

Globalisation and new forms of organising

The Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) of Argentina

Globalisation has led to fundamental changes in the world of work. In arguing that unions have not in any significant way risen to the new challenges, **Mthetho Xali** explores the new forms of organising being embarked upon by the Argentinean based Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA).

Even though the factory, farms and mines remain the main places of work, homes and streets have also become workplaces while workers work in workplaces not owned by their immediate employers, for example a labour broker worker or workers performing outsourced functions. These changes have posed serious challenges to unions, particularly to national industrial unions. Unions, have however, not in any significant way risen to these challenges. They have not organised non-permanent workers even though they talk about the rise of precarious jobs and take resolutions to organise vulnerable workers.

There are initiatives in some countries to organise vulnerable workers by experimenting on new ways of organising these workers. Some of these initiatives originate within the traditional unions while others result from the failure of established unions to respond appropriately to the challenges posed by globalisation. One such union is the Central de Trabajadores

Argentinos (CTA), a labour federation in Argentina that views itself as experimenting with new ways of organising under globalisation.

ORIGINS OF THE CTA

The CTA emerged out of struggles within the Argentine labour movement, organised under the Confederacion General del Trabajo (CGT), over how to respond to the implementation of neo-liberal policies by the Peronists party, Partido Justicialista. The Partido Justicialista had close relations with labour and the CGT backed it in the 1989 elections, which saw the Peronist party return to office under the leadership of Carlos Menem. This 'close' ally of labour was the one that pushed through the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, cuts in social spending, reductions of subsidies to the provinces, trade liberalisation, deregulation, reductions of budget deficits, increased interest rates – basically all the ingredients of neo-liberalism. These policies resulted in a sharp increase in unemployment and temporary employment,

retrenchments of state employed workers, and a reduction in the purchasing power of working people and as a result a dramatic drop in living standards. The sharp debates within the CGT as to how to respond to the neo-liberal path of the Peronist party divided the labour movement into two factions.

The dominant faction, despite all the neo-liberal attacks on the working class and the poor, believed and still believes that labour is best served under the Partido Justicialista. The other faction led by the state employees union, Asociacion de Trabajadores del Estado (Association of Public Servants, ATE) and the teachers' union Confederacion de los Trabajadores de la Educacion de la Republica Argentina (Federation of the Education Workers of the Republic of Argentina, CTERA) saw the Peronist party's neo-liberal path as what it is – an attack on the working class and the poor in general. These public sector unions and radical metalworkers, together with other smaller unions denounced the CGT leadership as having betrayed the workers to the Peronist-led government and resolved in 1991 to form a new federation – the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos. The CTA, having experienced the fragmenting effects of neoliberalism on the working class, resolved to shift away from a traditional trade unionism that organises along industrial lines, to an organisational form that sought to unite the working class as a whole.

ORGANISING STRATEGY

The CTA is a different kind of federation that does not limit its



membership to unionised members. Its focus is also not limited to the problems and needs of permanent employees but to the interests of the working class as a whole. How you become a member of the CTA, who can be its affiliate and the way it is structured accommodates all the different sections of the working class – from the different types of employed workers (i.e. permanent workers and vulnerable workers) to the unemployed, and those in the informal sector. It has demanded legal recognition as a congress of Argentinean workers by the state, punishment and incarceration of those involved in repression in the 1970s, a legislated minimum wage, family subsidies and pensions for retired workers of 82% of their salaries – all of which reflect its unifying character.

BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE CTA

A person becomes a member of the CTA through being a member of an affiliated union or organisation. A person can also become a member of the federation without having to

belong to one of its affiliates. Monthly subscription is kept low so as to encourage membership. Direct individual membership is 1 peso a month (R2.10). All CTA members have the same status irrespective of whether they are employed or unemployed. The CTA adopts this approach to membership to facilitate the organising of all the different sections of the working class, especially the unemployed and workers in precarious employment.

Affiliating to the CTA: Affiliation to the CTA is not limited to unions. Its affiliates are from a wide range of progressive organisations – community-based organisations and movements, youth organisations, sex workers' union, student organisations, industrial unions, factories without bosses (factories taken over by workers), cooperatives, organisations of the unemployed (e.g. the Federation for Land, Housing and Habitat, FTV), land movements, research and training centres and even homeless children. The CTA has more than 200 different affiliated organisations. Its approach to the membership question is informed by the CTA's understanding of the need to go beyond defending the interests of union members and to reach out to other social movements.

As part of its commitment to cooperation between the organisations of the working class, it also works and supports organisations that are not affiliated to it. Through this inclusive approach the CTA seeks to build a collective force that can put an end to the influence and control of capital in Argentina.

Structure of the CTA: The CTA has national, provincial and local committees. The National Committee is elected every three years and has various sub-committees. It has 24 Provincial Committees that are made up of representatives from

organisations in the different provinces. Its local committees are made up of affiliated organisations, workers and community members. All committee representatives are elected through direct voting. The election of leaders is done by individual members not through affiliates' representatives. All elected positions within the CTA are unpaid with only organising department directors and support staff paid a salary. The salary costs and costs for its activities are covered by subscriptions and international aid that the CTA receives from other labour organisations.

Women's representation within the CTA structures: Quotas for representation of women at all the levels of CTA are utilised to ensure women representation. There is approximately 30 to 40% female representation in the CTA structures. Voting lists are rejected if women candidates are not sufficiently represented.

CONCLUSION

The CTA's experience and its move away from the industrial trade union form, given the changes to the world of work and attempts to unify all workers, is an interesting innovation. Its institutional arrangements, which facilitate the organising of the unemployed and the building of unity amongst the working class, are significant. Trade union activists seeking to build unity among the broader sections of the working class in South Africa, and grappling with the organising of workers in precarious jobs, can draw valuable lessons from the CTA experience.

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