

Public Policies and Companies Recovered by their Workers in Argentina. Analysis of the Worker Self-Management Program, 2004–2012

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Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between the companies recovered by their workers in Argentina and the state during the last decade through an analysis of the evolution of Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security policies regarding these self-management experiences. A central conclusion of this study is that Argentine governments since 2003, after the serious social, political, and economic crises resulting from the systematic application of neoliberal policies, had to progressively incorporate the various forms of self-organization that were created and consolidated by social movements such as the recovered companies.

Keywords: Workers' management; state; public policy; market.

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Acronyms

CIFRA	Research and Training Center of the Republic of Argentina (Centro de Investigación y Formación de la República Argentina)
ERT	Worker-recovered enterprises
FACTA	Argentine Federation of Self-Management Cooperatives (Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajadores Autogestionados)
INAES	National Institute of Associativism and Social Economy (Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social)
INDEC	National Institute of Statistics and Census (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos)
MNER	National Movement for Recovered Enterprises (Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas)

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of de-industrialization in Argentina began during the last civil-military dictatorship (1976-1983) as a result of policies implemented primarily by its first Minister of the Economy, José Alberto Martínez de Hoz. In the 1990s and the first two years of the 21st century, these neoliberal policies were continued, leading to an unprecedented political, social, economic, and financial crisis. As a result, in 2001, the unemployment rate of the economically active population reached 25%.

In these circumstances, workers in many provinces of Argentina began to fight to recover enterprises that were on the verge of bankruptcy. These efforts included taking their facilities by force or blocking entrances with the cooperation of human rights groups, organizations of the unemployed, university students, alternative media, and leftist political parties, among others. The objective was to stop the owners from removing machinery or closing down the factories for good. The legal and organizational option chosen by the workers to reinstate production at these enterprises was the creation of work cooperatives.

Fifteen years have gone by since the first recoveries of enterprises: between 1999 and 2004, 161 were recovered, employing a total of 6,900 workers around the country. Currently, there are more than 311. These are primarily small and medium-sized businesses, with an average of 40 workers. The main branches of industry include: metallurgy (20%), food (13%), printing (10%), textiles (9%), gastronomy (5%), food (7%), and construction (5%). It is important to note that between 2005 and 2013, 149 enterprises were recovered (Programa Facultad Abierta 2013). This number is significant because this was a period of sustained economic growth in Argentina. Thus, recovery by workers is not only a tool of political struggle used during periods of extreme economic crisis (such as that in 1999-2003) but also a methodology that has become part of the repertoire of working class struggles unconnected to particular conjunctures.

The relationship between worker-recovered enterprises (ERT) and the state has not received in-depth attention in the specialized literature, even though a massive number of research studies were produced in a period close to the beginning of these experiences. In the studies that do analyze this relationship (Rebón 2004, 2007; Deux Marzi and Escobedo 2005; Fernández 2006; Gracia and Cavaliere 2007; Salgado 2012), the focus is primarily on the role of the state during the 1990s (which the studies characterize as being responsible for the de-industrialization undergone by Argentina), or on the responses of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government during the years of crisis (1999-2003). Other studies (Cafardo and Domínguez Font 2003; Rebón 2004; Fajn 2003; Magnani 2003; Heller 2004) analyze the debate between those who proposed the creation of autonomous

cooperatives and others who promoted the nationalization of factories under worker control. This was an initial debate that was quickly left behind when cooperativism began to predominate.

This set of research studies, however, does not take into account the new policies that were developed by the successive governments that came to power after 2003 (Néstor Kirchner 2003–2007; Cristina Fernández de Kirchner 2007–2011 and 2011–2015). In some cases this was because the studies were published before 2003, and in others, because they neglected the importance of analyzing new government policies that incorporated the recovery of enterprises and worker self-management as basic tools for the development of employment and social assistance policies.

A small number of studies that have treated this problematic in more detail (Allegro *et al.* 2007; Hudson 2009, 2011; Programa Facultad Abierta 2010, 2013) concentrated on how these new modes of management were implemented through specific programs, marking a significant break with the policies of previous administrations. Allegro *et al.* (2007: 7) describe this new orientation of public policies as follows: "Thus it was that the administration of the government of [Néstor] Kirchner designed a political strategy oriented towards the promotion of 'forms of association and self-management work', discursively constructed in opposition to the targeted and 'assistencialist' policies of the 1990s."¹ The Programa Facultad Abierta, specialized in the study of recovered enterprises, described the policies of the state in the period 2004–2010 as follows:

[...] the provision of subsidies to the ERT by the central government began to increase. Both the ministries of Labor and Social Development as well as INAES² (which intervened only marginally until the middle of the decade despite being the authority in charge of the implementation of cooperatives) developed a more active policy [...]. Thus, 85% of the ERT surveyed stated that they had received some type of state support.³ (Programa Facultad Abierta 2010: 70)

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1. Translation by *Apuntes*.
 2. The National Institute of Associativism and Social Economy (Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social) is part of the national Ministry of Social Development. It is charged with legislating, controlling, and promoting the social economy in relation to cooperative and mutual-benefit societies. It provides government oversight and its principal functions include: requiring the provision of the documentation it deems necessary, carrying out investigations and inspections of cooperatives, calling assemblies ex-officio, attending assemblies, assuring strict adherence to laws, authorizing the operation of cooperatives, providing technical assistance and advice, providing economic and financial support and promoting cooperative development.
 3. Translation by *Apuntes*.

In recent years, more and more publications have appeared that analyze the links established between the government and the social movements during the period of Kirchnerism that played a leading role in resisting neoliberalism. These studies can be divided into those that reduce this link to cooptation and subordination (Svampa 2003, 2005; Svampa and Pereyra 2004; Zibechi 2008; Fornillo 2009; Massetti 2009) and those that find there to have been decline and demobilization with a decrease in autonomy resulting from the re-legitimization of the state as a regulator of social action (Rajland and Campione 2006; Pereyra *et al.* 2008); there have also been many studies that find an impasse in the political radicalism of social organizations as new forms of governance developed on the national and regional levels (Colectivo Situaciones 2009).

When summarizing these varying perspectives, we find they have one thing in common: the upsurge of conflicts between the autonomy of social movements and the new role of the state after 2003. Maristella Svampa's studies have created a forceful image of prompt cooptation and institutionalization of social organizations by the state. Images of this type ignore the ambivalence and tensions that have characterized these new links between movements and the state since 2003, at the same time as they ignore the fact that the construction of alliances with a government does not signify the immediate and irremediable loss of a position that is autonomous and questioning. Except in theoretical terms, autonomy is not necessarily constituted, like a dogma, apart from government policies. There are many examples of movements that joined the state administration during Kirchnerism, but broke with it when they disagreed on policies or, at least, conveyed serious criticisms publicly.

The objective of this article is to determine, on the basis of a case study, the effects on the functioning of the ERT prompted by the creation by strategic offices of the national government of specific programs designed to establish policies for this sector. The analysis focuses on the tension between the affirmation of worker autonomy and the process of government institutionalization.⁴ At the same time, I will explore transformations in the management methods put into practice by national governments from 2003 to 2013 as a result of this close link constructed with the ERT.

While the state is made up of three branches – executive, legislative, and judicial – that have a direct impact on the functioning of the ERT, in this study I will analyze those policies designed by the executive on the national level. To this end, I will study a specific case: the Worker Self-Management Program (Programa de Trabajo Autogestionado) created by the

4. For a theoretical analysis of this tension see Hudson (2010).

Ministry of Labor, Employment, and Social Security (hereafter: Ministry of Labor) in 2004. Its creation was substantiated as follows:

The Worker Self-Management Program was created as a concrete response to diverse demands for support received from former employees of enterprises and factories involved in processes of recovery of manufacturing plants and workplaces. [...] From the beginning, we maintained contact with organizations that bring together enterprises and factories as well as with workers that contact us personally with the purpose of structuring a program that meets the demands and needs of those involved.⁵ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2004b)

Using documents and internal reports prepared by this program at the end of the years 2004, 2007, 2010, and 2013, I will analyze two main themes: the evolution of its lines of action and the financial resources transferred to the ERT during the period 2004–2012; and second, the variations in those targeted by the program during this period. I will explore two hypotheses. The first is that the Argentine state's adoption of worker self-management was a strategic tool for the creation of employment and social inclusion after the economic and labor crisis at the beginning of the century. The second hypothesis is that the new forms of governance initiated in 2003 discovered in the non-governmental networks constructed in 1995–2003 a vast arsenal of knowledge and collective practices that were developed through the self-organization of large sectors of the population during what was a very serious economic and social crisis. In this sense, the principal plans regarding employment implemented by the state between 2004 and 2013 were based on worker self-management and cooperative models similar to those adopted by social organizations during the period of struggle referred to above.

2. NEW FORMS OF GOVERNANCE AND AUTONOMOUS SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The cycle of struggles of grassroots social movements in Argentina – and in most of the countries of this region – during the 1990s and the first two years of the 21st century created ruptures in the neoliberal paradigm of management that had prevailed (in the Argentine case) until the beginning of that decade. The incorporation of the fundamental criticisms and demands emerging from the repertoire of struggles undertaken by organizations of the unemployed, the ERT, human rights organizations, indigenous movements, sexual minorities, and the alternative media, among others, generated what would be called new forms of governance in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador,

5. Translation by *Apuntes*.

to cite the most emblematic cases. In this article, I will employ the definition of the "new governance" provided by the Colectivo Situaciones:

It was created by the irruption of social dynamics that questioned the legitimacy of pure and hard neoliberalism and the later ascension to power of the "progressive governments" of the Southern Cone. The characters of these governments were determined, in varying forms and degrees, by the repercussions of the new social protagonism in the alteration of the purely neoliberal regime of government. [...]t was the dismissive power of these movements that impugned and led to the crisis of the financial arrangements, the subordinate social assistance, the unlimited expropriation of resources and consolidated racisms [...] and that which permitted, in one way or another, the accession to power of "progressive" governments. The new governance is the result of the combination of these dynamics.⁶ (Colectivo Situaciones 2009: 18)

We complement this definition with the description of the new governance by Raúl Zibechi:

Waves of social activism modified power relations in Latin America and had as an indirect consequence the installation of a set of progressive and leftist governments in most South American countries. Collective action put an end to the neoliberal period characterized by privatizations, deregulation, and the opening up of economies, and introduced a more complex period in which elements of the same model coexist with the search for paths based on a greater role for states and the construction of regional integration.⁷ (Zibechi 2010: 33)

In the case of the ERT, during the years when the first cases emerged (between 1999 and 2002), the workers presented strong demands and organized mobilizations in front of government agencies in order to receive legal and political recognition for their new projects. It was tiring work due to the general incomprehension that prevailed, but also because of the repudiation by these social actors whose struggle questioned, in the midst of a profound social, political, economic, institutional crisis, the basis of the capitalist system: private property.

During the assemblies of the National Movement of Recovered Enterprises (Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas, MNER), Rosario Region (Hudson 2009, 2011), I took note of the how the workers were incorporating what they were learning regarding everything related to the functioning and intricate internal dynamics of public agencies. If anything was clear, it was that the ministries, offices, and secretariats did not coordinate with each

6. Translation by *Apuntes*.

7. Translation by *Apuntes*.

other and did not act in a homogeneous manner. Indeed, it was only after intense efforts to obtain legal support and subsidies that workers were able to identify the specific areas within a municipality or a provincial or national ministry that provided some type of minimum openness to the sector and also to differentiate, within each area, the personnel with whom some formalities had already been successfully accomplished. This learning was socialized along with all the different experiences the MNER had accumulated in its first period of existence. The presidents and secretaries were in charge of seeking political support and, primarily, obtaining subsidies that permitted them to reconstruct the bankrupt productive units. The few positive responses received depended exclusively on the willingness of individual officials or legislators.

The mass appearance of new ERT and the intensification of protests and pressures resulted, starting in 2004, in a greater openness on the part of the national government.⁸ However, this was not an exception made for the case of the ERT. The strong popular resistance to the market economy in the period 1995-2003 resulted in a crisis of the capacity of the Argentine government to regulate and control social order. The largest social disturbances took place in December 2001, with mass marches in the streets that led to the resignation of four presidents in just one week. Starting in 2003, when Néstor Kirchner became president, the government reinvented itself in order to guarantee governability. This opening up and flexibility became evident in the new links that were constructed with the once antagonistic social movements (of the unemployed, human rights, recovered enterprises, etc.) that had confronted and delegitimized neoliberalism.

In the specific case of the ERT, the principal transformations were evident in the creation of teams and programs to implement public policies for this sector. The first result was a proliferation of channels of communication that did not previously exist. Secondly, it was the officials themselves who went out to obtain an overview of these workers' cooperatives. This is the description provided by the first document issued in 2004 by the Worker Self-Management Program:

A large part of the work carried out during these months consisted in identifying and contacting workers in each of the recovered enterprises and factories, with the purpose of informing them of the Program. From the beginning, we thought

8. It is worth noting the case of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, a pioneer in providing subsidies and political recognition through its legislature to cooperatives created by workers within its jurisdiction. However, this policy came to an end in 2007 when engineer Mauricio Macri became mayor. For an analysis of these transformations, see Programa Facultad Abierta (2010); this is a program of the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, Secretaría de Investigación and Secretaría de Extensión Universitaria.

it was very important that the lines of action were made known directly and homogeneously to all the E/FR [Recovered Enterprises and Factories], as a way of democratizing information and access to the resources available from the Program.⁹ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2004b)

From then on, a permanent flow of communication and visits by officials to factories was initiated. This is how an MNER activist in the city of Rosario described this process:

During the first years, we practically didn't receive anything from the state. We had to use part of my salary to support the factories. Now the years have gone by and luckily the national government I think has changed things a lot. And it is visible, because the Ministry of Labor created a special program for self-managed enterprises which works very well. There you meet people who come and get to know each of the enterprises, understand their problems, know the names of the workers, they help you implement programs, they change them according to the needs that they find in each particular case. There are second and third line officials that are really there and get in touch with us and start to work with you to put together what you need. At the same time, as this question underlines, it also has to be said that there are not a lot of funds in this ministry. We need much more. But, in another way, when it comes to management, you call the Program officials and they come and in two days they are seated with us and they help you put it together. What's important is that they create space for our participation in the shaping of the programs. They modify them according to our opinions and concrete requests and try to find a way that they can help and support factories in a more concrete way.¹⁰ (Hudson 2011: 60)

This account highlights two simultaneous processes that constitute a break with the forms of state management existing before 2003: the creation of channels of direct communication with the workers; and the preparation of diagnostics, programs, and projects aiming at the protagonism of workers. In a complementary manner, the Worker Self-Management Program created a register of the ERT existing in the country, beginning an exhaustive investigation: "[...] to identify and qualify the production and workers' units targeted by the Program, it is necessary to create a register of Productive Units Self-Managed by Workers."¹¹ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2004b)

Ten years have passed since the first programs targeting the ERT were created. Thus it is now time to analyze, using this specific case, the details of the complex link between

9. Translation by *Apuntes*.

10. Translation by *Apuntes*.

11. Translation by *Apuntes*.

these self-management experiences and the new forms of governance promoted by the central government.

3. THE STATE AND SELF-MANAGEMENT IN THE MARKET

Resolution 203 approved by the Ministry of Labor on March 26, 2004, laid down the explicit objectives of the new program, consistent with a context that was still close to the crisis that had destabilized the country for 13 years running: "The Worker Self-Management Program has as its objective to contribute to the generation of new sources of employment and/or the maintenance of existing jobs, through the promotion and strengthening of productive units, of both goods and services, self-managed by workers."¹² (Ministerio de Trabajo 2004b)

The first data compilation confirmed the existence of 180 ERT, which included 10,000 workers. The principal purpose of the program was the creation of minimum conditions for these experiences, which were mostly precarious from a legal, financial, commercial, and infrastructural standpoint, so that they could insert themselves into their respective markets.¹³ Thus, it was made clear that: "Progressively, the interest is in creating the conditions that make these types of projects sustainable legally, productively, and economically."¹⁴ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2007)

According to statistical data from official documents, agreements were signed whose purpose was, first, to complement the meager distribution of earnings among the members of the cooperatives (the complementary 150 pesos for each worker was eliminated); second, to provide subsidies to strengthen the weakest dimensions: acquisition of raw materials, equipment repair, reconditioning of infrastructure, targeted technical assistance, and support for commercialization. The amount assigned for this second type of subsidy in 2004 amounted to the equivalent of 500 pesos per worker, although 50,000 pesos was fixed as the maximum amount for each cooperative, even if it had more than 100 registered workers.

At the end of 2004, 28 agreements had been signed with 29 ERT; this represented 16% of the total number of enterprises registered on the national level. The amount spent on line item I (economic support for individuals) was 714,150 pesos (62% of the total) while the amount spent on line item II, which included strengthening of infrastructure, acquisition of inputs and machinery, and the design of business plans, totaled 446,000 pesos (38%).

12. Translation by *Apuntes*.

13. The word "market" is used here to refer to those economic, financial, and commercial scenarios (with their specific actors and logics) in which the ERT operate.

14. Translation by *Apuntes*.

At the end of the first year, the total transferred to the ERT was 1,160,150 pesos. There was an underutilization of 39% since the total amount budgeted was 2,982,429 pesos.

Two aspects need to be highlighted: first, the program was created for enterprises that had already been recovered (something that would change in future years) with the objective of preserving 10,000 jobs generated by the workers in a situation when there was 12% unemployment, according to INDEC (National Institute of Statistics and Census) at the end of 2004; and second, the state intended to intervene in key areas so that the cooperatives could sustain and increase their productive capacity and commercialize products in their respective markets, but at the same time it made clear its limitations when it came to regulating them. The end of the first report prepared by the program is very clear about the narrow scope of state intervention in this area:

We currently observe that the sectors that benefited from the economic situation, especially those related to the substitution of imports or with possibilities for export, constitute a more propitious framework for the development of some types of production units. For example, the metallurgical, textile, and footwear industries in the first category and the refrigeration industry, manufacturers of machinery, and the chemical industry in the second. Nevertheless, we found an economic situation that was very susceptible to international interests that can introduce variations in macroeconomic behavior in such a way that what was stated in the previous paragraph can lead to an uncertain scenario.¹⁵ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2004b)

The uncertainty, the constant variability, and the arbitrary conditions imposed by principal economic actors are essential characteristics of markets that combine local and international variables. Thus, after the workers ceased to be subject to the discipline of management, from the first day that they reinitiated production they had to face new types of control and discipline of which they had no prior knowledge. Full internal autonomy soon found itself limited by an economic, commercial, and financial context regulated by the neoliberal economy. We can hypothetically state that government support such as that provided by the Ministry of Labor, rather than distancing the ERT from these mercantile logics, was intended to stabilize the minimal conditions that would permit them to survive within scenarios characterized by permanent instability. The market, in such a situation, can remain indifferent regarding greater state intervention, insofar as the latter collaborates in reinstating the ERT into scenarios whose rules of the game are determined and regulated by the market. In relation to this, it is worth quoting the president of an ERT in Rosario that produces industrial cutting tools:

15. Translation by *Apuntes*.

We are doing better with the government. We have advanced considerably. The nation collaborates a lot with factories. They have already given us various important subsidies in social development and labor. But, afterwards, the market is difficult. It changes too quickly and you have to be very watchful and sometimes perform a balancing act. Because everything that is financing, even if it's government aid, which has been important, still costs us a lot. This is what happened to us: the central government gave us a subsidy – 130,000 pesos – to buy raw materials, which are our main problem. The thing is that just then we were hit by an international crisis, sales fell and we ended up using it all. Or what happened to us with a client from Chaco from whom we bought a large amount of raw materials, something like 70,000 pesos. Well, the thing is that the job that we bought this large quantity for disappeared from one day to another. The reason we lost it is that the same blade started to be imported at a lower cost. What the client paid practically for the complete blade was what we paid for the material. And then the Brazilians start to make a blade of another size or of another shape and it costs you a lot to build a machine capable of making these changes.^{16,17}

The conclusions of the program's officials and also of the activists and workers makes it clear that this new closer relationship with the government is relevant but, at the same time, limited. The government itself admits to its limitations in intervening in markets that are extremely sensitive to international variables. For their part, workers state that they suffer from constant variations in the rules of the game, whether due to products innovations introduced in increasingly shorter periods of time, accelerating production times as a result of the technological capacity of leading brands, whether subject to aggressive commercialization through product saturation or through sudden withdrawal, as happens, for example, in the market for fresh pasta or dairy products that I researched for eight years.

4. SELF-MANAGEMENT AS A MODEL OF STATE MANAGEMENT

A new report of the Worker Self-Management Program prepared at the end of 2007 includes a first definition of what an ERT is from the perspective of the Argentine government:

A "self-managed enterprise" is understood as a model of organization in which economic activities are combined with ownership and/or availability of capital goods and labor, with democratic participation in its management by its members. This model promotes the cooperation of all the workers in productive activities, administrative services, with decision-making power regarding the integral management of the enterprise.¹⁸ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2007)

16. Translation by *Apuntes*.

17. Interview in Rosario, September 7, 2011.

18. Translation by *Apuntes*.

A survey of cooperatives shows that the number of cases went from 180 in 2004 to 203 in 2007, not including the eight enterprises that closed their doors. In this second phase, the program decided to help 100 ERT, although it set a number of indispensable requirements for approving agreements:

The number of workers varies between 6 and 100; annual sales are less than US\$ 5 million; legal personality granted in the form of a work cooperative or commercial society, in whichever of its forms, with majority worker participation; self-management demonstrated by statutes, office holders, and internal regulations, preferably with financial balance sheets approved in terms of time and form by the appropriate entities; or accredited inscriptions in the case of the first year of operation; ongoing productive activities and/or services; and a percentage that is no less than 30% of the total number of worker members who can demonstrate a labor trajectory or continuity in the exercise of their skills or trades, with at least 6 months in the area of activity of the self-managed enterprise.¹⁹ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2007)

The imposition of these types of requirements created significant limitations for experiences such as the ERT, which generally had a precarious existence. That same year there was another inclusion, which constituted an indispensable preamble to a turnaround that was built upon in the following years: the goal of systematizing and disseminating information about successful experiences so that they could be "applied and replicated on the national and regional levels"²⁰ (Programa de Trabajo Autogestionado 2007). In order to fulfill this new objective, activities were initiated whose purpose was the compilation, systematization, and analysis of different experiences, together with the organization of workshops, seminars to promote good practices, and events intended to promote the development of shared activities among the enterprises.

Before continuing, it is worth reiterating the second hypothesis: the new forms of governance initiated starting in 2003 discovered in the non-governmental networks constructed in 1995-2003 a vast arsenal of knowledge and collective practices that developed through the self-organization of large sectors of the population during the very serious crisis in Argentina. Currently, a set of employment and social inclusion plans implemented by the state are based on forms of self-management and cooperatives that are similar to those established by social organizations in the period 1995-2003 (Gago 2014; Forni and Castronuevo 2014; Allegrone *et al.* 2007; SRNEC 2013).

19. Translation by *Apuntes*.

20. Translation by *Apuntes*.

This was not, of course, a passive incorporation of discourses and tools developed by social movements. In the case of the ERT, their more radical creations and innovations were translated into a technical language, typical of governments. This is how these issues are analyzed by the Programa Facultad Abierta:

Despite recognizing the importance and quality of some programs, public policy activities aimed at the ERT continue to be dispersed among different organs of state, they continue not to be considered economic nor production policy but rather as social or labor policy [...]. Even the meager funds for teaching or training workers continue to ignore the particularities of self-managed work and in particular, of recovered enterprises, adopting approaches targeted at classic cooperativism, the so-called social economy, and, as part of this, the promotion of "entrepreneurship" and microenterprises, something which at this point it is not necessary to explain are phenomena that are completely different than the recovery of enterprises by workers.²¹ (Programa Facultad Abierta 2013)

In the same vein, Allegrone *et al.* (2007: 5) point out the importance of reflecting on the "disputes around the concept of 'self-management' that come into play when relations between policies and social programs and the workers' collectives of recovered factories/enterprises are analyzed [...] noting the risks of considering self-management as a mere administrative technique."²²

At the end of 2007, an analysis began of the possibility of incorporating other actors that did not come from recovery processes, provided that they fitted the model of associative self-management (Ministerio de Trabajo 2010). One immediate antecedent of this state openness occurred in December 2006 with the creation of the Argentine Federation of Cooperatives of Self-Management Workers (Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajadores Autogestionados, FACTA), as a result of the breakup of MNER.²³ The principal innovation of this new sectoral movement was precisely the incorporation of other types of cooperatives and microenterprises that had not come into existence following an occupation and recovery process. The new opening up proposed by FACTA proves one hypothesis: the

21. Translation by *Apuntes*.

22. Translation by *Apuntes*.

23. MNER, founded in 2001, was the sectoral movement that included the largest number of recovered enterprises in the country. Its breakup in 2006 was the result of a terminal crisis among the principal leaders of the movement. One of the reasons for this internal conflict were differences in viewpoints on the political cycle that started in 2003 when Néstor Kirchner became president. For the sector that founded FACTA, it was fundamentally important to maintain autonomy but within the framework of an active and systematic relationship with these new forms of governance, which, according to them, favored worker self-management. Other leaders argued for a more critical and combative position and a more distant relationship with the state. In any case, as indicated previously, there were also other factors that intensified the internal power struggles but which are beyond the scope of this paper.

promotion of autonomous initiatives by workers came first and then these tools were incorporated by the state.

At the end of 2007, transferences to the ERT totaled 5,982,347 pesos, a considerably higher amount than in 2004 (1,160,150 pesos).²⁴ The program's lines of action remained similar: line I, economic aid to individual workers was the priority: 3,910,500 pesos (65%); line II included funds for productive investment (inputs, equipment, and infrastructure), the total reached 2,071,847 pesos (35%). The number of productive enterprises helped or with which there were agreements was 127, accounting for a total of 6,859 workers.

During that year, new actions involving promotion and diffusion were also carried out, such as the organization of the 1st Latin American ERT Exposition (1 Exposición de ERT) and later, the 2nd National Exposition of Enterprises and Factories Recovered by Workers (II Exposición Nacional de Empresas y Fábricas Recuperadas por los Trabajadores) as well as the presentation of a new line of action whose goal was to provide assistance in the areas of hygiene and security.

5. STATE TRANSLATION OF AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE

The promotion by the state or, even, by international organizations (the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, etc.) of associationism as a strategy of inclusion of popular sectors was already a constant in Argentina before 2003, primarily during the 1990s. In the words of Maristella Svampa:

[What the state] calls for from the world of popular sectors is not individual self-regulation (this is not possible, because of the lack of material support) but rather community self-organization. It is thus not uncommon for international bodies to support and promote the development of local community networks, previously seen as archaic remnants or obstacles to modernization and development.²⁵ (Svampa 2003: 6)

From Svampa's perspective (2003: 6), this promotion of community self-organization advocated by "a neoliberal state develops bio-political control of the poor population. Oriented as a strategy to control social conflict and poverty, its objective is to integrate

24. According to studies by the Centro de Investigación y Formación de la República Argentina (CIFRA), the percentages for each year during this period were: 2004: 4.4%; 2005: 9.7%; 2006: 10.3%; 2007: 18.3%; 2008: 27%; 2009: 14.6%; 2010: 23%; 2011: 23.4%; 2012: 24.2% (CIFRA 2015). This growth has to be understood by taking into account the high rate of inflation in Argentina in 2004–2012.

25. Translation by *Apuntes*.

the excluded as such."²⁶ From this point of view, the goal of these proposals is actually a manipulation from above that results in cooptation. Although I agree that the immediate antecedent of the promotion of cooperativism among popular sectors can be found in the 1990s, my perspective is the opposite of that argued by Svampa. This is basically because when I refer to workers or to members of popular sectors, I consider them as active populations, capable of the strategic use of resources and state plans without abandoning a critical and autonomous position. In concrete political practice, autonomy does not necessarily exclude a link with the state, insofar as this relationship tends to strengthen the capacity for self-managed work (in economic, productive, and legal terms).

I also do not think that the problem can be reduced to the state incorporating the inventions of workers and translating them into bureaucratic language. On the contrary, it is a virtue that its organizational forms, at least partially, have been institutionalized by official bodies, to the extent that this reflects their strength and importance. The questions at issue, in any case, are centered on whether the enterprises recovered by workers have been capable of making progress in the construction of their own political frameworks with the objective of making effective use of the public policies that have been promoted since 2004 but without delaying or stopping the creation of new discourses, projects, and autonomous organizational strategies (I will return to this issue later). My eight years of fieldwork on the ERT and sectoral movements allows me to affirm that since the beginning, most workers that participated in sectoral movements experienced serious difficulties, and this made it more difficult to achieve better articulation among the cooperatives. Currently, real links between the ERT have resumed through actions of solidarity at critical junctures (evictions or unfavorable decisions in legal cases involving business owners) while the promotion of larger projects (cooperative banks, health insurances, collective purchase of inputs, etc.) that were planned during the crisis years has been discontinued.

In 2010, a report prepared by the Ministry of Labor described a fundamental change: the incorporation of self-management as a management model beyond just the ERT. It stated that:

In view of this heterogeneous universe and experiences which meant that during the crisis and the first post-crisis years, the Ministry of Labor would play a role in developing social policy that provides responses to projects of unemployed workers that were clearly developed as alternatives in the midst of the crisis, the current challenge consists of assimilating the concept of "self-managed work in associative form" as an "alternative in the world of work."²⁷ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2010)

26. Translation by *Apuntes*.

27. Translation by *Apuntes*.

The agreements were no longer limited to the ERT but also included new actors (social organizations involved in the promotion of regional economies), sectoral value chains, and environmental employment with the development of innovative technologies that are part of the social economy. The same was true in the establishment of cooperatives in the construction sector, made up of beneficiaries of social programs and promoted by the Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment, and Services and other central government institutions. Thus, the program to promote self-management was formulated as an essential policy for the creation of employment:

[...] the policy based on employment as a pivotal element in the lives of citizens and the economic destiny of the country requires incorporating the consolidation of processes in which workers are protagonists: self-employment, entrepreneurship, and associative self-managed work, into the challenge of "full employment" for Argentina today and in the future.²⁸ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2010)

In 2010, 422 productive units were added to the list of beneficiaries, of which 280 were ERT and the rest were cooperative enterprises that were not the result of recovery. The total number of workers rose to 16,400, 71% of which were in the ERT and the remaining 29% in non-recovered enterprises. The total funds transferred after the signing of the agreements was 46,408,300 pesos. This number represents a marked increase when compared with the total amounts in preceding years. Distribution was carried out through already existing and recently created lines of action: line I, economic assistance to individuals: 37,992,600 pesos, distributed among 313 enterprises and 10,682 workers; line II, technical and economic assistance to improve productive capacity: 3,833,100 pesos distributed among 69 enterprises, reaching a total of 3,043 workers; line III, technical and economic assistance to improve competitiveness: 929,600 pesos; line IV, technical and economic assistance and training to improve management capacities in productive units: 763,000 pesos, distributed among 9 enterprises in 2010, with a further 3,675,000 pesos committed for the future; finally, line V, assistance in the area of hygiene and security: 2,890,000 pesos distributed among 34 enterprises, with 10,625,000 pesos committed for the future.²⁹

On July 3, 2012, the Ministry of Labor issued a decree that formalized the income in the cooperative experiences program that did not arise from the recovery of enterprises:

28. Translation by *Apuntes*.

29. The final figures for transfers as well as underutilization in the period 2004–2012 are provided in the appendix.

Implement, in the framework of the Worker Self-Management Program, an integral assistance scheme targeted at self-managed productive units that are not the product of a process of recovery of enterprises whose principal economic activity is targeted at the private sector of the economy. [...] Access to the integral assistance scheme implemented in this measure will be provided for productive self-management units that [...] meet the following conditions: 1) they must possess juridical personhood; 2) have up to thirty (30) associated workers; 3) be registered in the national register of agents of local development and social economy of the Ministry of Social Development and/or the Federal Administration of Public Income; 4) certify a minimum prior operation of six (6) months; 5) be the size of a microenterprise, according the parameters established by Resolution n° 24 of February 15, 2001, of the then secretariat of the small and medium-size enterprises and its modifications; 6) generate individual monthly incomes for the associated workers of below the adjustable minimum living wage.³⁰ (Ministerio de Trabajo 2013)

Towards the end of 2013, the number of self-managed enterprises that were not in the recovered category had grown larger than the number of ERT (the sector because of which the area had been created). Of a total of 786 productive units catalogued, 468 (60%) no longer were products of recovery processes and 318 were ERT. At the same time, a process that already featured in the 2010 annual report became relevant: the change from policies targeting individual productive units to ones promoting sectors or branches of industry, such as textiles, leather, meat, and the media. Evidence of this is the organization of national conferences for sectoral debate in 2010, 2011, and 2013.³¹ In addition, specific agreements were signed to strengthen these sectors. This promotion of productive sectors fits in with a minority tendency within the current ERT movements. This is the case with the creation of the Cooperative Printing Network (Red Gráfica Cooperativa), the Network of Metallurgical Cooperatives (Red de Cooperativas Metalúrgicas), the Cooperative Textile Network (Red Textil Cooperativa) and the Federation of Organizations Producers of Foodstuffs (Federación de Organizaciones Productoras de Alimentos).

At the same time that the state incorporated self-management and even the recovery of enterprises into its own management methods, the last eight years indicate that there has

30. Translation by *Apuntes*.

31. On August 5 and 6, 2010, the Ministry of Labor organized the 1st National Day of Sectoral Debate for Self-Managed Textile and Leather Enterprises (I Jornada Nacional de Debate Sectorial de Empresas Autogestionadas Textiles y del Cuero) in the city of Buenos Aires; the following year, on April 14, 2011, the 2nd National Day of Sectoral Debate for Self-Managed Meat and Leather Enterprises (II Jornada Nacional de Debate Sectorial de Empresas Autogestionadas de la Carne y el Cuero) was held; and finally, on July 27, 2013, for the third consecutive year, the 3rd Day of Sectoral Debate for Self-Managed Media (III Jornada Nacional de Debate Sectorial de Medios de Comunicación Autogestionados) took place.

been a marked decrease in the development of the different ERT movements. This does not mean that they have disappeared but rather that they have not been able to make progress in the creation of a minimum set of their own institutions capable of creating a networked sector that is more enduring and complex. This limitation does not permit the cooperatives to design more beneficial strategies for links established with markets. The creation of an autonomous institutional network could allow them to free themselves in important ways from the imperatives of the market or at least to deal with these by employing a sectoral strategy; the same would be the case of financial dependence on the state, which could diminish. At different times during the last 15 years, inside these movements (especially in the MNER) the following possibilities were discussed: establishing cooperative banks, carrying out social works, setting up their own marketing centers, creating spaces for educational training, and establishing productive chains with other social movements. But none of these ideas were implemented for a variety of reasons that are outside the scope of this article. These omissions were in large part substituted by state projects such as those that promoted the Worker Self-Management Program.

6. FINAL REFLECTIONS

In July 2014, the auto parts company Visteon announced that it would close its factory in the municipality of Quilmes, in the province of Buenos Aires, resulting in the loss of 240 jobs. In response, the Metallurgical Workers Union (Unión Obrera Metalúrgica), the city government, the Ministry of Labor, and the Ministry of Production came to an agreement within the framework of the initiation of the Crisis Prevention Procedure (Procedimiento Preventivo de Crisis): the union and the municipality of Quilmes would take charge of running the auto parts factory together with the workers organized in a cooperative. At the same time, the Ministry of Labor announced that it would hold educational and labor training workshops at the factory.

These types of alternatives promoted by the state itself, in cooperation with unions, municipalities, and ERT movements, have become common in recent years. This is in contrast to the consternation and repudiation provoked by the first enterprise takeovers.³² We can establish a counterpoint in relation to the judicial branch and the legislative branch, two branches of the government that are far from supporting workers when it comes to the crucial difficulties that they have to face in relation to the ownership of property; but it is

32. Other recent cases include the intervention of the Ministry of Labor in the conflict at the refrigeration plant in Huinca Renanco, in the province of Cordoba, with the objective of promoting worker self-management or the same types of alternatives proposed by this same ministry in the case of the recent effort to close RR Donnelley's printing plant in the province of Buenos Aires.

undeniable that in the executive branch there is progressive acceptance and incorporation of recovery and self-management of enterprises as two viable alternatives for solutions to processes involving terminal crises of productive units.

Based on the analysis of the lines of action put in place by the Worker Self-Management Program, we have verified a decisive step: an area that was created exclusively to create links and establish policies to consolidate the ERT, within a few years, created a strategic opening to the beneficiaries including endeavors that did not originate in recoveries, which quickly grew in number and caught up with and surpassed the ERT. Worker self-management became a tool that necessarily had to be incorporated by central governments to create work and social inclusion. This was not a circumstantial decision, taken amidst a crisis, but rather the result of a thorough investigation carried out by officials and professionals at the Ministry of Labor over a decade. To this end, periodic surveys were carried out, permanent channels for dialogue were established, other governmental entities – such as universities – were asked for assistance in producing specific knowledge, and national and international conferences were organized, among other initiatives. Through these investigative efforts, a conceptual body of knowledge regarding these self-management processes was constructed by the state. It is worth noting in this context, that the language of the state regarding the ERT eliminated its more radical political positions: the questioning of private poverty, denunciations of the partiality of the judicial branch in the resolution of worker conflicts, the complicity of unions in asset stripping of factories, denunciations of labor reforms that favored businesspeople, etc. But even with these mitigating factors, we have to stress that the Ministry of Labor had to transform itself into a specialist in ERT in order to incorporate their principal forms of self-organization into its own public policies regarding employment and social inclusion.

Government discourses since 2003 tend to reduce the popular protests in December 2001 to an economic, social, and institutional disaster that ravaged the Argentine population. This rhetoric, in effect, hides the high level of self-organization achieved by a multiplicity of social movements in a period characterized by historic levels of unemployment, poverty, and misery. Measures taken by the state in the period from 2003–2014 nevertheless had to be based on these very same non-government cooperative networks which were effectively consolidated on the social sphere. One key example should be mentioned, which involves the movements of the unemployed and the ERT: the principal social plans have now stopped being considered as short-term economic support for the unemployed and have been transformed into financing for collective forms of employment and cooperatives, similar to those established by social organizations over the last 20 years.

The analysis of public policies in this article reveals an ambiguous relationship with markets. On the one hand, the state has intervened to stabilize the ERT (strengthening strategic dimensions through subsidies), so that they could reinsert themselves in commercial circuits; but, on the other hand, it has shown signs of impotence in terms of its capacity to regulate the conditions of commercialization. The documents issued by the program admit that this is the case. One conclusion regarding this matter: the persistent crisis facing the recovered enterprise movements since 2006 leaves each cooperative to navigate the tumultuous waters of the market by itself. Without their own autonomous institutional network, each of the cooperatives suffers the controls and the daily disciplinary process imposed by mercantile logics.

It is also necessary to point out that, as specific figures demonstrate, the major part of the subsidies are allocated to compensate for the low level of income that each worker in the ERT receives, with a large decline in the sums assigned for technological modernization or productive reconversion.

Fifteen years have gone by since the recovery of enterprises in Argentina. During this period, the brilliant capacity for self-management demonstrated by the workers (only 3% experienced another bankruptcy) has created a path not only for each factory that owners try to shut down but also for the state itself as it considers its social policies.

APPENDIX

The breakdown of the final figures as per the reports of the Worker Self-Management Program issued by the Ministry of Labor is provided below. The classification is according to the year each report was issued and not by each year, because of the limitations of the statistical analyses carried out by the ministry.

Line I

Economic aid to individuals. The purpose of this line is to provide support in the initial phase of activities or when critical situations arise that affect jobs and/or the normal operation of productive activities (Table 1).

Table 1
Economic aid to individuals (line 1), 2004–2013 (in Argentine pesos)

Year of Report	Amount allocated	Amount spent
2004	950,703	714,150
2007	3,910,500	3,910,500
2010	49,854,000	49,854,000
2013	119,462,550	119,462,550
Total	174,177,753	173,941,200

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo (2004a, 2007, 2010, 2013).

Line II

Technical and economic support to improve productive capacity. The purpose of this line is to contribute to strengthening the productive units during the implementation phase and/or during the consolidation of productive processes (Table 2).

Table 2
Technical and economic support for the improvement of productive capacity (line II), 2004–2013 (in Argentine pesos)

Year of Report	Amount allocated	Amount spent
2004	2,031,726	446,000
2007	2,071,847	2,071,847
2010	4,753,327	4,753,327
2013	14,080,192	14,080,192
Total	22,937,092	21,351,366

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo (2004a, 2007, 2010, 2013).

Line III

Technical and economic support for improved competitiveness. Carried out through co-financing of very small scale investment projects for capital goods and/or capital goods with associated work capital and/or reconditioning of infrastructure and installations. This was listed as a separate line of action starting with the 2010 report (Table 3).

Table 3
Technical and economic support for the improvement of competitiveness (line III), 2010 and 2013 (in Argentine pesos)

Year of Report	Amount allocated	Amount spent
2010	1,068,700	1,068,700
2013	1,868,650	1,868,650
Total	2,937,350	2,937,350

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo (2010, 2013).

Line IV³³

Technical assistance and training to improve the management capacity of productive units. Listed as a line of action separate from the first two starting with the 2010 report (Table 4).

Table 4
Technical assistance and training to improve the management capacity of productive units (line IV), 2010 and 2013 (in Argentine pesos)

Year of Report	Amount allocated	Amount spent
2010	3,675,000	763,000
2013	ND	1,670,399
Total	3,675,00	2,433,399

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo (2010, 2013).

Line V

Assistance for hygiene and security in the workplace. Listed as a separate line of action starting with the report for 2010 (Table 5).

33. Not broken down by periods due to lack of available information at the Ministry of Labor.

34. Not broken down by periods due to lack of available information at the Ministry of Labor.

Table 5
Assistance for hygiene and security in the workplace (line V), 2010 and 2013 (in Argentine pesos)

Year of Report	Amount allocated	Amount spent
2010	10,625,000	2,890,000
2013	ND	3,479,491
Total	10,625,000	6,369,491

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo (2010, 2013).

Table 6 summarizes the information in tables 1-5.

Table 6
Summary in numbers, by lines, 2004-2012 (in Argentine pesos and quantities)

Line	Amount	Number of enterprises receiving assistance	Number of Workers
I	173,941,200	716	10,682
II	21,351,366	319	3,043
III	2,937,350	12	ND
IV	2,433,399	197	ND
V	6,369,491	44	ND
Total	207,032,806	1,288	ND

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo (2004a, 2007, 2010, 2013).

* * *

Table 7 provides a final summary of the branches of industry assisted by the programs (both enterprises recovered by workers and other enterprises). It should be noted that 47% of the ERT that received assistance were in the textile, printing, metallurgical, food, meat, and leather sectors. In the case of cooperatives that were not self-managed, 54% were in the construction, textile, agriculture and fishing, communication, and food sectors.

Table 7
Industrial sectors assisted by the Workers Self-Management Program, by number of recovered and other enterprises, 2004–2012.

Sector	Other Enterprises	Recovered enterprises	Total
Construction	125	14	139
Textile industry	110	31	141
Food industry	44	42	86
Agriculture and fisheries	32	-	32
Communication	22	6	28
Waste treatment	19	4	23
Tourist services	17	-	17
Metallurgical industry	14	65	79
Services	12	5	17
Wood industry	11	9	20
Hotels and gastronomy	10	11	21
Printing industry	10	24	34
Footwear industry	8	4	12
Education	6	6	12
Cultural industry	6	-	6
Chemical industry	5	7	12
Transportation and storage	5	10	15
Health	4	16	20
Marketing	3	2	5
Wood industry	2	-	2
Leather industry	1	6	7
Paper industry	1	5	6
Glass industry	1	9	10
Research and development	1		1
Meat industry	0	27	27
Rubber industry	0	5	5
Plastics industry	0	7	7
Naval industry	0	1	1
Health	0	1	1
Total 469	317	786	

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo (2004a, 2007, 2010, 2013).

Of the approximately 28,000 workers in the 786 self-managed productive units registered, 48% are recovered enterprises and 52% are other enterprises. Recovered enterprises have a higher average number of workers than those that were not.

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