

**Why “union revitalization” is not an issue in Argentina?
Labour institutions and the effectiveness of traditional
trade union recruitment strategies**

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From the 1950s and until the 1990s unionisation rates in Argentina have been high in terms of international standards and also relatively stable, in spite of changes, sometimes drastic, in the economic and political regimes. In this long period, well-established labour institutions converged to ensure that growth of wage employment was accompanied by the increase of union membership. These key institutions included: legal recognition of monopoly of representation in collective bargaining to the union with the largest membership (i.e. absence of inter-union competition); legal recognition of union workplace representation; an extensive scheme of union-managed health care for workers; legally-binding clauses in collective agreements stipulating agency shop; and a highly developed union system of service provision to members. In addition, the persistent intertwining between trade unionism and the *Peronist* party with widespread adherence among workers also favoured unionisation. In this context, and reinforced by factors that contribute to de-link trade union power from the number of union members, trade union recruitment strategies tended to be “passive”, concentrating in core territories with already high unionisation levels, and entailing little innovation.

But important changes starting by the mid 1990s led to a significant decrease in union membership (although not in the unionisation level). As a result of economic liberalisation and domestic currency appreciation employment fell considerably in several major economic activities, and unemployment rose to unprecedented levels; use of temporary contracts increased; and precarious employment (in practice, workers with precarious jobs are not entitled to union membership) became widespread. Following significant economic policy changes, devaluation in particular, the economy started to recover only by 2003.

During 2003-2007, a period of rapid economic and employment growth, trade unions faced renewed opportunities for recruitment. However, the context now was different from the pre-1990s historically prevalent conditions, because i) precarious modalities continued to account for a high share of wage employment; and ii) certain processes that took place in the 1990s – e.g. change in relevant labour institutions, and the unions’ reduced “capacity to deliver” - might have undermined the recruitment efficacy of traditional institutions and/or the credibility of unions in the longer term.

In this new setting, were trade unions driven to design and implement more “active” recruitment strategies directed at expanding their membership, incorporating innovative practices and extending recruitment territories to include non-core workers? To provide some answers to this question in this paper we analyse the recruitment practices of a relevant number of trade unions in the period in 2003-2007. These unions correspond to a variety of economic activities, have different sizes and legal structures (single national unions,¹ federations of local unions, local unions), and are affiliated to different central labour confederations. Information comes from

¹ These single national unions have regional and local branches, and they differ from union federations in that there is a centralised body that conducts the union at the national level. Federations, instead, are formed by independent trade unions. Still, the influence of federation leaders over the formally autonomous unions often is substantial, and there is some kind of centralised decision making.

interviews to union leaders especially undertaken for this research, collective agreements, union statutes, union published materials and web sites, and administrative records. To our knowledge, there are no previous studies on the recruitment strategies of Argentinean trade unions, and although this research concentrates in 2003-2007, it has been possible not only to identify the recruitment strategies prevailing in this period but also to contrast them with those that, according to several indications, seem to have historically been customary.

The article is organised as follows. First, we discuss conceptual issues (section 1), the key historical institutions regulating trade union activity in Argentina and the ways in which they contributed to shape traditional union recruitment strategies (section 2), and the relevant contextual transformations that took place as from the 1990s, that might have had an influence upon union recruitment policies (section 3). In section 4, the analysis centers in the 2003-2007 period, considering recruitment practices and territories, as well as in unions' assessment of the main motives that induce workers to join, and of the main obstacles to unionisation, both of which underlie the structure of incentives adopted by the labour organizations to promote affiliation. Conclusions are presented in section 5.

1. Analytical framework

This study deals with union strategies addressed at member recruitment and retention.² “Strategy” alludes here to the notion of “strategic choice”, i.e. to the sum of decisions adopted in each conjuncture, given the existing alternatives, that eventually defines the union’s policy,³ and not to formalised strategic planning.

Unions have available a repertoire of recruitment practices (in terms of location of contacts with potential members, who is in charge of making contacts, specific actions to carry out, and structure of incentives), and the mix finally selected by each union is influenced by its degree of institutional consolidation within the economic activity, as well as by the presence/absence of competing labour organizations in the same activity. The degree of institutional consolidation reached by the union in turn depends on the type of legal recognition obtained and the rights that this recognition entails. In the Argentinean case, for example, the highest degree of consolidation is given by having obtained legal monopoly of representation in collective bargaining and the right to establish legally-protected union representatives at the workplace.⁴

² Recruitment/retention strategies may be considered to be unionisation strategies in the strict sense; unionisation strategies in the large sense, i.e. those whose objectives are vaster than and/or different from recruitment, but have repercussions on unionisation, are analysed in Marshall & Perelman (2008). Examples of the latter are agency shop policies (agency shop fees generally being incentives to join the union); union policies to expand the union’s field of representation, thereby increasing the number of potential members; and union policies that make the weight of local branches in governing bodies, the number of local full-time officials, and the revenues of local branches contingent on the number of their members, thus generating positive incentives to stimulate recruitment at local levels.

³ On “strategic choice”, see Weil (2005).

⁴ More details in the next section.

Recruitment strategies may be characterised on the basis of the scale and type of resources and personnel allocated to recruitment, and the nature of recruitment targets; decisions on these issues reflect the degree of union commitment to the promotion of unionisation. Recruitment practices range from routine distribution of general union information to intensive recruitment campaigns. Recruitment efforts may be targeted to the consolidated core where most union members are located, or to other workers, more or less distant from that nucleus. Workers may be contacted by recruitment officers, or else by union workplace representatives or union inspectors, whose tasks are much vaster (naturally, even if trade union representatives with much vaster functions are in charge of recruitment, specific resources might have been invested, e.g. in training for recruitment). Personnel may or not be assigned specifically to monitor the results of actions taken to retain or expand membership. Recruitment strategies may also differ in terms of the means chosen to promote unionisation (economic incentives such as reduction of membership fees or expansion of services and benefits for members; coercion; or appeals to solidarity). Which means are chosen within the available options is influenced by the union's evaluation of the main reasons that move individuals to join (labour identity, solidarity and commitment to collective action versus instrumental motives, such as access to services, benefits or better earnings) and of the main obstacles to unionisation. *Prima facie*, certain practices and choices seem to express a more intense, or less ambiguous, commitment to the promotion of unionisation. However, decisions on the efforts to be deployed depend on the assessment of not only costs but also potential results,⁵ for instance when the union has to choose between moving to disperse territories, with more uncertain consequences, and concentrating in more promising sectors, where the level of membership already is higher. Sometimes, the preference for less "active" practices may reflect the evaluation that the deployment of more costly efforts would still be ineffectual.

Kelly & Heery (1989) indicate that recruitment policies involve decisions as to the scale of resources that should be allocated to recruitment, the recruitment territories that are to be given priority, and the type of resources and personnel that would be appropriate. For Kelly & Heery, recruitment is 'passive' if activities are confined to responding enquiries from non members, seeking contacts and similar practices, and to the "general promotion of trade unionism that forms an integral part of the work of most full-time officials" (:197); it is 'intensive' if recruitment activities involve the concentration of resources on a particular area/establishment for a brief period, i.e. some type of campaign; and recruitment is 'sustained' if continued priority and resources are given to the expansion of membership. According to these authors, only if recruitment is intensive or sustained are trade unions likely to focus in particular job territories, and the selection of territories is influenced by their proximity to the union's existing membership and (in the British case) the presence/absence of trade union recognition agreements. The combination of these dimensions leads to a typology of recruitment, that goes from recruiting members in already organised establishments who are covered by recognition agreements (*close consolidation*) at one extreme, to recruitment oriented to get members in unorganised establishments, without recognition agreements (*distant expansion*), at the other. The other two categories included between these extremes are 'close expansion' (recruitment in organised

⁵ See, for example, Snape (1994).

establishments, focusing in non members not covered by recognition agreements), and ‘distant consolidation’ (non members covered by recognition agreements but in weakly/non-organised establishments). The shift from one extreme to the other implies increasing difficulties requiring greater investment and diversification of recruitment resources (Kelly & Heery, 1989).

Kelly & Heery’s categories do not apply straightforwardly to countries where regulations on union activity are very different from those in Britain, in particular to countries like Argentina where practically all wage earners are covered by collective agreements, signed by either industry-wide, occupational, or enterprise trade unions. In cases like Argentina’s, and thinking along the same lines as Kelly & Heery, the distinction between close consolidation and close expansion may be based upon the differentiated efforts demanded by diverse forms of employment contracts or by different labour groups (such as the youth, women, professionals), within the same establishment with union representation and collective agreement coverage; for example, recruitment may be focused in permanent workers employed in establishments with union representatives and high union densities (a form of “close consolidation”) or, instead, in non-core workers (temporary and subcontracted workers, workers employed in externalised activities) in the same establishments but situated at the frontiers of the consolidated territory (a form of “close expansion”). Localisation of recruitment efforts in disperse establishments with no union representation but covered by the union’s collective agreement could be considered to express “distant consolidation”, whereas “distant expansion”, very infrequent in countries like Argentina where, as mentioned, practically all wage earners are under the coverage of collective agreements, may refer to recruitment activities in territories already covered by another union or, being in new activities, not yet claimed by any union. The expansion of recruitment efforts beyond the limits of the usual recruitment territories, to groups that in the past tended to be neglected, such as workers with non-standard employment, or minority groups, may also be seen as an expression of recruitment innovation (Heery et al., 2000).

2. Historical union recruitment strategies in Argentina

As mentioned above, several key labour institutions contributed to ensure high unionisation rates in Argentina once, by the 1950s, the major industry-wide labour organisations had obtained ‘*personería gremial*’ (hereon, full recognition), that is, the right to labour representation in collective negotiation,⁶ and (being the organisations with the largest membership in each economic activity) monopoly of representation. Union workplace representation was legally regulated in 1958, becoming mandatory in establishments with ten or more workers;⁷ only the unions with full recognition were entitled to have legally-protected workplace representatives

⁶ This legal form of recognition coexist with another legal form (*personería jurídica*) that, in contrast, entitles the union to defend only the individual rights of their members (they may defend collective rights only if in the same economic activity there is no labour organisation with full legal recognition).

⁷ This right does not imply that, automatically, all the establishments of the specified size will have union representation, but that if the union sets in motion the process to place representatives at the workplace employers cannot oppose it. Union workplace representation may be further regulated in each economic activity via collective agreements

who, among other rights, were guaranteed employment stability.⁸ Cross-national research has shown that union workplace representation (secured through either collective agreements or direct legal recognition) is a significant determinant of union affiliation, the workplace being the main "locus to recruit new members" (Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999). Consistently with those findings, data for Argentina show that, for instance in 1990, the propensity to join a labour organization was highest in workplaces with union representation, and the presence/absence of union workplace representation was the most important single influence on the probability of unionisation (Marshall & Groisman, 2005); in fact, according to various sources, unionisation often was quasi automatic in workplaces with union representation.

The second relevant institution promoting unionisation was the union-managed scheme of health-care provision for waged workers (*obras sociales sindicales*). The role of this scheme is similar to that played by the "Ghent system" in certain European countries. Comparative studies consistently found that union (as opposed to state) management of unemployment compensation ("Ghent" system) expands union influence and fosters affiliation, even in those countries where unemployment compensation is not restricted to union members (Rothstein, 1990; Ebbinghaus & Visser, 1999; Blaschke, 2000). The system of *obras sociales* for worker health care has key features akin to those characterising the union-managed unemployment compensation scheme in Europe. With precedents in the workers' benefit societies of late XIXth century, the development of union-managed health care was promoted by the government in the 1940s, and expanded continuously from that time (Cortés & Marshall, 1993; Danani, 2005). In 1970 it was unified at national level, becoming part of the social security system, and access to this scheme was made extensive to all workers in the economic activity, whether unionised or not, but this regulation was really enforced from 1980. Still, in spite of the legal separation between the trade unions and the *obras sociales*, the latter had become (and in the 2000s still continue to be) a crucial source of revenues and power for the unions, and an indivisible component of their unions for the workers ((Danani, 2005; Marshall, 2005).

Third, the attractive and ever increasing range of services (tourism, sports, legal advice, diverse lower-priced goods, etc.) offered by the labour organisations to their members also played a crucial role in stimulating union affiliation. The expansion of union services and benefits and of the required infrastructure was made possible by the extensive union revenues, coming from different sources, such as worker and employer regular and extraordinary contributions to unions stipulated in collective agreements, and legally-established worker and employer contributions to the *obras sociales*.

Finally, the inclusion of agency shop clauses in collective agreements (non members are obliged to contribute financially to the union with monopoly of representation), legally permitted in many periods, also encouraged unionisation.⁹ As shown, *inter alia*, by cross-state research within the

⁸ Even if the law grants unions with *personería jurídica* the right to organise meetings with no prior authorisation, legislation protecting union representatives at the workplace is confined to the labour organisations with full recognition.

⁹ On the evolution of Argentinean legislation regulating agency shop see Marshall & Perelman (2004a).

U.S., that revealed that states with "right-to-work" laws have lower union densities than those without them (Hirsch, 1980; Hogler et al., 2004), these compulsive fees not only provide the unions with substantial revenues but also tend to be incentives to unionisation, contingent on their amount relative to membership fees, and on the benefits offered by the union to its members.

From the 1950s, union density tended to be stable in the long term, oscillating about 40-42 % of wage employment (but was substantially higher, for instance about 65% in 1990, if estimated in relation only to workers entitled to join unions).¹⁰ The stability of unionisation levels suggests that the quantity of union members varied along with wage employment, and it is likely that unions came to expect that employment growth would always be accompanied by the increase of membership. This might have contributed to propagate the belief that unionisation depends on factors exogenous to the actions of trade unions themselves (in this case, employment trends), a notion that tends to deter unions from implementing more active recruitment strategies (Mason & Bain, 1991). In this context, free riding does not seem to have been a concern for trade unions, even if in Argentina collective agreements apply to union and non union members alike (*erga omnes*) – a factor that in general favours free riding. The distinctive characteristics of Argentinean institutions regulating trade union activity helped to expand unionisation, while social pressures at the workplace, deriving from the high union densities, also contributed to drive new workers to join the unions. Besides, the extremely close association, since the 1940s, between trade unionism and the *Peronist* party, with widespread support among workers (Torre, 1973) further reinforced this tendency.

High unionisation levels seem to have been sustained by means of routine recruitment practices, carried out by non specialised union officials. In the prevailing institutional context, besides, it is unlikely that trade unions would have been compelled to extend recruitment efforts to those workers that are more reluctant to join unions, or to invest specific efforts and resources in large-scale recruitment activities, such as extensive campaigns.¹¹ The “passive” attitude of unions towards recruitment (in the sense, as we have seen, that recruitment activities are not differentiated from the general promotion of trade unionism involved in the activities of union officials), that followed from the regular expansion of membership and the high unionisation rates achieved, is consistent with the relative autonomy of trade union power *vis-à-vis* the number of union members. Factors contributing to de-link union power from the size of union membership, thereby weakening the importance attached to recruitment, include unions’ repeated successes in exerting pressure on governments to obtain their demands, and their high labour mobilisation capacity, whose level systematically exceeded their membership, on the occasion of conflicts (both factors associated to the strong trade union-Peronism imbrication); and, as well, the variety of sources of union revenues, that made them less dependent on member fees (Marshall & Perelman, 2004a).

¹⁰ The sparse estimates on unionisation in Argentina in different periods and their problems are discussed in Marshall & Perelman (2004a) and Marshall (2005).

¹¹ There are no studies on the unionisation strategies of previous periods to fully confirm this interpretation.

3. Contextual changes in the 1990s-early 2000s

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed considerable institutional and labour market changes, with a potential impact on recruitment strategies, as some of these transformations might have weakened the recruitment efficacy of the institutional scheme just described; some did affect the number of potential union members; and others might have had an influence upon worker attitudes towards unions. These processes included:

1) *Labour market changes.* Employment declined in major economic activities, particularly in manufacturing where it fell at an average annual rate of -4% in 1992-2000 (Marshall, 2004a). Moreover, precarious employment – waged workers not registered by their employers at the social security system as it is mandatory - increased substantially, from 23% in 1992 to 31% in 2000 (Marshall, 2003).¹² Both trends were aggravated with the crisis of the early 2000s. Decrease of employment and growth of precarious employment cut down the number of potential members (although not necessarily the unionisation rates of wage earners registered at the social security scheme). The increase of non-registered employment had an impact on the number of potential members because, even if there is no explicit proviso in the law regulating trade unions stating that workers are not entitled to join unions, in practice and as stipulated in many union statutes such registration constitutes an indispensable requirement for union affiliation. In addition, the employment composition of at least some sectors changed, for example the share of women, workers with temporary contracts and/or professionals increased,¹³ and these groups might be less receptive to the traditional incentives to unionise. In particular, government-promoted temporary employment contracts, created during the 1990s, fostered substitution of adult males by women and young workers in certain economic activities while they lasted (until 1998).¹⁴

3) *Loss of union credibility.* Union influence on the determination of wages and working conditions was weakened; from the mid 1990s and until the economic recovery starting in 2003, unions often were unable to obtain wage increases, check the degradation of employment conditions (in fact many of them accepted the introduction in collective agreements of flexibilisation arrangements detrimental to working conditions) and prevent massive dismissals. In the context of the unfavorable labor market situation, unions showed a declining "capacity to deliver". This could have undermined the credibility of labour organisations, debilitating the propensity to unionise, particularly of younger workers.

3) *Changes in attitudes and in the climate for unions.* The advance of right wing ideas created an unfavorable climate for unions and, according to some opinions, individualism gained strength at the expense of solidarity and collective action. Negative views on the trade union leadership also

¹² These figures exclude domestic service, an activity with extremely high rates of non registration, as well as employment programme beneficiaries.

¹³ Own estimates on the basis of data in household surveys.

¹⁴ In 1997, for instance, temporary contracts represented some 80% of recruitment (Perelman, 2001). Some of the government-promoted temporary contracts lowered the costs of employing women and young workers (details in Marshall, 2004b).

became increasingly widespread in the media.¹⁵

4) *Changes affecting the institutions historically fostering unionisation.* The so-called "de-regulation" of the union-managed health-care scheme implemented in the 1990s permitted the free movement of workers from the *obra social* of the economic activity of employment to a different one. The loss of affiliates to the health scheme might have led to the loss of union members or potential members.

5) *Increasing obstacles to unionisation.* Expansion of foreign ownership and the subsequent changes in management methods in certain sectors might have led to increased employer hostility to trade unions, in particular to their presence within the firm and, therefore, employer practices intended to discourage unionisation might have become more widespread. For example, considering the 1000 largest enterprises, the value added share of firms with over 50% of its capital in foreign hands increased from 26% in 1993 to 75% in 2003, and their share of wage employment, from 21% to 51% (Economic Censuses, www.indec.gov.ar).

Indeed, during the 1990s the number of union members fell visibly in numerous labour organisations (Marshall & Perelman, 2004a), apparently without modifying significantly the level of unionisation of workers entitled to join the labour organisations: the unionisation rate of eligible wage earners declined only marginally between 1990 and 2001 (Marshall, 2005).¹⁶ In the context of retrogression and a generally adverse atmosphere it is unlikely however that unions would have been inclined to intensify recruitment efforts requiring specific investment.

But, after the crisis, employment started to increase from 2003 accompanying the economy recovery, and continued to expand steadily in the following years. In addition, collective bargaining gained momentum; wage bargaining at industry level was re-launched, now in a more auspicious context, delivering money wage increases close to the evolution of consumer prices. Nonetheless, unemployment remained at higher than the pre-1990s historical levels, and precarious employment receded only marginally, continuing to account for an important share of wage employment, even more so within new recruitment: in 2006, for instance, the proportion of workers not registered at social security among wage earners with up to one year seniority (64 %) almost doubled the proportion of non-registered workers in total wage employment (34%).¹⁷ After the long period of job losses, incorporation of workers into employment is apt to have been a propitious opportunity for the revitalisation of union recruitment activities. Given the previous regular and substantial membership losses, recruitment might have become a more central preoccupation for labour unions than it had until then.

¹⁵ Based on opinion polls, distrust of the union leadership was often reported during the 1990s in Argentine newspapers.

¹⁶ This loss of members in the 1990s was confirmed in the interviews made (described in the next section). In certain unions, this resulted from privatisation early in the decade. However, in the recession of 2000-2002 membership declines, surprisingly, seem to have been less generalised.

¹⁷ Own estimates based on data from EPH (INDEC), 2nd. Semester. Domestic service and employment programme beneficiaries are excluded from the estimates. These figures are not directly comparable with the estimates cited earlier for the 1990.

Still, in the new context of economic recovery and employment growth, due to decisions taken in a previous or the same period, a considerable number of labour organisations had revenues originating in a variety of sources – a factor that, as we have seen, weakens the incentive to recruit and, therefore, could have played against the revitalisation of recruitment strategies. Not considering the revenues associated with the union-managed health-care scheme, union financing sources include membership fees, regular and extraordinary contributions of workers (members and non members) and employers stipulated in collective agreements, and income from the management of insurance schemes,¹⁸ as well as supplementary funding from other sources such as rents or income derived from exploiting commercially their touristic infrastructure.¹⁹ In 2007, for instance, 15 of 24 important trade unions²⁰ combined agency shop fees with employer contributions (including those for insurance schemes managed by unions), and another seven had resources from either agency shop clauses or employer contributions. Membership fees, agency shop and employer contributions to the union tend to represent a roughly similar proportion of wages. Considering exclusively these three sources of union revenues established in collective agreements, employer contributions may in certain cases represent up to one half of union funding. Besides, a new source of union financing followed from the abovementioned deregulation of union-managed health care in the 1990s, as several unions invested, with considerable success, in attracting wage earners employed in other economic activities and non wage earners to their own *obras*.²¹ In brief, revenue maximisation is prevalent among Argentinean trade unions.

In 2003-2007 the number of members expanded once again in many unions (as indicated, for instance, by the respondents from practically all the trade unions where interviews were made as well as by sparse data on union membership available at the Labour Ministry).²² This growth of membership, was it attained resorting to the traditional recruitment practices and focusing in the usual job territories or, instead, trade unions did invest in stronger and more specific recruitment efforts than those customarily deployed in the past, and/or extended recruitment activities towards new territories, so far neglected or not considered suitable? To answer this question, in what follows we examine union recruitment strategies in those years.

¹⁸ Different types of employer contributions to the unions are stipulated in a high proportion of collective agreements. In general, they are to be used for specific objectives (such as training, health care, social activities), and to a lesser extent for insurance schemes and subsidies managed by the unions.

¹⁹ To elucidate the complex structure of union revenues we examined union annual balance sheets presented to the Ministry of Labour, collective agreements and other union information. In general, it is best to identify the sources and amounts of union revenues that are stipulated in collective agreements, that add up to membership fees, because the annual balance sheets do not always reflect the diversity of union financing sources.

²⁰ These organisations include 14 national unions, 9 federations and one local union, corresponding to diverse economic activities, with sizes ranging from less than 5,000 members to over 100,000. Estimates of size of membership come from www.trabajo.gov.ar, and originate in trade unions; although these figures are to be considered with reservations (Marshall & Perelman, 2004a), they are adequate to show the order of magnitude of membership.

²¹ Data on movements to union health-care schemes different from the one corresponding to the activity of employment are in www.ssalud.gov.ar.

²² On the trade unions where interviews were made see section 4 below.

4. Recruitment strategies

The following analysis of union recruitment practices (in terms of where are workers contacted, who makes the contacts, and which are the concrete activities implemented, categories that are analytically but not always empirically distinguishable) and territories, and of their assessment of the motives that drive workers to join unions and the obstacles to unionisation is based primarily on interviews to trade union leaders undertaken during 2006-2007.²³ Interviews (24) were conducted in thirteen single national unions, two union federations and nine local trade unions associated to federations. The unions selected are in manufacturing industries (11) and services (13), this latter including, among others, hotels and restaurants, insurance, air transportation and railways, public utilities (electricity, communications, postal services), public administration and education (university professors),²⁴ and range from having less than 5,000 members to over 100,000. All but three have full recognition, and while the majority are within the Central Labour Confederation (Confederación General del Trabajo, CGT), a few are associated to the Central of Workers of Argentina (Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina, CTA), the rival labour confederation, that lacks full recognition. Interviewed union leaders are placed in the highest positions (general secretary, organising secretary) or in positions close to member recruitment.

i. Practices

In Argentina, as we have seen, employer acceptance of union workplace representation is mandatory in establishments with ten or more workers if the union decides to set up representation. According to the interviews, a high proportion of workplaces do have union representation; the proportion varies with the industry's structure in terms of establishment size and degree of concentration. From information given by the respondents, it appears that practically 100% of establishments in public administration, public utilities under state or private hands (the public sector has historically been an union stronghold, and this does not seem to have changed with privatisation), and highly concentrated manufacturing activities with a small number of large firms, have union representation. In disperse sectors, with small firm predominance, around 40%-50% of workplaces have union representatives, whereas union delegates are in about 70%-80% of the establishments in economic activities with more equal representation of large, medium and small enterprise. These figures possibly overestimate actual proportions, considering the whole universe of firms in each activity, but might be adequate if respondents are thinking only in those establishments where it would really be feasible to set representation, i.e. the larger enterprises.²⁵ In fact, in the interviews it was often recognised that there is no union

²³ The questionnaire includes a menu of reply options for each question, that naturally may have some influence on the answers. Still, most respondents amply used the option provided for spontaneous observations.

²⁴ In total, 40 labour unions were contacted, of which only 24 accepted the interview, and in one of these the interview did not strictly adjust to the questionnaire; because of this, as will be seen, this interview is considered only in relation to certain specific issues. The high (explicit or *de facto*) rejection rate is revealing of how difficult is it to conduct this type of research in Argentina.

²⁵ Still, some of the numbers cited by the respondents are too high given the universe explicitly mentioned (all

representation in small firms, while in medium firms it is not widespread.

In 2003-2007 union workplace representatives continued to make use of their easy access to new employees. Practically all of the respondents (21 of 23) said that new workers are contacted by the union workplace delegate as soon as they take the job, and eight that this is the only action taken to approach potential new members.²⁶ It also became apparent from the interviews that many unions concentrate their recruitment efforts primarily in the workers employed in establishments with union representation.

To recruit among workers employed in establishments lacking representation, or to complement the activities of union officials at the workplace, unions use additional channels. According to the interviews, workers are approached at the time they register at the union-managed health-care unit (cited by seven),²⁷ or visit the trade union to enquire about services that non union members too are entitled to use, e.g. training courses or legal advice (cited by nine). Together, these means of contact are clearly relevant, as they were cited (separately or jointly) in 13 out of 23 trade unions. For the unions with low rates of workplace representation, these options would help to contact a disperse population of potential members. In any case, they are used also by unions with a more mixed employment structure in terms of establishment size and, even, by unions in highly concentrated sectors, with high levels of workplace representation. In addition, in the absence of union workplace representation, union inspectors (who control employer compliance with collective agreements, and that labour and employer contributions to unions are effectively channeled to the labour organisation) and local union officials visiting firms also undertake some recruitment activities.

Most respondents stated that in 2003-2007 the union had taken steps to promote unionisation. From the description of recruitment practices, it is apparent that in general they replicate those that had been usual in the past. Intensification of the general union activities of workplace representatives and distribution of union information were the two actions to promote affiliation most commonly cited in the interviews. In a few labour organization (4) no attempts at all had been made to recruit new members; these four, coincidentally, have some kind of formal or informal closed shop mechanism ensuring high unionisation levels, such as the "*bolsas de trabajo*", a system stipulated in a significant number of industry-wide collective agreements according to which unions control access to jobs in the event of a vacancy and, formally or informally, the job is conditioned or leads to union affiliation. At the other extreme, only three trade unions, whose recruitment activities were distinctively more intensive already in previous decades (1980s and 1990s), showed in 2003-2007 more diversified and innovative practices, like street campaigns or publicity in massive means of communication. These are unions in continuous

establishments with over ten workers, for instance). Figures for private-sector activities might be assessed against those emerging from a survey to employers, whose results might be biased in the opposite direction, indicating that some 53% of the firms with over 200 workers, and about 28% of those employing 50 to 200, have union workplace representation (Trajtemberg et al., 2005).

²⁶ These 21 trade unions include a few lacking full recognition, whose representatives in fact are not legally protected.

²⁷ This figure should be set against the number of unions that have their own health-care scheme (18).

expansion, and mainly in the service sector with significant employment dispersion.

Thirteen of the 19 interviewed union leaders that indicated that their organisation had taken measures to increase recruitment noted that, later, some kind of monitoring of results had been made, ranging from informal discussions to administrative controls, but generally these evaluations were not systematic (only six unions specified some kind of report or statistics). And, even though in 16 out of 23 interviews it was mentioned that the union has a section, a department or personnel specifically assigned to recruitment, in general this sector or personnel has a merely administrative role. In brief, no commitment with recruitment is apparent, in terms of resources, personnel or systematic efforts. Recruitment activity tends to rely on already existing resources with vaster functions, such as union representatives at the workplace and at the union itself.

The internet is a new resource available to labour organisations, that may be utilised to promote affiliation. In 2006 – 2007 trade union web sites showed a rapid expansion and visible improvement in design and degree of updating,²⁸ revealing of the growing union interest in developing and using this new resource,²⁹ in part to offer information to members, and in part to facilitate payment of employer contributions (12 of 19 union web sites provide specific information to employers). Given that employer compliance in this area is crucial to the unions – employers are in charge of transferring to the unions not only their own contributions but also member and agency shop fees -, it is not surprising that the employer is one of the main targets of union web sites. Union web pages offer information that is relevant for all the workers employed in the economic activity of the union (wage rates, collective agreements, labour legislation, issues related to union-managed health-care schemes), but seldom (only in 7 of 22 union web sites) use is made of the potential access of non unionised workers to the web site to explicitly promote affiliation; still, advertising union services for members might *per se* help to stimulate unionisation (and in 16 out of the 22 examined union web sites, services for members are given a very relevant place in the site).³⁰ In addition, only in four of the 14 unions whose health-care scheme has an independent site is there a link from this site to the trade union; such link may indicate greater interest in promoting the union among non members. In summary, union web sites are used mainly to give information to members and employers, but only seldom to promote affiliation, either explicitly or by facilitating the affiliation procedure. A few labour organisation (5 of 22) have in their web pages an application form, that may be used to initiate the affiliation process.

²⁸ To analyse trade union web sites we examined complexity of design, degree of updating, space and relevance assigned to different aspects (union/labour information; information on services and benefits for members, such as training courses or tourism; information for employers on how to pay contributions; political information; etc.); link to/from the union-managed health-care scheme; promotion of unionisation; online affiliation; among others. Selected trade union web sites (22) include some unions where interviews were not conducted; and not all the unions where interviews were made have their own web pages.

²⁹ As yet, very few union have in their web sites a visitor counting mechanism, that could give an idea on the size of the “audience” for each union.

³⁰ In any case, the description of services and benefits is almost always included in the sites.

ii. Territories

It was not uncommon among respondents to point out that certain groups, in particular the youth and women, are more reluctant to join the union. However, in very few trade unions specific policies to attract these groups had been designed (only in four interviews was the possibility of differentiated strategies mentioned). Further, the unions continued to concentrate their recruitment activity not only in establishments with union representation, but also in workers with permanent contracts, i.e. in consolidated job territories.

Workers with temporary or casual contracts, or employed in externalised activities undertaken within the firm, and also workers with precarious employment, are situated at the border of the consolidated recruitment territories, the latter placed farthest from the core. In very few interviews specific efforts to promote affiliation among workers with non-standard or precarious employment were mentioned, and those few that did mention them in fact were talking of activities directed at changing the employment status of workers with non-standard employment (2), or to union inspections to detect non-registered employment (2).³¹ Respondents associated these efforts to recruitment via the expansion of the potentially eligible members. With one exception, the few labour organisations that expanded their recruitment territories in those directions do not share the most typical traits of the Argentinean trade unions broadly speaking: they are newer or in new industries, lack full recognition, and/or compete with others in the same economic activity.

For trade unions without full legal recognition, member recruitment is vital (as full recognition depends on the number of members), but at the same time they have limited recruitment possibilities if they are competing with already recognised unions in the same industry, since Argentinean labour legislation grants all collective rights to the organisations with full recognition. As we have seen, these latter may openly carry out union activities at the workplace as their representatives are legally protected; the fact that they are entitled to sign collective agreements generally guarantees them substantial revenues coming from employer and worker contributions, revenues that, in turn, may be used to offer a wide range of attractive services to members; and last they also administer the health-care scheme for workers, an important channel for recruiting new members. Probably this reason contributes to explain why unions lacking full recognition have looked for new recruitment territories: the unemployed, non-core workers, and workers in precarious employment (who, as said earlier, in practice are not entitled to unionise), i.e. workers historically excluded from the unions' field of representation. The same happens with other unions that, even if having full recognition, are newer or in new economic activities, and have still a

³¹ Other unions too have some policy intended to deal with precarious employment, but only in those two cases the problem with linked to unionisation.

relatively small membership base (and sometimes face the additional constraint given by type of labour represented, less prone to become unionised, e.g. university professors), and with organisations competing with another union in the same activity (this time both of them with full legal recognition, as is the case of trade unions in public administration).

iii. Assessment of motives and obstacles to affiliation

Recruitment strategies are based on the dominant views as to why do workers join unions. According to all but four interviews, union services for members are one central, although not necessarily the sole, reason driving wage earners to unionise (only in three cases it was regarded as the only reason for joining). Three of the four unions that deviate from the general pattern correspond to privatised public utilities, with a strong unionisation tradition, sometimes reinforced by mechanisms that ensure union control of access to jobs; two of them are enrolled with the CTA, the newer general labour confederation, opposed to the historically hegemonic CGT, that has openly emphasised the importance of commitment to collective action. The fourth union is new, lacks full recognition, and is also enrolled with the CTA. In any case, according to union respondents, other motives, together or separately, also play a role, principally the possibility of having access to the *obras'* health services (cited by 9 of 23) – although in actual fact being an union member is not a requisite for access - and the influence of co-workers and/or union representatives at the workplace (cited by 14). In summary, the dominant evaluation is that workers are driven to unionise by instrumental reasons or some form of pressure, while motives such as “solidarity”, “to collaborate”, or “identification with the union” were cited only in six interviews.

Consistently with the dominant view about the main reasons behind unionisation, a majority of union leaders (21 out of 23) answered that to foster affiliation the union stresses the services they provide to members, such as tourism, goods, training and sports (18 of 23); the health-care scheme (10) and/or a better access to its services (7), even though, as said earlier, all workers are eligible to use the scheme, whether being union members or not. Still, the fact that an increasing membership would help to strengthen the union's power position in collective bargaining often is emphasised as well (as cited by 17); more even: in nine unions this option was ranked in the first place. But, surprisingly, union protection at the workplace very seldom is the argument used to promote affiliation. In any case, only one third of the unions that emphasise their services to members to promote unionisation had actually expanded services during 2003-2007 (for instance, introducing new but very circumscribed benefits; increasing differentiation between members and non members in the cost of access to certain services; incorporating training).

The views as to which are the main obstacles that hinder unionisation also may contribute to shape recruitment strategies and the structure of incentives. For over one half of the interviewed union leaders (13 of 23), lack of worker commitment is an important problem, but employer hostility is the most cited obstacle (by 16). By contrast, only six respondents thought that labour market problems, such as high unemployment and employment instability, deter workers from joining the union; five of these six unions are with the CTA, the general labour confederation that

in 2003-2007, in spite of economic recovery and employment growth, maintained its negative diagnosis of the labour market and social situations. The fact that the adverse labour market situation was so seldom taken into account is surprising given that, even in the more favourable circumstances characterising the period during which the interviews were made (2006-2007), unemployment and precarious employment continued to be severe problems.

The high rank attributed to employer hostility among the obstacles to unionisation merits a detour. Argentinean labour legislation guarantees both the freedom to unionise and trade union rights at the workplace, as well as the application of collective agreements industry wide. Nonetheless, respondents cited many examples of employer practices intended to discourage unionisation, such as conditioning the job to not being an union member or threatening with dismissal if the worker were to join the union; those who made threats or tried to discourage unionisation were often placed at medium-level positions (supervisors, personnel in the human resource departments). Hostile attitudes to unionisation possibly became more explicit in the 1990s, with growing unemployment and instability, the general unfavourable climate for labour unions and, in certain cases, the changes in labour management resulting from the increasing internationalisation of ownership, mentioned above. Respondents linked hostility to unionisation to the employers' ultimate objective of "preventing the union within the firm". As we have seen, employers have weak grounds to exert anti union practices, but in fact union representatives may scrutinise more closely compliance with collective agreements and the effective channeling of employer and worker union contributions, and may challenge employer discretionary practices.

5. Conclusion: continuity or innovation?

In the introduction to this paper it was argued that the profound transformations of the 1990s (in the labour market, in attitudes, in the unions' "capacity to deliver" and credibility, among others), and later the increase of employment after sustained losses and a deep crisis, with growing recruitment opportunities, might have been a sequence of circumstances propitious to induce changes in the historically dominant "passive" pattern of union recruitment strategies. However, the study reveals that tradition prevailed over innovation. In general, recruitment practices did not show significant changes in the 2003-2007 period as compared to the traditionally implemented activities. The same past practices were now deployed on a larger scale to take advantage of the growing number of workers incorporating to employment, i.e. the general activities of union workplace representatives were intensified, union services and benefits for members were punctually expanded or improved, communication was facilitated through union publications and web sites (only in this latter case was a new resource utilised). To foster unionisation, emphasis was placed on the traditional structure of union services and benefits to members, including access to health care, on the basis of the assessment that instrumental motives dominate among the reasons to join unions, and that one of the main hindrances to unionisation comes from labour's lack of commitment (even though employer hostility was also perceived to be a significant obstacle). In any case, to promote affiliation, the importance of membership to strengthen the union's collective bargaining position was also stressed.

Trade unions' attitudes to unionisation and recruitment tend to be very similar in spite of their diversity in fields of representation (in terms of industry and worker skills), membership size, legal structure, degree of dispersion of potential members, political orientation and the larger confederation to which they belong. For solidly implanted unions, traditional recruitment mechanisms, routine functioning, and concentration of recruitment efforts in consolidated territories seem to have sufficed to preserve a membership volume that they apparently find to be satisfactory. In this sense, unions at large were not compelled to innovate, with the exception of a small number that faced disperse employment, and had been showing more recruitment dynamism and diversification of practices already from the 1980, but who did not move in the direction of recruiting workers with non standard contracts or other non-core workers.

The – minimal – expansion of recruitment activities towards non-core workers is found mainly in unions that did not reach as yet the degree of institutional consolidation of the traditional labour organisations, because they either have not obtained full rights, have a more recent origin and still are in the formative stage or, even if having full recognition, they were competing with another union in the same industry. In other words, the few and timid recruitment moves to non-traditional territories are associated to singular situations as compared with the typical features of the traditional unions, who are sheltered from competition by the labour institutions that had been progressively established since the 1940s.

At least from the 1950s, member recruitment has not been a problematic area for the great majority of Argentinean trade unions, and still by the 2000s it does not seem that this has become an important concern, in spite of the profound economic, social and labour market changes that took place since the 1990s. Whereas in many countries sharp declines in union density have spurred discussions as to how labour organisations might be “revitalised” and unionisation promoted, this discussion continues to be absent in Argentina. It looks like, therefore, the traditionally passive recruitment strategies are still effective: the resilient key labour institutions that had traditionally fostered unionisation continue to succeed in providing trade unions with a regular inflow of members that seems to satisfy the vast majority of the union leadership. Why have these institutions survived without significant alterations – throughout military regimes, economic liberalisation, labour and social policy reforms – and the role of trade unions themselves in the political interplay that contributed to their resilience is an issue still open to further investigation.

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