

**Unit 9:
Anarcho-syndicalism in
Argentina 1870-1939**

This Unit aims to

- Give an overview of the conditions that encouraged the growth of anarcho-syndicalism in Argentina.
- Examine the theory and practice of Argentinean anarcho-syndicalists in the FORA.
- Look at the main issues that arose within the anarcho-syndicalist movement.
- Discuss the reasons for the decline of the FORA.

Terms and abbreviations

FOA: Federación Obrera Argentina. The first Argentinean union federation that, initially, contained both socialists and anarcho-syndicalist factions.

FORA: Federación Obrera Regional Argentina. In 1904 the FOA formally adopted anarcho-syndicalist principles and changed its name.

UGT: Union General de Trabajadores. The socialist union federation formed after the split from the FOA.

CORA: Confederación Obrera Regional Argentina. A (majority) split from the UGT that moved towards syndicalism.

FORA-IX: 'Politically neutral' federation formed after the 1915 FORA conference split.

FORA-V: Anarcho-syndicalist federation formed after the 1915 FORA conference split.

Patriot League: A right wing militia formed in 1919.

USA: Unión Sindical Argentina. Formed in 1922 from an alliance of FORA-IX and other, non-aligned, unions.

ACAT: Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores. Latin American anarcho-syndicalist association.

CGT: Confederación General de Trabajadores. An amalgam between the USA and the socialist Confederación Obrera Argentina established after the military coup of 1930.

ACP: Argentinean Communist Party.

Introduction

Until the mid-19th Century, Argentina's economy was primarily based around agriculture for the domestic market, with exports being limited to primary resources. However, around this time, a major shift occurred, as agriculture was increasingly aimed at the export market. First, it was wool to feed the growing European textile industry and later beef and cereal to feed the population explosion that accompanied European industrialisation. It was the growth of this agri-export industry that led the industrialisation process and so, unlike in Europe where industrialisation had led to the demise of the landed classes, in Argentina it led to a new land owning class. Their wealth was based on the expulsion of native Indians from the land as they developed huge ranches to support the booming Argentinean agri-export industry.

The need to move agricultural produce to the ports for export led to the expansion of the railways and this, in turn, powered manufacturing industrialisation. Railroad expansion was rapid; from 2,516 kilometres in 1879 to 13,682 kilometres by 1902. Related industries saw similar expansion; ports were modernised and refrigeration factories were introduced across Argentina.

Much of the finance for Argentinean industrialisation came from Britain. As British capitalism declined from the 1880's on, British capitalists began exporting their capital around the world in search of higher returns, establishing London as the financial capital of the world.

International Labour

The existing labour supply in Argentina was not large enough to support economic expansion and so it needed international labour as to attract more international finance and foster economic growth. The Argentinean government brought forward laws and inducements to attract foreign immigrants. Results were immediate, and the population rose from 2 million in 1869 to over 4 million by 1895. By this point, 50% of the population of Buenos Aires were immigrants. Some early influxes came from Northern Europe, but the main bulk originated in southern Europe –notably Italy and Spain.

The large influx of labour ensured that employers were able to impose terrible working conditions on the working classes. Agricultural labourers were barred from tenancy of the land and were the property of the ranchers - they were basically treated as slaves. The army was used to hunt down those who attempted to escape.

In the growing cities, the industrial workers fared little better. Immigrant hotels and “corticos” (beehives) were established, where living conditions were appalling and rents extortionate. Working hours were 5am to 6pm, and health and safety regulations were non-existent. Workers were not allowed to talk on the shop floor, work that bosses deemed unacceptable had to be paid for, and a system of fines and corporal punishment was used to discipline workers. Sexual abuse of women and use of child labour was widespread. A complaint meant instant dismissal, and the employer would give the reason on the work permit, ensuring that others would not employ them. Wages were often paid in the form of “chits” redeemable only at the company store.

Organising Resistance

Amid the horrific working conditions, the first workers' movement began to emerge. From the outset, this resistance was heavily influenced by the ideas of anarchism brought in by some of the European immigrants. As early as 1872, a section of the First International (see Unit 3) was established in Argentina. Like its European counterpart, the International in Argentina quickly split into Marxist and Bakuninist sections. However, the influence of Marxism was to remain minimal in Argentina up until the Russian Revolution in 1917.

By 1876, the Anarchists had established their 'Centre for Workers Propaganda' in Buenos Aires, from which the anarchist newspaper, 'El Descamisado', and numerous other propaganda papers began to appear. Numerous languages were used, reflecting the multi-national nature of the Argentinean working class. In 1884, the 'Anarchist Communist Cycle' was established, which later became 'The Circle for Social Studies' and produced its own paper, 'La Question Social'. By 1894, anarchist ideas had become well established amongst the emerging workers movement. At least three anarchist newspapers, 'El Perseguido', 'La Protesta Humana' and 'El Oprimido' had achieved mass circulation.

The anarchist groups were diverse in nature and many became well-integrated parts of Argentinean working class life. Amongst other things, they ran cafés, schools, libraries, study groups and provided free legal advice. They organised outings on weekends and cultural events such as plays, music and dance. Art and literature created by and for workers began to flourish, creating the beginning of a distinct working class culture separate from that of the dominant capitalist culture. In this way, over the first twenty years of the century, the network of solidarity within working class 'barrios' was increasingly cemented with a rich mix of social, political, educational and cultural activity.

Meanwhile, in workplaces, the anarchists began to organise unions. In 1886, a group of bakers formed one of the first unions to emerge in Argentina. The Italian anarchist Malatesta wrote its constitution and it was to form the basis of a number of anarcho-syndicalist unions in Argentina. In 1888, the bakers organised their first strike, securing a 30% pay rise from the employers. This success prompted the railworkers to announce a strike, which was also successful, and the process continued. In 1889, growing unrest

resulted in fifteen strikes taking place in Argentina.

In 1890, the bakers union began publishing its own paper, 'El Obrero Panadero'. The same year a group of Brazilian exiles started 'L'Avvenire'. Along with 'La Question Social' and 'El Oprimido', these papers began to call for the establishment of a national federation of anarcho-syndicalist unions. Several newly created unions signed a solidarity pact as the first step to achieving this.

By 1896, there were some 27 unions functioning in Buenos Aires alone - including both the socialist dominated ones and those influenced by anarcho-syndicalist ideas. Twelve of the anarcho-syndicalist unions organised a national conference at which the general strike was adopted as the main method of struggle and the weapon to bring an end to capitalism. Within months, the anarcho-syndicalists attempted to put this weapon into practice.

The catalyst was a strike on the Buenos Aires-Rosario railway line, which quickly spread to the Buenos Aires-Tolosa line. Rosario anarcho-syndicalists then organised a general strike, and workers in La Plata and Buenos Aires came out in support. Though it ended in failure, the action demonstrated the potential power of general strike solidarity and, in so doing; it had a profound effect on the emerging workers movement.

FOA

With unrest growing, an attempt was made to organise a national union federation. In 1900, several unions came together to produce the joint paper 'La Organización'. This led to various discussions, culminating in a conference of 27 unions on the 21st May 1901, at which the Federación Obrera Argentina (FOA) was founded. Within months, the FOA organised its first dispute, when 1,000 workers struck at a sugar refinery in Rosario. A meeting was organised with management at which police attempted to arrest one of the FOA delegates. In the struggle, police opened fire, murdering one person and wounding several others. A general strike was immediately organised in Rosario, and workers held stoppages in sympathy across Argentina. Later in the year, the FOA organised a national strike of bakery workers in an attempt to force union recognition and negotiating rights. Alarmed at the militancy of the FOA, the government gave permission to the scabs to carry guns "for their own protection". Police raided the FOA offices and a number of activists were arrested, imprisoned and tortured. Despite this repression the strike successfully established the FOA as a national organisation. The FOA published its own paper 'Solidaridad', while various groups within it produced their own, such as 'Ciencia Social', 'El Rebelde', 'Nuova Civiltà' and 'El Sol'. This diverse and growing range of publications reflected the growing anarcho-syndicalist culture being established amongst the Argentinean working class - both in the cities and countryside.

However, division marked the FOA's second conference in 1902. Though growth was continuing (the number of unions had grown to 47), a dispute broke out between the socialist and anarcho-syndicalist tendencies. The socialists argued that the FOA should concentrate on winning reforms, while the anarcho-syndicalists held that revolution should be its major priority. Eventually, 19 socialist unions walked out.

Despite the 1902 conference the FOA continued to grow, with the 15,000 strong Cart and Coach Drivers Union affiliating to the new national federation within weeks of the conference. They launched a number of strikes culminating in a walk-out by Stevedores in Buenos Aires, over the excessive weight of cereal bags they were expected to carry. The strike led to two days of street battles between strikers and police, and soon spread to Rosario and Bahia Blanca. In response, the government introduced the Anti-Alien Act, under which the police

could deport or prevent entry into the country any aliens which they deemed undesirable.

In protest at the imposition of the Anti-Alien Act, the FOA immediately set about organising a general strike, which duly took place in December 1902. This was the first national general strike in Argentina and it was a remarkable success, which brought much of the country to a standstill. Though still relatively small, the FOA clearly had widespread support across the Argentinean working class.

The state was clearly alarmed and responded with yet more repression. The City Centre was quickly occupied by troops and they patrolled the workers' quarters of Buenos Aires fearing that workers were about to launch an insurrection. The FOA offices were forcibly shut and the anarcho-syndicalist papers were prevented from operating.

Though state repression brought the general strike to an end, the experience further demonstrated the power of the general strike and the ability of the working class to organise. Spurred on, in 1903, the FOA organised several strikes, including one by 5,000 sailors in Buenos Aires port. Pitch battles were fought as the employers attempted to bring scabs in and strikers were shot.

Both the insurrectionary atmosphere and the state repression continued to mount throughout 1904, with some 188 strikes being recorded in one year. FOA organised a May Day demonstration at which mounted police led a cavalry charge, killing and wounding several demonstrators. In November, shop assistants in Rosario struck for the 8-hour day. When a striker was killed during clashes, the police stole the body. As demonstrators lay siege to the police station, the police opened fire, killing three people including a 10-year-old boy. In response, the FOA called a general strike, which paralysed much of Argentina. Again, the army was brought out onto the streets. This time the workers refused to be intimidated and the strike remained solid until the government gave in to their demands.

FORA

The 1904 FOA conference was held in an atmosphere of heightened revolutionary expectations. It was also a highly significant event in the development of anarcho-syndicalism, as it was here that the FOA formally adopted the ideas of anarcho-communism, changing its name to Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA), to emphasise the international nature of the workers' struggle. The 1904 conference stated:

"We as anarchists accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and must not forget that a union is merely an economic by-product of the capitalist system, born from the needs of this epoch. To preserve it after the revolution would imply preserving the capitalist system that gave rise to it. We as anarchists accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and we try to ensure that they should approximate closely to our revolutionary ideas. We recommend the widest possible study of the economic and philosophical principles of anarcho-communism".

This statement is significant in two ways. Firstly the FORA clearly states that the unions were not the base of the future society. The syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations examined so far in Units 1-8 envisaged that all workers would join one union that would then administer the future society. In France, the Bourse de Travail had begun to be seen as bodies that would administer society outside the workplace, but they remained part of the union organisation. The FORA now recognised that although the unions would play a crucial role in the immediate aftermath of a revolution, as it developed, new democratic structures would be required to administer social organisation. Every individual must be able to participate fully in the new society on equal terms - whether they were previously waged workers or not.

Secondly the FORA placed new emphasis on the need for the ideas of anarchism to be part of day-to-day organisation. In order to begin organising the new society within the old, anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be run on the same principles and ideas that the future society would be organised. This preparation through practice would enable the working class to develop the democratic structures and organising skills that would be needed to ensure the success of the future communist society.

The FORA had developed anarcho-syndicalism an important step further. It was not enough that workers reject political parties and

unite around the economic struggle. While in North America the IWW allowed members of various parties to join the union, confident that the needs of the economic struggle would unite workers despite their political differences, the FORA argued against this political neutrality, arguing that workers must explicitly adopt the ideas of anarchism.

Without this, the FORA were clear that the revolution would not succeed. Though the argument that 'all economic struggle is political and vice versa' had been implicit in anarcho-syndicalism, it was made explicit by the FORA. It was not enough to unite around a revolutionary-inspired economic struggle; workers must also unite around the ideas and principles of anarchism. By arguing that the union should seek to 'approximate closely to our revolutionary idea', the FORA sought to build an organisation that was so infused with anarchist ideas that the day-to-day running of the union used the same principles that would power the future society. This way, the economic struggle would not take preference over or become detached from the revolutionary goal. Anarchism and anarchist organisation would prevent a drift to reformism.

By 1904, the FORA had both ideas and commitment to action. This was a combination which the Argentinean state and capitalism viewed as a major threat. The success of FORA in organising the first general strike was enough to convince some within the army that the social democratic government would be unable to control the situation. A military coup was attempted in 1904, but was easily put down by government forces but, as is so often the case, this was enough to persuade the social democratic government that something had to be done to placate the military. The government therefore introduced a 'State of Siege'. Over the next forty years the Argentinean State instigated numerous 'State of Siege' episodes, and they became synonymous with state brutality. During this first episode, FORA offices were raided and activists tortured and then deported.

Rent Strikes

The state repression brought misery to thousands of FORA activists, but it did not prevent the FORA from continuing to organise. In 1906, with the 'State of Siege' relaxed, 105 unions attended the FORA conference. By 1907, the FORA was able to turn its growing organisational strength into large-scale action. A 24-hour general strike was organised in support of the fight for the 8-hour-day, which was supported by the socialist union, the UGT. During the strike, marines stormed the dockers' union office in Bahía Blanca, killing a number of workers. At the funerals, police opened fire on the mourners, killing at least one person. This resulted in gun battles between workers and troops in most of Argentina's major cities. A revolutionary atmosphere once again gripped the country.

In 1907, some 231 strikes were organised in Argentina, one of the FORA-organised strikes, which 'went national', was a rent strike in Buenos Aires. Massive immigration had caused a housing shortage, which landlords had exploited by charging extortionate rents. Anarchists and socialists had long agitated against the rent increases, inciting people to direct action or electoral reform accordingly. It was this background that led to the mass-withdrawal of rents. Eduardo Gilimon, an anarchist activist in Buenos Aires gave the following account of the beginnings of the strike:

"One bright morning, the inhabitants of one conventillo resolved not to pay their rent until it was reduced. This resolution was treated as a joke by half the population but the joking soon stopped. From conventillo to conventillo the idea of not paying rent spread, and in a few days the whole proletarian population had heard of the strike. The conventillos became clubs. There were street demonstrations in all areas, which the police could not prevent, and with an admirable spirit of organisation, committees were set up in all areas of the city."

The 'clubs' that grew out of the strike were turned into permanent bodies, adding further breadth to the working class culture developing within Argentinean society.

State Responses

The combined workplace and community action of the anarcho-syndicalists only heightened the fear within Argentina's ruling elite that anarchist revolution was not far away. They responded by attempting to discredit the anarcho-syndicalists through a counter-propaganda campaign. Police raided the offices of the FORA shoemakers' union, claimed they found 'explosive materials', and arrested three FORA members. Within weeks, a bomb exploded on a train, the state claimed FORA was responsible, and a press campaign was launched. However, the fact that a number of FORA supporters were killed on the train undermined the state's attempt to discredit the union.

In 1909, the state resorted to more tried and tested methods to crush the union. During May Day celebrations, the police murdered 8 people and critically injured 40. FORA again responded by calling for a general strike, which again was backed by the UGT. Over 250,000 workers participated, and this time all major cities were completely paralysed. The police responded by arresting 20,000 workers and closing all the FORA offices and workers' centres. Three union activists were murdered during the arrests. After 8 days of strike, the state was forced to back down, releasing all the prisoners and allowing the reopening of the closed offices and centres. The victory proved a massive boost to the FORA. The growing strength of anarcho-syndicalism was reflected in the organisation of a further successful general strike on October 17th, called by FORA as a protest at the murder of the anarchist educationalist Francisco Ferrer by the Spanish state.

Anarchist ideas began to have an effect on the socialist movement. Many socialists had become disillusioned with a parliamentary politics strategy which had seen, since 1904, socialist members elected to parliament with little subsequent change. By 1906, this opposition was forced to leave the socialist party. Though it was a tiny faction in a party dominated by the middle class, it dominated the socialist union federation, the UGT. This led to a split, with the majority forming a new union (CORA) that moved rapidly towards a more syndicalist position.

In 1909, yet another 'State of Siege' was imposed by the state after the murder of Colonel Ramon Falcon, who had led the charge against the May Day demonstration. Union offices and centres were closed as well as the revolutionary press, including the now-huge

CORA and Split

circulation daily paper 'La Protesta'. As soon as the State of Siege was lifted in January 1910, La Protesta reappeared, and was joined by another anarcho-syndicalist daily evening paper, 'La Batalla'. Within weeks, the FORA announced a general strike for May 25th, the anniversary of Argentinean independence from Spain. At the same time, it called for repeal of the Anti Alien Act, the freeing of all political prisoners and the end of military conscription.

In the build-up to the strike, the authorities became increasingly alarmed that it would turn into an attempt by the workers to seize power. On May 13th, they began to arrest anarcho-syndicalists, including the editors and producers of La Protesta and La Batalla. As the day of the strike drew near, the number of arrests increased. By the eve of the strike, some 20,000 anarcho-syndicalists had been imprisoned. Despite the mass-arrests, the strike went ahead. The government responded with massive repression. The printing presses of numerous anarchist papers were destroyed and workers centres and FORA buildings were burned down. Martial Law was declared and the government passed 'The Law of Social Defence', under which any immigrants who had links with anarchist groups were refused entry, permission was needed to hold any form of meeting, and incitement to strike was made a criminal offence with those convicted sent to prison.

Anarchist organisation continued to function underground. The State of Siege was lifted in early 1913, and the unions emerged from their underground activity. However, two years of repression had left its mark on union thinking and many weary activists were growing impatient for a significant breakthrough.

After its formation, the CORA moved rapidly from a position of conditional acceptance to outright opposition of political parties. Instead of parliamentary action, they began to argue for political neutrality, under which workers would unite around the economic struggle. They called for unity and argued that the CORA and FORA should merge. FORA rejected the calls. At the 1914 CORA conference, it was decided to dissolve the organisation and for all members to join the FORA *en masse*. Most CORA affiliates were hostile to anarchism and so this move caused confusion and division in the FORA. The 1915 FORA conference became a bitter debate as to the nature of anarcho-syndicalism and resulted in a motion under which workers would unite around the economic struggle, staying aloof from party politics. This was the position of political neutrality, reverting to the stance of the FOA, toning down the commitment to anarchism. The move caused uproar and a number of unions walked out in protest, leading to a major split in FORA. The FORA-V refused to recognise the 1915 conference, arguing that CORA had hijacked it, while the FORA-IX adopted the political neutral stance passed at the conference.

Although the FORA-IX continued to grow it drifted towards reformism. Whether through devious tactics of party political socialists or too much concentration on day-to-day issues such as striking for better conditions, its watering down of anarchism also contributed directly to the drift. By 1917, its commitment to the general strike had been reduced from "*a major resource of the proletariat in its revolutionary education and the means of destroying capitalism to be used without limitation*", to a tool for use "*only when it is exercised with intelligence and energy to repulse the aggression of capitalism*".

This drift gathered pace after 1916, when electoral reform and extended voting rights led to the election of the Radical Party to government. The new government called on both the middle and working classes to support its bid to modernise the Argentine economy by opposing the capitalism of the conservatives and foreign elites. In response, the FORA-IX leadership decided to negotiate with this new government, which led to the development of relations between President Yrigoyen and the FORA-IX general secretary Francisco Garcia. As a result, limited negotiation mechanisms were re-established, under which joint manage-worker bodies were set up,

Class War and Backlash

where the government acted as arbitrator. Behind this new special relationship, the government aim was clear - to consolidate "moderate" unionism as a counterweight to the FORA-V.

By 1919, the international socialists had gained a number of seats on the executive committee and had formed a political group within the FORA-IX. This group was to split away to form the Communist Party after a bitter debate within the FORA-IX, which helped to contribute to its eventual collapse.

The strong anarchist commitment of the FORA-V prevented it from negotiating short-term gains by entering into agreements with bosses and the state. As a result, the FORA-V was unable to grow at anything like the pace of the FORA-IX. Nevertheless, whenever the opportunity presented itself, action was forthcoming. One of the principal successes of the FORA-V was in organising the meatpackers' strike in Berisso. From the outset, strikers went throughout working class areas within the town explaining the situation and gaining the backing of the local community. As a result, local shops offered food and barber shops gave free shaves to strikers, while a boycott was organised of those businesses siding with the factory owners. Women made up a large part of the workforce and they organised a women's support group, which organised mass picketing against the state's attempt to move in scabs. Rail workers helped boycott the plants and other companies supplying fuel. Workers derailed scab trains manned by troops. By such methods, the FORA-V were able to unite workers in the locality against the capitalist class.

In early 1918, tension between the state and workers grew once more, as workers went onto the offensive, inspired by the news of the Russian Revolution. In January 1919, the police launched a fierce attack on strikers at the Vasena metallurgical plant in Buenos Aires, killing several workers. In response, the FORA-V called for a general strike against state repression. The following day a 200,000 strong march, led by the FORA-V general council and 200 hundred armed workers, was organised. At the Vasena plant, police opened fire on the demonstrators. The workers returned fire, with the police being eventually overwhelmed. In response, the Government ordered troops to march on the city.

Fearful of being outflanked, the FORA-IX called for a 24-hour strike, while behind the scenes they attempted to negotiate a deal to end it. However, the strike soon spread across the country. The state ordered troops backed by the newly formed 'Patriot League' (a right wing militia) to break the strike. They attacked working class areas throughout Argentina, burning and murdering as they went. As the Patriot League was sent into the mainly Russian born Jewish population, the cold-blooded slaughtering and burning grew to new heights. After a week of terror, the strike crumpled as workers were literally beaten back to work. Once the strike was over, the true horror of the police repression became clear. Over 700 workers had been murdered in 5 days, with thousands wounded and some 55,000 imprisoned.

In early 1920, equally barbaric state brutality spread to the countryside. With the end of the First World War, wool prices had fallen as the world economy went into recession, and this had led to widespread unemployment in rural Argentina. In 1920, shepherds in Patagonia launched a strike backed by FORA port workers (the FORA-V had always sought to organise agricultural workers and, by 1920, had 30,000 members).

One General Varela led the state troops into the area. What followed must go down as one of the worst episodes in the history of working class struggle. Varela got his troops to round up the workers and massacred them, after first forcing them to dig their own graves. Thousands of workers were put to death in a wave of killing that lasted several months. With the workers defeated, the British landowners of the area organised a reception for Varela, at which they honoured him and sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow".

Drift to Marxism

After the strike, the right moved to consolidate their position. Backed by employers, the military, sections of the church, and even sections of the Radical Party, the Conservative opposition established the Patriotic League as a permanent organisation. The 'White Guard', as they became known, were recruited from the sons of the oligarchy, and became the assault guards of a new alliance within Argentina's elite. This new alliance preached a racist nationalism aimed at asserting Hispanic values against the 'flood' of foreign culture. It argued for a strong state and against parliamentary democracy. It increasingly identified with the fascist movement then being organised by Mussolini in Italy. If the new alliance thought its savagery of 1919-20 would destroy the revolutionary movement it was soon mistaken. In the months following, strikes increased, with some 259 strikes occurring, involving 100,000 workers. The repression had strengthened the position of the FORA-V, since it confirmed to many workers the reason and logic of the anarcho-syndicalist hostility to the state. The FORA-Vs membership grew rapidly, reaching 180,000 by 1921. At the same time, the FORA-IX's 'special relationship' with the Radical Party government during the repression discredited it in the eyes of many workers.

By 1920, the Russian revolution began to cause political confusion among anarcho-syndicalists, as we have seen elsewhere. The Argentinean labour movement was no exception. Where the state had failed, it was to be Marxism that was to succeed in putting a stop to the revolutionary zeal of the FORA-V.

When news of the Russian revolution first reached Argentina, it gave rise to widespread celebration among the working class. Initially, the majority of the labour movement supported the revolution, albeit from different perspectives. The socialists argued that it was a democratic revolution, and fervently supported Kerensky, while the anarcho-syndicalists saw it as a social revolution, in which the workers controlled the streets, making the constitutional government an irrelevance.

Even when news broke of the October 1917 revolution, under which the Bolsheviks seized power (see Units 11-12), the labour movement continued to demonstrate its support. The socialists switched their support to the Bolsheviks declaring them "the most daring socialist faction which best understood at the precise moment what the needs of the country were, and moved resolutely to serve them". The anarchists also at first supported the October revolution, seeing it as "a rising of the exploited", and arguing that its methods were direct action and insurrection rather than the adherence to the parliamentary system.

By 1919, splits within the Argentinean left led to the formation and growth of the Communist Party, which joined the Bolshevik International, The Comintern, in 1920. Meanwhile, the events in Russia had split the anarcho-syndicalist movement. As news came through about the real nature of the Bolshevik revolution, a number of anarcho-syndicalists began to raise doubts about it. The most widely read anarchist paper, La Protesta, began to print articles condemning the Bolsheviks as creating a new form of dictatorship.

A large section of the anarchist movement reacted with fury at the publication of the articles in La Protesta. Outspoken amongst these was the large anarchist Russian immigrant population, who still strongly supported the Bolshevik revolution at this stage. In some cases, several years would pass before they realised that what the Bolsheviks had created in Russia was not going to emancipate the workers, rather, quite the contrary.

The fact that such false hope was placed in the Bolsheviks by

so many has to be seen in the context of the period. A sizeable minority within the world's working class in the first years of the century believed in the need for and immediate possibility of revolutionary change. It was generally held that it was only a question of time before the revolution would take place. When news of the Russian revolution reached the revolutionary working class, it was naturally felt that this was it - the start of a revolution that would soon sweep the world. The euphoria with which the news was greeted, and the effect on the working class was summed up in 'Cuasimodo', an Argentinean anarchist review magazine:

"Russia is something more than a national or geographic category; it is the great myth which has taken root in the spirit of the people and in the consciousness of each person."

The sense of joy and the fact that the slogan "all power to the soviets" sounded like a call for an anarchist form of society was enough to convince many anarchists to support the October seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. A pamphlet appeared in Argentina entitled 'Anarchism and Marxism (Bolshevism)', written by Locscio (editor of the anarchist journal 'Via Libre'). It provides a telling example of how anarchists caught up in the excitement attempted to reconcile anarchism with the events in Russia. In the pamphlet, he sought to demonstrate the 'anarchist' character of the Russian revolution, endorsing the soviets as equivalent to the anarchist idea of the commune, which would federate both nationally and internationally to form a new society.

A majority of anarcho-syndicalists in Argentina held this pro-Bolshevik view up until 1920, as demonstrated by the fact that, at the 1920 FORA-V conference, the pro-Bolshevik tendency gained a majority, and the adjective 'Communist' was added to the FORA name. However, a year later, with news of Bolshevik repression filtering through (often via the same Russian immigrants who at first so avidly had supported the revolution) the anarcho-syndicalists began to reassess the Russian revolution. At the 1921 FORA conference, the idea of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' was roundly condemned, and the name was reverted back to the FORA-V.

Among many workers the anti-soviet line was far from popular, and the FORA-V initially suffered a decline in membership. However, it had recovered sufficiently enough by 1923 to organise a general

strike in protest of the murder of Kurt Wilkens, a young (formerly pacifist) anarchist who had murdered General Varela, the butcher of Patagonia. In the same year, FORA-V also launched a strike in support of Sacco and Vanzetti, the two Italian anarchists facing execution on trumped up charges in the USA. The campaign to free Sacco and Vanzetti was truly international and, though it tragically ended in failure, it remains a timeless testament to anarcho-syndicalist internationalism.

On the other hand, the FORA-IX, already weakened by the pact with the radical government, was dogged by splits and infighting caused by the events in Russia. The formation of the Communist Party saw key leaders leave, further weakening the organisation. By 1921, on the brink of collapse, the FORA-IX sought an alliance with other non-aligned unions, changing its name to the Unión Sindical Argentina. On this, the communists rejoined, only to split into three warring communist factions, leading to a further collapse in union membership.

1920s: Internationalism

During the mid-late 1920's, a relatively booming economy brought respite from poverty, as wages and conditions began to rise. As the Argentinean economy began to move away from dependence on agri-exports, problems arose for the FORA-V over their method of organisation. In the face of growing industrialisation, the need for workers to organise on an industrial basis was becoming imperative. While the strength of anarchist ideas had enabled the FORA-V to resist the pull of communism and the Russian revolution, however, it also held a deep mistrust of centralisation, which led it to reject the idea of industry-wide union organisation. Indeed, at the 1923 FORA-V conference, the port workers union was expelled for organising in an industrial federation. This was to prove a costly mistake that was to later benefit the communists, who, with growing industrialisation, began to advocate industrial unions.

By the late 1920s, the economic downturn, which was to lead to, the 1930s slump, was in evidence. As working conditions came under attack and profits began to be squeezed, so predictably, the workers began to become increasingly militant. Throughout 1929, the Argentinean economy was hit by wave after wave of workers' unrest. The FORA-V again began to grow rapidly. Over 100 unions were present at the 1929 conference.

The first all Latin American anarcho-syndicalist conference also took place in Argentina in 1929. Groups attended it from Bolivia, Guatemala, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Brazil, Mexico and Paraguay. The result was the creation of the Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores (ACAT). In later years, many other Latin American countries were to join ACAT.

Buoyed by this new alliance of Latin American states, the FORA-V's newspaper (now entitled 'Organizacion Obrera') announced a new dawn for Latin American anarcho-syndicalism. Sadly, this optimism was short-lived with regard to FORA-V. In 1930, the troops led by General Uriburo staged a coup and overthrew the Radical Government. The aim was to install a full-blown capitalist corporatist system under which only state-controlled unions would be allowed.

Military Coup

The coup leaders quickly moved against the FORA and unleashed yet another wave of repression. Right wing death squads were used to hunt down anarcho-syndicalists. The death penalty was imposed for the crime of distributing subversive literature. All the FORA buildings were either evicted or burned down. Printing facilities were closely targeted in an attempt to silence the rich diversity of the anarchist press.

The FORA, again forced underground, still managed to produce a paper called 'Rebelión'. The penalty for distribution was summary execution. Unknown numbers of anarcho-syndicalists were murdered, deported or forced to flee. This time, the sheer unadulterated scale and brutality of the repression was such that it virtually wiped out the FORA as an organisation.

While brutally repressing the FORA, the coup leaders allowed a new moderate trade union movement to organise - the Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT). The new union declared itself neutral regarding the coup and stated that it would seek a "professional relationship" with the state forces (which were still systematically murdering members of the FORA). While the CGT made its peace with the brutal coup leaders, working class conditions plummeted. By 1932, wages had dropped by over 25%. The 8-hour-day, which had been won after prolonged struggle by the FORA, came under attack across the country. The right to Saturday afternoon off was lost, and unemployment soared.

Communist Party

By 1935, a new force was beginning to make its mark within the Argentinean labour movement - the Argentinean Communist Party. After numerous splits, it had established a form of unity around strict centralised control. Like other Communist Parties around the world, the ACP had, by this time, rejected class struggle as 'ultra left' and instead adopted the 'popular front' strategy, which sought to build alliances with socialists and social democrats. As part of this strategy, the communists entered the CGT, arguing for the creation of industrial unions to match the growing centralisation of Argentinean capitalism. By 1941, the communists dominated the four largest industrial unions, accounting for 95% of union growth between 1936 and 1943.

The emergence of these industrial unions made the communist party the most influential force within the Argentinean working class by the late 1930s. However, this position of strength became a disaster for the working class, as the communists obediently followed the line dictated by Stalin. The communists announced in 1941 that there was "no opposition between capitalism and workers, only between those supporting democracy and those serving Nazism". This led to the absurd position of distinguishing between 'Nazi' firms, such as Siemens and Beyer, and democratic firms such as the British-owned railways.

The ACP called for workers to make sacrifices and actively undermined disputes in the democratic allied owned firms, while seeking to organise workers' unrest among German companies' workforces. Thus, as the Second World War continued, the communists aligned with the pro-British and rabidly anti-union Argentinean land-owning classes, while alienating themselves from workers in the largely German-owned manufacturing sector. It was this absurd position that Perón was to exploit, as he sought to build a nationalist-based trade union movement, which was later to help propel him to power, before coming under his strict state control.

Postscript

The FORA developed a highly sophisticated brand of anarcho-syndicalism, which combined agrarian, industrial, and strong political and cultural elements, as well as intense solidarity and fighting spirit. Despite withstanding several brutal periods of state repression and coming out fighting, the FORA in Argentina was eventually subdued by a mixture of post-Russian Revolution communism, and a particularly barbaric mass slaughter of many hundreds of anarcho-syndicalists by the military in the 1930s.

By 1940 it had been able to re-establish itself in a number of industries, but suffered from its refusal to countenance industrial unions and from a long-term drift of the wider labour movement into reformism. In the 1940s, it again came under systematic attack by the state, this time the Perónist regime, in what was to become a familiar pattern for most of the post war period; brief periods during which the FORA began to organise, followed by brutal repression. The FORA has managed to survive throughout, and is still active today, both within Argentina and the wider International Workers' Association.

Key points

- The growth of the agri-export industry led the industrialisation process in the 19th Century and the economic expansion required international labour to attract more international finance and foster economic growth.
- Anarchist ideas were at the forefront in the Argentinean labour movement and anarchists established the first labour organisations.
- The anarchist groups became well-integrated parts of Argentinean working class life. Solidarity within working class 'barrios' was increasingly cemented with a rich mix of social, political, educational and cultural activity.
- The FOA became a specific anarcho-syndicalist union federation changing its name to the FORA.
- The FORA argued that the unions were not the basis of the future society. They placed great emphasis on the need for anarchism to be part of day-to-day life. To begin organising the new society within the old, anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be run on the same principles and ideas that the future society would be organised.
- Internationalism was important to the FORA and they were present at the founding of the IWA in 1921. They also organised the first Latin American anarcho-syndicalist conference, which took place in Argentina in 1929. The result was the creation of the Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores (ACAT).
- A deep mistrust of centralisation within the FORA led it to reject the idea of industry-wide union organisation. This was to prove a costly mistake that was to later benefit the communists, who, with growing industrialisation, began to advocate industrial unions.

Checklist

1. How did the anarchist movement establish itself within the Argentinean working class?
2. What were the main differences between the FOA and the FORA?
3. What were the major contributions to anarcho-syndicalist theory that the FORA made?
4. How did the Argentinean state react to the militancy of the FORA?
5. What effect did the Russian Revolution have on the FORA?
6. What were the main causes of the decline of the FORA?

Answer suggestions

1. *How did the anarchist movement establish itself within the Argentinean working class?*

From the beginning anarchists established their 'Centre for Workers Propaganda'. Anarchist newspapers began to appear in numerous languages reflecting the multi-national nature of the Argentinean working class. By 1894 at least three anarchist newspapers had achieved mass circulation. The anarchists remained well-integrated within Argentinean working class life, organising and running cafés, schools, libraries, study groups and providing free legal advice. They organised outings on weekends and cultural events such as plays, music and dance creating the beginning of a distinct working class culture separate from that of the dominant capitalist culture. In workplaces, the anarchists began to organise the first unions and so the network of solidarity within working class 'barrios' was increasingly cemented with a rich mix of social, political, educational and cultural activity.

2. *What were the main differences between the FOA and the FORA?*

The FOA contained both socialist and anarcho-syndicalist unions. It stressed that unions were the natural organisations for the struggle against the state but there were divisions between those who saw the unions' priority as gaining reforms and those who saw it as fermenting revolution. After the split the FOA changed its name, adopted a specific anarcho-syndicalist constitution and the aim of anarcho-communism.

3. *What were the major contributions to anarcho-syndicalist theory that the FORA made?*

The FORA developed anarcho-syndicalism by arguing that it was not enough that workers reject political parties and unite around the economic struggle. They argued against political neutrality, saying that workers must explicitly adopt the ideas of anarchism. In doing so they saw that in order to begin organising the new society within the old, anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be run on the same principles and ideas that the future society would be organised. This preparation through practice would enable the working class to develop the democratic structures and organising skills that would be needed to ensure the success of the future communist society.

Without this, the FORA were clear that the revolution would not succeed. Though the argument that 'all economic struggle is political and vice versa' had been implicit in anarcho-syndicalism, it was made explicit by the FORA.

The FORA also clearly stated that the unions were not the basis of the future society. Syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations at the time envisaged that all workers would join one union that would then administer the future society. The FORA recognised that although the unions would play a crucial role in the immediate aftermath of a revolution, as it developed, new democratic structures would be required to administer social organisation. Every individual must be able to participate fully in the new society on equal terms, whether they were previously waged workers or not.

4. *How did the Argentinean state react to the militancy of the FORA?*

Successive governments introduced 'States of Siege'. This gave the state power to arrest militants, deport immigrants, close down union offices and workers' centres and suppress anarchist newspapers and periodicals.

5. *What effect did the Russian Revolution have on the FORA?*

In common with many other anarcho-syndicalists the FORA welcomed the revolution and became influenced by Bolshevik ideas. A majority of anarcho-syndicalists in Argentina held pro-Bolshevik views up and, at the 1920 FORA-V conference, the adjective 'Communist' was added to the FORA name. However, a year later, with news of Bolshevik repression filtering through the anarcho-syndicalists began to reassess the Russian revolution. At the 1921 FORA conference, the idea of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' was roundly condemned, and the name was reverted back to the FORA-V.

6. *What were the main causes of the decline of the FORA?*

The leaders of the Military coup used right wing death squads were to hunt down anarcho-syndicalists. The death penalty was imposed for the distributing subversive literature. All the FORA buildings were either evicted or burned down and printing facilities were closely targeted in an attempt to silence the anarchist press.

The FORA was forced underground. Unknown numbers of anarcho-syndicalists were murdered, deported or forced to flee. While brutally repressing the FORA, the coup leaders allowed moderate trade unionists to organise. The CGT declared itself neutral regarding the coup and sought a “professional relationship” with the state.

The Argentinean Communist Party, like other Communist Parties around the world, had, by this time, rejected class struggle as ‘ultra left’ and instead adopted the ‘popular front’ strategy, which sought to build alliances with socialists and social democrats. As part of this strategy, the communists entered the CGT, arguing for the creation of industrial unions to match the growing centralisation of Argentinean capitalism. The FORA, who had a deep mistrust of centralisation, had rejected the idea of industry-wide union organisation. This was to prove a costly mistake that was to benefit the communists.

Discussion points

- What can be done to prevent the situation that arose when the CORA joined the FORA *en masse* in present-day anarcho-syndicalist unions and organisations?
- How important are cultural issues and aspects of anarcho-syndicalist unions in maintaining influence and relevance within the working class?

Further Reading

P. Yerrill and L. Rosser. Revolutionary Unionism in Latin America: The FORA in Argentina. 1987. ASP, BM Hurricane. -AK-

Excellent - using direct historical sources, the authors cram a surprisingly detailed history of anarcho-syndicalism in Argentina in only 48 pages. The perspective is generally revolutionary syndicalist, although the pamphlet also deals with more individualist revolutionary currents.

Ronaldo Munck. Argentina; From Anarchism to Peronism Workers, Union and Politics 1855-1985. Zed Books. 1987. ISBN 0-86232-570-6. -LI-

In-depth, albeit general view of Argentinean labour history. Academic view, balanced perspective during early period, but tails off after 1911, with over-emphasis on reformist unions.

A. Hobart. Organised Labour in Latin America. Spalding. 1977. ISBN 0-8147-7787-2. -LI-

Good overview. Detailed and relatively comprehensive - as close as any book has got to a full coverage of the huge Latin American revolutionary labour movements in English.

Charles Bergquist. Labor in Latin America. Stanford Press. 1986. ISBN 0-8047-1253-0. -LI-

Demonstrates a very weak understanding of anarcho-syndicalism, but otherwise a fair coverage of the general background to the Argentinean labour movement.

Note 1: For more general sources on Argentina, and central and south America, try AK Distribution (PO Box 12766 Edinburgh EH8 9YE, 0131 555 5165, ak@akedin.demon.co.uk).

Note 2: Books on the subject are not plentiful, but it is worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).