



**Nahuel Moreno**

**Origins of  
the Argentine  
workers'  
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(up to 1943)**

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1965

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**English Translation:** Daniel Iglesias

**Cover and interior design:** Daniel Iglesias

**Editor notes:** Daniel Iglesias

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[cehus2014@gmail.com](mailto:cehus2014@gmail.com)



# Foreword

The topic is a look at the origins of the workers' movement until the emergence of Peronism. It starts in the 19th century, its great struggles, anarchism and socialism, the Tragic Week of 1919, and the importance and decline of FORA. The strengthening of the CP in the 1930s and its retreat due to its betrayals in the early 1940s, opened the doors for the bourgeois sector led by General Perón to win the majority of the working class to Peronism.

Notes that were used for a talk in Avellaneda (province of Buenos Aires, Argentina) in 1965 on the origins of workers' struggles and organisations at the end of the 19th century and their development until the emergence of Peronism in 1943.

All notes are by the editor.

**The Editors**

March 2024

# Origins of the Argentine workers' movement (up to 1943)

## First course

All these talks serve to show a side of our country's history, almost totally unknown to us. A side of history that the bosses have skilfully covered with the black cloak of "official history", the one of San Martín, Belgrano, Mitre, Yrigoyen, etc. and there are no books yet that tell it. This is the history of the Argentine workers' movement, our own history. That of our struggles, of our advances and setbacks. Of our known and unknown heroes. As we said, this story is not yet printed in any book. We can find it in newspapers and magazines from different periods. Therefore, may these writings serve as a general basis for knowing and understanding, our history.

First of all, we must say that our workers' movement is one of the oldest in the world and one with the most militant tradition. It is formed fundamentally by the immigration of European workers, most of them German, Italian, Spanish, and French, who, driven by the persecution of trade union leaders in their countries, had to emigrate from them. All these workers, leaders already in their countries, had a deep union training, and politically we could divide them into "anarchists" and "socialists"; we must take the latter into account as a fundamental thing to see how later these positions influence the organisation of our movement.

As they arrive in our country, these comrades begin to group around organisations, which they call clubs, mainly by nationality and sometimes even by country region. Thus, the Germans formed a club called "Vorwarts" [Forward], the Spanish met in the Basque, Andalusian centres, etc., the Italians in the famous *Unione e Fralanza* and the French in similar organisations. Initially, these organisations did not encourage union objectives but rather their objectives were more political.

When the French arrived in Argentina, they created with the Italians and Germans a section of the First International, although very small. It was in 1880 that the first major workers-bosses conflicts arose. One of the first was that of the railway workers. Faced with growing inflation, the workers at the Sola workshop raised the need to be paid their wages in gold. The strike is reached and it is crushed after a massacre at a public meeting held in Plaza Herrera by the workers. The conflict resurfaces later over the same issue and this time it does triumph.

May 1st is proclaimed as World Workers' Day. It was in 1896 that a great public meeting was prepared in conjunction with all the organisations. At that meeting, workers representatives of all nationalities spoke in their own languages, German, French, Italian, and some in Spanish. This produced great joy among the bosses who, through *La Prensa*, their most preferred organ of expression, said that the Argentine worker did not care about union or political problems since the majority of those who had spoken at the meeting were foreigners. In this meeting it is resolved to submit a petition to the government requesting: 1) an 8-hour workday; 2) Protection laws for workers; 3) Protection for working women and children, etc. This was the first political step of the Argentine workers' movement.

That same year, the first workers' confederation in the country was structured, later cut short by the revolution against Juárez Celman<sup>1</sup> and the implementation of the state of siege. Later it was established again and, in an assembly, they decided to present another petition complaining to the government that the previous one had not been taken into account.

The differences between socialists and anarchists already begin to be noticed and increasingly profoundly. The former is for the organisation, the latter for the destruction of all types of organisations based on their principles. Despite everything, anarchism emerges as the most combative sector by posing the *struggle through direct confrontation*, and the socialists as reformists by proposing the *parliamentary struggle*. To explain better: the anarchists, through frontal, carnal struggle, set themselves the goal of wresting conquests from the bosses in the first instance and continuing with that method until the total destruction of the regime and society and the establishment of an anarchist society, without a state, without any organisation and with complete freedom for all individuals. The socialists proposed to gain power little by little through the parliamentary route, that is, by presenting bills to the Congress, through their deputies elected in elections. The positive position of the anarchists was the destruction of the state through the *direct struggle*. The positive position of the socialists was the *organisation*. The common mistake of the two factions was total ignorance of the political problem in Argentina. They ignored it because they held that it was a bosses' government and they should not be messed with for that reason.

It is at this moment that a Catalan anarchist writer appears, who begins to raise the need for the workers' movement to be well organised, with its governing bodies, its premises, its contributions and, most importantly, in a *permanent way*; he went so far as to raise the need for a revolutionary party to lead this movement. This approach arises because anarchism had as its method the momentary organisation as soon as a conflict arose and then this organisation disappeared, leaving everything in nothing.

Thirty-five trade union societies meet. Thus, the emergence of the FORA in 1905. From the beginning, a struggle was started between the socialists and the anarchists. Specifically, the organisation is established under the name of the Argentine Regional Workers' Federation [FORA being its initials in Spanish]. In the struggle between the two sectors, the anarchist sector triumphs in almost all the votes. This is when the most fabulous stage of the organisation of the Argentine workers' movement began.

In the 2nd Congress, the division between the two sectors took place and the socialists were expelled.

This entire period at the beginning of the century was intensely revolutionary until we reached the year 1905, when the movement splits. There are strikes from all sectors and unions. It was in 1902 when there was an attempted general strike. The government, alarmed by the characteristics that these strikes took, voted in Congress on the Residence Law. It was said that it was aimed at expelling the *cafisios*<sup>2</sup> from the country, but, in reality, it was used to expel all the leaders of the workers' movement who were foreigners. The process of the general strike opened a controversy between the socialists and anarchists. The socialists had had an opportunistic and traitorous position since they had planned to act as intermediaries between the government, the bosses and the working class as if they were part of the process and workers also. We must clarify that the FORA brilliantly led this stage of the movement.

In the Socialist Party, a division occurs that is later structured in the UGT [General Union of Workers] with a clearly revolutionary tendency that raises the need for unification of the two organisations. The FORA in its stage of growth became increasingly sectarian, going so far as to raise

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1 **Miguel Ángel Juárez Celman** (1844–1909) was a liberal lawyer and political representative of the Argentine financial oligarchy and foreign monopolies. President of Argentina from October 12, 1886 until his resignation on August 6, 1890. He was a prominent promoter of the separation of Church and State, public education, immigration and public works, but he was unable to maintain the economic stability and had to face the armed uprising known as the Revolution of 1890. In August Juárez Celman resigned and Carlos Pellegrini assumed the presidency.

2 **Cafisios**: Argentinian slang for ruffians or pimps.

the need for all unions to carry out communist anarchist propaganda. All these positions conspired against the unity of the movement.

After the Revolution of 1905,<sup>3</sup> led by Yrigoyen,<sup>4</sup> in the face of which neither socialism nor anarchism took a positive position, the former calling it a simple barracks coup and the latter washing their hands of it, the government began serious repression against the Radicals and the entire workers' movement. This is when the retreat of the workers' movement begins.

Until 1910 the workers' movement fought but defensively. Thus, in this stage, black boss figures emerge who massacre the workers' movement without any consideration, the most important of them being that of Ramón Falcón,<sup>5</sup> killed in 1909 by the anarchist Radowitzky. For the year 1910, the government plans to lavishly celebrate the centenary of the May Revolution, so high-ranking world personalities are invited. The workers planned to give them the big battle that day. The already bureaucratised FORA leadership was doing nothing and was negotiating with the government.

The UGT, which had changed its name to CORA [Argentine Regional Workers' Confederation], together with a sector of the FORA, proposes a strike. Their objective was to be against the Residency Law. The police and the government begin to carry out great repression, imprisoning, torturing and deporting until the movement is completely destroyed.

The defeat and retreat of our movement, although not mechanically, coincides with the defeat of the world workers' movement and its decline.

It should be noted that FORA was an organisation that had the virtue, despite all its sectarianism, of being able to reach the entire workers' movement and even the countryside.

In 1916, two years after the outbreak of the First World War, Radicalism, a political party from a sector of the bourgeoisie, emerged in full force in the country. The war caused the industrial isolation of the country, allowing the emergence of the first factories to supply domestic consumption. It is at this moment that the workers' movement develops here.

Thus, we arrive at January 1919. In the Vasena Factory (Cochabamba and La Rioja Streets, currently Plaza Martín Fierro, in the city of Buenos Aires) the workers are on strike. The owner wants to break it up. The workers, who had organised pickets, controlled the entry and exit of the scabs, fighting with them. Determined to put an end to this situation, Vasena got police officers to enter through the roofs of the factory, causing a massacre among the comrades stationed nearby. The next day the funeral procession begins, moving along Entre Ríos Street to bury the dead in Chacarita cemetery. As they pass through the streets, the agitation becomes increasingly greater, and the assaults on the armouries begin. The police, who try to repress, when they see the violence that the events have taken, do not repress and withdraw. So, the bosses and the government decide to quarter the troops and see how events develop. The rest of the population of the Capital was terrified to see that the comrades were advancing without being stopped. The police were preparing in the vicinity of the cemetery, having previously been drunk to prevent what happened before. When the cortege reaches the cemetery and an orator is speaking, the shooting begins and they are massacred. The workers organise themselves and declare a general strike. Despite the massacre, the armed workers controlled the entire Capital for three days. The government brings out the army to repress but encounters the problem that they shoot into the air. This is when it takes place the great betrayal

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3 The **Revolution of 1905** was a civil-military uprising that occurred in Argentina, organised by the Radical Civic Union and led by Hipólito Yrigoyen against the government of the National Autonomist Party (PAN) in demand of free and democratic elections. In 1912, with the so-called Sáenz Peña Law, secret and mandatory universal male suffrage was approved.

4 **Hipólito Yrigoyen** (1852–1933), was an Argentine politician, a relevant figure in the Radical Civic Union. In 1916, with the male popular vote allowed by the Sáenz Peña Law, he won his first presidential term, thus opening the historical period known as the first Radical presidencies. He was re-elected in 1928 and overthrown in 1930 by a coup led by José Félix Uriburu.

5 **Ramón Lorenzo Falcón** (1855–1909) was an Argentine politician, soldier and police officer. He stood out for his harshness as head of the Capital Police (later the Argentine Federal Police), repressing in cold blood or with an "iron fist" the workers' revolts of the early 20th century. As a consequence of the repressive events of the so-called Red Week of 1909, in which the police under his command murdered approximately 11 anarchist protesters on May 1, 1909.

of La Fraternidad<sup>6</sup> workers who collaborate with the repression by sending a train to Chaco, at full speed, to bring a battalion of soldiers from that area. Upon their arrival, the great repression begins. The mounted police and some of the so-called, already at that time, Reformist students appear. Faced with the great repression, the mobilisation began to retreat, and the anarchists and socialists began to fight for the leadership of the movement. The anarchists raise the freedom of prisoners as their slogan; The socialists propose a return to work simply because they have already demonstrated sufficient strength. The mobilisation is destroyed, and the workers' movement is defeated. We must say that the proposal of the anarchists is positive about the continuation of the strike but not with the objective of the freedom of the prisoners since this was a very limited objective, a consequence of their political conception. The correct position was the seizure of power by the workers' movement, but unfortunately, this could not be because of the lack of a revolutionary Marxist leadership of the movement. There was no revolutionary party. This is how the bosses organise and strengthen themselves, imprisoning all the leaders. After this great defeat, defensive and organisational struggles took place in 1920–1930, thus reaching the year 1930 with the conservative Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

This decade is one of the greatest democratic freedoms. The government of the Radical Hipólito Yrigoyen, from the middle class, allows formal freedom of a democratic nature. The conservative coup was carried out by the oligarchy because of the economic crisis that the country had been enduring, directly related to the global economic crisis.

FORA has no position regarding the coup because it considers it just another bosses' struggle. We believe that the position should have been in defence of the government, as it allowed the organisation of the workers' movement with its formal freedoms, and ultimately for being more progressive than the one that would be established later with Uriburu.<sup>8</sup>

We must also say that the petty and reactionary characteristics of the middle class in general meant that the government had no basis of support to face the coup.

Uriburu rises and the entire workers' movement is repressed, Law 4,144<sup>9</sup> is applied. The entire workers' movement is beheaded, confining a large number of anarchist leaders in the South.<sup>10</sup>

## Course 2

In 1930, during Yrigoyen's second presidency, the agricultural-livestock bosses, the old Argentine oligarchy through its best representative, Lieutenant General Uriburu, carried out a military coup that overthrew the most democratic government the country had had until that moment.

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6 **La Fraternidad** (The Fraternity): union by trade, groups train drivers. It still exists today. All other railway workers are part of the Railway Union.

7 **Revolution of 1930** was the dictatorship imposed by the *coup d'état* of September 6, 1930. It was promoted by the most reactionary, oligarchic and conservative forces in the country, and opened a chapter of repression and submission to British imperialism. It was headed by General José Félix Uriburu. The constitutional president Hipólito Yrigoyen, the National Congress and 12 of the 14 provincial governments were overthrown, beginning the period known as the "Infamous Decade" (1930-1943).

8 **General José Félix Uriburu** (1868–1932), fascist dictator who, through fraudulent elections, was succeeded by Agustín P. Justo, a politician and military man from the pro-oligarchic and coup-plotting sector of Radicalism.

9 **Law No. 4,144** on Residence of Foreigners, better known as the Residence Law, was an Argentine legislation of 1902 that authorised the Executive Branch to prevent the entry and expel foreigners "whose conduct compromises national security or disturbs public order." This law, which was repealed in 1958, was used by successive Argentine governments and employers to super-exploit immigrants and repress workers' union organisation, expelling mainly anarchists and socialists. In 1933, Carlos Gardel sang and popularised the tango "At the foot of the Holy Cross", which denounced this repression of immigrants.

10 It refers to Ushuaia Prison, a prison that operated in the Argentine city of Ushuaia between 1902 and 1947. The harshness of the climatic conditions and the geographical isolation of the southernmost city in the world reinforced the security of the prison, intended for repeat common criminals and those most dangerous, and also used for political detainees.



The attitude that FORA had towards the *coup d'état* only highlighted the negative nature of its position of denying a political attitude in the face of the country's problems. They characterised this as another coup by the military and, in short, a fight between sectors of the bosses. Unfortunately, and due to the sectarianism that this organisation had reached and, we repeat, its negative attitude towards political problems, they did not know how to characterise the progressive nature of the Yrigoyen government compared to the reactionary nature of a new oligarchic, semi-fascist government. They considered that both were disastrous, and they wanted to fight against both, just like the doctor, who faced a patient who came to see him because he was having an attack of peritonitis and in turn, had a liver disease, began to heal the liver and the patient died of peritonitis; Since this disease was more acute and led to death, this disease had to be treated first. Uriburu was the peritonitis and Yrigoyen was the liver. This was also how Uriburu, once entrenched in power, began to repress the workers' movement, and the anarchist movement collapsed as a representative of the best workers' cadres, its leaders being deported or confined in prisons in the south of the country.

Due to the crisis that Argentine agriculture was experiencing, and the gradual development of the industry, a stream of inhabitants from the interior of the country began to arrive in Buenos Aires, to work or set up small industries or workshops there.

This is how the great unions by industry began to develop, the first being construction workers, then meatpackers, and later textile workers. Until then the unions were organised by trade, following the old anarchist tradition. Faced with the need to carry out a strike, the woodworkers union, having all the trades common objectives, came together to carry out the first strike within the Uriburu regime, which ended in a draw.

In 1935, the first major strike took place, the construction strike, which lasted eight months in which a 100% wage increase was requested. It is here where the Communist Party (which followed to the letter the orders of the bureaucratic apparatus dominated by Stalin, the dictator of the USSR) launches itself into its organisation and leadership. The CP grows and develops during this strike, becoming stronger until it becomes a true power. Committees to support the strike emerge and are led by the woodworkers union. The CGT [General Confederation of Labour], which already existed as a union body, was taken over, giving rise to the current structure of the workers' unions.

In 1936, to be more precise, in January, the construction union went on strike again. The top leader of the union is deported, and the CP begins negotiations with the government so that Fioravanti,<sup>11</sup> as this leader was called, would not be expelled from the country. But the world policy of the CP, directed from Moscow, changes completely, taking a 180-degree turn. From an anti-boss and ultra-leftist policy, it moved to the Democratic Union<sup>12</sup> with imperialism, due to the problem of the looming world war. It is because of this criminal and traitorous policy of communism that the leader is deported and the strike is lost. The CP accused the government of betraying the agreement they had reached. We must explain that it is not the government, which carries out its policy, that betrays it, but the Communist Party, since a class problem is what never allows us to reach an agreement with the bosses without them, in the short or long term, betraying it.

From then on, the workers' movement began to fail.

In 1942, the metalworkers' union went on strike. With the union well united and organised, it was winning. The CP proposes that the strike be mediated by Monsignor Andrea since he was considered a progressive priest by the CP. He refuses, as he claims to be unaware of these problems

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11 **Guido Fioravanti** (1901–1964), great union leader of the Communist Party. Secretary General of the National Federation of Construction Workers (FONC), organised and led the great construction strike in 1936. Once the strike was defeated, Fioravanti and other worker activists were subjected to the residence law 4144, and were dispatched to the Fascist Italy of Benito Mussolini.

12 **Democratic Union** (UD) was a pro-imperialist and pro-oligarchic electoral alliance formed in 1945 between the Radical Civic Union, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Progressive Democratic Party to confront the Perón-Quijano ticket in the 1946 presidential elections. It was supported and financed by the Rural Society, the Argentine Industrial Union, the Stock Exchange and by the former United States ambassador, Spruille Braden. The nascent Peronism called not to vote for it with the electoral slogan "Braden or Perón."



and proposes that the Minister of the Interior arbitrate. Culaciati,<sup>13</sup> who was the minister, accepted the workers' proposal in all its terms but added a clause by which seniority is not recognised. Thus, when comrades return to work, they are fired without any formality and without receiving any type of compensation.

In 1943 the meatpackers' strike began. José Peter,<sup>14</sup> who was the top leader of the union, was confined to the South. The workers' movement does not want to negotiate if its leader is not released. He is flown in and an assembly is held in a stadium in Avellaneda. By this time, the government of Ramon S. Castillo,<sup>15</sup> the last remnant of the infamous decade, had already been overturned. Peter and Mercante<sup>16</sup> appear. The first, who was a member of the CP, suggests that the union should return to work without a list of demands. This position had been voted by the Central Committee, a consequence of its policy of supporting the allies in the war, holding that the troops could not fail to lack meat. People are disillusioned with this position but comply. We must highlight again the CP's betrayal of the working class, and articulate that of Peter who, as a reflection of the meatpackers union, should have opposed that policy and in any case resigned from the party, before betraying.

The meatpacking plants of Berisso<sup>17</sup> rebel and do not comply, continuing the strike, and triumph by achieving the hourly guarantee, which is the payment of salaries even if there is no work. As a consequence of this, Berisso breaks with the Union. This is the germ of what would later become the Peronist unions. In the other unions, breaks begin to take place in the communist leadership. This is how the Peronist workers' movement began to take shape, based on the permanent betrayals of the CP towards the working class.

We must say that at that time being a union leader was truly a daily demonstration of manhood. When the comrades organised a strike inside the factory, the bosses repressed with beatings, given by the internal police and the regular police, the frightened people became disorganised and scattered. To avoid this, Peter, and Lucas Domínguez,<sup>18</sup> along with other fellow activists, surrounded the other comrades, holding arms tightly and enduring the beating in their own bodies. It was the only way to keep people from scattering and disbanding; little by little the bosses came to negotiate with them.

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13 **Miguel Juan Culaciati** (1879–1970) was a Radical Argentine lawyer and politician who in 1941 was appointed by President Ramon S. Castillo as Minister of the Interior, a position he held until the overthrow of the national government on June 4, 1943.

14 **José Peter** (1895–1970) was an Argentine trade unionist, member of the Communist Party. Leader and founder of the Federation of Workers of the Meat Industry (FOIC) in 1931 and of the Federation of Food Workers in 1937. He was one of the most important union leaders before the rise of Peronism in 1945.

15 **Ramon S. Castillo** (1873–1944) was a conservative Argentine lawyer, judge, and politician belonging to the National Democratic Party. In 1938 he became Vice President after the victory of Roberto M. Ortiz. Upon Ortiz death in 1942, Castillo assumed the position of President of the Nation. He was overthrown by the military coup known as the Revolution of 1943.

16 **Domingo A. Mercante** (1898–1976) was an Argentine military man and politician who stood out for being one of the initiators of Peronism. He was an organiser of the workers' mobilisations that concluded on October 17, 1945 with the release of Juan Domingo Peron. He also served as governor of the province of Buenos Aires between 1946 and 1952, and secretary of Labor and Welfare between 1945 and 1946.

17 **Berisso** is a city in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina. It forms part of the Greater La Plata urban area.

18 **Lucas Domínguez** was the great anarchist labour leader of the Anglo-Ciabasa meat processing plant. In the great meatpackers strike of 1945, the young Nahuel Moreno and his group, the GOM, contacted Domínguez to support the strike and since then he was in close contact with Domínguez and the leadership of the conflict. Domínguez made it easier for the GOM to win over the best activists, and, although he never stopped being an anarchist, he maintained a close relationship with Morenism. At the beginning of the 1970s he visited one of the premises of the PRT-LV, near the Faculty of Philosophy, the COE, and an emotional meeting was held where the young people met and paid tribute to him. In a difficult personal situation, years later he committed suicide.