

LOBATO, Mirta Zaida and Juan SURIANO (eds.), 2014, *La sociedad del trabajo. Las instituciones laborales en la Argentina (1900-1955)*, Buenos Aires, Edhasa. 368 pp.

One of the main elements of the rhetoric of the first Peronist government was the presentation of labor policies developed by Colonel Perón himself during his period as head of the Secretariat of Labor and Welfare (STyP; 1943-1945) as the starting point of labor legislation in Argentina, marking a contrast with an earlier stage that had been dominated by a complete lack of interest in state intervention in the workplace. *La sociedad del trabajo. Las instituciones laborales en la Argentina (1900-1955)*, compiled by Mirta Lobato and Juan Suriano and recently published by Edhasa in Buenos Aires, questions this interpretation. The volume includes a dozen papers by Argentine historians, who have been working for several years on a set of studies on Argentine labor institutions during the first half of the twentieth century. The result is a book that contributes to our understanding of how Argentine labor policies evolved and how state agencies implemented them for several decades before Peron came to power.

The volume begins and ends with articles by Mirta Lobato and Juan Suriano, respectively, which provide a general characterization of the perspective that guided the researchers. The compilers state that the purpose of the book is to "analyze the process of formation, evolution and transformation of the state agencies related to the world of work in Argentina"\* (p. 9). Suriano and Lobato emphasize that between 1905 and 1943, forty-three national regulatory labor laws were enacted and an entire set of national and provincial institutions were created for the task of managing, in the face of limitations to varying degrees, their regulation and compliance. In this context, the overall objective of the book is to emphasize the importance of the National Department of Labor (DNT), created in 1907, that, according to the authors, "laid the foundations of modern labor policies in Argentina"† (p. 343).

Returning to a debate between Juan Suriano and Eduardo Zimmerman, the book highlights the role played by the struggle of the workers as a determining factor when analyzing the emergence of new approaches to social issues. Indeed, the authors argue that "social conflict thus appears as a motivating or triggering factor in the formulation of social policies by governments." From a perspective based on the work of Theda Skocpol, they note that "once these policies were implemented, which included the establishment of specialized institutions, organizationally coherent collectives of government employees started to

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\* Translation by *Apuntes*.

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be created and attempted to promote social policies in a relatively independent manner" (p. 11). In fact, a certain tension between the two elements can be perceived throughout the entire book, and the question of the "relative autonomy" of the state looms over the contributions of the different authors in one way or another. In the end, Suriano and Lobato conclude that, with the creation of the DNT, "forms of scientific-administrative intervention commenced," whose main characteristics were "the relative autonomy of governments and interest groups, the production of scientific knowledge about labor conditions and its publication, incentives for the organization of provincial departments, the training of specialists and experts, as well as specialized office [...] and [the] promotion of labor law and justice"<sup>†</sup>(p. 343).

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, written by Lobato and Suriano, the book consists of twelve articles that are divided into three sections. The first deals with the intervention of state agencies in relation to labor unrest through three case studies: Silvana Palermo examines the role of the DNT in the railway conflicts, and, in particular, the strike of 1917; Alejandra Landaburu analyzes the actions of the Tucuman Provincial Department of Labor during the strike in that province in 1919; and Laura Caruso takes a more long range view, analyzing state intervention in maritime disputes in the period from 1890 to 1920. Through the analyses of different episodes of class struggle, this section has the merit of relating the evolution of state agencies with the dynamics of conflict within the labor movement itself. Caruso states explicitly that "the underlying content of this government action was based on the need to ensure the reproduction of social domination and the capitalist character of the state and of Argentine society"<sup>§</sup>(p. 106).

The second section is devoted to examining the development of labor institutions in four provinces. With the exception of the article by Mariana Garzón Rogé on Mendoza, which covers the period from 1916 to 1943, the rest of the articles focus on the 1930s. In addition to the case of Mendoza, this section includes studies of the development of labor organizations in Tucuman by María Ullivarri; in Cordoba by María José Ortiz Bergia; and in Santa Fe by Susana Piazzesi. These articles contribute to an understanding of the development of state institutions in the interior of the country, a subject relatively less studied than the DNT and its activity in the city of Buenos Aires. Taken together, this research shows that labor organizations were steadily being established in different provinces, but that they also had to face a whole set of obstacles related to employer resistance, which took advantage of the lack of legal clarity regarding the competence of these institutions to enforce the national legislation in the provincial territories.

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<sup>†</sup> All translations of quotations in this paragraph by *Apuntes*.

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The last section of the book is perhaps the most heterogeneous and is entitled "Towards the Transformation of Labor Policies." \*\* It brings together five articles that address different aspects of labor policy and how it changed after the crisis of 1930. Mariela Rubinzal examines the influence of anti-liberal and nationalist thinking on DNT officials after the Uriburu coup. Hernán González Bollo analyzes the DNT Statistics Division and its transformation during the 1940s, when it became an important part of the state apparatus that was in charge of economic interventionism. Maria Paula Luciani, entering the Peronist period, examines the history of José María Freire, who took over as head of the STyP in 1946 and became the first minister of labor following the creation of this portfolio in 1949. The remaining two articles address relatively unrelated subjects: Karina Ramacciotti focuses the application of the "Work-related Accidents Law" between 1915 and 1955; and Enrique Mases addresses the relationship of the STyP with the indigenous world of northern Patagonia.

While the chronological period in the title of the book stretches to 1955, the bulk of the volume concentrates on the period before 1943. As noted above, the book's most important contribution is to a questioning of the rhetoric of officials in Peron's government and of Peron himself, who sought to erase "the previous process of building labor policies" and attempted to present the STyP as a kind of "foundational" institution, as the initiator of "the era of social justice in Argentina" (p. 43). The authors acknowledge, however, that the changes that were implemented after 1943 "were qualitatively and quantitatively significant," in part because "the policy implemented by the secretariat until mid-1946 was based on a political practice facilitated by the characteristics of a government that resulted from a military coup" †† (p. 44). It is, however, a subject that receives less attention in this book. Hopefully, future research by this group of authors will throw more light on the following period.

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