reaction to 1970s economic and social turmoil, aimed to re-establish conditions for capital accumulation and restoration of class power and involved both the creative destruction of institutions, social relations, work organisations and welfare systems and an hegemonic discourse, which legitimised market reforms as natural and common-sense.

Harvey’s analysis of neo-liberalism as a worldwide project aimed at rebalancing the class relationship and thus comprehending economic, political and ideological dimensions, seems particularly relevant in the case of Argentina, where since 1976 a combination of all these dimensions has appeared, responding to macroeconomic international variables, local political struggles and social conflicts. Three main neo-liberal phases can be identified. The liberalisation of the economy introduced by the military dictatorship of the period 1976–1983 the structural and fiscal adjustment policies that characterised the return to democracy in 1983–1989 and the massive programme of privatisations, public sector reform and labour flexibility implemented during the 1990s but opened by the economic terror of the hyperinflation of 1989–1990. Since the 2001 economic and political crisis, a neo-developmental and agricultural
commodities export oriented scheme has moved away from crude neo-liberalism, though not reversing the structural changes brought about by the previous decades (Basualdo 2006; Kosacoff 2010).

These phases have, in turn, differently affected workers and unions, which have alternated themselves between full and partial rejection, forced and pragmatic acceptance, complicit and explicit consensus, reflecting not just – within each of these phases – a variety of political and ideological approaches, but occasionally important differences between institutional and grassroot based responses (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 2009). However, as the chapter will show, this diversity does not allow for a clear cut distinction between different unions’ ideological stances toward neo-liberalism. These tactical oscillations and more in general unions’ politics in Argentina cannot, however, be fully comprehended without considering some distinctive institutional, political and organisational features, around which the activity of unions has been structured. In this respect a crucial aspect is represented by the history of Peronism, a union based political movement, which has marked the political landscape of the country since the mid-1940s.

Thus, in the following sections, the chapter will describe first what makes unionism peculiar in Argentina to show how each different phase of globally imposed neo-liberal reforms produced a series of responses from unions which, mixing pragmatism, ideology and politics, have allowed organisational survival when facing 35 years of neo-liberal policies as well as a renewed political role. However, looking at the devastating effects of neo-liberalism on the Argentinean working class, it is questionable the extent to which this success in the defence of the institutional role of trade unions really corresponded to better conditions for workers.

PERONISM, THE STATE AND THE UNION STRUCTURE

The rise of Colonel Juan Perón to power (1946–1955) represented a turning point in the history of Argentinean trade unionism, which as a result, became a major political actor with enough institutional power to mobilise workers at a political and industrial level. This new role was rooted in a political alliance based on redistributive policies, to reinforce the process of import substitution industrialisation and framed ideologically by the notion of social justice. By this alliance, the government was expected to favour workers’ economic and social demands and empower their unions; whereas the latter had to play a key role guaranteeing the social peace necessary for the country’s industrial development. Since that moment, the state played a central role in the system of industrial relations as the transformation of trade unions into the political constituency and structure of the Peronist movement was paralleled by legislation
regulating workers’ organisations and collective bargaining. This industrial relations context created periodic struggles to defend trade unions’ institutional autonomy from attempts to subordinate it to state regulations, political interference and party loyalties (Doyon 2006; James 1990).

First and foremost, the Peronist government regulated workers’ representation by giving legal recognition for the negotiation of collective agreements and representation of workers at the workplace or in courts (the so-called personería gremial) to just one organisation per industrial sector or economic activity. While generally strengthening trade unionism, this legislation conditioned workers’ freedom of association to decisions of the executive power, often putting unions at risk of losing their personería gremial. Besides this, legislation also regulated the arbitration and participation of public authorities, making this compulsory, as with the formal approval by the Ministry of Labour of new collective agreements or by enforcing mediation to conflicting parts (conciliación obligatoria) (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2009).

This rigid and politically dominated system of industrial relations has been historically supported by most, mainly Peronist, union leaders, as it was thought to be functional to reinforce the union bargaining position. Strategic coincidence about the advantages offered by such legislation has not precluded different views among Peronist unions in the face of changing circumstances. Thus informal and highly volatile alliances, known as nucleamientos sindicales, have often been formed, gathering trade unions according to political and tactical aims regarding industrial and governmental issues as well as leadership rivalries (Fernández 1998).

The legislative framework that empowered unions’ structures at national level however also corresponded to the expansion of shop steward structures (cuerpos de delegados and comisiones internas). These have historically challenged both managerial control over the labour process and working conditions and decisions taken by established leadership at central level, expressing workers’ concerns over the impact of economic and political reforms upon the workplace. Thus, in the history of labour unionism in Argentina, a threefold dynamic can be identified. On the one hand, the juridification of the system of industrial relations and the relationships between unions and the Peronist political movement has maintained a powerful and centralised union oligarchy, which often looks for government support and political exchange as means to its ends. On the other hand, scattered but vibrant grassroots’ worker mobilisations came to the fore time and again, often through the revitalisation of the comisiones internas, and frequently, in open confrontation with national or regional trade union leaderships (Basualdo 2009). Finally, unions’ power in Argentina rests also on the obras sociales, institutions under union management, which provide workers with health care and general social welfare schemes. Obras sociales have been a crucial source of financial and political
resources for unions since Peronism, and an axis of union political exchange with the state (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2009).

In sum, every attack to workers’ organisations during the three aforementioned neo-liberal phases entailed an attack to their legal and financial underpinnings and, until 1989, an attack to Peronism as well as an assault of comisiones internas, the grassroots sources of workers’ power (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 2009). This institutional and structural background should be kept in mind to explain the variety of trade unions reactions to neo-liberalism in Argentina.

NEO-LIBERALISM THROUGH REPRESSION: UNION OPPOSITION TO THE MILITARY REGIME

There is common agreement that the military putsch on 24 March 1976 was a turning point in the country’s economic and social history (Basualdo 2006). The climate of violence, terror and persecution brought about by the military regime in Argentina during the years 1976–1983 is well known, although much less, it is the price paid by workers’ delegates and unions’ activists (which represented 30 per cent of the disappeared). The physical repression of workers’ resistance, the control of unions, the anti-labour legislation and the overall attempt to increase productivity by imposing discipline and silencing dissent in the workplace, was the most visibly brutal side of a project that, by dissolving unions’ political and social power, wanted to entirely restructure the model of capital accumulation in Argentina (Palomino 2005). Indeed, the first historical encounter of Argentina with a fully fledged programme of neo-liberal economic reforms cannot be understood without linking the restructuring of the economy to the physical and associational destruction of the labour movement power (Peralta-Ramos 2007). In consequence, in considering this period, unions’ response to neo-liberalism should be seen as an attempt to defend workers’ historic conquests, their own organisational survival and the ideals of wealth redistribution as embodied in the Peronist ideology of social justice, within a more generalised struggle for democracy. This main response, however, did not avert that a small group of union leaders collaborated with the military rulers (Pozzi 1988).

On the economic front, pressured and justified by growing inflation, the military government introduced a series of fiscal, monetary and financial reforms, all made possible by the expansion of external debt, to liberalise the market, attract foreign investments and increase external competition. This meant the abandonment of the model of import substitution based on the development and protection of local industries that dominated the country’s economy for over 30 years. These policies caused de-industrialisation and
boosted capital concentration, determining an overall reduction in real salaries and worsening working conditions (Schvarzer 1996). On the legislative front, a series of decrees and acts suspended collective bargaining; changed the labour contract favouring employers; widened wage differentials; facilitated redundancies and layoffs; prohibited the right of strike (and other forms of workers’ direct action along with union activities in the workplaces); and paralysed the normal functioning of national and regional trade unions’ confederations (by controlling their finances and obras sociales) (Pozzi 1988).

This legal contraction of workers’ rights, disarticulation of trade unions’ organisational power, state repression and the use of this apparatus by employers to eliminate any form of dissent in the workplace, thus, went together with the contraction of employment in the industrial sector and the corresponding increase of outsourced, underpaid, informal work in the growing service sector (Chitarroni and Cimillo 2007). These economic and legislative factors, far from being mutually unintended consequences, represented a concerted attack on established workers’ rights and on the political power of the unions’ movement, which was seen as the cause of both the political revolutionary and economic turbulence that preceded the putsch.

How did workers react to the changes in employment conditions produced by the neo-liberal economic reforms? What sort of reaction was possible in a legally restrictive and repressive environment? At the level of national union coordination, with the Confederacion General del Trabajo (CGT) banned and most important unions under military control, their leaders jailed and in a context of extreme organisational difficulties, divisions emerged between confrontation and participation approaches. The former was more prone to actively oppose the regime and to give voice to the scattered but continuous local struggles, while the latter was more open to dialogue and negotiation. These two approaches operated in parallel over the course of the period through diverse nucleamientos sindicales. The Comisión de los 25 favoured a more confrontationist approach and led the call for general strikes in 1979 and 1981. These ended with hundreds of union officials and activists in jail but showed publicly their opposition to the government’s economic policy while at the same time claiming the enforcement of civil and political rights for detainee and missing union activists. On these occasions, the Comisión Nacional de Trabajo (CNT), which endorsed an apolitical and servicing unionism, was against the industrial action and in favour of promoting dialogue with military authorities. In 1981, both nucleamientos converged within the CGT but the internal struggles caused its division. The confrontationist CGT increased its mobilising capacity and organised two massive demonstrations. Then, with the military forces in retreat, there would be three more general strikes, with the involvement, in the last two, of the ‘participation’ wing of the union movement (Iñigo Carrera 2007). These mobilisations
framed the opposition to neo-liberalism together with the struggle for democracy.

Notwithstanding the importance of the national level in coordinating opposition, in evaluating union responses to neo-liberalism under the dictatorship, it is essential to take into account the level of militancy and grassroots activism (Pozzi 1988). Comisiones internas, union locals or simply informal, often clandestine, groups of workers, by defending their salaries and rights to work, constantly challenged the regime and its economic policies, contributing to the return of democracy. The legal prohibition of any forms of dissent, employers’ despotism and often their acceptance of military repression, left workers alone and at risk in their struggles against employers. Nevertheless, representing a recurrent trend in the history of Argentine unionism – that of the contradictory interaction between grass-roots mobilisations and central leaderships – workers scattered but continuous opposition strengthened coordination and representation at national level.

There is no doubt that the last military dictatorship has been very effective in reducing what was perceived as a too powerful labour movement. Systematic use of repression, physical elimination of militants and introduction of anti-labour legislation were all used to break worker and union resistance as these were seen as the main obstacle to the introduction of neo-liberal market reforms. By the end of the dictatorship, unions regained political freedom, but not power over employers. Without the support of a Peronist government and in an employment context that had changed consistently since 1976, unions remained divided, at least initially, on their approach to neo-liberalism. However, government attempts to use these divisions to reform their structure and the increasing influence of international financial institutions in defining the economic agenda of the country helped to characterise the first period after the return of democracy as one of intense labour conflict.

UNION REACTIONS TO STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENTS

Worker and union experiences of, and responses to, neo-liberalism during the 1980s are still under-researched compared to those of the 1990s and this is despite their distinctive character, which stemmed from the contradictions arising from unions’ broad opposition to neo-liberalism and their corporate and organisational interests (Pozzi and Schneider 1994). It was within this context that a few influential unions, grouped in the nucleamiento sindical Gestión y Trabajo, a continuation of the collaborationist CNT, began to advocate the need to accept change in industrial relations and accommodate their agendas to neo-liberalism, whereas most unions pursued a traditional path and advocated import substitution industrialisation policies. Thus the years
between 1983 and 1989, notwithstanding the apparently shared political rejection of neo-liberalism, witnessed the seeds of unions’ likely transformation in the face of changing circumstances. The return to democracy did not reverse the structural changes brought about by eight years of neo-liberal policies and military rule (Peralta-Ramos 2007). After a short attempt to reintroduce distributive policies, the government of Raúl Alfonsín (Partido Radical – PR) adopted, first, IMF recipes to stabilise the economy; and then, since the Baker Plan (1987), those of the World Bank to promote structural reforms. This meant the privatisation of public firms, free trade and deregulation. According to the government, the idea was to promote primary exports while restructuring the industry towards an export oriented model through market liberalisation (Basualdo 2006). Nevertheless, the development of neo-liberal reforms was uneven and piecemeal during the 1980s; in fact, most of them failed, partly due to inter-bourgeois conflicts, partly due to popular, and increasingly, trade unions’ resistance (Palomino 2005).

In the midst of recession, conflicts between agrarian and industrial interests and between local economic groups and external creditors doomed official economic initiatives to failure, making it difficult to deepen neo-liberal reforms. The only shared understanding of the ruling classes was the need to increase productivity (Peralta-Ramos 2007). Meanwhile, real wages and the labour income component of the GDP fell steadily. The worsening of the reproductive conditions of the labour force manifested itself in labour market indicators too, with the unemployment rate doubling in the first five years of the democratic government. In brief, the recovering of political and organisational rights for unions was paralleled by the continuing deterioration of the economic situation, which prevented workers from achieving meaningful changes in the relative balance of power with employers (Basualdo 2006).

The electoral defeat of Peronist Partido Justicialista (PJ) in 1983 further complicated the recovery of unions after the ending of military rule. Union leaders had played a central role in the presidential campaign and were blamed for the electoral failure of Peronism. As a result, many politicians within the party began to advocate its de-unionisation (Levitsky 2003). Divisions within the union movement exacerbated the problem; at the end of the dictatorship there were two CGTs and four nucleamientos sindicales, clear indicators of disorganisation and lack of strategic perspective. The PR attempted to take advantage of this situation and just a week after Raúl Alfonsín took office, the government sent a bill to reform unions’ organisational structures. While this was justified as an attempt to introduce a more democratic system of workers’ representation it aimed at the same time to undermine the historical support of trade unions for Peronism. The outcome would be, however, the opposite. Unions reorganised the CGT to face this new threat and to advocate the recovery of the institutions and legal basis of the industrial relations abolished by
the dictatorship. This regained unity strengthened the CGT, which by beginning to campaign against neo-liberal recipes gradually ended up leading the social opposition to the overall governmental policies. Between 1983 and 1989, the CGT called 13 general strikes. Most of them had as their main goal the rejection of government economic and social policies and wage increases. Indeed, some of these general strikes held explicitly anti-imperialist slogans and included mass demonstrations (Iñigo Carrera 2007). This widespread union opposition rested, however, on the defence of an inward-looking import-substitution industrialisation model, based on state intervention and distributive policies. This standpoint was majoritarian but, as usual, not unanimous among unions; moreover, within this orientation there were also tactic and strategic differences. A minority of unions, gathered in Gestión y Trabajo, even presented an alternative plan inspired by neo-liberal principles. This nucleamiento argued for the need to participate in the political system as an interest group subordinating union policies to the strategic definition of the ruling elites.

However, during this period of return to democracy, more important than some of the unions’ arguments in favour of a new, neo-liberal oriented system of industrial relations, was the reactivation of collective bargaining. While this certainly represented a gain in terms of contributing to re-balance power in favour of trade unions, it also opened the door to exchange wage increases for flexibility and productivity. Important unions like those representing the metal and automotive workers who were campaigning at that time against the market reforms as part of the CGT, left the space open for a de facto acceptance of neo-liberalism at the workplace by signing these sorts of agreements. At a different level, another sign of opposition to neo-liberal policies, which would gradually develop up to the point of division of the labour movement in the start of the 1990s, was the increasing militancy of public workers caused by the external debt-driven fiscal crisis which led to IMF and World Bank imposed adjustment policies for the public sector. Public sector workers were the prime victims and actively opposed the state reform and its consequences, with health workers, civil servants and teachers being the most active strikers (Pozzi and Schneider 1994; Villanueva 1994).

Finally, it is necessary to underline the ideological and political consequences of the hyperinflation processes that hit the economy between 1989 and 1990. Their disciplining effects prepared the terrain for making the population accept the need for a radical change in economic policy; indeed, this crisis helped too to overcome the resistance of the union movement. Thus, these events brought forward change at the political level and paved the way for a wide programme of reforms in which privatisation was decisive (Thwaites Rey 2003). It was in this critical context that the new Menem’s government, despite advocating industrialisation, distributive policies, and the
support of unions in the electoral campaign, passed the state reforms and the economic emergency laws which launched the political process of market reforms.

MASSIVE NEO-LIBERAL REFORMS OF THE 1990s

The period of 1989–1993 is crucial in the history of neo-liberalism in Argentina (Bonnet 2007). During these years, the agenda of the New Right was finally put into practice in full through furthering deregulation and market liberalisation, and a set of specific policies: fiscal bonuses to attract multinational investments, anti-inflationary monetary policies, reduction of public employees, cutting public expenditures, privatisation of social security services and labour flexibility. One of the pillars of the programme was the Convertibility Plan introduced in 1991. By fixing the peso to the US dollar, this policy stopped hyperinflation, produced stability and market confidence and created consensus among bourgeois parties and state bureaucracies. However, the decisive policy was the privatisation of public companies. Between 1990 and 1993 the Peronist government launched a fast and massive privatisation programme, technically and financially assisted by the IMF and World Bank. In four years, the government sold 34 companies and let concessions for 19 services and 86 areas for petroleum development. It was one of the broadest and most rapid privatisation programmes in the Western hemisphere (Ghigliani 2010).

The programme was accompanied by an ideological campaign against public sector unions. They were blamed for maximising salaries and benefits for themselves, at the cost of service quality and economic efficiency, and generally at a cost to consumers. Indeed, the need to curb the power of public unions was a topic included in the agenda of public debates of that time. Accordingly, public enterprises underwent significant change prior to privatisation to modify their collective agreements and systems of industrial relations and to break unions’ capacity to obstruct the managerial decisions of the future private owners. To that aim, a horde of consultants paid with the World Bank loans were personally involved in negotiations with managers, union officers, and authorities. Negotiations soon gave way to imposition as the government suspended 718 clauses from the collective agreements previously reached by unions with 13 public enterprises. By 1993, there had already been 280,509 job losses in the public sector, with a cost to the state of $2,035m in voluntary redundancy packages, again financially supported by the World Bank (Ghigliani 2010).

So, how did unions respond to this attack? To begin with, as the Partido Justicialista (PJ) was the historical channel by which the government was
accessed and its favour gained by unions, the implementation of these policies required to deep the redefinition of the relation between the state, the party and unions. In this sense, unions continued to lose influence within the PJ and, therefore, the Parliament (Levitsky 2003). Nevertheless, direct confrontation of a Peronist government implied the risk of political isolation and, more importantly, breakage of the historical alliance that had provided unions with political resources and had served their corporatist interests well so far. Once again, strategic differences led to a new division between those union leaders wanting to confront this departure from the classic legacy of Peronism (the CGT-Azopardo) and those who supported the government (the CGT-San Martín). In turn, the government repressed by force every attempt to oppose privatisation, such as the resistance by telephone (1990–1991) and railway workers (1991–1992), and restricted by decree the right to strike in public services and utilities (Pozzi and Schneider 1994). Moreover, it decided to cut off wage increases to prevent a new inflationary crisis, and issued in 1991 a decree linking rises in wages to productivity growth. Unions opposed this decision, arguing that it limited actors’ autonomy in collective bargaining, but its consequences were much deeper. The decrees impacted on the whole structure of collective bargaining by forcing unions to negotiate wages at firm level and to take into account differentials in productivity between companies. They also constrained corporative strategies by precluding demands for governmental wage polices. Thus unions were obliged to discuss with employers how to increase productivity and concede changes in the labour process that they had previously resisted. In 1993, another decree would formalise bargaining at enterprise level and during 1995–2000, 90 per cent of collective agreements of this kind facilitated labour flexibility (Ghigliani 2010).

In the face of governmental determination to further the neo-liberal turn, hesitative unions declined to form part of the opposition, and the CGT once more unified its ranks in 1992 and aligned itself with the Government. The subordination of the CGT to Menemism, and hence, to neo-liberalism ended up, however, in a new and more serious division of the labour movement. In 1992 the Congreso de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) was created, mainly by public workers’ unions, and two years later declared itself as an alternative workers’ central. Also, in 1994 another split in the CGT led to the creation of the Movimiento de los Trabajadores Argentinos (MTA) with the aim of recovering the tradition of Peronism to oppose the neo-liberal agenda. These three workers’ organisations corresponded, broadly, to three different responses to neo-liberalism over the 1990s (Fernández 1997).

The CGT gathered those unions (or union leaders) supporting Menem’s reforms in return for business concessions. However, during this Peronist government’s first term in office (1989–1995), only eight out of 20 legislative projects to reform labour laws were passed in the parliament. In order to
introduce change, the government was forced to give exchange protection and financial support to the obras sociales, and permit unions to invest in the new business opportunities brought about by the privatisation of public enterprises and deregulation of social services. This entrepreneurial unionism was discursively legitimised as a strategy to maintain union structures and services to members in an economic and political context in which modernisation of union politics was deemed to be inevitable (Murillo 2001). Thus these unions collaborated actively in the introduction of neo-liberalism.

In turn, the CTA intended to depart from the traditional model embodied by the CGT, advocating independence from the state and from the PJ. The organisation has demanded personería gremial since its conception (which has been denied by the Ministry of Labour so far), while promoting a pluralist model of representation. Organisationally, the CTA has developed new forms such as a territorial body for the unemployed, individual affiliation of workers, direct ballots for all union posts, membership among workers from cooperatives and promotion of the organisation of disadvantaged groups. In this way, the CTA became a main actor in the mobilisation against the neo-liberal agenda during the 1990s, seeking coalition building with social movements and political organisations, and enriched the traditional repertoire of the labour movement (Armelino 2004). The formation of the MTA was more a tactic following the traditional divisions of the union movement in nucleamientos sindicales, than a proper project to build an alternative to the CGT. Its rationale can be found in the internal struggle of the CGT regarding how to react in the face of Menemism. The MTA advocated the opposition to governmental policies based on the national and popular traditions of Peronism (Fernández 1997). This internal struggle ended in 2000 after the electoral defeat of the PJ, with the effective division, once more, of the CGT into a dialogue-oriented CGT (CGT Dialoguista) and a more combative CGT (CGT Rebelde); the latter built upon the MTA faction.

Despite a general union retreat, if measured by number of conflicts, this period witnessed bitter and active popular resistance. In the privatised public industries, the processes of rationalisation and the closure of production sites led to job loss and strong workforce opposition. When company restructuring impacted areas of the country dependent on one productive sector (metallurgy, oil extraction, sugar cane plantations, among others), resistance translated into broader mobilisations involving rebellions of civil society as a whole, as in the case of the communities of Villa Constitución (Santa Fe), Cutral Có and Plaza Huincul (Neuquén), and Tartagal and General Mosconi (Salta). In all these conflicts, unions played a secondary role. The leading force, instead, were the piqueteros, whose organisations gradually occupied the centre stage of the social mobilisation against neo-liberalism. By the end of Menem’s second presidency, however, union opposition grew, with four general strikes called
by all components of the labour movement in an attempt to block government efforts to further undermine unions’ position in collective bargaining. Yet the success of these demonstrations, while it saved union prerogatives, neither changed flexibility at workplace level, already recognised by the *Acuerdo Marco*, nor negated the thrust of neo-liberal reforms.

**REVITALISATION OF UNIONISM AFTER THE 2001 CRISIS?**

The popular upheaval of December 2001 led to changes to the neo-liberal model dominating in the country. Angered by the consequences of a downward spiral of economic recession that started in 1998 and that further worsened the unemployment and precariousness generated by the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s, ordinary people and social movements occupied the streets of Buenos Aires and other major cities demanding political and economic changes. In the space of a few days, five different presidents alternated in power and important reforms were finally made to rescue the country from financial default. The end of convertibility and currency devaluation, together with positive conditions in the global agro-commodities market, gave room for a recovery of the economy (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007). Since 2003, the average annual growth rate has oscillated between eight and 95 per cent, except for 2009 when the GDP shrunk to 0.9% due to the global crisis. This positive context and governmental policies towards a more traditional, consensual system of industrial relations, functional to social stability, have certainly contributed to the revitalisation of unions’ politics and mobilisation. However, in order to evaluate unions’ politics in the current period, it is important to re-emphasise how more than 30 years of market reforms have profoundly changed the structure of employment in Argentina. On one hand, following international patterns, this has now shifted from industry to services and from big to small enterprises. On the other hand, precariousness, outsourcing, flexibility, and informality have become structural components of the employment system (Chitarroni and Cimillo 2007). This situation has objectively weakened the numerical and social basis of unionism, widening the gap between protected and unprotected workers.

Yet, the current positive economic trend manifested in the corresponding growth of employment, particularly in the private industrial sector (Kosacoff 2010). This has been important for unions first to keep control of labour intensive and historically strategic sectors of the economy (automotive, foods, transport, telecommunication, energy) and, second, to use this renewed strength to obtain concessions and wage increases taking advantage of growing capitalist profitability. Thus, through collective bargaining and industrial
conflict, workers, particularly those employed in the private sector, have been able to partly recover the value of their real salaries. The other aspect that explains the recently renewed political importance of unions in influencing the employment relations agenda is represented by the explicit government’s support and alliance with the more traditionally Peronist sections of the labour movement. This has been expressed in various ways since the election of the Peronist Néstor Kirchner. First, by encouraging collective bargaining at national and plant level and by summoning after ten years of inactivity the Consejo del Salario Mínimo, Vital y Móvil, a tripartite body that aims to spread social dialogue among different actors and to fix the minimum wage. Second, by an initial tolerance to social protests, particularly labour conflicts, although this approach has gradually changed since 2005. Since then, in the face of intense labour conflicts or grassroots defiance to the power of either or both employers and conservative union leaderships, repression and criminalisation of workers’ protests have been commonplace in several services and industries, public or private (undergrounds, teachers, health workers, fishing, wood, textile industry, food, railways, among others). Third, by favouring reunification of the CGT in 2004. By this time, the new leadership of the CGT, composed of those opposing neo-liberalism over 1990s through the MTA, backed the government’s departure from neo-liberalism, advocating a return to the traditional Peronist project of industrialisation with social justice and wealth redistribution. Governmental support in turn empowered traditional Peronist union leaders against the unemployed led social mobilisation and the mounting rank and file pressure for wage recovery after the crisis of 2001–2002. In parallel with the reunification of the CGT, the governments of Néstor Kirchner and then Cristina Fernández de Kirchner denied the personería gremial to the rival CTA. Thus, the CGT has sided with the government against the bitter opposition from landowners, economic corporations and political parties advocating a return to more liberal policies (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007).

Whether one considers the combination of these economic and political factors as part of an explicit neo-corporatist project that sees the institutional insertion of unions from strategic sectors of the economy a condition for stability (Etchemendy and Collier 2007), or as a part of the government’s attempt to gain hegemonic control over the broader process of social mobilisation launched by the crisis of 2001–2002 (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007), the concrete result has been a widespread increase of union-led mobilisations. However, these have differed in scope, nature and duration, with workers alternatively contesting or accepting, in exchange for wage increases, the neo-liberal changes imposed in the structure and conditions of employment over the last 30 years. Thus, the case of unions’ resistance to neo-liberalism should once again be seen in the light of the distinction between unions as institutions and as movement (Cohen 2006).
Many would point to the fact that the Argentinean union movement has recently recovered strength, especially if compared with those in countries like Chile that went through similar processes of market reforms and liberalisation. While this is certainly true for the aforementioned reasons, questions arise about the true nature of this strength and its prospects. In this sense, it is important to underline that so far, the more radical breaks with neo-liberal imposed flexibility and precariousness in the workplace came from the renewed activity of *comisiones internas* and not from the top-down corporatist approach. Even though scant, these cases have been important for setting a precedent not just in terms of their concrete demands but also for re-opening in Argentina the debate about democracy in organising workers and representativeness, an issue crucial to any union movement future. For instance, struggles against temporary contracts in the telecommunication companies and railways, outsourcing of services in the Buenos Aires underground, the implementation of the 12-hour shift in Kraft Foods and many other conflicts mainly driven by wage increases and working conditions like those of Fate rubber tyre plant, Maffisa (textile), Stani and Pepsico (food), Parmalat (milk), Paty and Tango Meat (meat), Praxair (chemistry), among others, are just some of the most well-known examples of episodes in which workplace based organisations have been able to lead important industrial action built on democratic principles of representation and participation (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007). While there have also been cases of struggles for union recognition in previously union-free sectors, as with SIMECA (an independent union affiliated to the CTA that organises workers in the delivery sector) or UTC (that represents Bolivians in the *maquila* type textile small workshop of Buenos Aires), the main processes of mobilisation were driven by *comisiones internas*, often in tension, and sometimes in open confrontation, with central union leaderships.

All these grassroots movements share some basic features. To begin with, most of them took advantage of the rise in collective bargaining to organise their workplaces. The majority of their leaders are young and without previous union involvement, though many have passed through experiences of high turnover. In all these conflicts, leftwing activists have played a leading role through grassroots mechanisms of decision-making and intense participation and when conflicts turned bitter, workers resorted to direct action and violence. A few of these conflicts ended up changing workers’ representatives at the workplace and even unions’ local structures (Ghigliani and Schneider 2010). The salient case being underground workers, whose conflicts with the leadership of the national union forced the shop steward structure to lead a breakaway, which ended up successfully gaining partial official recognition to their new union after acute struggles. Although many of these experiences failed to maintain the organisation in the face of the concerted attack from employers, union oligarchies and public authorities, they have constituted the
main workers’ attempt to reverse some of the most devastating aspects of the neo-liberal agenda. At the same time, they contributed to open a public, though fleeting, debate about unions’ organisational models and democracy.

Notwithstanding the importance of these bottom-up movements, traditional union leaderships have ended up conducting the majority of conflicts in the recent context of economic growth. This contributed to the partial recovery of real wages but did not threaten neo-liberal established standards in the employment relationship as shown by the contents of collective agreements, which have not seriously challenged flexibility. At the same time, this process of collective bargaining reinforced the legitimacy and the economic resources of national leaderships, which obtained the re-introduction of the employers’ financial contributions and benefited from a percentage of the wage increases reached in negotiations. In turn, the CTA has insisted in his mobilising tactics to get recognition and broaden its presence in manufacturing and services but with little success, as shown by the failure to obtain the personería gremial. In this sense, the CTA has not been able to replicate its successful mobilising policies of the 1990s, which played an important role in the popular resistance to market reforms and translated in a sustained organisational growth. On the contrary, the emergence of the so-called kirchnerismo, whose human right, economic and social policies have gradually gained popular support, put the organisation into crisis as an internal faction began to claim a closer relationship to the Peronist national government leading the workers central to virtual rupture. Similarly, the kirchnerismo also impacted on the CGT, where a breakaway of former supporters of market reforms ended up in a third, though smaller organisation, the CGT Azul y Blanca, which has sided with those Peronist politicians, who have decided to break with the government adding their support to the opposition parties.

In sum, the main challenges to neo-liberalism from trade unions since the crisis of 2001 have found two different sources in Argentina. On the one side, an institutional revision of the traditional tactics of Peronist unions in alliance to the Peronist Government of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, which partially contested the heritage of the market reforms of the 1990s. On the other side, a more fundamental and frontal opposition arisen from those scarce but important events of grassroots activism, which are still too weak to anticipate a real alternative to traditional unionism in the near future.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of the last 35 years of union and worker responses to the implementation of neo-liberal reforms in Argentina cannot be univocally interpreted
nor easily framed within pre-defined categories. This is partly a problem related to the inner nature of unions, intermediary organisations trapped within class, market and societies (Hyman 2001), and it is also a matter of the particular history of Argentinean unionism. Moreover, unions’ responses have changed over time according to different phases, methods and political conditions through which neo-liberalism developed and consolidated in the country. In conservative environments, neo-liberalism has often been associated with progressive ideas about globalisation and the potential benefits that this can produce for unions willing to support and invest in companies’ competitiveness. This ideological mutual gain agenda, however, has never been assumed by unions in Argentina. Even when the accommodation to globalisation and market reforms prevailed, political pragmatism seems to have informed the actions of the bigger unions more than ideologies. During 1990s, the CGT continued to launch strong criticisms of the worst effects of market reforms and liberalisation, claiming the need for state protection. Meanwhile the CTA, breaking away from the CGT, built its distinctive character on an open opposition to neo-liberalism, advocating redistributive policies and social movement strategies. But despite the CGT’s connivance with neo-liberal reforms, unions have generally opposed corporate globalisation and the structural adjustments imposed by local ruling classes and international financial institutions. This has been particularly evident in the 1980s but resumed its strength at the end of the 1990s and in coincidence with the 2001 crisis, and has been based on wide popular support.

However, this opposition has not been framed in social democracy as an alternative but, mainly, in the Peronist ideology of social justice, redistribution and national sovereignty. This, more specifically, implied not just state protection against the unbalances produced by a liberalised market but also the building of institutional forms of exchange with the state. The Peronist identity of most union leaderships, their close association with the fate of Peronist governments and, thus, the power they can exert on state structure to gain advantages might then be considered as one of the main axis of analysis of unions’ reaction to neo-liberalism in Argentina. Yet, opposition to neo-liberalism has been the product of grassroots as much as top down workers’ mobilisations and of open resistance to capitalist globalisation as much as of institutional forms of exchange with the state. *Comisiones internas*, local union branches and other workplace based organisations have led some of the most radical actions against some of the most severe effects of neo-liberalism on employment security and income. This opposition has also counteracted opportunistic tendencies within unions, encouraging more democratic forms of representation and leadership accountability. It is in these grassroots actions and organisations that the seeds of a more fundamental opposition and anti-capitalist ideology can be found.
The unions’ responses, then, have not been uniform, and have produced groupings and temporary alliances more than unity within the labour movement. Indeed, they have heavily depended on the more pragmatic, ideological or politically driven motivations leading the strategy of each union. This lack of unity should not be a surprise, however, if neo-liberalism is seen as both a political and economic project directed to rebalance class relations. Neo-liberalism has destroyed many workers’ economic lives by creating unemployment, flexibility and precariousness, and its inception in Argentina as in many other countries has also been associated with the physical destruction of the labour movement power and its institutions. The imposed consensus of the military government was later to be substituted by the financial imposition dominating the structural adjustments of the 1980s and the massive reforms of the 1990s. Following global trends, the imposition of neo-liberal orthodoxy has produced de-industrialisation, de-centralisation of collective bargaining, reduction of the formal sector and labour market flexibility, which have undermined not just the role of unions as progressive social forces but also their own institutional survival. Judging from these outcomes, and notwithstanding workers’ resistance and oppositions to neo-liberal policies, the conclusion is that 35 years of market reforms have brought seriously into question the ability of unions as institutions to resist change and channel effectively the bottom-up grievances and collective mobilisations that the model of accumulation associated with global neo-liberalism constantly reproduces. As recent developments seem to suggest, the reconstruction of a political dimension in unions’ activity, which is fundamental to any future resistance of the labour movement to changes associated with globalisation, parallels processes of democratic participation, decision making and accountability of the unions to their members. Whether or not traditional unions in Argentina will be able to move in this direction will strongly depend on abandoning a reformist and corporatist approach in the defence of workers’ interests.

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