

Strategic Position and Trade Union Power: An Analysis of Trade Union Strategies in the Automotive, Chemical and Edible Oils Sectors in Argentina, 2003–2015

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse empirically the importance of union strategies as a moderating variable between unions' structural and associational power and their bargaining and mobilisation power. To this end, we selected three unions, one from each of three strategic industrial sectors in the Argentinian national economy – automotive, chemical and edible oils – and analysed their dynamics of collective bargaining and labour conflict in the 2003–2015 period. The research is based on a review of secondary sources (collective bargaining agreements and conflict databases) as well as primary sources (semi-structured interviews with managers, trade union leaders, worker representatives and activists). Whereas workers in each of these sectors have a similarly high degree of structural power, we observed differences among the sectors in working, wage and organisational conditions. These differences are associated with three different union strategies for building union power, which we identify as partnership, confrontational and combative.

KEYWORDS

Strategic position; trade union power; union strategies; sectoral analysis; Argentina

Introduction

Studies of the transformation of working-class power in recent decades, both in the Global North and the Global South, stress the depth of the global capitalist crisis. However, new forms of resistance and organisation have also emerged that show the potential of the working class to defend its living and working conditions from the offensive of capital (Atzeni and Ness, 2018; Fishwick and Connolly, 2018; Nowak, Dutta and Birke, 2018). Within this framework, studies of class power and trade union power have become central.

Along these lines, the power resources approach (PRA) has gained importance in recent years as a way to analyse the resources used by unions in facing the capitalist offensive against labour (Schmalz, 2017; Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster, 2018, 2019). The PRA considers the relationship between structural and associational power and between institutional and social power as dimensions of union strategies. In this approach, union strategies are seen as “strategic choices”, displacing the question about the *how* (the organisational process) and *what for* (the aims) of union action. Consequently, the PRA has been criticised for its failure to consider the political orientation of trade union strategies to explain union and class power (Nowak, 2021).

Building upon this debate, this article discusses the importance of trade union strategies as a key element of union power. We highlight the important role of union strategies in moderating the

relationship between unions' structural and associational power and their bargaining and mobilisation power. In other words, we see union strategies as key to explaining the differences in bargaining and mobilisation power. To this end, we look at three unions, one from each of three strategic industrial sectors in Argentina – automotive, edible oils and chemical – and we analyse their collective bargaining and labour conflict dynamics from 2003 to 2015. We based our research on a review of collective bargaining agreements and conflict databases, and on semi-structured interviews with managers, trade union leaders, worker representatives and activists. As the next sections will show, we treat collective bargaining as an indicator of unions' bargaining power, and labour conflict as an indicator of their mobilisation power.

Workers in each of the three selected sectors hold a particular structural power due to their sector's strategic position in the economic system. This position is based on each sector's distinctive features: the automotive sector's linkages both up and down the productive chain, the edible oils sector's central role in Argentinian exports, and the chemical sector's role as supplier to most industries. However, despite these strategic positions, our results show that the working conditions and wages achieved by each union differ significantly in the three sectors. Where there is greater confrontation (chemical sector) or combativeness (edible oils sector) against capital, the content of collective bargaining agreements (negotiated content) not only indicates improvements in wage levels but also in working conditions and trade union organisation. In the case of strategies involving partnerships with capital, as in the automotive sector, conditions of labour flexibility and bureaucratic structures prevail.

This article is organised into three sections followed by a conclusion. First, we present the theoretical and conceptual aspects that support our empirical analysis. Next, we discuss the methodology involved in the research. Third, we analyse union strategies in each economic sector, focusing on the dynamics of collective bargaining and labour conflict. Finally, in the conclusion, we summarise the argument and show how our analysis contributes to the existing literature on labour power.

Class Power, Union Power and Union Strategies

The question about the determinants of class power and union power may be defined as one of the key topics in labour studies. However, the response to this question, both in theoretical and methodological terms, remains elusive. Among the approaches to class power are those that focus on structural variables and those that articulate structural power and associational power, the latter incorporating forms of class organisation (Marticorena and D'Urso, 2021).

In the first group, Perrone (1983) seeks to derive workers' power from their structural power. The author understands "the 'structural power' of strikers ... as the varying amount of 'disruptive potential' endowed upon workers by virtue of their different positions in the system of economic interdependencies" (Perrone, 1983: 231). More recently, Womack (2008) underlines the importance of the strategic position of workers in relation to the economic sector where they are employed or the technical position they hold in the production chain of a given sector to explain class power. However, these perspectives do not take into account organisational dimensions of class power (Marticorena and D'Urso, 2021).

In the second group, Wright (2000) and Silver (2005) include both structural and associational aspects. While structural power results from the position of workers within the economic system, associational power rests on organisational dimensions. In Wright's words, associational power is based on:

... the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers. This includes such things as unions and parties but may also include a variety of other forms, such as works councils or forms of institutional representation of workers on boards of directors in schemes of worker codetermination, or even, in certain circumstances, community organizations (Wright, 2000: 962).

“Power” is understood as “the capacity of individuals and organizations to realize class interests” (Wright, 2000: 962).

A series of articles published in the *Global Labour Journal* on the PRA have recently gained attention as a way to analyse the power of trade unions and their resources (Schmalz, 2017; Schmalz et al., 2018, 2019). The PRA aims to understand workers’ strategic choices as a result of the challenges posed by globalisation in the context of a general setback of the working class as a whole. Considering Wright’s (2000) and Silver’s (2005) distinction between structural power and associational power, this approach also points to institutional and social power as new dimensions in trade union strategies.¹

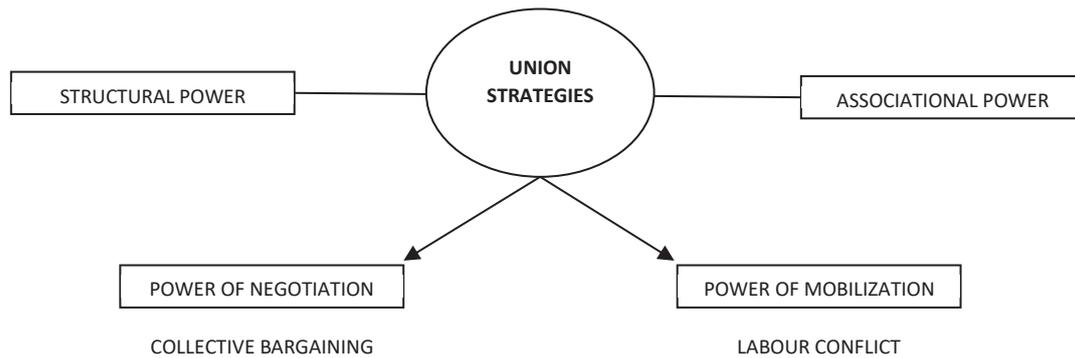
Several aspects of the PRA have been criticised. On the one hand, its interpretation of institutional power tends to locate institutions as the goal in class struggle (Gallas, 2016), and to restrict class action to an economic and social democracy approach (Nowak, 2018). On the other hand, the PRA seems to understand trade unions as homogeneous organisations; different political–union perspectives and inter- and intra-union disputes are considered to be less important. The question about the orientation of union strategies remains absent (Gallas, 2018; Nowak, 2018, 2021; Marticorena and D’Urso, 2021).

In our study we view trade union strategy as the key moderating variable² with which to analyse the relationship between workers’ structural and associational power and the outcomes achieved in terms of working and class conditions (Figure 1). Considering that both institutional and social power derive from structural and associational power, our focus is on these two last analytical dimensions.

The institutionalist approach in the field of industrial relations explains trade union strategies as the outcome of contextual dimensions such as the economic, political and institutional environment. For example, Etchemendy and Collier (2007) define union revitalisation strategies as a result of both immediate and long-term factors; the first includes labour market conditions and government policies toward unions, and the second includes institutional and organisational factors related to labour law and the trade union model in Argentina. These authors do not consider intra- and inter-union disputes and the actions of rank-and-file workers against their union leaders to explain labour conflict and collective bargaining dynamics (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2013; Marticorena, 2014; Varela, 2015).

¹ Institutional power is conceptualised as “the result of struggles and negotiation processes based on structural power and associational power” (Schmalz et al., 2018: 121). Social power results from the position of workers in social production and reproduction, as well as from their associational power (Schmalz et al., 2018: 122).

² A moderating variable influences the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent one. Although it is usually used for statistical correlations, here its use is to highlight the influence of union strategies in shaping bargaining and mobilisation power.



Source: Own development

Figure 1: Analytical model for the analysis of trade union power

Frege and Kelly (2003) and Behrens, Hamann and Hurd (2004) discuss internal variables of trade union action and organisation. Frege and Kelly (2003: 20) introduce framing process variables, related to “the ways in which issues are framed by union organizations” and their leaders, as affecting union identities and repertoires of contention. Behrens et al. (2004: 132) stress the importance of the institutional dimension, “which was defined as a composite of unions’ institutional shape, identities and dynamics”. Even when the authors introduce internal variables and include union identity to explain union strategies, the political dimension is limited to the interactions among union organisations, the state and employers. Here, union strategies are conceptualised as “strategic choices”, adopting the concept introduced by Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986), where strategies are rational and voluntary choices defined in a given context. A similar notion is adopted in the PRA, where the strategy means that trade unions must make use of certain resources. This “choice” seems to be independent of trade unions’ perspectives, which may differ in political and ideological positions on the relationship between capital and labour and the role of the state in the class struggle (Marticorena and D’Urso, 2021).

Other authors highlight the importance of organisational traditions, political-union perspectives and alignments within unions at the national level in shaping trade union strategies (Gindin, 2011; Soul, 2012). Recognising the importance of these dimensions, in this article we will focus on three analytical dimensions of union strategies that, in our view, help to explain how trade unions build union power: forms of union action, demands, and internal organisation of trade unions. The characteristics of these internal dimensions are shaped both by organisational traditions and political-union perspectives. In this way, the problem about the *how* (the organisational process) and *what for* (the aims) of trade union action is included in the conceptualisation of union strategies.

Taking into account the limits of classic trade union power indicators – frequency of labour conflict, collective bargaining coverage and unionisation rate (Kelly, 1998) – we approach the importance of union strategy in shaping union power through the study of the characteristics of collective bargaining and labour conflict, considering both qualitative and quantitative aspects.

Far from considering collective bargaining as an expression of social dialogue or industrial democracy, we recover Hyman’s (1975) earlier conceptualisation of collective bargaining as a mechanism to institutionalise class struggle. That conceptualisation does not mean that class

struggle is excluded. On the contrary, the content of collective bargaining and its structure are seen as an expression of the balance of social forces between classes (Marticorena, 2014). Such a correlation is the outcome of structural conditions, the strategies of trade unions and employers in bargaining and conflict processes, and state policies. Trade unions and employers usually define a bargaining agenda that expresses their own interests. In this article, we focus on union strategies, leaving the analysis of employers' strategies for future research.

Our research differentiates three types of strategies for building union power – partnership, confrontational and combative. While partnership strategies are built upon class conciliation between capital and labour, confrontational and combative strategies express antagonistic class relations. Confrontational strategies build union power based on the recognition of the contradiction between capital and labour, although economic-corporate demands prevail within the economic sector. Combative strategies tend to establish links with workers of different sectors and to overcome purely economic-corporate demands. For example, while partnership strategies reproduce the internal fragmentation of the working class, combative strategies fight against subcontracting policies, precariousness and labour flexibility. In this sense, the link between union and class power is far from automatic, raising questions about the way in which strategies to build union power do or do not reinforce class power.

In summary, union strategies are a key variable for the study of union and class power in that they moderate the relationship between structural and associational power and the outcomes in labour and wage conditions achieved through collective bargaining and mobilisation. Here union strategy is not considered as the outcome of contextual dimensions (economic, political, institutional, social) nor as a “strategic choice” made by unions to “use” different “resources”. In contrast to institutionalist and instrumentalist perspectives of trade union strategies, it is necessary to consider the ways in which unions build power. To approach these dimensions, we employ both a qualitative and a quantitative analysis of collective bargaining and labour conflict.

Data and Methods

This study is based on an analysis of the dynamics and characteristics of collective bargaining and labour conflict in three unions and in three different industrial manufacturing sectors in Argentina. As mentioned above, these are the automotive, edible oils and chemical sectors; the unions are the Union of Mechanics and Related Automotive Transport (Sindicato de Mecánicos y Afines del Transporte Automotor, SMATA), the Trade Union of Workers of Chemical and Petrochemical Industries in Zárate (Sindicato del Personal de Industrias Químicas y Petroquímicas de Zárate, STQyP) and the Federation of Workers of the Oilseed Industrial Complex and Cotton and Allied Ginnery of the Republic of Argentina (Federación de Trabajadores del Complejo Industrial Oleaginoso, Desmotadores de Algodón y Afines de la República Argentina, FTClODYARA).

The sectors were selected due to their economic relevance and the differences between their trade union structures and strategies. They are important in the economic and productive structure of Argentina due to their contribution to gross production in manufacturing, and have undergone an important expansion during the studied period.³ At the same time, the unions have been in the

³ According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INDEC), in 2012 the “manufacture of food products (meat, fish, fruits, legumes, vegetables, oils and fats)” represented 16 per cent, the “manufacture of chemical substances and products” 12.2 per cent, and the “manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers” 8.2 per cent of the manufacturing product. According to the Monthly Industrial Survey carried out by INDEC, between 2002 and 2014 (latest data available), the Physical Volume of Production Index

public eye because of their involvement in some significant labour conflicts (Arecco, Cabaña and Vega, 2010; Olivo, 2017; Perazzo, 2017; D'Urso, 2018).

However, despite these common elements, the sectors have distinctive features that differentiate their structural power. In the automotive sector, structural power is related to the characteristics of the labour process and its linkages both up and down the production chain, involving diverse industries such as auto parts, metallurgical, rubber and plastic, and glass (Santarcángelo, 2013). The oilseed complex constitutes most of Argentina's industrial exports: in the first half of 2015 – the last year of the period under review – oils represented 30 per cent of exports, followed by the automotive complex at 11.9 per cent (INDEC, 2015). The distinctive characteristic of the chemical sector is its role as supplier of a heterogeneous range of products, from intermediate-use chemical substances and products (basic chemical substances, agrochemicals and fertilisers, and specialised chemicals) to end-use chemical products (paints and coatings, cleansing and personal care products, cosmetics, pharmaceutical and medical products) (CIQyP, 2011). In addition to supplying the domestic market, the sector represented 8 per cent of total exports in 2010, and 24 per cent of manufacturing exports. This sector employed 8.1 per cent of formal workers in the manufacturing sector (CIQyP, 2011: 20).

As will be developed in the next section, the selected period (2003–2015) is characterised by a roughly consistent labour and economic political orientation of the Kirchner governments.⁴

To analyse union strategies in each sector, we examine three dimensions of analysis: forms of union action, demands, and internal organisation of trade unions (Table 1). These dimensions allow us to analyse indicators of bargaining and mobilisation power through different sources, and to identify different types of union strategies in each sector.

We identify five indicators for the *forms of union action*:

- (1) forms of struggle (strike, mobilisation, picket, etc.);
- (2) the labour groups that led the struggles, as a way to analyse alliances with other social actors;
- (3) the scope of struggle, both economic (workplace and branch) and territorial (centralised/national and decentralised/local/regional) (we consider that a greater economic and territorial scope is an expression of greater power to mobilise);
- (4) the articulation of struggles and alliances with other labour groups and social movements, which shows the expansion of the objectives of union organisation beyond economic-corporate goals; and
- (5) the scope of collective bargaining, considering a more centralised collective bargaining structure to be an expression of workers' bargaining power because it supposes fewer differences in labour and wage conditions, and indicates a stoppage of the whole sector or branch if workers go on strike (Marticorena, 2014).

(IVF) of the “manufacture of food and beverages” sector grew at an average annual rate of 9.3 per cent, the “manufacture of chemical substances and products” sector at a rate of 8 per cent, and the “manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers” sector at a rate of 9.3 per cent. In all cases, the IVF increase was higher than the General Level of the Manufacturing Industry (7.9 per cent).

⁴ We refer to the Peronist governments of Nestor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2011 and 2011–2015). Despite differences in the political situation and the evolution of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the three administrations were characterised by strong state intervention in the national economy and the labour market (Etchemendy and Collier, 2007; Marticorena, 2014; Bonnet, 2015; Atzeni, Elbert et al. 2018).

Table 1: Dimensions, indicators and sources for analysis of trade union strategies

Dimensions	Indicators	Sources
Forms of union action	Forms of struggle	- Database on labour conflict (MTESS) - Collective agreements - Interviews
	Labour groups that led the struggles	
	Scope of struggle	
	Articulation of struggles and/or alliances with other labour groups and/or social movements	
	Scope of collective bargaining	
Demands	Collective bargaining content	- Database on labour conflict (MTESS) - Collective agreements - Interviews
	Content of demands in the labour conflict	
Internal organisation of trade unions	Decision-making mechanisms and forms of participation	- Interviews
	Role of trade union leaders and representatives	

Source: Own development

By analysing collective agreements we can identify the dynamics of labour relations in a given period (Marticorena, 2014). Our research focuses on the content of collective bargaining agreements in order to analyse similarities and differences among sectors. To this end, the collective bargaining carried out by the main trade unions and/or federations of each sector is considered.⁵

Studying the negotiated content over a period of time allows us to discern changes in the balance of social forces between “contenders”. As long as the exchange relation between capital and labour (the purchase and sale of labour power) does not guarantee labour to the capitalist but rather the use of labour power in an agreed timeframe, disciplining the working class at the workplace is a necessity for capitalists. Therefore, the disputes over both wages and working conditions are key elements in the class struggle.

For that reason, when analysing *demands*, we consider labour relations, wage and non-wage contents in collective agreements, and distinguish between wage and non-wage claims in labour

⁵ The trade union model in Argentina has three levels – trade unions, federations and confederations. Two or more unions may establish a federation, and two or more federations may establish a confederation. Trade union representation at the workplace is guaranteed by law. If there is more than one union in a given branch (industry), usually only one has the *personería gremial* – that is, recognition as the representative of workers’ collective interests. In some economic activities, however, there is more than one trade union with *personería gremial*, but they represent workers from different regions or different occupational categories. Collective bargaining is carried out by trade unions with *personería gremial* status, and covers both unionised and non-unionised workers. Unions can negotiate agreements both at company level or branch (industry) level. When we analysed the scope of union struggle, we differentiated conflicts that involved a single plant, one company, or the entire branch. For more information on Argentinian labour law, including union structure, see Cardoso and Gindin (2009), Battistini (2010) and Etchemendy et al. (2011).

conflicts. As is developed in the next paragraphs, within those categories we differentiate bargaining contents and demands that express different union strategies.

To address the dimension of *internal organisation of trade unions*, we consider two aspects – the decision-making mechanisms and forms of participation, in order to assess the differences between more bureaucratic or democratic forms of trade union organisation; and the role of trade union leaders and representatives in leading labour conflicts and in the bargaining process.

The analysis of labour conflict draws on the database on labour conflict produced by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MTESS) since 2006.⁶ Despite the known limitations of conflict databases (Ghigliani, 2009; Fransozi, 2017), the data provided by the MTESS gives us an opportunity to obtain general information about sectoral conflicts. In addition, in 2019 we conducted twelve interviews with union leaders, delegates⁷ and managers in the three sectors. We also rely on interviews with union leaders, delegates and managers, conducted between 2014 and 2017, as well as earlier fieldwork carried out by the authors and other researchers in the chemical, automotive and edible oils sectors (Marticorena, 2014, 2017; D'Urso, 2016; Olivo, 2017; Perazzo, 2017).

Sectoral Analysis of Trade Union Strategies

An introduction to the field

The neo-liberal reforms promoted in Argentina during the 1990s had a negative impact on the local economy and on labour markets, resulting in rising precariousness, unemployment and poverty. After several years of economic recession and austerity policies, in 2001 unemployed workers and members of the middle class mobilised intense protests against the De La Rúa administration (1999–2001), forcing the president to resign. The people used demonstrations and roadblocks to question not only the political system but also state domination, chanting about the politicians, “May they all leave, may not one remain!” (*¡Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo!*). Bonnet (2008, 2015) explains that the 2001 crisis was both an accumulation crisis (the economic crisis) and a domination crisis (questioning state power).

After the massive mobilisations in December 2001, social struggles were redirected and contained within institutional frameworks, resulting in a reconstitution of accumulation and domination encouraged by the first Kirchnerist government (Bonnet, 2015). After 2003, a period of economic growth weakened unemployment as a working-class disciplinary mechanism. This, along with a fall in real wages after the devaluation of the Argentine peso in January 2002, prompted a series of labour conflicts led by employed workers and trade union organisations. In this context, the debate on trade union renewal gained greater salience. Several studies highlighted the evolution and scope of labour conflict and collective bargaining, as well as unionisation rates, as evidence of union renewal (Etchemendy and Collier, 2007; Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2008; Atzeni and Grigera, 2018).

This period was characterised by an increase in labour disputes focused on wage claims following the fall in real wages after the 2002 currency devaluation and the acceleration of inflation

⁶ The MTESS series documents collective labour conflicts, “understood as the series of events triggered by the performance of a conflictive action of a group of workers or employers to achieve their labour demands” (MTESS, 2018: 2). The database collates the labour conflicts published by 120 newspapers from all over the country and by media outlets specialising in union news.

⁷ Delegates are elected worker representatives.

after 2007; it was also driven by the drop in unemployment, which helped to improve workers' bargaining power in the labour market. From 2009 onwards, after the impact of the Great Recession and the decline in national GDP, studies highlighted the growth of non-wage claims, such as conflicts against dismissals and suspensions (Varela et al., 2016; Marticorena, 2020). The government supported collective bargaining as a means of institutionalising conflict, and bargaining was used to establish nominal wage increases for all economic activities. The number of collective agreements (CCT and Acuerdos)⁸ went from 208 in 2002 to 1 957 in 2015, reaching a peak of 2 038 agreements in 2010 (Marticorena and D'Urso, 2018). The increase in the number of collective agreements and labour conflicts during this period was also observed in the selected sectors of this research (Table 2). However, this quantitative evolution it is not enough to explain the strategies used to build union power.

Table 2: Number of sectoral collective bargaining and labour conflicts, 2003–2015

	Collective agreements			Labour conflicts*		
	Automotive	Chemical	Edible Oils	Automotive	Chemical	Oils
2003	25	11	13	-	-	-
2004	8	8	17	-	-	-
2005	22	7	5	-	-	-
2006	35	15	10	6	2	2
2007	29	9	17	9	10	1
2008	39	17	56	19	3	5
2009	108	23	62	34	6	10
2010	87	29	14	13	7	3
2011	98	39	12	19	6	3
2012	167	43	12	19	4	6
2013	155	33	4	19	4	7
2014	226	56	28	35	13	9
2015	189	53	37	18	9	6
Total	1188	343	287	191	64	52

Source: Compilation made by the authors based on MTESS.

**Strikes, pickets and other mobilisations.*

Another indicator of union renewal is the unionisation rate. Even though there is no systematic record of unionisation rates in Argentina, Trajtemberg, Medwid and Senén González (2009) used the Labour Indicators Survey (EIL) of the Ministry of Labour to establish the unionisation rate in the whole economy (excluding agriculture) at 39.7 per cent and at 48.8 per cent in manufacturing. This is an increase from the lower rate in 2000 – 31.7 per cent in the whole economy (Senén González, Trajtemberg and Medwid, 2010). Thus, both statistics and case studies for the period indicate that workers in all economic sectors have expanded their level of organisation. Moreover, in this period grassroots organisation at the workplace became more important, and inter- and

⁸ The Convenios Colectivos de Trabajo (CCT) comprise extensive norms on working conditions in different sectors or companies – occupational categories, forms of labour contract, working hours, work organisation, wages, labour relations and so on. The Acuerdos (ACU) are partial norms that modify some aspects of the CCT.

intra-union struggles over union perspectives and strategies emerged.

The unions we study here represent workers with structural power, but this power does not by itself explain the differences in organising, wages and working conditions between the three sectors. Also, if we consider the unionisation rate and the presence of union delegates at the workplace as indicators of associational power, the three sectors seem to have high levels of associational power.⁹ But in the three sectors we find differences in their bargaining and mobilisation power that cannot be explained without considering the strategies used to build union power.

Partnership strategy in the automotive sector

The automotive sector is characterised by two main business groups: final assembly plants and auto parts plants (Novick and Catalano, 1996). In Argentina there are eleven automotive assembly plants, all of which are foreign-capital based. Four companies account for 70 per cent of production: Toyota, Volkswagen, Ford and Fiat (ADEFA, 2016). For our analysis of collective bargaining, we look at Ford and Volkswagen. Their production plants are in General Pacheco (Buenos Aires Province). Volkswagen also has one factory in the city of Córdoba (Córdoba Province).

The automotive sector has more collective agreements (1 188) than the other two sectors (Table 2). This is because the union, SMATA, negotiates collective agreements at a company level. Our analysis of the contents of collective agreements indicates that the union builds its power by seeking a partnership with capital, avoiding labour conflict and trying to maintain harmonious labour relations inside the factories without disputes related to working conditions.

In the automotive assembly plants that we analyse, 109 collective agreements were signed between 2003 and 2015: 29 in Ford and 80 in Volkswagen. When focusing on the content analysis of the collective agreements, most negotiated clauses are about social peace and the increase in the basic wage (Table 3).

The emphasis on social peace clauses helped to reduce labour conflict between 2003 and 2007, when conflict was aimed at recovering the purchasing power of wages after the devaluation of the currency in 2002 (Santella, 2008; D'Urso, 2016). The prevalence of content related to wage increases is in line with the union's decision-making strategy. Wage disputes were institutionalised through negotiations between union leaders and company representatives every three months. This bargaining process allowed the union to limit wage conflicts at the plant level and to solve wage disputes outside of the workplace, without grassroots involvement.

A union representative pointed out that this quarterly negotiation mechanism did not deal with issues related to working conditions, and that union leaders did not discuss wage bargaining with delegates and workers. Union leaders communicated decisions to workplace representatives:

You could ask, but the cards were already dealt... it's not like you could suggest an idea for [collective] action, nothing. They came, told us what happened [in the negotiation with the company] and that's

⁹ There is no official data for these indicators at sectoral level, but information provided by union representatives we interviewed indicates that nearly 99 per cent of chemical workers in Zárate-Campana are unionised, and they have union representatives in practically all plants. In edible oils, 95 per cent of workers were unionised, with delegates in all the plants under the coverage of the Federation Agreement. Finally, union membership in eleven automobile factories at the beginning of 2000 was 95 per cent (Perelman, 2006), while in Ford and Volkswagen-Pacheco (the selected companies in this research) it reached 90 per cent (Battistini and Wilkis, 2004: 151).

it [...vos podías preguntar, pero igual ya estaban todas las cartas tiradas, no es que vos podías dar una idea de acción, nada. Fueron, contaron lo que pasó y ya] [(SMATA representative, May 2019).

Table 3: Top ten negotiated contents by company, 2003–2015, in %*

Type of Content	Negotiated Contents	Ford (N: 29)	Volks (N: 80)	Total (N: 109)
Labour relations	Social peace clause	68.9	60.0	62.3
Wage	Base wage increase	68.9	32.5	42.2
Wage	Other wage-related content	10.3	16.2	14.6
Non-wage	Occupational categories	6.9	13.7	11.9
Non-wage	Forms of labour contract	10.3	12.5	11.9
Wage	Extraordinary non-remunerative amount ¹⁰	3.4	13.7	11.0
Wage	Non-remunerative increase	6.9	10.0	9.1
Non-wage	Working hours / overtime	6.9	8.7	8.2
Contributions to the union	Employer contribution to the union	10.3	6.2	7.3
Non-wage	Other contents on labour relations	-	10.0	7.3

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the agreements analysed.

* Contents were classified in descending order of percentages in the Total column.

The way in which the union managed the bargaining process shows a bargaining power based on a collaborative relationship with the employers. At the workplace level, the results of wage agreements were sometimes communicated by the company in the presence of union representatives, to legitimate the decision:

They do this to show that it is an outcome that was reached jointly [between the company and the union] [...ellos hacen esto para que se vea que es un resultado conjunto] (Automotive assembly plant worker and SMATA activist, May 2019).

Through its partnership strategy, SMATA accepts and negotiates precarious working conditions and flexible forms of labour contracts. In the case of Ford, this is evident in agreements that describe a fixed-term hiring method, while in Volkswagen 800 workers were hired as term employees (collective agreement 749/2010). These hiring forms are seen as producing precarious work since they do not guarantee continuous employment or provide the working conditions that permanent workers enjoy. In the agreements, the content associated with “occupational categories” is related to the content on “forms of labour contract” since it provides for hiring workers through precarious contracts. The agreements also define tasks and functions of those workers.

The agreements that include clauses related to forms of term employment are closely related to those that include content on “suspensions”. These were mostly negotiated during the Great Recession that affected the sector in 2008 and 2009; at that time there was an increase in the number of collective agreements with crisis clauses, such as suspension of employment and

¹⁰ Non-remunerative payments are those that are not considered for the calculation of contributions to social security and health insurance, the Supplementary Annual Salary and compensation, among others – for example, when a company pays an extraordinary amount of money not included in the basic wage package.

reductions in wages and working hours. Those crisis clauses, in addition to others such as flexible vacation time and reduced working time, are frequently used in collective bargaining between SMATA and the automotive companies we analysed. In times of crisis the union chooses to negotiate the loss of labour rights and thus paves the way for companies to reduce labour costs. This, in turn, enables the hiring of workers under precarious conditions once productive levels are re-established.

From the point of view of union leaders, at these times the union strategy is limited by labour market and economic conditions. Thus, guaranteeing the continued operation of the companies becomes the priority, even if it means making working conditions more flexible or reducing the purchasing power of wages:

The worker becomes more flexible himself because he has to put food on the table. As an organization, I can put a stop to it, but it is very difficult to get anywhere ... when unemployment is very high, all the conditions are set by the boss. And we ... prioritise keeping the companies open [El trabajador se flexibiliza solo porque tiene que llevar la comida a su casa. Yo como organización puedo poner coto pero es muy difícil llegar a todos lados... cuando la desocupación es muy grande, las condiciones todas las pone el patrón. Y nosotros ... priorizamos ... que no cierren las empresas] (SMATA union leader, May 2019).

The features of collective bargaining are linked to the dynamic of labour conflict, which aims to contain disputes inside the factories and to solve them through bargaining channels between union leaders and company representatives. Even though the automotive sector has the highest number of conflictive actions (191) (Table 2), only 51 were led by SMATA, while the Metallurgical Workers Union (UOM) called the most actions (81).¹¹ The remaining actions were carried out by shopfloor committees, delegates and self-organised workers, which illustrates the range of actors that represent the workers' interests.

As in the case of collective bargaining, most conflict actions showed that labour disputes were decentralised. More than 82 per cent took place at the workplace level and 14 per cent at the branch level; the UOM called the most actions involving the entire branch (20 of 26). For the most part, the conflicts did not involve work stoppages at either the workplace or branch levels (127 of 191); only 7 actions out of 27 stopped all activity.¹² A worker from an automotive plant pointed out that since he started working there in 2006, they had never gone on strike for wages or working conditions in the factory (Automotive assembly plant worker and SMATA activist, May 2019). According to this worker, the disputes led by SMATA were expressed in a more institutionalised way, such as through statements by union leaders.

Non-wage claims prevail due to dismissals and suspensions, which shows that the wage disputes are institutionalised through collective bargaining. From the point of view of union leaders, the strike is a "last resort", a situation that they "have known how to minimise" (SMATA union leader, May 2019). This is related to the dynamic of collective bargaining because conflict breaks out on those issues that could not be solved through negotiation and also to take up demands related to working conditions.

There were also intra-union conflicts (32) in which shopfloor committees, delegates or self-

¹¹ SMATA represents most workers in the automotive assembly plants (70 per cent), in some auto parts enterprises and in half of the car dealerships. The UOM represents 50 per cent of workers in the auto parts companies and has representation in the Peugeot-Citroën assembly plant (Senén González et al., 2006).

¹² "Conflicts with strike or stoppage" refers to those that involve temporary interruption of work. "Conflicts without strike or stoppage" means that there is no interruption of work and refers to different collective actions promoted by workers.

organised workers denounced the inaction of the trade union in the face of complaints from grassroots members. In the automotive assembly plants, ten union conflicts were driven by workers without the support of SMATA. In these cases, all but one of the actions were related to dismissals which the union had not reversed.

As noted in earlier research, the strategies established by shopfloor committees opposed to the auto union leadership were more combative, and the action repertoires demanded more participation in decision-making, both on wage issues and working conditions (D'Urso, 2018). These approaches were usually dismantled through coercive mechanisms, strengthening the control exercised by the official union representatives and plant supervisors inside the factories (Santella, 2016; Fishwick and D'Urso, 2022).

Confrontational strategy in the chemical sector

As we have previously mentioned, the chemical sector produces a heterogeneous range of products. Within this sector, the petrochemical industry is characterised by a high level of capital concentration, with many foreign companies located in production hubs such as the one in Zárate-Campana-San Nicolás (Buenos Aires Province).

This sector is also characterised by fragmented trade union representation, with two federations – the Argentine Federation of Workers of Chemical and Petrochemical Industries (Federación Argentina de Trabajadores de Industrias Químicas y Petroquímicas, FATIQyP), and the Trade Union Federation of Workers of Chemical and Petrochemical Industries of the Republic of Argentina (Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Industrias Químicas y Petroquímicas de la República Argentina, FESTIQyPRA). In this study, even while we consider some characteristics of the sectoral federations, we centre our analysis on the strategy of the Trade Union of Workers of Chemical and Petrochemical Industries in Zárate (Sindicato del Personal de Industrias Químicas y Petroquímicas de Zárate, STQyP), as an example of a confrontational strategy.

The Zárate union signed eighteen collective agreements with companies in the Zárate-Campana industrial hub during the period 2003–2015. The success of the union's bargaining power is not only expressed by high wage increases but also by other wage clauses. One example is decoupling the wage increase achieved in collective bargaining from future wage increases set by the government or the companies.¹³ Another example refers to proportional increases in both the base and additional components of the wage structure (Table 4).

This highlights the differences in collective bargaining strategy between STQyP and SMATA. The wage clauses were achieved by STQyP after a heated conflict in 2007, which resulted in a substantial increase in the wage levels of petrochemical workers at Zárate-Campana. From 2007 to 2014, all the agreements included those clauses.

The agreement signed in 2007 (1274/2007) also included the reinstatement of workers dismissed during the conflict and the ability to request intervention by the Joint Negotiating Committee in future conflicts. The analysis of collective agreements shows the link between class conflict and the collective bargaining process in this sector: four of the eighteen Zárate agreements mention previous conflict situations (in 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2015).

¹³ The clause means that employers will not be able to discount companies' bonuses or future increases set by the government, so the increase negotiated at the bargaining table must be added to the current wage and future increases must be added to that amount.

Table 4: Top ten negotiated contents by Zárate trade union, 2003–2015, in %

Type of content	Negotiated Contents	Total (N: 18)
Wage	Base wage increase	66.7
Wage	Decoupling future wage increases set by the government or the companies	61.1
Wage	Amounts in instalments or stages	55.6
Wage	Commitment to reopen a wage negotiation council*	44.4
Wage	Proportional increases in both the base and additional components of the wage structure	44.4
Contributions to the union	Employer contribution to the union	33.3
Wage	Remunerative increase not included in the base wage	33.3
Labour relations	Trade union topics	33.3
Wage	Extraordinary non-remunerative amount	22.2
Labour relations	Social peace clause	16.7

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the agreements analysed.

**A wage negotiation council is where representatives from the union and the company negotiate various aspects of wages, such as the effect of inflation on agreed wages.*

On “trade union topics”, the setting of union dues at a symbolic \$1 by the Zárate-Campana union in 2005 stands out (ACU 178/2005 E), and created a strong incentive to join the union. This is reflected in the unionisation rate of 99 per cent mentioned earlier (Zárate Union Leader, October 2019).

Also worth noting is the importance that the union gave to the struggle against company outsourcing policies, as expressed in the collective agreement:

The companies will be jointly and severally responsible for the compliance by contractors and/or subcontractors with the legal regulations in force, exercising strict administrative control of the payments of wages, social charges and/or contributions established under laws and/or Collective Agreements of the corresponding unions. It is clarified that in no case may the contracted personnel carry out normal production and/or routine maintenance work [*Las empresas serán solidariamente responsables del cumplimiento por los contratistas y/o subcontratistas de las normas legales vigentes, ejerciendo un estricto control administrativo de los pagos de jornales, cargas sociales y/o aportes establecidos en virtud de leyes y/o Convenios Colectivos de los gremios que correspondan. Queda aclarado que en ningún caso el personal contratado podrá efectuar trabajos normales de producción y/o mantenimiento de rutina*] (CCT N° 1386/2014, Art. 4).

In the words of a representative of the Zárate union:

We have a fight with all the companies in the area of maintenance, because the companies bring in outside personnel to do the tasks, which ends up being more expensive and riskier.... Because the one who comes from outside does not know the plant; he does the work and hands it over, and it's when we try to get it up and running, that is where we see the consequences and the accidents... [*Abí tenemos una pelea con todas las empresas, con el área ... de mantenimiento, porque las empresas traen personal de afuera para hacer las tareas, donde termina siendo más caro y más riesgoso para la actividad. Porque el que viene de*

afuera no conoce la planta, hace un trabajo y lo entrega y cuando se intenta poner en marcha es donde vienen las consecuencias y los accidentes...] (Zárate union leader, October 2019).

The collective bargaining structure is another dimension of power in trade union strategies, and is related to the coverage of collective agreements. While the companies of Zárate-Campana define the agreements with the union as “multiemployer” ones, the Zárate trade union defines them as regional. The difference is important because if it is defined as the employers want, the agreements do not apply to all the companies located in Zárate-Campana (Marticorena, 2014).

In the chemical sector, the MTESS database registered sixty-four conflict actions, with similar numbers of actions with and without work stoppages – thirty-one and thirty-three respectively. Conflicts with stoppages at the branch level and conflicts without strikes at the workplace level predominate. In contrast to the automotive sector, only a few agreements in the chemical sector included social peace clauses.

We also observed a high degree of participation by formal union organisations: only five conflict actions were promoted by grassroots movements instead of union leadership. Reflecting the union fragmentation that characterises the sector, labour conflict is regionally decentralised. Zárate-Campana was the most conflict-ridden region in the sector during the period under study, with fifteen conflict actions noted in the database (eight did not include work stoppages, while seven did). Most of these actions were at the company level (8), with some at the branch level (6); in one case, the actions involved more than one company but did not reach the branch level. In reference to the type of claim, five actions demanded wage increases and/or bonuses while ten made non-wage claims (mainly against layoffs).

The mobilisation and bargaining power of the Zárate-Campana union is also expressed through solidarity strikes: when there is conflict in a company, the workers of the entire chemical and petrochemical hub go on strike. Workers remember two main conflicts during the period we studied. One, in 2007, was defined by the struggle for an increase in the base wage, but also for other key wage conditions like a proportional increase in both the base and additional components of the wage structure, and the decoupling of future wage increases, as we saw above. The solidarity strike took place when one of the companies, Petrobras, ignored the agreement signed at the branch level. A union leader recounted:

...the branch defended the agreement because the position that Petrobras was attacking was the agreement of the branch in that area. So that’s why the strikes were in solidarity. The options in the courts had been exhausted, the Labour Ministry had overseen a mandatory conciliation process whose terms Petrobras did not comply with; that’s why you have the solidarity of the other workers... They stopped work in the area... [*...la actividad defendió el convenio, porque la postura que estaba atacando Petrobras era el convenio. El convenio de la actividad en esa zona. Entonces por eso los paros eran solidarios. Agotada la instancia, interviniendo el Ministerio de Trabajo con una conciliación obligatoria dictada y que Petrobras no la acataba, entonces la solidaridad de los demás trabajadores ... Paraban la zona...*] (Zárate union leader, September 2014).

Another conflict took place in 2014–2015 due to dismissals in TFL Argentina S.A., one of the oldest companies within the industrial park (*La Nación*, 2015). At the end of the conflict, workers received a severance payment and the trade union helped them relocate to other companies.

The Zárate trade union uses its mobilisation power to achieve bargaining power. This power of mobilisation does not rest only on the positional power of the represented workers, but also on the union’s strategy, which built associational power based on those structural conditions. However, its mobilisation power, union perspective and practice remain within the limits of

economic-corporative demands, centred on the defence of the collective agreement as a guarantor of working conditions. In this sense, a union leader described the role of grassroots delegates:

The delegate's role is to enforce the agreement, raise the usual grievances that can arise within a company, discuss it with the company. If compliance [with the agreement] is achieved, good. Otherwise, the union comes in to mediate [*La función del delegado es hacer cumplir el convenio. Plantear los reclamos convencionales que puedan llegar a existir dentro de una empresa, conversarlo con la empresa. Si se logra la aplicación bien. Si no, viene a mediar el sindicato*] (Zárate union leader, September 2014).

The union does not participate in labour conflicts outside the chemical sector. In terms of decision-making mechanisms and forms of participation, our analysis of interviews and informal conversations with delegates and union leaders showed that a bureaucratic form of decision-making predominates. Assemblies are held when wage negotiations are closing or when facing some important conflict, but there are no democratic forms of participation observed in daily decision-making.

Combative strategy in the edible oils sector

The workers in the edible oils sector have attained high levels of mobilisation and have achieved significant gains in recent years. Employing 2 per cent of registered workers in the manufacturing sector, edible oils is a highly concentrated sector with a large number of foreign companies. It constitutes one of the major export hubs in Argentina;¹⁴ therefore, these workers are in a strategic position. This sector has led the wage negotiations at the national level since the big conflict in the oils sector in 2015.

A key element to achieving greater bargaining power lies in the organisational and mobilisation power built through a combative strategy. Since 2013, a group of union activists and grassroots delegates from Rosario, Buenos Aires Province, City of Buenos Aires (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, CABA) and the Cotton Ginners in Santiago del Estero formed the Movimiento 17 de Julio and won the leadership of the Federation of Workers of the Oils Industrial Complex and Cotton Ginners of the Republic of Argentina (Federación de Trabajadores del Complejo Industrial Oleaginoso, Desmotadores de Algodón y Afines de la República Argentina, FTClODYARA). The strategic change became apparent in 2009 during the union's annual National Congress, when members from various regional unions were incorporated into the Federation's executive council. As a result, activists and grassroots delegates drove bureaucratic union leaders out of the Federation. As a union leader of CABA pointed out:

We came to have an executive council entirely composed of rank-and-file workers, an executive council of former delegates who work in the factory, entirely composed of the workers from each factory [*Llegamos a tener una comisión directiva totalmente compuesta por trabajadores de base, una comisión directiva por ex delegados que laburan en la fábrica, totalmente compuesta por los trabajadores de cada fábrica*] (Oils union leader 1, June 2017).

The political stance of the oils Federation is to promote “worker democracy and a minimum wage for the working class” (Ceruti, 2017: 445). Among its main achievements are the fight against labour outsourcing and the creation of Joint Health and Safety Committees.

¹⁴ By 2014, the oilseed complex represented more than 25 per cent of the economy's exports (Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería y Pesca, 2013).

One of the main transformations in the area of trade union democracy achieved by the union leaders was the change in statutory provisions in 2014. Among the most salient points of this change is the election of the national leaders of the Federation by the secret and direct vote of all rank-and-file workers. As one union leader said:

One of the most important changes is that now the rank-and-file worker, the fellow oil worker, can vote for his national leaders [*Uno de los puntos fundamentales es que ahora el compañero de base, el compañero trabajador aceitero puede votar a sus dirigentes nacionales*] (Oils union leader 1, June 2017).

Another mechanism of trade union democracy was the formation of a Meeting of Delegates as a deliberative body that must be convened once a year. These meetings have taken place since 2010. As the Federation union leader explained, they changed the character of these meetings from the bureaucratic approach that predominated previously to an organisational and educational one:

The congresses, which at another time had been merely administrative ... became political-union events with invited guests who represented different ways of thinking... [*Los congresos, que en otro momento eran meramente administrativos ... se hacen político-sindicales con invitados de distintos pensamientos...*] (Oils union leader 2, October 2019).

Union leaders define their ideological perspective as anti-bureaucratic and combative, identify with class-struggle unionism, and highlight their independence from political parties. They conceive trade union action as part of class action, building class solidarity in the sector and establishing alliances with workers from other sectors. As a union leader explained, there are differences between going on strike for wages and doing so in solidarity with fired workers:

Factory colleagues say, 'I strike for my wages', 'I strike for my working conditions' ... But to say to the comrades: 'we have to strike in solidarity with comrades who were fired', is a different consciousness, and that is what we have begun to do since we came in [*Compañeros de fábrica dicen 'yo paro por un salario para mí', 'paro por condiciones de trabajo para mí' ... Pero decirle a los compañeros: 'tenemos que parar en solidaridad con compañeros que fueron despedidos', es una conciencia diferente, y eso lo empezamos a hacer desde que estamos nosotros*] (Oils union leader 1, June 2017).

Union leaders also promoted solidarity actions with other sectors in struggle, for example, bus drivers and bank workers (FTCIODyARA, 2014, 2015a, 2015b).

The union's strategy goes beyond economic-corporate demands to include actions and support for policies relating to Memory, Truth and Justice – that is, policies and actions in search of justice for the crimes against humanity committed during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983).¹⁵ The Federation and the trade union in the capital district were plaintiffs in a case of crimes against humanity committed against workers and their families by Molinos Río de la Plata Company in Avellaneda (Buenos Aires Province) during the dictatorship (Ceruti, 2017: 413).

The main changes in the negotiated settlement, due to the major shift in position and conquest of the Federation by the combative elements in the union, was expressed in the percentages of the

¹⁵ These policies include the judgement in legal cases of those responsible for torture, deaths, disappearances, stealing children and other crimes during the last dictatorship. Human rights organisations estimate that 30 000 people disappeared (mainly workers, students and intellectuals), and about 400 children were born during their mothers' captivity and appropriated by the repressors; most of these children (who are adults now) do not know their true identity to this day.

wage increases¹⁶ and in the changes introduced to statutory provisions (see above). Given their bargaining power, workers in the edible oils sector succeeded in getting regular increases to their wages (Table 5), as a result of the commitment to reopen wage discussions that emerged in several negotiations after 2010.

In collective agreements there are mentions of union conflicts prior to the negotiations, providing an account of the union's use of mobilisation power to obtain its demands. Since the combative sector took over the Federation, there has been a greater centralisation of collective bargaining, which also coincides with a more centralised labour conflict.

Table 5: Top ten negotiated contents by the Federation of Oil Workers and Cotton Ginners, 2003–2015, in %

Type of content	Negotiated Contents	Total (N: 92)
Wage	Base wage increase	69.6
Wage	Extraordinary non-remunerative amount	43.5
Wage	Absorption of previous wage increases	35.9
Wage	Attendance bonus	25.0
Labour relations	Social peace clause	23.9
Wage	Shift bonus	20.7
Contributions to union	Employer contribution to the union	18.5
Wage	Seniority bonus	16.3
Wage	Amounts paid in instalments or stages	12.0
Wage	Non-remunerative increase	12.0

Source: Compiled by the authors based on sectoral agreements.

In the edible oils sector, where the database lists fifty-two conflictive actions, 2009 is one of the years with the highest number of such actions (Table 2). This increase coincides with the beginning of a process of change in the internal structure of the Federation. It began with a sectoral conflict distinguished mainly by centralised actions that accompanied a more centralised approach to collective bargaining. In this sense, the achievement of twenty-two conflictive actions that involved the entire branch of activity stands out. The Federation played a leading role; since 2009, it initiated thirteen actions of struggle, nine of which comprised the entire branch of activity. In eight of these nine conflicts, oils workers and the Federation fought for wage increases, and in five of the nine conflicts they used the strike as a form of struggle. Most of the conflicts for wage claims occurred during the bargaining process, due to the employers' refusal to grant the wage increases demanded by the oils workers.

The most emblematic conflict of the period was the national strike in the oils sector in 2015, also known as *El Aceitazo*.¹⁷ It lasted for twenty-five days and included a five-day blockade of the

¹⁶ Between 2003 and 2007 sectoral wages showed a similar evolution to those in other economic sectors, but since 2008 there has been a significant rise in the percentages of wage increases in the edible oils sector. See Ceruti (2017) and Olivo (2017).

¹⁷ For readers who do not understand Spanish: Adding “azo” at the end of any noun essentially means that

port of San Lorenzo, where the agro-export complex is concentrated. This conflict was key in the demonstration of the mobilisation power of the workers and their union, not only because of the results of the conflict (oils workers negotiated a 27.8 per cent increase in the basic wage, reaching 36 per cent with additional wage items), but also because of what was achieved in organisational terms (Ceruti, 2017). The conflict reinforced the cohesion between the rank and file and oils union leaders, and the use of the combative strategy as a tool to further workers' interests. As the leader of the Federation pointed out:

Our firepower is the strike; we stopped three hundred boats on the Paraná River, the Río de La Plata and the coast of Uruguay, I even think there was a boat in Brazil; that is the power that we have [*El poder de fuego nuestro está en el paro, paramos trescientos barcos sobre el Río Paraná, el Río de La Plata y la costa de Uruguay, hasta creo que había barco en Brasil, ese poder lo tenemos nosotros*](Oils union Leader 2, October 2019).

Although the sector's importance in the local economy was key to winning the conflict, the union's organising strategy was decisive in the strike's success. The Federation strategy was characterised by the role of union leaders in organising the conflict, consultation with the grassroots in plenary sessions of delegates and assemblies, and the dissemination of information about wage negotiations to all the workers (Ceruti, 2017). This strike established a new balance of forces between capital and labour in the sector, but also became a leading experience for the entire Argentinian working class.

Conclusion

In our research we analysed union strategies as a moderating variable to examine the relationship between workers' structural and associational power and their bargaining and mobilisation power in three key economic sectors in Argentina: automotive, edible oils and chemical. We also examined the outcomes achieved in terms of class and working conditions. We identified three dimensions for the study of union strategies: forms of union action, demands, and internal union organisation. This perspective differs from approaches based on institutionalist and instrumentalist interpretations of unions and their strategies. Despite the importance of the PRA in the study of union power, its conceptualisation of strategy as a "strategic choice" does not take into account the importance of the different political-union perspectives involved in union action. The approach assumes an automatic link between class and union power, without considering the ways in which different strategies do or do not reinforce workers' power.

To further our study of union strategies to build power, we explore the *how* (the organisational process) and *what for* (the aims) of the trade union action, by analysing unions' bargaining power and mobilisation power. Our analysis of collective bargaining and labour conflict shows that structural power does not determine wages and working conditions. Our analysis also shows the limits of quantitative measures of trade union power (such as unionisation rate, also used as an indicator of associational power) to explain these conditions. We argue that the trade unions' gains differ significantly according to their strategies for building union power.

Hence, we identify three types of strategies: partnership, confrontational and combative. The partnership strategy in the automotive sector is characterised by conciliation between capital and

it is very big, so this is a colloquial expression to refer to the major strike in the oils sector – aceite (oil) + azo.

labour. This is expressed in the negotiated contents of the collective bargaining agreements, where social peace clauses to avoid labour conflict prevail. In this way, wage disputes are institutionalised with little or no worker participation. Labour conflict and collective bargaining dynamics in this sector are characterised by decentralisation, because SMATA negotiates agreements at the plant level. However, in the period we studied, this strategy showed limitations, which were expressed in a high number of conflicts over dismissals, suspensions and working conditions led by opposition shopfloor committees and delegates.

The confrontational strategy in the chemical sector is characterised by the defence of working and wage conditions using mobilisation power to gain bargaining power, but also by containing union demands within economic-corporate and sectoral limits. The Zárate union fights for an increase in real wages, by seeking an increase in both basic wages and company bonuses. The struggle against outsourcing and the defence of regional-level bargaining are other key aspects in the confrontation with employers. As to the forms of struggle, the solidarity strike – in which all chemical and petrochemical activity in the region is halted – stands out. Despite the mobilisation and bargaining power of workers, institutionalised and bureaucratic forms of decision-making predominate.

Lastly, the combative strategy in the edible oils sector sees capital and labour conflict as a central aspect in disputes over working conditions and wages, in establishing alliances with workers from other sectors, and in going beyond purely economic-corporate demands. Following the displacement of “bureaucratic” leaders, the combative faction that won the leadership of the oils Federation implemented a radical change in union strategy. Their main demands focused on defending wages and health conditions and combatting outsourcing. The Federation has also participated in the judicial proceedings investigating the disappearance of workers during the last military dictatorship. In terms of organisational aspects, the Federation promoted union democracy through the direct election of its leaders by all unionised workers and reinforced the role of delegates. Although union leaders claim to be independent from political parties, they define their ideological and political-union perspectives as classist. Hence, their mobilisation and bargaining power are based not only on workers’ strategic position but also on their union strategy. They have participated in important conflicts and upheld the national strike as the main weapon of the working class against capitalists.

This sectoral analysis of union strategies highlights the importance of unions’ political and ideological perspectives in approaching the problem of union and class power. The analysis also points to at least two main research areas that could deepen the study of union strategies in these sectors. One is to examine the relationship between union traditions and union action; the second is to study the role that state policies and employers’ strategies play in the dynamics of sectoral labour conflicts and collective bargaining.

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