

Spirited fight for workers' control

Buenos Aires subway workers

When the union of subway workers in Buenos Aires signed an agreement without consultation, workers fought back. **Mthetho Xhali** tells of this struggle and what these workers won.

As part of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) obligation Argentina privatised its underground rail service in Buenos Aires in 1994. Metrovias, a US company, took over the running of the subway under a concession arrangement which was to end in 1999 but was extended until 2017.

In 1994 Metrovias launched an attack on subway workers' working conditions. The company restructured its staff and working hours.

It fired 60% of its workers and as a result the workforce dropped from 4 600 to 1 500, of which 800 were newly-employed. It increased working hours from a seven-hour to an eight-hour workday. The company also reduced the hours during which the trains ran whilst tightening commuter controls at entrances to the subway. These changes were forced through but the workers' union, the Union of Transport Workers (UTA) were consulted and, largely, accepted the changes.

After these changes, in the first three years train services improved, but as the company pushed for more profits problems began to

show in the service provided. The company failed to invest in the maintenance of the trains and the tracks. Trains became more overcrowded at peak hours and often ran late.

In 2001 and 2002 Argentina was hit by a political and economic crisis resulting in factory closures, mass retrenchments and widespread protests in which the train service was a particular focus of public anger. Under these conditions the subway workers organised themselves to challenge Metrovias management. The problem was that the UTA had agreed to the changes and the involvement of the subway workers was minimal in such discussions. So workers struggled to put in place processes that promoted the participation of subway workers in struggles against management.

DEMANDS AND DEMOCRATISING UNION

The subway workers started fighting within the UTA for an internal commission to restructure the union. The purpose of the internal commission was to promote the involvement of rank-and-file workers, and not only shop

stewards, in the union.

The rank-and-file began to participate in the UTA elections and voted for pro rank-and-file workers as their representatives. They developed organisational structures that emphasised direct democracy and horizontal organising. These changes involved functioning general assemblies with special commissions and delegates (worker representatives) to coordinate the implementation of general assembly decisions.

The assemblies were constituted to correspond with each of the six subway lines serving the city. Each line had its own assembly to elect delegates to represent them. The elected delegates then constituted a coordinating team and held weekly coordinating meetings.

As the influence of the internal commission grew amongst the workers, they began to engage in militant struggles for a six-hour work day and demanded an increase in wages.

The subway workers also denounced the bad state of trains and the poor passenger security and supported community movements' calling for lower fares.

Inspired by almost 100 companies under workers' control elsewhere in the country, especially the Zanon ceramics factory, the subway workers called for workers' control of the Buenos Aires subway. They got solidarity support from public hospital workers, the Zanon reclaimed ceramics factory, other train workers and even public school teachers in their struggles. The workers also supported struggles waged by other sections

of the working class.

Their militant struggles resulted in improvements in working conditions. They won demands such as ten years, no retrenchments. In fact the workforce has expanded since 1998 as a result of a six-hour working day, the creation of new work places, and the incorporation into the company of 800 workers from external companies providing services in the subways. The last gain was a victory over the outsourcing of services and fragmentation of the work force.

The victory of the six-hour workday forced the company to increase its workforce to 4 000 employees. The victory also marked a return to the working hours before the subway was privatised and inspired workers in other sectors to demand a six-hour workday. It led to a national campaign for a national six-hour workday by train workers, unemployed worker organisations and worker-controlled workplaces. The campaign for six-hours also received general public support as a way of dealing with high unemployment.

SPLIT IN UTA

The emphasis placed by the subway workers commission on involving rank-and-file members in decision-making brought them into conflict with UTA leadership. This turned into UTA threats, persecution and physical aggression against representatives of the subway workers. These confrontations and the conduct of UTA leadership forced subway workers to think of creating their own union. In August 2008, worker representatives of subway workers made a request to be informally registered with the Ministry of Labour.

In response the UTA leadership embarked on removing the subway worker commissioners as worker representatives. UTA called for new elections of worker representatives to take place on December 12, 2008. It also changed the procedure that allowed the subway union branch to create a voters' roll and created its own voters' roll. UTA union leadership also reduced the number of delegates eligible for voting and disregarded the different sizes of the subway workers' workplaces in determining representation.

The subway workers' representatives challenged the union leadership and requested the Ministry of Labour to intervene, but there was no response.

On the day of the election, the subway workers held assemblies in their workplaces, and rejected the union elections. A worker representative addressing a subway workers' assembly stated that "The Company made an agreement with the bureaucracy to impose on us delegates who correspond to their interests and with the complicity of the Ministry of Labour".

In the elections organised by the UTA bureaucracy, only 8% of 2 500 registered workers voted. Pro rank-and-file workers' representatives also lost formal representation in the UTA.

The removed worker representatives, with the support of subway workers, resolved to set up their own union. As the first step they called for a referendum for all the subway workers on 5 February 2009, in order to find out if subway workers were in favour of forming a new union.

All polls were monitored by people with legal authority to monitor, and also observed by social, political and human rights activists. This step was rejected by

the UTA leadership and the General Federation of the Work (CGT), a long-time ally of the national government of Cristina Kirchner.

The UTA supporters attempted to disrupt the referendum by violently attacking those participating in it, without success. In response subway workers went on strike causing several hours of interruption of the subway service, and continued with their referendum.

More than 70% of registered workers voted in the referendum and 98.8% voted in favour of forming a new union. The next step for them is to register with the Ministry of Labour so as to have a legal status. This step is not going to be easy because the Ministry of Labour did not support the idea of subway workers forming a new union.

The workers' fight for a union controlled by its membership, and its exploration of new ways of involving rank-and-file membership through workers' assemblies, was an important innovation. These innovations increased the participation of general membership in the life of the union.

The fact that these innovations emerged as a response to union leadership not answering to the needs and demands of union membership is significant. The case study shows that when union members are united and clear in their demands they can take control of their destiny. The case study also reveals that when workers are organised, united and involved in decision-making they can make important gains. LB

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