

Book Review

Santella, Agustin (2016) *Labour Conflict and Capitalist Hegemony in Argentina: The Case of the Automobile Industry, 1990–2007.*

Leiden and London: Brill.

ISBN 978-9004291515, 244 pages, \$137

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The demise of the trade union movement has been presented as a reality throughout the world. In his book, *Labour Conflict and Capitalist Hegemony in Argentina*, Agustin Santella contends that this is not a definitive description of the situation. Based on a broad Marxist perspective that includes key issues like defining the working class today, trade union representation of that class, the method of general strikes and the trade union bureaucracy debate, Santella makes a case in favour of trade union action and survival in a context of capital's hegemonic despotism, with a focus on the automobile industry in Argentina. The actions of protest and consent within that context have lost the radical elements of the past, but nevertheless maintain the capacity to challenge the industry and keep unions afloat in difficult times.

Labour Conflict and Capitalist Hegemony in Argentina contributes three distinctive elements to contemporary debates on labour. First, it presents a view from the Global South on key Marxist debates around what trade unions are, who they represent, the uses of general strikes and issues with bureaucratic structures that sustain the organisations. Second, the book counters the arguments that unions were in demise during neo-liberal times, as in Argentina during the 1990s. Third, it challenges the view that union structures have been completely bureaucratised and do not represent the views of the rank-and-file workers. These three elements are the major contribution of the book, introducing the reader to a novel perspective of fundamental debates that have taken place in the last two decades within Marxist circles, supplemented by a thorough case study on the Automobile Workers Union (SMATA) in Argentina.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, and roughly four occupy each of the debates mentioned above. It starts with a revision of Marxist perspectives on trade unions, analysing Engels, Trotsky and especially Gramsci. The author states his views as being closer to Gramsci's analysis of trade unions, reinforcing the concept of hegemony to analyse the situation in the automobile industry in Argentina, as well as Gramsci's contributions regarding workers' councils – *Comisiones Internas* (CI). The CIs are a central component of trade union life in Argentina, and distinctively characteristic when compared to other semi-peripheral economies. This section helps to explain Santella's later analysis of SMATA's actions, which take place in a context of hegemonic despotism expressed by the neo-liberal regime of the 1990s, and are a representation of a union that does not challenge capital reproduction but rather tries to bargain within the constraints of that system.

A following chapter analyses the debates of Postone and Van der Linden regarding working class formation and whether we can think of a unique and comprehensive definition of the working

class. An interesting feature, also reproduced throughout the book, is that Santella places Marxist authors from Europe and the United States in debate with authors from Argentina, especially with the use of the work of Iñigo Carrera, a leading intellectual in the field in Argentina, who reinforces the idea that to understand working class formation we need to look at struggles and social confrontation. This exchange between perspectives brings to the fore the diverging understandings of working class formation and the role of contexts in those understandings, a critique that Van der Linden also makes of Postone's arguments. Santella puts forward the idea that there is no class without organisation, and thus trade unions are intrinsic to working class formation.

The author moves these exchanges further when he looks at the issue of the general strike and its uses in the context of Argentina. At first the chapter debates the conceptual differences between different authors, and then places these within the context of Argentina's long history of general strikes. As the author asserts at the beginning, strike action tends to be undermined in reactionary periods, but it is an element that cannot be overlooked in the case of Argentina. This is certainly the case when exploring the historical relevance of the general strikes in the country, but especially when looking at the 1990s. Santella challenges the commonly established ideas that labour opted for political alliances as a form of adapting to neo-liberal changes in Argentina during neo-liberalism. By listing all the strike actions and the general strikes during the Menem governments, Santella shows the relevance of struggles (although contained within a hegemony of neo-liberalism) that played out in the negotiations between unions, employers and the state during those times. Despite the alliances established with the Peronist parties, the use of general strikes as a strategy during the neo-liberal regime means that reformism, a predominant characteristic in Argentina's labour movement, can also resort to direct confrontations when needed. In this sense, and despite the serious blows on workers produced by neo-liberalism, trade unions managed to negotiate the effects of those policies.

On the issue of trade union bureaucracy, Santella questions the idea that union bureaucracy is disconnected from working-class interests, or the interests of the rank and file. To do so, he analyses in detail the situation in the automobile industry, focusing on cases that look at the roles of the workers' council (CIs) in Fiat and Ford terminal plants during the 1990s and in a second moment during the early 2000s. The overall conclusion is that SMATA acted according to the different political opportunities given at the workplaces and in a context of neo-liberal hegemony. The union based its actions and negotiations on the positions of the CIs, which at the same time were closely linked to workers' daily issues. This does not mean that all the decisions were made with the support of the entire plant, but they did represent the opinion of the majority of the workers in those workplaces. This finding, especially coming from an academic closer to the political position of the alternative forces within labour, challenges the idea that the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and its central union structures are lost to bureaucratic practices. This is partially the case, but in order to survive, these same bureaucracies have to be responsive to workers' demands. The issue of the legitimacy of actions, and rank-and-file support for decisions made by bureaucratic unions is often overlooked in labour debates on the left in Argentina. The role of unions like SMATA and the CGT (the largest confederation and historical backbone of trade unionism in the country) is often presented as against the interests of workers. Santella shows that this is not an established norm, while struggles within workplaces do not necessarily represent a lack of consensus for the decisions made by the union, including on critical moments like the reorganisation of the automobile industry during the 1990s.

The chapters of the book regarding the early 2000s narrate SMATA's action as very much in

line with the rest of the trade union movement, taking advantage of the political opportunity structure provided by the massive mobilisations of 2001, which placed capital on the defensive. Santella concurs with the assertions that the stages of rebellion did not lead to a revolutionary situation, but contributed to later conditioning capitalist development under the Nestor Kirchner administrations. SMATA showed that, despite the recession in the car manufacturing sector towards the end of the 1990s, the union had managed to maintain its presence in the industry and used that power to mobilise in the years of economic growth (especially during the strike wave of 2005). After losing presence in social struggles to movements like the road blockades – *piqueteros* – and other forms of organisation, from 2002 onwards trade unions regained the momentum and showed that their capacity to rally workers had not disappeared. Santella criticises the idea of a “revitalisation” since unions in Argentina had not “died” during the harshest neo-liberal years. He concurs with the idea of an increase in union activity post-crisis, but warns against the belief that this represents a reorganisation of the working class as a subject of historical transformation.

Labour Conflict and Capitalist Hegemony in Argentina is a necessary read for those who want to understand the realities of labour in the Global South in the last two decades, and especially to understand Argentine labour’s particularities that make it distinctive from other countries in Latin America. Santella’s detailed account of SMATA’s dynamics during those years is a valuable contribution to the theory of union survival throughout different regimes of capital accumulation. The critical analysis also provides a space for reflection on strategies and realities of trade unionism in the context of reversals of trade union rights due to the despotic accumulation of capital in the last three decades. The in-depth analysis of SMATA’s internal debates permits a reflection on the need to connect analytical categories with real cases that sustain, or confront, those categories. Without that connection, the theoretical debate will remain in the realm of academic circles. Overall, Santella brings to the table a theoretical reflection on Marxist perspectives which is complemented by the in-depth analysis of concurrent union debates. This opens the door for rethinking the ways in which we regard unionism in the Global South today.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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