

# RESISTANCE AND INTEGRATION

PERONISM AND THE ARGENTINE  
WORKING CLASS, 1946–1976

DANIEL JAMES

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, Yale University*



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## Introduction

Over the last forty years the Peronist union movement has been a crucial actor in the drama of modern Argentine history. It has been the principal institutional channel for, and beneficiary of, the Argentine working class's allegiance to Perón as a person and Peronism as a movement. A vital pillar of the Peronist regime from 1946 to 1955, the unions have remained the main mobilisers of the Peronist masses and the union leadership has acted as the chief broker of this power in its negotiations with other sectors of the Argentine polity, above all the armed forces. Indeed, a dominant theme of contemporary Argentine history has been the role of the union movement as the chief interlocutor between the armed forces and civil society; the fate of modern Argentina has frequently seemed to hinge on the outcome of an uneasy but ever present dialogue between generals and union bosses. The power accruing to the union movement from this situation has been enormous; frequently repressed, the unions have nevertheless presented themselves to even the most hostile military governments as an irreducible social and political force.

This book seeks, at a most basic level, to trace the development of Peronism within the unions in the 1955–73 period. What was the relationship between union leaders and members? How valid is the popular conception of union power which emphasises corruption, violence and power politicking? What were the real sources of union, and more particularly union leadership, power? By asking and trying to answer these obvious but important questions we can hope to go beyond the surface plausibility of popular images.

The book also addresses the wider issue of the relationship between Peronism and the Argentine working class and the meaning of that relationship for workers in general and the trade unions in particular. Frequently, this issue has been approached from the perspective of more general notions concerning populism. The result of this has been an em-

phasis on the aberrant quality of working-class participation within Peronism. Such participation has been treated as something of an historical conundrum requiring explanation, most usually in terms of notions such as manipulation, passivity, cooptation, and not uncommonly, irrationality. This work does not offer an all-embracing theory of populism. Indeed, from the historian's point of view I would suggest that part of the problem with many existing analyses has been the level of abstraction at which they have operated. Macro-explanatory frameworks have not been able to cope with the concrete questions and exceptions they themselves have often suggested. The specificity of concrete social movements and historical experience have escaped through the broad mesh of such frameworks.

First and foremost, I have attempted to explore the historical experience of Argentine workers in the decades following the overthrow of Juan Perón in 1955. Within this general framework, two terrains of analysis have interested me in particular: the Peronist union hierarchy and its relationship with its rank and file, and the issue of Peronist ideology and its impact on the working class. Considerable emphasis has been placed in this work on grounding our analysis of these issues in an understanding of the concrete experience of the Peronist rank and file. I feel that this emphasis is important for two reasons. First, because a grass-roots perspective is essential if we are to analyse the themes of major concern to this book. A better understanding of the actions and perceptions of rank-and-file Peronist unionists is essential to this enterprise.

In addition, however, this aspect is crucial because it has largely been overlooked by writers on this subject. One has a curiously ambiguous feeling reading much of the material written on modern Argentine history. The working class is present in such analysis; political reality and the nature of the dominant Argentine political and intellectual discourse clearly compel such a presence. Yet, this presence has a certain unreality about it. The working class usually appears as a cypher, almost an ideal construct at the service of different ideological paradigms. The essence of these abstractions derives from broader notions concerning the relationship of workers and Peronism. From Gino Germani and modernisation sociology we find the passive, manipulated urban masses which result from an incomplete modernisation process. Marxism and Latin American communism and socialism present us with inexperienced proletarians incapable of realising their true class interests, dominated by bourgeois ideology and controlled and manipulated by demagogic politicians and a ruthless union bureau-

crazy. Finally, the Peronist left and many radical youth sectors of the late 1960s and early 1970s offered a vision of exemplary proletarians forging a peculiarly Argentine movement towards socialism and national liberation. Behind these paradigms lurk a series of global antinomies which have dominated the general debate over populism and the working class: traditional/modern, cooptation/autonomy, false consciousness/class consciousness, and of particular importance for Peronism in the post-1955 era, resistance and integration. What these abstractions fail to give us is generally any sense of the concrete historical experience of working people and their complex, ambiguous, frequently contradictory responses.

I would suggest that this lack results, partly at least, from the long-standing failure of much academic theory to come to terms adequately with the complexity of working-class experience. It is also partly due, however, to the extraordinary polemical relevance of past historical models and experience in contemporary Argentina. Past historical experience is evidently a crucial bedrock of contemporary ideological and political debate in most societies. In Argentina, however, the past has been lived as the present in a peculiarly intense way. It has been precisely a perception of this fact which has underlain much of the aura of pessimism and fatalism which has informed public and intellectual attitudes toward the Argentine 'enigma'. Argentines have seemed condemned to endure a present dominated by symbols drawn from past conflicts and experiences. National figures, social and political movements from the past have frequently become mythologies which serve as symbols whose function is to rationalise, justify and give emotional coherence to present political needs.

In the case of the working class such mythologising has implied a simplifying and an idealising of the painful complexities of working-class experience. Much of the internal debate within Peronism over the last thirty years has indeed revolved around the conflicting idealisations and stereotypes of working-class history and experience. Similarly, an understanding of the development of the Peronist left and guerrilla groups in the late 1960s and 1970s must be based on an understanding of their mythologies of the working class and its role in Peronism in general and particularly during the decade following Perón's ouster in 1955. Such mythologies are both bad for historical understanding and pernicious for political practice by groups who have claimed to symbolise and represent this working class. Uncovering some of the reality behind these myths concerning the working-class presence in Peronism is one of the major preoccupations of this work.

The sources used for this study have been primarily threefold. First, I have made use of archival resources that existed in Argentina. These included national newspapers, magazines from the period, trade union newspapers and journals, yearbooks and materials available in government agencies, principally the Ministry of Labour. Second, I was fortunate enough to have access to a large number of unofficial Peronist newspapers, rank-and-file newspapers, pamphlets, and barrio broadsheets. These were almost exclusively part of private personal holdings not available to the general public. Third, I have relied heavily on interviews, conversations, and discussions with participants active within the unions in this period.

The general approach adopted in terms of the organisation of this work has been a narrative analytical one. The chapters follow a chronological order. It should be emphasised that within such an approach selection has been made. This work is not a history of Argentina in the decades following the overthrow of Perón. Many issues have been referred to obliquely, or only as they had bearing on the labour movement. Thus, for example, the relations between civilian authorities and the military, or the intrigues within the armed forces, are referred to very briefly and only as they affect the overall context within which the Peronist unions had to operate.

The first chapter, 'Peronism and the working class, 1943-55', provides an interpretation of the relationship between Peronism and the working class in the period of the formation of the Peronist movement and the Peronist governments. It seeks, in particular, to examine the roots of the working class's identification with Peronism so that we may better understand the reaction of the working class to the situation created by the overthrow of Perón. Part Two, 'The Peronist Resistance,' deals with the resistance of the working class and other sectors of the Peronist movement to the military regimes which governed Argentina from 1955 to 1958. Part Three, 'Frondizi and integration: temptation and disenchantment', analyses the period of Arturo Frondizi's government, 1958-62. In Part Four, 'The Vandor era', I have studied the development of the Peronist union movement's power under the dominant influence of Augusto Vandor, the metal workers' leader, in the period from the overthrow of Frondizi to the military coup of June 1966. Finally, Part Five, 'Workers and the *Revolución Argentina*', offers an analysis of the period of military government from 1966 to 1973.