

# ***The Universe of Worker-Recovered Companies in Argentina (2002-2008): Continuity and Changes Inside the Movement***<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Argentina's movement of worker-recovered companies (WRC) gained significant public visibility during and in the years following the institutional crisis of December 2001. In light of company shutdowns and dramatic increases in unemployment rates, many workers promoted the reopening of workplaces abandoned by their owners, giving origin to a movement that still exists to this day. Collectively, the actions centred on workplace and job "recoveries" have made up the distinguishing feature--or the "identity"--of the movement. Even though today's conjuncture is somewhat different than Argentina at the turn of the millennium, the universe of WRCs continues to expand. Moreover, the movement's new actors inscribe the earlier experiences of older WRCs onto their newer recoveries via their reinterpretation of collective memory. The objective of this article is to describe and analyze the characteristics of the expansion of the universe of WRCs in Argentina and compare the limits and potentialities between newer and older experiences of workplace recoveries. It also explores the specifics of how this expansion is due to a historical rereading of older worker experiences that influence how newer WRC protagonists self-identify with the broader WRC movement.

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## **Introduction: The two-way expansion of the universe of worker-recovered companies in Argentina**

Argentina's worker-recovered companies (WRC) movement gained significant public visibility during the period that followed the country's institutional crisis in December 2001. These self-managed companies constitute workers' responses to imminent job loss due to shutdowns or failures of employer-managed firms. In most cases, employees were among the first creditors in bankruptcy processes due to the breaching of labour contracts before the shutdowns took place. Facing the improbability of ever receiving salaries, benefits, or pension contributions owed, and in light of a socio-economic context that made it difficult for workers to get back into the labour market, workers of self-managed companies seek to take control of a

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firm's administration in order to, first and foremost, guarantee the continuity of their source of income. Soon after gaining control of the firm, the form of a workers' cooperative emerges as the legal construct that offers the most accessible solutions to these workers' needs.

Interestingly, a considerable number of more recent participating actors of the WRC movement link their experiences of converting a firm in crisis into a workers' coop to earlier workplace conflicts that occurred during and prior to December 2001. Some newer WRCs identify with these previous experiences more than others. Moreover, as our research team continues to build on a substantive database of WRCs--what we call the "universe of WRCs"--and gather more and more of these experiences as self-identified by its very actors, we find that the first registered cases of recovered companies actually precede the conjuncture of 2001, going back to the late-1990s or even earlier.

Today, the socio-economic context of Argentina has changed substantially in comparison to the period of acute national crisis around the turn of the millennium when the movement is said to have originated (Palomino 2008). Today's economic and social conjuncture, even taking into account the current world financial crisis, bears witness to a significant drop in the rate of structural unemployment in Argentina when compared to 2000-2002. Since at least 2005, there has been an evident improvement in the living conditions of an important portion of the country's working class. Nevertheless, the recovery of companies by employees continues to occur in Argentina, showing a clear continuity of the practice of worker-led workplace recovery within the country's new socio-economic context. This continuity encouraged us to inquire about the methods of and motivations for current recoveries compared to those that took place during Argentina's crisis of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. One of the tasks we take on in this article, therefore, is to compare the methods and motivators of workplace recoveries across the WRC universe based on the self-reported experiences of WRC protagonists themselves.

The data that we present in this article clearly shows that, despite the conjunctural changes in Argentina over the past dozen years or so, the continuity of company recoveries up to the present has produced a systematic expansion of the universe of WRCs (see Table 1). This also suggests to us a continuation of the practice of workplace recoveries and conversions in Argentina well into the foreseeable future as these practices transform, in the expectations of workers and even the state, into legitimate solutions to job loss and business failure throughout the country. This raises questions linked to the conditions of possibility for the recurrence of these experiences in the future when new micro- and macro-economic challenges will undoubtedly still compel workers to consider the occupation and conversion of firms in crisis into workers' cooperatives as viable solutions for saving and guaranteeing their jobs.

Curiously, *the expansion of the universe can also be seen to extend backwards into the past*, since new actors that might not have considered themselves WRCs in the early days of the phenomenon might now take on the identifying mark of a “recovered” company. Actors recently involved in newer workplace recoveries--recoveries and conversions that tend to be, for example, less conflictive than those that occurred at the height of the crisis years around 2001--also now bring with them memories and imaginaries of earlier workplace recoveries. These memories, we have been noticing, extend back to the earliest recoveries prior to 2001, the moment that the literature usually considers as the beginning of the movement. This suggests that it is the movement’s current protagonists--in their *imaginaries* and *memories*--that make these first “anticipatory” or “prefigurative” experiences with workspace recoveries and conversions still exist as such. This article will also explore the implications of these memories assimilated by the WRC movement for newer strategies and tactics of workplace recoveries and WRC organization. Indeed, these memories, we argue, have an important role to play in the steady and continued growth of the universe of WRCs.

### **What constitutes a WRC and inclusion into the “universe” of WRCs?**

In the essay “Kafka and His Precursors,” Jorge Luis Borges refers to the following apologue by Han Yu, a Chinese prose writer of the IX Century:

It is universally admitted that the unicorn is a supernatural being and one of good omen; this is declared in the odes, in the annals, in the biographies of illustrious men, and in other texts of unquestioned authority. Even the women and children of the populace know that the unicorn constitutes a favorable presage. But this animal is not one of the domestic animals, it is not always easy to find, it does not lend itself to classification. It is not like the horse or the bull, the wolf or the deer. And therefore we could be in the presence of the unicorn and we would not know for certain that it was one. We know that a certain animal with a mane is a horse, and that one with horns is a bull. We do not know what the unicorn is like.<sup>3</sup>

When building the worker-recovered company (WRC) database we had to decide what companies to include, which led to questions about the unit of analysis: What is a worker-recovered company? And, in the words of Han Yu, as channelled by Borges, does this phenomenon “lend itself to classification”?

Instead of trying to find a “proper” definition--perhaps layered with predetermining concepts that might not resonate with the protagonists of WRCs--we decided to guide our work according to the self-reported definitions provided by the protagonists of the WRC themselves, specifically

considering how they themselves define a worker-recovered company. We noticed that even amongst the movement's protagonists there is some controversy about what defines a WRC, especially concerning which practices are emphasized and which are not in deciding what a WRC is.<sup>4</sup> Most curiously, we also noticed that the universe of WRCs seems to expand faster than actual reported workspace recoveries. We hypothesize that this discrepancy is mainly due to the fact that some workers participating in worker self-managed experiences in Argentina today, who originally did not consider themselves part of the WRC movement when their self-managed firms first emerged, now do.

There are several cases of companies under workers' administration before the recognized "emergence" of the WRC movement in late 2001. However, these particular early cases were comparatively few and isolated experiences and did not yet constitute a "movement" with the same widespread characteristics that took shape during and after 2000-2002. The workers of these earlier self-managed experiences seem, however, to now reinterpret their historical memory in light of other recovered cases that have occurred since 2000-2002, the moment of the phenomenon's greatest public visibility. Clear examples of these earlier cases we have been documenting that now re-interpret their historical memory and self-include themselves as part of the WRC movement include: Campichuelo (founded in 1993), Unión Saladeña (Ex-Pindapoy) (founded in 1993), COTRAVESA (Cooperativa de Trabajo Vélez Sarfield) (founded in 1994), Adabor (founded in 1995), Puerto Vilelas (founded in 1995), Frigorífico Yaguané (founded in 1996), and some that even emerged before the 1990s, such as CITA (Cooperativa Industria Textil Argentina) (founded in 1952).

Observing the data in our WRC universe of cases, and analyzing the changes inside the movement that noticeably occurred around 2005, a year which witnessed the consolidation of Argentina's labour-market recovery,<sup>5</sup> we subsequently asked ourselves: What differences do we find between "older" and "newer" cases (those that emerged during and after 2005)? What changes are there in the movement's logics of association with other WRCs and in the organizational structures within WRCs as newer recoveries emerge? Could any of these possible changes or differences, if any, be related to the particularities of the expansion of the universe of WRC cases that we witness today?

After comparing WRC cases that emerged before and during the crisis with those that emerged in the post-crisis years, we did indeed find certain differences in the experiences of the processes of company recoveries. First of all, more recent experiences are immersed in a conjuncture of economic and labour growth. Secondly, there are now, in the post-crisis context, new public policies promoted by different state agencies that reinforce the legitimacy of company recoveries. Therefore, while the first experiences of WRCs constituted an unconventional response by workers to macro- and

micro-economic crises, newer experiences of WRCs tend to operate within a *quasi-institutional mechanism* within the Argentine juridical-political system that, in essence, are newly legitimated methods for avoiding further company shutdowns and the needless sale of assets of companies facing commercial or legal failure.

### The universe of WRCs<sup>6</sup>

The emergent notion of “recovered company”

Our most recent survey of the WRC universe allowed us to update a previous database we initially developed in 2005.<sup>7</sup> Our database now includes 221 worker-recovered companies from all over Argentina. This database also includes emerging WRCs that are still going through the recovery process. We were also able to update the information on our previous list's 170 companies. (However, the 51 cases that update our initial database are not included in this paper's analysis because the available information still needs further corroboration by our team.)<sup>8 9</sup> Interestingly, the small number of WRCs in our database that have dissolved since our original analysis (approximately 16) points to the low mortality rate of the WRC phenomenon; that is, only 7% of WRCs have stopped functioning, while 93% continue to operate.<sup>10</sup> Since the unit of analysis stemming from our multidimensional identification of WRC processes is in continuous transformation, the updating of the database is a constant challenge.

Table 1: Recovered companies by date of recovery<sup>11</sup>

Year of recovery	Number of Companies	
Before 2000	24	14 %
2000 to 2004	123	72 %
2005 to 2008	23	14 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>100 %</b>

Table 1 shows that almost three quarters of the worker-recovered companies that exist today in Argentina were recovered during the 2000-2004 period, largely linked to the context of the period's financial, social, and political crises; this segment of WRCs belongs to the period where many social movement groups and protagonists came to public light around the year 2001. Throughout the rest of the article, we refer to this period as the period of *initial* company recoveries. This assessment entails a reinterpretation of previous experiences (mostly between approximately 1998 and 2000) immediately prior to the constitution of the WRC as a “movement.” That is, we also include in the “initial” period cases of companies managed by their workers that appeared before the formation of the broader WRC movement itself.

This reinterpretation can be confirmed by one of the most emblematic WRCs that gave name to the movement: The notion of “recovered company” was

“born” in 2001 and was coined by the promoters of the worker recovery of IMPA,<sup>12</sup> located in the city of Buenos Aires neighbourhood of Caballito and the largest aluminium products manufacturer in Argentina at one time. Interestingly--and unlike most other WRC cases--this plant was already a cooperative when it was “recovered” by some of its workers. In 1998, due to many years of mismanagement and negligence by its workers’ council, one group of workers decided to “recover” it by changing its board of directors. During the deepening of the crisis of 2001, and based on the historical reinterpretation of the processes of workplace recoveries that had already begun by 1998 with IMPA, the notion of “recovered company” began to gain momentum, in no small way via the dissemination of this concept through the political work of the Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas (National Movement of Recovered Companies, or MNER), made up mostly of IMPA workers at the time.

Since roughly 2005, newer WRC protagonist that subsequently began taking part in the movement also promoted their practices as “recoveries.” Interestingly, those that had been involved in recoveries prior to the crisis years of 2000-2002 also began to *reinterpret* their historical memory by identifying their pre-2000-2002 experiences with the worker-led workplace “recoveries” that emerged during the crisis years.

Some distinguishing features of the WRC movement

In this section, before moving on to analyze the impacts of the emergent notion of a *recovered company* to the WRC movement and to the organizational structures of its firms, we take stock of WRCs’ most common characteristics and most salient variances.

Regarding their size, 70% of WRCs have less than 50 workers and only 4% have more than 200 (see Table 2). This allows us to characterize most of the cases of this universe as small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), except for very few cases, such as the famous worker-recovered ceramics factory Zanón which has around 400 workers.

Table 2: Recovered companies by number of workers

<b>Number of workers</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Less than 15	35	21
15 to 49	85	50
50 to 99	28	16
100 to 199	16	9
200 or more	6	4
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>100</b>

As Table 3 shows, these experiences have taken place in a wide variety of economic sectors. They are especially prominent in industries such as food,

metallurgy, textiles, and the service sector (primarily in health and education).

Table 3: Recovered companies by economic activity

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Subtotal</b>
<b>Industry Subtotal</b>		<b>130</b>
Food	38	
Metallurgy	26	
Textile	16	
Printing	7	
Ceramics	6	
Glass	6	
Electrical appliances	5	
Chemical	5	
Press	4	
Metal mechanical	3	
Plastic	3	
Shipyards	2	
Packaging	2	
Wood	2	
Automotive	1	
Building fixtures	1	
Others (rubber, tanning, paper)	3	
<b>Services Subtotal</b>		<b>25</b>
Health	8	
Education	4	
Tourism (hotel management)	3	
Mechanic (repairing services)	3	
Service station	1	
Gas (fractionation and distribution)	1	
Radio	1	
Others (wholesale, workshop, paint, etc.)	4	
<b>Transport Subtotal</b>		<b>5</b>
<b>Commerce Subtotal</b>		<b>6</b>
Restaurant	3	
Supermarket	2	
Armaments	1	
<b>Mining Subtotal</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>Construction Subtotal</b>		<b>2</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>170</b>

Table 4 shows that WRCs are concentrated in the industrial centres of the country. More than 50% of these companies are in the city of Buenos Aires (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, or CABA) and its surroundings (Gran Buenos Aires, or GBA), 15% in the rest of Buenos Aires province, 10% in Santa

Fe province, and the remaining 39 cases are distributed along the rest of the national territory.

Table 4: Recovered companies by geographic location

<b>District</b>	<b>Number of Companies</b>
GBA	58
CABA	30
Buenos Aires	26
Santa Fe	17
Córdoba	6
Mendoza	5
Corrientes	4
La Rioja	4
Chaco	3
La Pampa	3
Neuquén	3
Río Negro	3
San Juan	3
Chubut	2
Entre Ríos	2
Tierra del Fuego	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>170</b>

Our analysis shows considerable heterogeneity regarding the methods of recovery, allowing us to detect diverse strategies and factors involved in the recuperation of jobs over the past dozen years or so. Understanding the various organizations that have supported some of the recoveries are key for understanding these different strategies.

A group of interesting cases involves those in which trade unions were involved in the recovery of the plant. While some unions offered support or even guidance to recovery processes, other unions reacted negatively to these experiences or chose to not get involved with these conflicts (such as in the textile and food sectors). Unions which were supportive of WRCs include some sections of Argentina's Unión Obrera Metalurgica (Metallurgic Labour Union, or UOM) such as the Quilmes, province of Buenos Aires local UOM Quilmes, the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense (Buenos Aires Graphic Labour Federation), the Asociación de Empleados de Comercio de Rosario (Rosario Commercial Employees' Association), and the Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (Argentinean Workers Central, or CTA).

Similar inconsistencies can be found in the actions of local governments, legislative bodies, and juridical institutions. Certain political blocks within the legislative assemblies of the city of Buenos Aires, the province of Buenos Aires, some local governments such as the municipality of Gaiman in the province of Chubut, and other provincial governments such as La Pampa's, chose to



support some WRCs within their jurisdictions, while other representative local and regional governments did not. The same can be said for certain bankruptcy court judges and judicial officials as they deliberated on the legality and viability of each WRC on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, as we will discuss in detail in the last section of this article, several changes of positions and strategies throughout the years can also be observed in the different representative social movements and political groups that have “guided” the recovery processes to date.<sup>13</sup>

These variables aside, it is possible that the variances and changes in strategies of workplace recoveries and conversions could also be related to the expansion of the universe of WRCs itself. First, because of the length of time it takes for the processes of workplace recoveries to play out, WRCs face new and changing challenges and difficulties throughout, at times forcing the self-managed workers to redefine their alliances and associational affiliations. For reasons that we will elaborate on shortly, there are also a plethora of new difficulties that workers have to confront once they have moved beyond the recovery stage and begin the task of stabilizing the business. Second, and, again, as we will elaborate on later in the essay, the reinterpretation of the historical memory of earlier WRC experiences in recent years has witnessed the increased participation in the WRC movement of labour and cooperative organizations that were not deeply involved in workplace recoveries during the “initial” period of WRCs. An example of an older organization that has recently integrated itself more with the WRC movement is FECOOTRA (see endnote 13), which has been in the recent past more closely aligned with the traditional cooperative movement that preceded WRCs (indeed, during the “initial” period of WRCs Argentina’s traditional and much older cooperative movement itself played a minor role in the WRC movement).

There are also variances in the degree of conflict that WRCs have had to go through. It is, for example, possible to identify a group of WRCs that have had highly troubled experiences of recovery (e.g., Brukman, Zanón, and Chilavert), as well as another group that have had less-troubled recoveries, where, for example, the recuperation of the firm by workers emerged out of more “peaceful” agreements with the former owners (e.g., Cooperativa Metalúrgica Vicente Hermanos (or MVH) from Villa Martelli, Cooperativa San Carlos from Avellaneda, Cooperativa Campos de San Martín in the Provincia de Buenos Aires, the former Textil San Remo from Lanús, and Cooperativa 11 de Junio from Berazategui, among others).

In some cases, workers resolve the issue of taking over private property and a business’s assets and facilities via the now-legally recognized method of regional legislatures expropriating these firms on behalf of workers (see our discussion of this below), while others still operate under unstable legal situations (e.g., the city of Buenos Aires’s Hotel BAUEN). In other cases,

bankruptcy courts grant the workers' cooperative use of the business's machinery or buildings as payment for salaries due, or decide to rent or lease the business's facilities to the workers' coop in order to enable them to continue with the project of self-management. These various legal options allow these workers to break links with former owners and help WRCs maintain some of the same members of the labour group that had worked at the previous firm, while also helping to restart the firm as a new company, again, usually under the legal rubric of a workers' cooperative. Table 5 shows the distribution of the 170 cases according to their methods of recovery.

Table 5: Recovered companies by recovery methods

<b>Method</b>	<b>Number of Companies</b>
Resorted to expropriation	98
Acquired the company's assets by other means (transfer, purchase, lease, rent, etc.)	67
No information	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>170</b>

In particular, Table 5 shows the importance of the expropriation mechanism for the process of workplace recovery in Argentina: 60% of the cases resorted to this legal instrument, while 40% acquired the firm's assets and facilities by other means (e.g., transfer, purchase, rent, etc.). Of the 98 firms that have been expropriated to date, 94 of them have been authorised to operate by an expropriation act, while the other 4 are in a transition period of expropriation as the workers still await a bill of expropriation from regional legislatures.

It is important to make clear that the expropriation procedure is the result of a case-by-case process. That is, there is no national law of expropriation for these firms. Instead, a unique legislative bill is passed for each case according to the political situation of the region and the particulars of each case's conflicts. In this sense, even though a *de facto* recovery "mechanism" has been set up in Argentina, the bankruptcy act as such has not been amended as of yet in order to transform this mechanism of expropriation into an official institutional means of resolving the bankruptcy process for all cases of workplaces in conflict.

Having just laid out some of the most common characteristics of the universe of WRCs, we return to the question posed at the beginning of this article: What aspects of the movement of recovered companies in Argentina are most important for distinguishing or delineating their experiences? Undoubtedly, this question has been one of the key points of reflection for researchers and observers of the WRC movement. Additionally, as the universe of WRCs keeps expanding, it may also be of interest to discern if whether, beyond just the symbolic relevance of WRCs,<sup>14</sup> the movement has now reached a stage where it is large enough to begin to have considerable

economic impact in terms of the number of companies and workers involved.<sup>15</sup>

### **Key criteria in defining a “recovered company”**

Some definitions and meanings in the WRC literature

When exploring the emergence of the WRC phenomenon and the construction of the identifying characteristics of workplace recoveries, we are faced with different situations and options for designating a particular case or experience as a “worker-recovered company.” One way that researchers distinguish these experiences is linked to the specific origins of WRCs.

For example, the literature tends to trace the experiences of factory occupations in Argentina with workers’ repertoires of collective action,<sup>16</sup> or registers the processes of conversions within the evolution of cooperativism in recent years in Argentina.<sup>17</sup> The literature also tends to agree as to the starting point of the WRC phenomenon, usually placing it somewhere within the crisis years of 2000-2002. Moreover, the literature suggests that this phenomenon deals with actions, strategies, and tactics capable of creating “ways out” or “defensive alternatives” in view of the very real risks of structural unemployment or loss of jobs in Argentina in recent years. That is, it tends to identify the real and felt consequences of desperation amongst a group of workers caused by the need to survive in a context of a labour market in deep crisis around 2000-2002, a crisis that motivated them to take on the risky actions of occupying and attempting to self-manage their failing firms.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, researchers looking at WRCs tend to agree that these actions were further motivated by the perception that there was, at the time, no possibility of relying on the Argentine state to support them, a state which was absent in terms of job promotion, although present in terms of liberalisation and deregulation of labour markets. Many authors agree that the origin of these experiences was a defensive response to the crisis rather than the product of an ideology of self-determination or workers’ control through cooperative or socio-economic projects.<sup>19</sup> For these authors, WRCs are considered new forms of collective social practices, or the re-collectivization of older labour practices within a context of deep social and institutional fragmentation that took place in the country during these years of crisis. As such, the option taken by some workers of re-grouping around the project of forming a WRC when collectively facing structural unemployment offered them concrete ways out of this during a time of deep social, political, and economic crisis.<sup>20</sup>

But the evolution of these experiences also involved their *symbolic re-elaboration* through which different actors in subsequent years reinterpreted the practices and concepts of occupying a failing firm and eventually self-managing them as workers’ coops. As such, researchers have also focused

on different aspects of these reinterpretations. Some emphasize the collective component of the project,<sup>21</sup> while others highlight a defining event such as the moments whereby workers' physically occupy and squat the company as they await legal solutions and recognition.<sup>22</sup> Some focus on the actual responses of workers living in a state of extreme necessity before imminent job losses.<sup>23</sup> Other authors primarily emphasize the possibilities for change in these protagonists' labour and social identities--that is, the changes that occur in their subjectivity--made possible by the experiences of recuperating a failing business.<sup>24</sup> Some highlight the newness of this type of response to micro-economic crises, mainly as a new mechanism of job security available for a group of workers facing imminent job loss.<sup>25</sup> Yet another group of investigators look mostly at the importance of these experiences in terms of a "demonstration" of the capacity of workers to self-organise their productive activity.<sup>26</sup> And, finally, a group of researchers suggest that these methods and experiences are not homogeneous but, rather, quite a diverse means to recover or save one's source of income.<sup>27</sup>

#### The actors' own criteria

Rather than appropriate these researchers' definitions, we have decided to define the processes of workplace recoveries by relying on the very words and vocabularies used and emphasized by WRC actors themselves.<sup>28</sup> We base our actor-focused interpretation on our own study of different cases of WRCs, on our explorations of the universe of WRCs from the first cases on up to present cases, on our analyses of the actual actions of WRCs' various actors and of the diverse movements and organizations involved with WRCs, and on our study of the policies and practices of the various echelons of the Argentine state that take interest in these experiences.

From out of this research, we have identified three processes of identity construction linked broadly to three related groups:

(1) *The definitions offered by WRC workers.* We have found that workers tend to self-identify with the greater movement of WRCs and adopt the title of an "*empresa recuperada*" (recovered enterprise) or "*fábrica recuperada*" (recovered factory) from out of their own experiences. This can be verified not only within WRCs that are strongly associated with the origins of the movement, but also with WRCs that have emerged more independently in more recent years.

(2) *The definitions offered by outside actors working with WRCs--* for example, organisations that represent groups of WRCs and lobby on their behalf as allies and/or promoters of workplace recuperations. These organizations (see endnote 13) often use the word "recovered" in their names or include the term in their actions of collective representation or consultancy activities.

Here we are specifically referring to the different organizations that specifically call themselves “movements” (see endnote 13) and their protagonists, different labour or worker-based organizations that also contribute to defining WRC protagonists as political subjects (such as the CTA), and various government actors within institutions that participate in strategies of associating or assisting WRCs, such as: the Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Industrial (National Institute of Industrial Technology, or INTI) through its “Technical Assistance and Innovation Network for Recovered Companies” program; the government of the city of Buenos Aires through the “Buenos Aires City Recovered Companies’ Register;” and the Ministry of Labour through its “Self-Managed Labour Program.”<sup>29</sup>

(3) *The reinterpretation of the historical memory of the earliest WRCs when the protagonists of more recent WRCs self-identify their experiences with “recovered companies.”* These reinterpretations unfold by means of newer WRC protagonists identifying with or otherwise connecting their experiences of workplace conversions with the collective memory of older WRC experiences from the “initial” period, or from earlier periods in Argentina’s labour history. This desire to self-identify with the WRC movement constitutes a key indicator of the movement’s lasting symbolic potential.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, and as we will explain shortly, the self-identification of newer workplace conversions with older WRCs tends to also be promulgated by newer protagonists of representative organizations that remained ancillary to the WRC movement during the “initial” phase of WRCs.

When surveying the universe of WRCs in accordance with these three schemas of identity construction, three periods of the WRC phenomenon can be more clearly distinguished: (1) the aforementioned “initial” period revolving around the economic crisis year of 2001, when an actual “movement” of WRCs, and in particular MNER, enter the greater Argentine public’s awareness; (2) the “post-crisis” period, from circa 2005 up until the present, when new cases of recovered companies appeared within a context of an improved economy and the fall of national unemployment rates; and (3) the period previous to the 2001 crisis, within different socio-economic conjunctures and varying experiences of “recoveries,” some of them occurring during earlier socio-economic crises in the early 1990s, the 1980s, and even before.

Diverse “methods” of recovery

On the whole, the processes of identifying a recovered company, from the perspective of our analysis, usually involve recognizing the various common “methods” of actual workplace recovery, which include: (1) owners

“abandoning” their firm while the workers stay on in the factory so as to preserve their jobs and income sources; (2) owners selling or transferring the assets of the firm to the workers in compensation for unpaid salaries and benefits; or (3) workers acquiring the machinery from the previous firm while renting or even leasing a different workplace in order to continue with production. In some cases, companies actually went bankrupt and workers took over the plant after bankruptcy proceedings began. In other cases, bankruptcy was imminent but workers took the plant before court proceedings unfolded. In short, *the conversion of a firm into a WRC is taken up by a collective of workers embarking on a project of self-management for various reasons via heterogeneous methods of recovery particular to their microeconomic context*. This heterogeneity of recovery methods forces the observer, researcher, and the very protagonists of the WRCs to participate in a permanent process of conceptual definition, constantly redefining or expanding the notion of “recovery” as new WRCs emerge, and as the collective memory of past recoveries shift in the imaginaries of these workers.

### **Old and new experiences of company recoveries**

#### From “movement” to “mechanism”

Comparing WRC cases that emerged during the conjuncture of crisis of the “initial” period and those that emerged afterwards during the “post-crisis” period enabled us to observe certain changes in the experiences and processes of company recoveries. First, more recent experiences are situated within a scene of an improved national economy and higher employment rates, especially since 2005. Second, in the “post-crisis” period new public policies stimulated by different state entities appeared, increasing WRCs’ social, political, and legal legitimacy. Thus, while the experiences of the “initial” period were seen at the time to be unconventional responses from workers in light of a conjuncture of deep socio-economic crisis, newer recoveries now operate in what can be termed a *quasi-institutional framework* enabling more recent WRCs to circumvent some of the difficulties earlier WRCs faced, such as having to negotiate their legal status and the outstanding debts of former owners, or impending evictions, shutdowns, or the threat of asset liquidation. Moreover, more recent state policies have allowed, to varying degrees, the introduction of workplace conversions as an “out” for a collective of former employees desiring to self-manage a dying business—not only as way of saving jobs during severe macro-economic crises, but also as a precautionary measure of saving a business in crisis, and as a less-costly alternative to bankruptcy proceedings and closure or asset stripping by fleeing owners. Moreover, the mere threat of employees converting a firm into a WRC is now seen by many to be a new tool in the hands of Argentina’s workers for them to put pressure on bosses thinking of engaging in non-compliance of labour regulations.

In sum, while companies go bankrupt and others appear all the time, nowadays a new alternative set of tools exist in Argentina for a collective of employees: the worker-recovery of their companies. In the “post-crisis” period, a quasi-institutional mechanism of recuperation now operates enabling workers to recover or secure their sources of income. This mechanism is transmitted amongst workers from different plants and economic sectors through relatives, movement leaders, other players inside the movement, the media, the Internet, various sympathetic social movements, government actors, trade unions, etc. By *mechanism* we do not mean that labour issues at the point-of-production are now able to be resolved beforehand without much struggle. Rather, we mean that there now exists another set of options and certain accepted routines of company recoveries capable of being activated by workers when a firm begins to show signs of imminent closure. Via the media and myriad social networks, public visibility of the movement generated a feedback loop for this “mechanism,” now available for workers that face situations of crises or when sensing the imminent risk of job loss or closure of their plant.

#### From survival to development

When WRCs begin to overcome the immediate challenges of the first days, weeks, and months as a self-managed plant--what can be called a WRC’s “survival” period--their worker collective is then faced with the challenge of the continuity and development of their firms--that is, their long-term viability. Some recent studies on this theme have inquired into different aspects of self-management, analyzing the main difficulties that different WRC experiences have to deal with in their actual processes of self-management.<sup>31</sup> Among WRCs’ main weaknesses, the following tend to be stressed in the literature: a precarious legal framework that often prevents them from applying for loans;<sup>32</sup> issues related to collective management bottlenecks and tendencies of self-exploitation;<sup>33</sup> or current obstacles to building new identities as cooperators or as self-managed workers needing to work in solidarity.<sup>34</sup>

One of the unresolved challenges of WRCs is the weak legal situation they tend to find themselves in. As we briefly touched on already, workers are usually afforded temporary use of the facilities in usufruct by legal institutions as previous debts remain unpaid or bankruptcy situations remain unresolved. Because these “solutions” are usually done at the local level on a firm-by-firm basis, they are always subject to possible changes in public policies. Indeed, as long as the state does not offer financial assistance to cover for expenses for expropriation proceedings, for example, previous owners may find it easier to begin reverse-expropriation trials to recover their workplaces.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, although there are a considerable number of government assistance programs, these subsidies are usually not enough for the continued capitalization needs of medium to large WRCs which continue to face many difficulties in obtaining long-term loans to renew or fix machinery, which is frequently obsolete already by the time workers take over the firm.

Another difficulty is the paucity of professional, technical, and administrative staff at most WRCs since these employees are normally among the first to leave when the decision of occupying the workplace is taken. This deficiency results in many management struggles that various agreements with universities and government agencies have been trying to resolve, with dissimilar results. Moreover, the self-managed workers' relationship with external professional personnel is complex: in some WRCs mechanisms of cooperation with external professionals were successfully set up. These cases depend on the confidence that the "external professional" is capable of establishing with the workers of a particular WRC and on the capacity of the professional to adapt to a logic that is different to that of a traditional, owner-run company. In some occasions, the technical or feasibility reports produced by these professional consultants have considered key aspects of self-management--processes established by the very collective of workers themselves--as actual organizational deficits. From the perspective of professionals, such "deficits" might include the WRC's reduced levels of supervision, their horizontalized and decentralized workplaces, and the frequency of workers' assembly meetings. These anti-self-management views serve to de-legitimize these recommendations, and the professionals that author them, in the eyes of WRC workers.

One unique experience that has managed to overcome some of the typical managerial challenges faced by WRCs is the case of the Pauny tractor factory in the town of Las Varillas in the province of Córdoba. Its continuity--and subsequent growth--was secured through a co-management solution. Pauny was reopened as a corporation whereby the control of the property was redistributed as follows: 33% control was given to the workers' cooperative (which is made up of the assembly-line and shop floor workers), 33% to the original managers and administrative staff, 33% to the trademark licensor, and 1% to the municipal government of Las Varillas. According to Buffa, Pensa, & Roitman, this case opens up a debate at the core of the WRC movement: Through such a co-management "mechanism" a cooperative can end up being subsumed by the usual capitalist organisational model.<sup>36</sup> Some protagonists of the WRC movement--such as Pauny's own workers--have seen this particular case differently, however: As long as a mixed, co-management mechanism guarantees the continuity of income sources and preserves workers' identities such a division of labour can still be considered as an achievement rather than as restrictive to workers. Indeed, by creating a cooperative under the umbrella of a broader corporation the Pauny workers managed to avoid the most typical legal and managerial problems faced by other WRCs. Moreover, the Pauny workers seem to have found a way to effectively coordinate knowledge and information sharing concerning production, design, marketing, commercialization, labour organisation, and administration issues with the other co-managers of the plant.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the Pauny workers, in turn, have been able to reformulate and influence management methods at the



plant (for example, for the workplace to become more democratic) even though this version of co-management did not involve the complete restructuring of labour-capital relations at Pauny.<sup>38</sup>

But the case of Pauny is an exception in the universe of WRCs. There are still important challenges to overcome in most WRCs as they struggle to more firmly institutionalize the processes available to workers aspiring to recover plants in trouble in Argentina. For example, the bankruptcy act has yet to be amended to better serve WRCs; the current legal bankruptcy framework falls short of meeting these companies' most immediate needs during and after workers recover firms in trouble. Several legislative bills initiated in order to reform current bankruptcy laws, and introduced after the first WRC experiences, have since stalled. The continued inefficacy of bankruptcy laws for the sustainability of WRCs has found its protagonists looking for alternative solutions, such as the struggle to reform the Cooperatives Act, although concrete changes to the act have also yet to be finalized.<sup>39</sup> Initiatives for better social security laws and policies for WRC workers have also stagnated and are desperately needed. The lack of strong social security policies for WRC workers is pushing many of them to look for alternative solutions in order to face the difficulties of losing the social protection they had as employees. In the same way that standing cooperative law does not adequately respond to the everyday needs and realities of WRCs, the "*monotributista*" construct of social security delivery whereby "independent" workers such as WRC protagonists have access only to two of the five social security benefits guaranteed to other Argentine workers working for bosses (pensions and health services) is also inadequate for the broader needs of these workers.

Nevertheless, in spite of the persistence of these difficulties, many authors are still optimistic about the future of WRCs.<sup>40</sup>

Many organizations are now explicitly working with WRCs in their struggle for new legislation, legal status, and financial assistance in order to better facilitate their development. In this respect, the Annual Report of the CTA-affiliated Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Autogestionados (National Association of Self-Managed Workers, or ANTA),<sup>41</sup> for example, included an amendment to the Argentine Expropriation Act to specifically consider the particularities of WRCs, the creation of a Technological Conversion Fund for WRCs, the approval of self-managed worker regulations, the remission of self-managed companies' debts with state organizations, the promotion of legislation to favour worker cooperatives provisioning products for the state, and, within the Ministry of Education, the creation of a social, popular and community management department.

Specific answers to questions concerning the articulation and implementation of institutional support that would contribute to the development of these kinds of self-managed organizations within the so-

called “social economy” are still pending and under debate. Such questions revolve around how WRCs can best transform into real productive alternatives and not merely be a means of survival for a few workers within the traditional labour market. How to best tackle these outstanding questions remains a challenge for each WRC, for their representative organizations, and for the state itself. Finally, it is clear that the Argentine state needs modify its logic of using “traditional methods” of saving jobs and supporting workers at risk by considering seriously the “new” situations of economic crises faced by workers in Argentina and their “new” responses to these crises.

#### Transformations of WRC associations and “movements”

As we have already suggested, the strategies applied by recovered company workers and other protagonists when forming WRC-based associations--or “*movimientos*” (movements), as they are also called in Argentina--have changed throughout the years. In this section, we will discuss some hypotheses that might shed light on these changes in movement- and association-building strategies by linking them to the expansion of the WRC universe itself.

These changes are linked to the historically observable low “mortality rate” of recovered companies (see above). In the “initial” phase of WRCs, the main focus of its associations was to assist in securing the plant for the workers as quickly as possible, help the workers in legal matters, lobby state institutions on the workers’ behalf, and give aid in getting production started as soon as possible. In more recent years, with the “mechanism” for recovery more solidly in place, the issue that now tends to take up WRC associations’ time is how existing worker-recovered companies are to concretely face challenges to long-term organizational sustainability and expansion.

In general, after a WRC at least partially solves the most common problems initially faced by the workers’ collective (such as overcoming precarious situations of property repossession, resistance to eviction threats, finding and securing initial capital and/or renegotiating agreements with suppliers, etc.) other issues soon arise. These latter issues are directly related to eventual job reorganization at the workplace, establishing adequate production levels, marketing requirements, management issues, and general administration needs--that is, issues concerning how to self-manage the firm. In most cases, there is also a permanent tension between a WRC’s growth expectations and the preservation of the sense of solidarity amongst workers. These are all common challenges that have existed throughout the history of WRCs. More recently, however, the existence of the quasi-institutional mechanism we discussed at length above has tended to speed up a WRCs passing from its initial situation of recovery to the stage of actual self-management and production. Also, the reinterpretation of the actors’ historical memory expanding the WRC universe backwards “into the past” brings to the movement more “traditional” concepts of cooperativism.

These factors explain some of the changes that have taken place with inter-WRC associative methods and the current place of associations within the movement. Today, for example, one type of associative process sees WRCs from the same economic sector forming alliances. Another type of associative strategy sees a rapprochement with traditional cooperative groups. Both processes--building associations intra-sectorally and with the traditional, non-WRC cooperative movement--may overlap. At the same time, different WRC actors within these newer associations, and for different reasons, are starting more and more to refer more broadly to *self-managed work* as one of the central concepts up for consideration and debate, having specific implications for the alliance priorities of WRC organizations and "movements" existing today. These reprioritizations mark a noticeable change when contemporary WRC associations are compared with the mostly political interests of the associations that were present during the "initial" period of WRCs.

*Recovered companies, cooperativism, and  
the formation of sectoral networks*

The relationship between the more traditional cooperative movement that preceded the WRC phenomenon and the recovered companies has changed throughout the years. During the period of WRCs' highest public visibility (2001–2004), most members of the WRC organizations of the time tended to argue that they were making use of the cooperative model merely as a legal framework in order to more quickly resolve the otherwise precarious legal situations of WRCs. At the same time, during the "initial" period, WRC protagonists (for various reasons we map out below) tended to distance themselves from the traditional cooperative movement, continuing instead to identify more with the labour movements and economic sectors that they had belonged to when they were employees of the previous firm. Moreover, those having a more "radical" position of "nationalization" of their recovered firms under "workers' control"--such as first advocated by the workers of Clínica Junín in Córdoba, Brukman in the City of Buenos Aires, and Zanón in the province of Neuquén--eventually ended up adopting the legal framework of a workers' cooperative when the state refused to nationalize these WRCs. With no other legal options left during the "initial" period, and at a time when they were starting to experiment with and debate how to best proceed with the self-management of their firms and minimize the risks of eviction or state repression, most early WRCs reluctantly turned to the workers' cooperative model as the quickest way to restart production.

WRCs' initial reluctance to reach out to the traditional cooperative movement was (and in many cases still is) based on two major factors:

On the one hand, there has been an ideological rejection of cooperative values by some of the most militant WRC protagonists because, for these

workers, cooperativism is a conservative position and not a real alternative to the status quo capitalist system in Argentina; that is, cooperativism does not lay out any strategic anti-capitalist objectives. It was these WRC protagonists who most grudgingly adapted the worker coop model as an organizational solution for WRCs. While many WRC actors shared this anti-coop position in the “initial” period, it is less emphatically and less broadly shared today than in the years immediately following 2001, although it is a position still held by some protagonists. Among the staunchest advocates of the anti-cooperativist position were those advocating the idea of reopening WRCs as “state-owned companies under workers’ control,” some leaders from ANTA-CTA (see endnote 13), and the IMPA-wing of MNER most closely aligned with MNER’s former president, Eduardo Murúa (see endnotes 13 and 45).

On the other hand, there is a more pragmatic position that questions cooperativism only in regards to the inadequacies of Argentina’s Cooperatives Act for meeting the specific and unique needs of WRCs. Advocates of this position particularly point out the Act’s blind spot concerning the specificities of worker-led recovery processes. In addition, the paucity of details concerning democratic principles in the Act means that it does not adequately reflect the actual democratic procedures practiced in most WRCs. Here, the Act is particularly seen as de-emphasizing workers’ participation in WRCs because it only considers the legal requirement of holding a yearly members’ assembly where coop policies and budget allocations are decided on and workers’ council members elected; the Act does not take into account the actual frequency of workers’ assemblies in most WRC experiences. This point is emphasized by many actors, especially by members of the Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores (National Movement of Worker-Recuperated Factories, or MNFRT) headed by the lawyer Luis Caro (see endnote 44). In some experiences, the lack of legal recognition of the frequency of workers’ assemblies is resolved by informal means or by modifying the articles of association of each WRC.<sup>42</sup>

Despite these two common critiques of cooperativism, hostility towards traditional cooperativism has been mellowing as of late, leading towards much more diffuse boundaries between WRCs and traditional cooperative organizations. These two cooperative sectors are increasingly sharing more spaces and talks, and second and third tier coop organizations have recently been forming between them. This does not, of course, mean that every recovered company worker embraces cooperative principles wholeheartedly, but we do see a definite trend of rapprochement between the two coop sectors, and believe that this newer development is worth understanding. It is, we believe, directly linked to the increased focus on the “how to’s” of self-management by more and more WRC protagonists who must now, in a different economic conjuncture and after some years into their cooperative project, think about sustaining and perhaps even growing their firm.

In the newer scene of association building within the WRC phenomenon, where cooperative values and practices are now emerging as key areas for development, the role of the aforementioned second-tier workers' cooperative FECOOTRA, a much older organization than the WRC phenomenon (see endnote 13), has grown in importance. Originally founded in 1977 as the limited liability company Ferrograf during the last military dictatorship, and with the initial support of railway and graphics workers, it was specifically created to offer a solution to the persecution of unemployed trade union activists at the time. In 1988 Ferrograf became a cooperative, out of which, at the same time, FECOOTRA was founded on May 29<sup>th</sup> of that year--an emblematic date for the Argentine labour movement.<sup>43</sup> The same spirit of labour-cooperative association and networking which was present at its founding accompanies the Federation to this day; one of the founding principles of FECOOTRA establishes the "integration of the associates to the trade union." Even though some recovered companies could be found within FECOOTRA throughout the "initial" period, it maintained a low profile during these years while the main organizations that represented WRCs at the time--specifically MNER and MNFRT--were engaged in more outwardly activist, confrontational, and political practices. Moreover, FECOOTRA never has had aggressive policies for adding new members. Its goal, rather, has been over the past few years to work towards closer interlinking between traditional cooperatives, traditional labour, and WRCs. Indicative of this position, FECOOTRA states that it is not possible to talk about individual "recovered" companies but of "cooperative associations of recovered companies," focussing the issue on the logic of continuity with the history and principles of the cooperative movement. FECOOTRA's leaders have long emphasized this inter-organizational stance, having maintained strong connections with members of UOM Quilmes and the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense and, at times, with some leaders of WRC organizations such as Luis Caro from MNFRT or Rufino Almeida from ANTA-CTA.

The WRC movement's rapprochement with the traditional cooperative movement is extending to other, newer WRC associations that have emerged recently, such as the Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajadores Autogestionados (Self-Managed Workers' Cooperative Federation of Argentina, or FACTA) (see endnote 13). FACTA, a second-degree cooperative federation, was founded by a group of dissident former members of MNER based out of the Hotel BAUEN and by José Abelli, who used to head MNER's work in the province of Sante Fe. It emerged out of the second fracturing of MNER in 2005 from internal disputes concerning whether the organization should continue to focus primarily on political and lobbying activities or whether, in the new, "post-crisis" phase of WRCs, the focus should be more on how to actually consolidate cooperativism within a WRC and how self-management can unfold most effectively.<sup>44</sup> Today, FACTA actively promotes a rapprochement with the traditional cooperative sector as a central component of its platform.

In sum, there are three principle reasons why newer WRC organizations are emphasizing rapprochement with the traditional cooperative movement: (1) WRCs' continuing need for assistance to solve their concrete and everyday issues concerning the "how-to's" of self-management without putting at risk WRCs' principles of solidarity; (2) the decreasing influence of the anti-cooperativist views held by more radical WRC protagonists, mainly due to the loss of legitimacy of the position of "state-owned companies under workers' control" and the fragmentation of MNER; and (3) the creation and increasing influence of FACTA, an organization that over the past two years has been openly promoting cooperative values and dialoguing with the traditional cooperative movement.

The most important of these three points, we believe, is the first. It permeates and drives the reasons for the other two. Organizations linked to traditional cooperativism, including FECOOTRA, are established and have the knowledge and experience needed to more readily deal with institutional actors such as the government and financial organizations, as well as skills in building networks. In this sense, in the WRC phenomenon FECOOTRA's leaders attentively observed a process emerging from the grassroots and had the necessary vision to help give it shape as well as organizational support.

Another recent development in the formation of inter-WRC organizations has been the emergence of sectoral associations. For example, gestures of solidarity emerged at the end of 2006 among the recovered print and graphics sector companies in and near the city of Buenos Aires, eventually forming into the the Red Gráfica (the Graphics Network). This second degree cooperative gathers WRCs created during the first months following the 2001 crisis, such as Gráfica Chilavert, and other more "historical" graphics cooperatives like the 50 year-old Cogtal (which, interestingly, also received the support of FECOOTRA and the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense trade union in the past). There are different working commissions in the Network with various concrete links to government agencies. These commissions have the explicit objective of coordinating productive capacity and social work between the different member print shops.

An additional trend that has emerged in recent years is for WRCs to be members of and participate in various organizations at once. For example, belonging to the Graphics Network does not preclude one of its WRC-members from the possibility of participating in other associations. FACTA and ANTA-CTA also engage in similar, non-exclusive membership practices. These flexible membership practices complicate delimiting the current universe of WRCs to organizational affiliations. While during the "initial" period a WRC's participation in MNER, for example, did excluded it from also being member of MNFRT (and vice-versa), memberships in different WRC-focused organizations can, and do, overlap in today's more conciliatory and outward

looking WRC movement, where a different, more inclusive and pragmatic logic of association prevails.

Another sectoral space that has also gained consolidation and strength in recent years brings together metallurgic WRCs from the city of Quilmes in province of Buenos Aires belonging to UOM Quilmes. Although local metallurgic companies in Quilmes had always been well connected through this particularly militant local of the national metalworkers' trade union, and while the local had also been particularly involved in the worker recovery of Quilmes' metal shops, the past few years have seen this associational process reinforced as the UOM Quilmes-affiliated WRCs began working with the National University of Quilmes, the Italian NGO Cooperazione per lo Sviluppo dei Paesi Emergenti (Cooperation for the Development of Emergent Countries, or COSPE), and other local organizations such as Corporación Buenos Aires Sur.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in a further example of affiliation overlap, these companies also converge in the provincial organization of recovered companies known as Movimiento de Empresas Recuperadas de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (Movement of Worker-Recuperated Enterprises of the Province of Buenos Aires, or MERPBA).<sup>46</sup>

The most recent development in this newer, "post-crisis" period of WRC organizations is the creation of a nascent third-tier cooperative organization (i.e., a cooperative of cooperative federations) that, up till recently, was known as the Unión de Federaciones de Cooperativas de Trabajo de la República Argentina (Union of Worker Cooperative Federations of the Republic of Argentina, or simply UF). It began to emerge as an organizational player in the WRC phenomenon with the release of a letter of commitment in May, 2008 signed by FECOOTRA, ANTA-CTA, FACTA, UOM Quilmes, and other cooperative federations from across the country with no previous connections to WRCs.<sup>47</sup> Its main objective is to support the strengthening of practices of self-management and cooperativism in *all* of the country's workers' coops by acting as a cross-sectoral labour union of workers' coops, by helping to build inter-regional and national coop networks, and by continuing to lobby, from a unified position of strength, for the reform of the Argentine Cooperatives Act so as to better favour all workers' cooperatives. By May of 2009, 20 second-tier workers' coop federations from across the country made up a larger version of UF now known as the Confederación Nacional de Cooperativas de Trabajo (National Confederation of Workers' Cooperatives, or CNCT).<sup>48</sup>

And what of the two older WRC representative organizations from the "initial" period, MNER and MNFRT? MNFRT has added some new recovered factories to its organization in recent years while mostly avoiding other processes of organizational unification such as the UF/CNCT initiative. MNFRT does still promote solidarity actions between their member WRCs but tends not to look for the creation of other types of strategic alliances with other WRCs not belonging to MNFRT. In turn, the IMPA-faction of MNER still led by Eduardo

Murúa continues to defend an informal, pseudo-autonomist logic of association. Its function remains as a political lobby group for new recoveries and WRCs in crisis. While they do recognize that every WRC faces the real need to finally consolidate its productive processes, so far, however, MNER has yet to find a way to put this recognition to practice for actually assisting the productive needs of firms associated with it.<sup>49</sup>

### *Recovered companies and self-management*

In part due to the symbolic importance of the WRC movement, the last years have seen self-managed work practices stand out in the Argentinean labour scene. Although the Argentine Ministry of Labour and Social Security's "Self-managed Work Program" was specifically conceived of to offer support to WRCs, it is now not clear how many "recovered" companies could be assisted by the Program because, as we've been emphasizing throughout this article, some self-managed entities that might not have considered themselves "recovered" before, now might consider themselves as such.

One organization that has specifically used the concepts of *self-management* and *recovery* in a more expansive and inclusive way has been ANTA-CTA. Since its inception in late-2005 it has actively promoted the notion of "self-managed work" so as to expand the possibilities of including different experiences of self-management under one umbrella "union" of self-managed enterprises. Its mandate is to defend the self-managed worker in the common struggle towards equality of rights with salaried employees, especially in terms of social protections (i.e., workers' compensation, uniform health coverage, regular pension plans, etc.), which almost all self-managed workers in Argentina lack when compared to salaried employees working for bosses because WRC workers usually lose these benefits with the closure of the previous owner-managed company. This union-based idea is similar to the idea we touched on earlier that proposes a rapprochement with the traditional cooperative movement. Both the cooperative rapprochement and the ANTA-union model desire to diffuse the (perhaps artificial) boundaries between different types of Argentine self-managed workers.

These recent trends have thus seen a merger between the myriad associations of self-managed workers and the appropriation of the concept of "recovered" factory or workplace by other firms that might not have considered themselves as such a few years ago. These emerging processes of association are contributing to the expansion of the universe of WRCs, as we've been arguing throughout this article, as companies recovered after 2005 are, conceptually and practically, converging more-and-more with previous workspace recoveries that appeared around the year 2001 (and even earlier). These new associational developments are, in turn, forcing further reinterpretations of the historical memory of these experiences with other cooperative and self-management experiences that may or may not



have emerged in ways that the first WRCs are commonly understood to have emerged.

As the universe of “recovered” enterprises expands, some workers feel that the “spirit” of WRCs’ is being lost (such as with some factions of MNER). Others appreciate the newer convergence of different experiences from different historical moments (i.e., FACTA, ANTA-CTA, UF/CNCT) and feel that this is strengthening, not weakening, the WRC movement in general.

## **Conclusions**

Even though there has never been one definition of a “recovered company” that has satisfied all of the protagonists of the WRC phenomenon, the changes in these companies’ logics of association during the last years have been leading to a “merging” of WRCs with traditional cooperatives or other self-managed experiences in Argentina. At the same time, a redefinition of what a “recovered” enterprise constitutes demonstrates the impulse to revise or even re-establish objectives and strategies of collective organization from workers that have gone through processes and experiences of self-management. These redefinitions by Argentina’s self-managed workers themselves are perhaps bringing them closer in strategic ways to sectors of the traditional cooperative movement or to trade unionism. In fact, a process of sectoral association on one side and a rapprochement to traditional cooperative sectors on the other is developing within the WRC movement. Also, for different reasons, various actors have started to refer to the idea of self-managed work more and more, having concrete implications for the methods of association and in the alliance practices of the movement.

At the same time, the perception of earlier experiences of workplace recoveries has been transforming as the existence of the WRC movement for well over a dozen years now witnesses newer self-management experiences also claiming for themselves the identity of a “recovered” workplace. As such, we say that this phenomenon of reinterpretation of historical memory has made the universe of WRCs also “expand into the past,” as it were, as it incorporates cases into the movement that already existed before the “initial” period of WRCs. Desire for inclusion into the WRC movement for these older self-managed firms points to, moreover, the symbolic cachet that WRCs have achieved within Argentine society at large.

On the other hand, the newer tendency of some WRCs to merge with other kinds of self-managed companies or find closer affinities with the traditional cooperative sector, as well as the new logics of association of these experiences, might perhaps lead one to pose new questions concerning what is new or what firms can be said to make up a “worker recovered” company. It certainly forced us as social science researchers of the WRC phenomenon to revise the theoretical and methodological assumptions employed in our approach to researching WRCs.

In this sense, it is necessary to ask again both from theoretical and methodological perspectives the following questions: How should one consider building a universe of cases of WRCs that expands both “forwards,” as new worker recoveries emerge, *and* “backwards” in time, as older experiences of self-management are reinterpreted by protagonists? Which experiences of workplace recoveries should be included in this emergent universe? Who is to take part in the construction of this universe and who decides inclusion in it? These problems are similar to those posed by Borges in the aforementioned essay “Kafka and His Precursors.” The solution to such questions suggested by Borges is radical: If Kafka had not existed, forerunners to Kafka would also not have existed as such. Something similar happens with the universe of WRCs: Current members of the WRC movement make “forerunner” experiences of workplace recoveries also “exist” as such.

It is probable that the continued re-signification and re-interpretation of this movement will continue well into the future, as long as it carries on incorporating new experiences of workplace takeovers and self-management and as long as new organizations and alliances of WRCs and other cooperatives emerge. Maybe the most important thing at this point for social scientists studying such emergent phenomenon is to simply attempt to show some of their transformational paths as they unfold. This has made us think about understanding the WRC movement as situated in a social, political, and economic sphere much larger than how the WRC movement has been conceived of to date by researchers. Hence, new hypotheses regarding the WRC movement must, we believe, more closely link these experiences to the new and burgeoning social economy in Argentina.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> Borges, J.L. (2000). *Other inquisitions 1937-1952*. Austin: University of Texas Press (pp.106-107). We are thankful to the writer Mariana Palomino for this reference.

<sup>4</sup> There currently exists an ongoing debate amongst WRC actors concerning the meaning and possible future trajectories of the movement of recovered enterprises. These debates are reflected in the conundrum faced by researchers concerning how to define WRCs. While we share many of these definitions (see below), we are reticent to apply any one of them to our analysis here because we do not wish to invalidate any of the actual self-reported experiences of the actual protagonists of the movement that might not coincide with these formal definitions. This is why we have chosen to incorporate all experiences where protagonists self-identify as being a part of a "recovered company" into the "universe" of WRCs presented here. Hence, some of these experiences included here as part of the universe of WRCs might actual be--to borrow Han Yu's quote above--"unicorns" to some researchers.

<sup>5</sup> Palomino, H. (2010a). *El fortalecimiento actual del sistema de relaciones laborales: Sus límites y potencialidades* (pp. 207-225). In H. Palomino (Ed.), *La nueva dinámica de las relaciones laborales en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Jorge Baudino Ediciones; Palomino, H. (2010b) *La instalación de un nuevo régimen de empleo en argentina: De la precarización a la regulación* (pp. 176-206). In H. Palomino (Ed.), *La nueva dinámica de las relaciones laborales en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Jorge Baudino Ediciones.

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<sup>6</sup> With the collaboration of the research team of the chair of Labour Relations at the School of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires, held by Héctor Palomino, which includes, in addition to the authors of this piece: Javier Antivero, Lorena Ciolek, Diego Kenig, Paola Salamida, Roxana Sánchez y Julieta Zocco. This team did extensive work in conducting interviews with workers and key informants from Argentina's recovered companies, lawyers, social leaders and public officials between the months of January and July of 2008. In addition, they have been conducting documentary analysis of press articles, academic papers, and documents issued by WRC actors, which also make up the data analyzed in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning that this research team was first engaged in an exploratory investigation of the recovered companies movement in the year 2003, out of which our project of analyzing the universe of WRCs emerged.

<sup>8</sup> The survey was pending at the time of submission of this article. It still requires an exhaustive search of sources to guarantee data validity.

<sup>9</sup> The methodology used for this survey consisted in gathering information of different types (general data of each WRC case, their history, sectoral category, number of workers, and location, among other variables) based on different sources such as interviews of key informants, academic papers and congresses, seminars, journalistic articles, expositions and research on social economy and cooperativism in general and recovered companies and factories in particular.

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, we have information on 32 companies that at a certain moment made up part of the universe but which now no longer belong to it. In the future we would like to particularly analyze this segment so as to determine the cases in which companies were initially recovered by its workers could not continue to operate--estimated to include 50% of these 32 companies--and those in which the recovery process could not be fully accomplished.

<sup>11</sup> Our database has been constructed from information taken from interviews of key informants, conference papers, seminars, press articles, social economy and cooperativism research, and particularly direct research with recovered companies and factories. From now on, we refer to our database--the source of our statistics and analysis--as BADUER (the Spanish acronym of our Universe of Recovered Companies Data Base).

<sup>12</sup> Industrias Metalúrgicas y Plásticas Argentina Cooperativa Limitada (Metallurgic and Plastics Industries of Argentina, or IMPA) was founded in 1910 with German capital. It was later nationalized in 1945 and turned into a worker cooperative in 1961.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the most important lobby groups and representative associations that have supported WRCs' processes of recovery include the Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas (National Movement of Recovered Companies, or MNER, founded in 2001), the Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores (National Worker-Recovered Factories Movement, or MNFRT, founded in 2003), the Federación de Cooperativas de Trabajo de la República Argentina (Worker Cooperatives' Federation of the Republic of Argentina, or FECOOTRA, founded in 1988), the

Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajadores Autogestionados (Self-Managed Worker Cooperatives Federation of Argentina, or FACTA, founded in 2006)), and the Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Autogestionados belonging to the Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (National Association of Self-Managed Workers of the Argentine Workers' Central, or ANTA-CTA, founded in 2005)).

<sup>14</sup> Palomino, H. (2003). The worker's movement in occupied enterprises: A survey. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 28(55), 71-98.

<sup>15</sup> We mention this in light of the point Héctor Palomino made earlier on in the WRC phenomenon: "the social impact of the movement of occupied enterprises is more closely related to its symbolic dimension than to its real strengths" (Ibid., p. 72).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example: García Allegrone, V., Partenio, F., & Fernández Álvarez, M. I. (2004). Los procesos de recuperación de empresas: Una mirada retrospectiva. In O. Battistini (Ed.), *El trabajo frente al espejo* (pp. 329-343). Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Fontenla, E. (2007). Cooperativas que recuperan empresas y fábricas en crisis. Buenos Aires: Fundación Centro de Investigaciones de la Economía Social (CIESO). <http://www.monografias.com/trabajos51/empresas-recuperadas/empresas-recuperadas.shtml>; Vigliarolo, F. (2008). Empresas recuperadas: Análisis y evolución desde 2001 hasta hoy. Report in the project *Emprendedores cooperativos: Recorridos posibles para los italianos de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Ministry of Labour and Social Services of the Argentine Republic.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example: Fajn, G. (Ed.). (2003). *Fábricas y empresas recuperadas: Protesta social, autogestión, y rupturas en la subjetividad*. Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, Instituto Movilizador de Fondos Cooperativos; Palomino, 2003; Ruggeri, A., Martínez, C., & Trincherro, H. (2005). *Las empresas recuperadas en la Argentina: Informe del segundo relevamiento del programa*. Buenos Aires: Facultad Abierta, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Programa de Transferencia Científico-Técnica con Empresas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores (UBACyT de Urgencia Social F-701); Vieta, M. (2010). The social innovations of *autogestión* in Argentina's worker-recovered enterprises: Cooperatively reorganizing productive life in hard times. *Labor Studies Journal*, 35(4), published online before print July 13, 2009, DOI: 10.1177/0160449X093337903; Fajn, G. and Rebón, J. 2005. El taller ¿sin cronómetro? Apuntes acerca de las empresas recuperadas. *Herramienta* 28. <http://www.herramienta.com.ar/revista-herramienta-n-28/el-taller-sin-cronometro-apuntes-acerca-de-las-empresas-recuperadas>.

<sup>19</sup> Almeyra, G. (2004). *La protesta social en la Argentina (1990-2004)*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Continente; Monteagudo, G. (2008). The white walls of a recovered factory. *Urban Anthropology*, 37(2), 175-210; Antón, G. & Rebón, J. (2005). El conocimiento en los procesos sociales: Una aproximación a la

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[http://www.iisg.nl/labouragain/documents/anton\\_rebon.pdf](http://www.iisg.nl/labouragain/documents/anton_rebon.pdf); Bialakowsky, A.L., Grima, J.M., Zelaschi, C., Costa, M.I., & Campos, O. (2005). *Identidad y conflictos entre trabajadores en empresas autogestionadas: La recuperación del método*. Paper presented at the VII National Congress of Labour Studies of the Asociación Argentina de Especialistas de Estudios del Trabajo (ASET), Buenos Aires, Argentina; Fajn & Rebón; Gracia, A. & Cavaliere, S. (2007). Repertorios en fábrica: La experiencia de recuperación fabril en Argentina, 2000-2006. *Revista de estudios sociológicos* 25(73), 155-186; Ruggeri, A. (Ed.). (2009). *Las empresas recuperadas: Autogestión obrera en Argentina y América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires; Vieta, M. & Ruggeri, A. (2009). The worker-recuperated enterprises as workers' cooperatives: The conjunctures, challenges, and innovations of self-management in Argentina and Latinamerica. In J. J. McMurtry & D. Reed (Eds.), *Co-operatives in a global economy: The challenges of co-operation across borders*, (pp. 178-225). Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.

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<sup>21</sup> Echaide, J. (2003). Debate sobre empresas recuperadas. Un aporte desde lo legal, lo jurídico y lo político. *Cuaderno de Trabajo*, 25. Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, Departamento de cooperativismo; Bialakowsky, et al.

<sup>22</sup> Fernández Álvarez, M. I. (2004). Proceso de trabajo y fábricas recuperadas: algunas reflexiones a partir de un caso de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. In *LabourAgain: Factory takeovers in Argentina*. Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History.

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<sup>23</sup> Dávalos, P. & Perelman, L. (2003). Empresas recuperadas y trayectoria sindical: La experiencia de la UOM Quilmes. In G. Fajn (Ed.), *Fábricas y empresas recuperadas: Protesta social, autogestión y rupturas en la subjetividad* (pp. 185-219). Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Instituto Movilizador de Fondos Cooperativos

<sup>24</sup> Godio, J. (2004). Análisis sociopolítico de las empresas recuperadas en Argentina: Perspectivas sindicales y cooperativas del fenómeno.

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<sup>25</sup> Fajn; Antón & Rebón; Fajn & Rebón.

<sup>26</sup> Santamarino, J. (2005). *Ocupando, resistiendo y produciendo: La experiencia de las empresas ocupadas y gestionadas por sus trabajadores*. Paper presented at Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano de Empresas Recuperadas, Caracas, Venezuela.; Ruggeri et al.

<sup>27</sup> Gracia y Cavaliere.

<sup>28</sup> That is, our reliance on WRC actors' own definitions is based on a methodological consideration: our study is exploratory and begins and ends with a complex universe of cases, diverse as it is and with identities still in construction. We say identities in continuing construction because, while the universe of WRCs continues to expand, there is, as we are centrally proposing in this article, no one accepted definition of what exactly constitutes this universe. (See also endnote 5.)

<sup>29</sup> These latter governmental groups tend to use broad definitions of WRCs so as to more broadly capture different self-managed labour models into their programs.

<sup>30</sup> Palomino, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Atzeni, M. & Ghigliani, P. (2007). Labour process and decision-making in factories under workers' self-management: Empirical evidence from Argentina. *Work, Employment and Society*, 21(4), 653-671; Rebón, J., Salgado, R., & Totino, L. (2007). *Los desafíos de la autonomía en el proceso de recuperación de empresas*. Paper presented at VII National Congress of Labour Studies of the Asociación Argentina de Especialistas de Estudios del Trabajo (ASET), Buenos Aires, Argentina; Vieta.

<sup>32</sup> Partenio, F., Fernández Álvarez, M. I., & García Allegrone, V. (2007). *Pensando en los dilemas de la autogestión en los procesos de recuperación de empresas y fábricas*. Paper presented at the VII Jornadas de Sociología: Pasado, Presente, y Futuro, 1957-2007, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

<sup>33</sup> Fajn & Rebón; Vieta.

<sup>34</sup> Balladares, C. (2005). *Dilemas de la autogestión en una empresa recuperada de la provincia de Buenos Aires*. Paper presented at the VII National Congress of Labour Studies of the Asociación Argentina de Especialistas de Estudios del Trabajo (ASET), Buenos Aires, Argentina; Bialakowsky et al.

<sup>35</sup> Vigliarolo.

<sup>36</sup> Balladares.

<sup>37</sup> Caffaratti, J. (2004). *Empresas recuperadas: Pauny (ex Zanello): Estudio de caso*. Paper presented at III Encontro de Investigadores Latino-Americanos de Cooperativismo, Unisinos, São Leopoldo, Brazil

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> After interviewing Red Gráfica Cooperativa's (the Graphics Network Cooperative) legal advisor and member of FECOOTRA, Dr. Juan Araujo in June 2008, we discovered that there is currently a draft of a bill to transform aspects of cooperative law in Argentina (known as *Proyecto Camaño*). *Proyecto Camaño* looks to legalize alternative cooperative regulation that would better serve the unique needs of WRCs and other converted firms and workers' cooperatives. The law has been promoted by FECOOTRA and the Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social (National Cooperativism and Social Economy Institute, or INAES, the overseeing body for all legal aspects of cooperativism and mutualism in Argentina). To access this bill, see file 1438-D-2008 in *Trámite Parlamentario* n° 25, 15/04/2008 of the



Argentine Federal Government, published as "Workers' Cooperative Regulation" (copy of file 4684-D-06).

<sup>40</sup> For example, see: Gracia & Cavaliere.

<sup>41</sup> ANTA-CTA. (2007). Informe anual. ANTA-CTA.

[http://www.cta.org.ar/base/article8529.html?var%20\\_recherche=anta](http://www.cta.org.ar/base/article8529.html?var%20_recherche=anta).

<sup>42</sup> In the case of the worker-recovered newspaper in the city of Córdoba, Comercio y Justicia, for example, a practice of renewing half of the managerial positions each year was established. We obtained this information courtesy of Graciela Di Marco's field work.

<sup>43</sup> The date is the anniversary of the *cordobazo*, an important social demonstration of workers and students which took place in the city of Córdoba and throughout the province of Córdoba starting on May 29, 1969.

<sup>44</sup> MNER's first fracturing occurred in 2003, only two years after its founding. This first fracture resulted in the creation of the MNFRT by Luis Caro, a more right-leaning lawyer who originally worked with MNER. Without going deep into the issue, we can mention that the divisions emerging out of the original MNER were mainly due to accusations and counteraccusations of personalism and to differences with the political positioning of MNER towards the national government.

<sup>45</sup> [Corporación Buenos Aires Sur](#) is a governmental initiative promoting small businesses and microenterprises in the southern area of Greater Buenos Aires.

<sup>46</sup> There are also numerous other smaller and more incipient associations of WRCs involved in the hotel and tourism sectors, the meatpacking sector, and with a group of newspaper cooperatives. Moreover, there are various provincial boards of WRCs created to solve local and regional issues concerning, in particular, production linkages and the sharing of resources.

<sup>47</sup> ANTER. (2008, March 11). El cooperativismo de trabajo se junta para crecer: varias federaciones firmaron la Carta de Compromiso por la Unidad. *Pionero Diario*.

<http://www.pionerodiario.com.ar/noticia.php?id=5309&edicion=2008-11-03%2007:27:57>.

<sup>48</sup> CNCT. (2009, June). *Autogestión argentina*, 2(5).

<sup>49</sup> It is also worth noting that, since around mid 2006, they have maintained a strategic political alliance with ANTA-CTA.

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