

On the Socio-Economic Roots of Argentina's Worker-Recovered Enterprises

An interview with Eduardo Murúa¹

Conducted during Eduardo Murúa's visit to Toronto, Canada
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00:00:06

J – What were you involved in before the financial collapse of Argentina in Dec. 2001?

M – OK, well, the movement [of recovered enterprises] begins before the financial collapse of Argentina. Before I got involved with the movement of recovered enterprises I was a political union organizer in Argentina. I was an oppositional individual within the steelworkers union in Argentina. I was also a political militant in an organization that originated in the Montonero movement.² And, that's basically it. I was a militant on behalf of workers' rights. I would get involved with workers' conflicts in their struggle to better their wages and social benefits.

00:01:09

J – Was the financial downfall of Argentina anticipated and what was the role of the movement during the financial crisis?

M – I'm wondering why you're pivoting on the role of the financial crisis here? We shouldn't really focus entirely on the financial crisis. This movement began before the crisis; the movement of recovered enterprises began four years prior to the formation of the National Movement of Recovered Enterprises [*Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas*]. What happened in 2001, that is, what it perpetuated, beginning with the financial crisis and the social crisis that this generated, was that all of the experiences of struggle of the labour movement, the movement of unemployed workers, the *piqueteros*,³ the recovered enterprises, became visible to society at large. It wasn't that these movements began with the financial crisis, but that all of this already started with what the neoliberal model generated, the model that was installed by the dictatorship of 1976 and that was continued by the subsequent formal democracies up to '95-'96. And it was then that there was a decision by a good part of the collectivity of workers to begin a method of struggle that included occupying factories and get them producing again. This was many years before the financial downfall. But that perhaps presaged what was about to happen in the country, which ended up being the rupture of the chain of debt payments, the financial crisis, the massive closing of factories, and so on.

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J – I realize now that I made a mistake in my initial question to you. Perhaps this has to do with my lack of knowledge on the particularities of the movement, and also an error in the information that I've been receiving up till now. But, OK, let me ask you straight out: How did the movement start?

M – No, no. What I want to clarify is that it's not a problem with, say, your lack of interest or with your education on these matters. The issue rests with the level of disinformation that often comes out of Argentina from certain sectors, like the parties of the left that joined these movements almost three or four years after the struggle that the workers had already begun. It's as if when they appear the struggle begins! So they tell the story from 2001 onwards when the story really begins much earlier. That's why you at times most likely receive information saying that the recovered enterprises began in 2001, but then you'll find, if you dig deeper, that there were recovered enterprises in '97, '98, '99.

But, OK, like I was telling you, the first factory recoveries begins in '97 and '98. I think the main reason for these first recoveries was the situation that the Argentinean workers found themselves in, due to the high rates of unemployment in the country that [at its apex] reached 35% unemployment. This in a country that historically has had a three or four percent rate of unemployment (that's to say, almost full employment), that had a work culture that was firmly established with workers, a culture that in Argentina even defines dignity closely with work. So these factors caused workers, at that moment, feeling that it was impossible to find work elsewhere when they got fired, to fight for the recovery of their employment. Rather than falling prey to structural unemployment, they decided to fight for recovering their factories and getting them up and running again under their own management. They knew that, otherwise, the fate that awaited them was to become structurally unemployed forever.

00:05:01

J – OK. So can you explain the role of the movement from that point on a bit more?

M – Yes. Those of us that came from previous union and political struggles had already come to the realization that the usual methods of labour struggle would not be enough. It wasn't enough to fight for wages or our work conditions; we had to, rather, find new methods of struggle that would ensure the preservation of employment for all workers. What the movement did very well was to accompany the struggle of workers in recovering their factories, to create the experience – because it's one thing is to plan and propose, it's quite another thing to actual *do* – of recovering factories that were almost emptied of their prime materials, machinery, that had their gas and light cut off. It was a huge challenge. A challenge that those of us that came from a history of militancy knew we had to confront. But those that really confronted these challenges were the actual workers. They were the ones that sacrificed the most, and it was the workers who recomposed the factories with what I would not hesitate to say were at times inhuman sacrifices. Inhuman because they had to stay in the factories all day, they had to suffer not receiving salaries, to work many more hours than what would be deemed normal.

But, OK, all of this helped to convince us that this method of struggle that we were proposing was actually viable. And the only ones that could make this strategy

possible were the actual workers and their own will to resist being shut out of the nation's productive apparatus. In other words, what the movement has always done well has been to accompany the workers in solidarity with them and to explain to them and attempt to convince them that they had to use the early struggles of the first recovered factories as examples for how to continue to work. So, more than anything, the most important thing that the movement gave workers was solidarity.

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J – Can you speak more about the cultural change that is needed in the workers that participate in this movement in order to move towards a notion of *autogestión*⁴ in their work and their community?

M – Yes. We are still a new movement that has much to learn, that has to study more, that has to have many more debates between workers. In the beginning I have to say that we didn't set out to study the question of *autogestión*. Rather, we began by defining what juridical form would serve us best during that historical moment and in order to ensure that the factory would be able to function. We thus decided that the cooperative form of organization would be best because it would permit workers to self-manage their enterprise, enable decisions to be made within an assembly, and ensure that revenues would be distributed equitably. Afterwards, the transformation of each worker is dissimilar. That is, the change in subjectivity in some workers is much more powerful than in others. The subjectivity and culture of many, *many* workers have not changed. Many workers go and do their tasks in the recovered enterprise, they do them very well, perhaps with more effort than before when they worked under a boss. But they finish their job for the day and they go home like they did in their old jobs. Other workers are different. They have reconceptualized the factory differently. They begin to talk and think in a new way. They have come to understand how their former bosses were exploiting them. They have come to understand how the economic system functions in Argentina, how the capitalist system destroys each one of our workplaces. How the monopolies function. That is, that change in subjectivity in the *compañeros* that have entrenched themselves the most in the issues of the enterprise was very important.

Another change that for us was very fundamental was that, given the same salary with the same work conditions, we are most certain that a worker in Argentina today would chose to work in a recovered enterprise over an enterprise under the management of a boss. No *compañero* that has gone through the experience of working in a recovered enterprise will want to return to a job managed by a boss. That is, we're assuming that work conditions are the same and that salaries are the same. For sure if there is an offer of *x* amount of financial benefit that is more than what a worker would make in a recovered enterprise it is possible that he would migrate to a capitalist enterprise. But under similar conditions, it is certain that that worker would not want to work under a boss. Yes? This is to do with the degree of internal democracy, the degree of freedom that that worker feels by working in a recovered enterprise. That is, the change in subjectivity, I would say, happens even within the relations of production within the firm. Today the worker doesn't feel like a worker any more, inside of a recovered factory the worker feels like a *compañero*.⁵ He doesn't feel like a worker utilized within an alienating job.

Independently from this though, we can't forget that even in recovered enterprises work is still alienating to a certain degree in some sectors.

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J – With what other social movements is this movement allied with in Argentina?

M – OK, well, I would say with all of the sectors that struggle against the system. With the *compañero* in the *piquetero* movement, the unemployed *compañeros*, the *compañeros* in unions. In all of these organizations there are *compañeros* that struggle for the destruction of the system. There are some organizations that are more centrist, others that align themselves with the left, but within these organizations there are always *compañeros* that are involved in the fight, that are in solidarity with other *compañeros*, and that are definitively fighting for a different Argentina, an Argentina without exploitation, for a freer people.

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J – Can you talk more about the economic cycles that Argentina is living through right now?

M – I think that there is an entire discussion to be had around cycles, whether cycles exist or not. I don't know if they are called "cycles" anymore. Well, that is, there is a permanent cycle that is the decadence of the system. In Argentina what happened after the financial collapse of 2001 was that an accord was formed between the different sectors of power, between the interested monopolistic sectors in the internal market and those interested in producing products for exportation, another sector that is made up of the historical Argentinean oligarchy and foreign groups and international financial capital groups, and yet another group that administered the privatized enterprises and service enterprises that proposed and spearheaded the dollarization [of the peso in the 1990s].⁶ The group that ends up winning this intense competition was the export sector that succeeded with the devaluation [of the peso] in 2001, where there was also a small import substitution, and where there was a reconstitution of idle but productive capital, but that had already reached its limit point, and that, I feel, in the next few years, will provoke another crisis. International financial power gave us a brief summer, gave us brief respite, because we have to also say that for two years Argentina didn't pay even one peso of interest on its debt with the permission of international financial power so that Argentina's political power base that had lost all of its legitimacy could reconstitute itself. And it's not that they gave this permission joyfully either, they gave this permission because they knew that if they didn't give this permission the revolution in Argentina was imminent.

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J – So what do you think of how Kirchner is represented as leaning more towards the left or as part of this wave of the left in Latin America?

M – Well, first off, I don't think there is a wave towards the left in South America. What I do think is that international power has designs to continue with the same model, to

change a few things in order not to change anything – *acopiardismo*.⁷ What's been designed for Latin America is a democratic assistentialism,⁸ that's why they used and are continuing to use a progressive discourse, the same progressive discourse that says "no" to the IMF but yet pays it \$10 billion US, like Kirchner paid to the International Monetary Fund, like the \$15 billion US that Lula paid to the IMF. The same discourse that says there is a need for the IMF to recover that money, that says the international debt must be recognized – which is a fraudulent debt, a debt that was put into place via dictatorships and with the fall of our *compañeros*, with the death of our people and our country. Argentina's economy continues on this transnationalistic path; over the past two years major Argentine companies have been sold off to Brazilian and American groups. The strategic sectors of our economy continue to be privatized and remain in the hands of foreigners. So to call Kirchner's government of the left is, at minimum, a joke.

I want to say one more thing regarding this: What's worse – and this really makes us angry – is the government of Mr. Kirchner sometimes uses, when it is convenient for him to do so, the memory of our *compañeros* who have disappeared and died confronting the dictatorship with arms – this memory is the only thing that remains alive, symbolically, of the memory of our people. He often uses this when talking about the dictatorship.

00:16:25

J- I'd like to talk a bit about the international movement: What's happening with the movement of recovered enterprises in other countries in South America? Can you talk about this?

M – Well, with regards to other workers' movements, what happened in Argentina is happening in other places. It's a byproduct of the crisis that's inherent in the system. A system that can't create employment, that creates societies that are completely dualistic. Slowly but steadily, this [crisis] will deepen more and more. What happened in Argentina happened in Brazil, in Uruguay, in Venezuela. We began to work with our *compañeros* in Venezuela, and with the Ministry of Labour in Venezuela, after the general work stoppage generated by that country's bourgeoisie, the general lockout of workers by the the country's employers, and the closure of factories there. After some initial discussions with our *compañeros* in Venezuela, and with our connections with *compañeros* from the recovered enterprises in Uruguay, and Brazil, we convened in Caracas in October 2005 to discuss and debate all of this, to see how we could consolidate this process of recovering work and jobs by the very workers of Latin America. Something we also discussed there as a movement is that we shouldn't only think of this movement as a Latin American one, because the problem of unemployment is everywhere and our intention is to congregate all self-managed workers that practice *autogestión*. But it's also important to say that it's the intention of our movement to not only congregate those involved in recovering companies. Our people has generated a plethora of options in the search for work, in order to create new work: microenterprises, peoples assemblies that got together to produce, cooperatives of rural workers, *campesino* movements recovering land, etc. The idea of our movement is to work towards congregating all self-managed workers in order to discuss, debate, and consolidate our processes and to be an alternative to that which

capitalism is developing, which is rooted in exclusion. We want an alternative of inclusion that also obviously disputes power.

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J – What type of infrastructure can you see as an alternative for the different manifestations of this movement amongst these diverse peoples, such as the proposal for a “multinational of the people” and those types of proposals?

M – Well, what we proposed to the Latin American workers in the meetings in Caracas is that we need offices of interchange in the different countries in order to form a database of experiences, in order to understand better the level of productivity that we can rely on, to complement each other in our productive activities, in order to exchange knowledge between the workers of each country. Also, in order to exchange technology between each country, which would be to differentiate us from the financial agreements between the big multinationals. And they are of no interest to us because the development of “the market” in each country is of no interest to us – what *is* of interest to us is that each of the nations’ peoples experience their own development. Therefore, we want to be able to share with all of our *compañeros* our technologies, our learning, and also be able to commercialize our products between the workers of the recovered enterprises. We want to be able to share between all of us an entity that would help in this commercialization; that is a “multinational of the people” that could distribute our products directly to the people of Latin America. We want to be able to ultimately compete with capitalist production. We feel that we could even have competitive advantages over capitalist enterprises, not by having the same economic and financial capital that they have, but because we consider and have confidence in the conscience of our people: That is, we feel that if we arrive on the market with the same quality of products at the same prices, that people will prefer to buy products from workers of recovered enterprises or from self-managed workers rather than capitalist products.

So, on the one hand, it is to generate a market, a brand,⁹ a new form of integration between peoples.

On the other hand, we [are proposing] the creation of a “bank of the worker.” A bank that would take care of the savings of the very workers and the middle class that would then be redirected back into production, not into the international financial system, not into the financial game of chance, in umpteen types of bond schemes. Rather, we think that the people’s savings should be directed into physical production in order to then enable [these funds] to be redistributed. We think that one of the deficits that self-managed workers have in the recovered enterprises movement is lack of capital. And we think that we are more than able to not only produce well but also to capture these savings and transform them into new types of production while at the same time being able to return the savings to those that have saved with this bank, and even return these savings with some interest as well, right? Nobody is going to contribute one’s savings without seeing some interest returned to them. We feel that we would be able to return this interest to savers and at the same time take away the mediation of the traditional bank. When one puts money into a traditional bank on a fixed term rate he or she is paid a predetermined rate of interest, and when he or she takes out a loan the same bank charges

them three times more interest. This gap wouldn't exist in the workers' bank we are proposing.

OK, well, one of the other things that we are proposing – and this is perhaps more immediate – is to call on all Latin American workers of recovered enterprises to carry out a boycott against all monopolies. To unite against the big monopolies and oligopolies that drive the structures of production in our countries, beginning with raw materials and the prices and the conditions of payment they establish in our countries. We'd call on this boycott in order to impede these policies that are an offence to all small and medium sized enterprises and all workers. This, I think, is something that we can already do. If we settle on thinking that we can be profitable only by recovering factories and that that's it and that nothing else has to change, then we're going to make a mistake because, at some moment, just like the small and medium sized enterprises disappeared and just like the old bosses went bankrupt, there is strong possibility that we too could end up bankrupted. – especially if we don't look at modifying the market system and if we don't begin to put into place the rules necessary for [the creation of] a popular economy.

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J – What do you think about the fair trade system that we've been talking about a lot over the past few days, and maybe also the similarities or solidarity between the fair trade system and what you've been describing up until now?

M – Yes, I think it's extremely important to have this type of mechanism. To be sure, those of us that are involved in the production and the commercialization of these types of products must come together so that our products can effectively reach our communities. When we speak of a “just price” we also need to discuss what this price should be and how this final value will be distributed among the whole of the chain. In any case, it seems to me that this is an important issue because we could even set benchmarks to control the enterprises [that engage in these practices] by setting the norms within which they must operate using criteria such as how they treat their workers, how they distribute salaries, allocate vacation time, etc. That is, if the enterprise desires to enter this market that we call “fair price” or “fair trade” we could better control those enterprises that carried this certification.

I think this is all a bit incipient, still, however. We would have to discuss these possibilities further. I, we, need to study and debate these options further to see if we could incorporate the system of recovered enterprises within this mechanism. But I do think it does line up with our thinking around setting up an alternative market to those markets that are dominated by the monopolies and oligopolies.... But it's still important to remember that the instruments that we generate within our various alternative movements – the recovered enterprises and the fair trade and fair price movements – is one thing; but we must never forget that the struggle is also a political struggle, the struggle for mobilization, the struggle of bodies on the streets.¹⁰ These things are, in the end, the only things that will ensure that one day we will have the possibility of liberated peoples living democratically and with justice.

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J – We spoke a bit about Kirchner already. I'd like you to give your opinion on Chavez, too, and the way he is presented in the international mass media and also his role right now, perhaps not for proposing *the* solution for South America, but perhaps with respect to his role in creating a space for the social movements.

M – What I have to say concerning President and *Commandante* Hugo Chavez is this: I think he has made a very important contribution to all of the world's peoples when he proposed, from the presidency of a nation – that is, from an institution that is as important as the presidency of a country – to suggest that the capitalist system is finished and that we have to invent a new system, which is undefined still, which we must create collectively, that must be created between the world's peoples. It's a proposal which he hasn't attempted to define, and I think it's respectful not to define what this other system should be. But he has certainly said to the entire world that our system of capitalism is finished. No president has ever dared to say this much. And I believe that this is important and it encourages the collectivity of our people to debate whether [solutions] should be like this or like that, to debate solutions.

Also, with respect to what we've worked on together, I think that we have found in President Chavez and his ministers a special attention that we did not find in the governments of our country with respect to the problematic of workers, to the problematic of employment, of the necessity for the productive development of our countries.¹¹ And, in point of fact, the Latin American workers of recovered enterprises were able to get together thanks to the support of the Venezuelan state. It was the Venezuelan state that permitted all of the workers from Latin America – because it wasn't only workers of recovered enterprises that got together but rather also workers from many unions and leaders from many unions throughout Latin America – to debate how this method of struggle that some workers had initiated some time ago was multiplying throughout Latin America....

So, I think that what Chavez is doing in his country is very important, although surely there is still much to do. But the most important thing that I have seen in Venezuela is the policy decisions initiated by the government that favour popular organization. That is, everything that Venezuela does it does in order to make popular organization functional, to make democracy possible, to facilitate the unity of each *barrio*.¹² Wherever there is a necessity an organization is formed, and it's not about the state needing to direct solutions but that the solutions should begin to emanate from social organization, each demand comes from the social organizations, and the state assists in complementing these. To me, it seems that – much beyond just the words of President Chavez with respect to the system, much beyond just the words of President Chavez with respect to what Mr. Bush is, or what US imperialism implies – what is really worrying the system about Venezuela is the organization that's forming in the grassroots, how the *campesinos* and workers are organizing without intermediaries. It is that [kind of] democracy and that organization from the people that can prevent any foreign intervention.

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J – What can you say to the workers and the people of North America, that is to the people of the so-called “first world,” about what can happen here, about the changes that are also needed here?

M – I think that, just like in my country, in the first world there are two classes of sectors. One sector is the majority of the people, that is the group that I like to talk about, that is the majority of the working class that will suffer the consequences of the crisis of the model that is entrenching itself more and more, that will suffer the same fate that the Latin American people have suffered: the loss of employment and of [deteriorating] life conditions. I would tell this sector to organize, to occupy those spaces that are empty, that they should occupy these spaces in order to produce, that they should start their own productive activities, their own culture, their own education. Spaces must be occupied. We can’t let ourselves be robbed anymore, we can’t allow our rights to be taken away anymore. We have to organize ourselves.

And to those sectors that today feel included? I say to them that their current strategies are not the best form of security. First, it’s as if they’re living in a bubble, or a great lie. A great lie because they believe that their lives are secure with their pension funds, retirement funds, savings, bonds upon bloody bonds, and all of these things that generate the mechanisms of debt. One day they will find themselves with the great surprise that in reality they have *nothing*. And, furthermore, the thing that they are really generating is poverty. Each supporting act that they do beginning with their proposals for “security” – between scare quotes – is really adding another brick to the wall and is killing another child in Iraq. Do you understand? The world needs other things; it needs the world’s peoples to complement themselves, in needs for all of us to work for the integration of all people. There is no way out from within the system of capitalism; there is no way out using the capitalist system. We’re not going to tell the world what to do, though. I think we have to all sit down and debate this. But we do have to change all of the institutions that are now invalid and out of date – like the International Monetary Fund, the ONC,¹³ like the UN, where four or five decide what can and cannot be discussed. We instead have to find new forms of integrating and structuring society. The world has reached a level of technological development where we could all live well. The problem is that what is lacking are the institutions that can properly distribute this wealth. Humanity has already attained such a high level of knowledge that we could produce everything that we need. Now what’s needed is the right degree of consciousness of society in order to create the [proper] institutions of distribution.

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J – OK, well, perhaps there is another thing that I perhaps forgot to ask you. I have no more questions. Is there anything else that you’d like to share with us?

M – Well, I love Toronto. [Laughter.] No, really, I’m serious. I was just telling my *compañeros* here earlier today that I am certain that Toronto has its problems, that there are *compañeros* in Toronto that are badly off. Lamentably, I know the state of Latin American cities better and I would say to the people of Toronto that poverty appears to be far tougher there, in Latin America, however. The streets there are harder. Far too many of our people are badly off. And, unfortunately there still continues to be, as in colonial

times, the extraction of resources or of production from our Latin American countries to sectors of the first world.

Endnotes

¹ Eduardo Murúa is the president of one of the two factions of the National Movement of Recovered Enterprises (*Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas*, or MNER), one of the first and most important umbrella organizations of Argentine workers involved in recovering and self-managing their workspaces. Murúa's faction of MNER loosely represents mostly small and medium sized recovered factories and businesses in and around metropolitan Buenos Aires (the other faction of MNER is lead by José Abelli and represents recovered enterprises from other parts of the country outside of greater Buenos Aires). The National Movement of Worker-Recovered Factories (*Movimiento Nacional de Fábricas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores*, or MNFRT), and the Federation of Work Cooperatives of the Republic of Argentina (*Federación de Cooperativas de Trabajo de la República Argentina*, or FECOOTRA) make up the other major umbrella organizations of worker-recovered enterprises. By far the two factions of MNER and the MNFRT represent the largest groupings of recovered enterprises in the country, together representing roughly 68% of all recovered enterprises. These lobby and support organizations are not unions per se but rather cooperatively organized and mostly autonomous political entities that have, in the cases of MNER and MNFRT, emerged rather organically. Having roots as far back as the first recovered enterprises that began to appear in the late-1990s, they officially formed in 2002 and 2003, respectively. They serve to represent the interests of the protagonists of Argentina's worker-recovered enterprises in numerous ways, providing management, organizational, and legal advice; organizing plenary sessions, conferences, workers' assemblies, and spaces for voicing the concerns of workers' groups; and offering support and political lobbying when a workspace's employees are considering occupying and expropriating a bankrupted, near-bankrupt, or emptied enterprise.

The two factions of MNER represent roughly 34% of the country's recovered enterprises and tend to operate more autonomously than the other workers' lobby groups, aligning themselves closely with the global social justice movement. MNER tends to also distance itself as much as it practically can from the state while, at the same time, lobbying the state for strategic subsidies (e.g. pensions, funds for technical upgrading, funding for cultural centres, etc.) and for fundamental constitutional reforms that would ease a recovered enterprises legal burdens. MNER, for example, was instrumental in changing Argentina's national law of expropriation and is currently engaged in attempting to change its bankruptcy laws in order to facilitate the recoveries of failing businesses by its employees. MNER also actively encourages recovered enterprises to open up community centres and other community-based initiatives within their premises, proactively supporting those recovered workspaces that interact openly with the communities and neighbourhoods that surround them.

However controversial a figure Eduardo Murúa might currently be to some observers and protagonists of the movement, it is important remind ourselves that Murúa was very much involved in spearheading the formation of MNER, in articulating the strategies and tactics of workspace occupation and workers' resistance to state and employer repression that have subsequently been taken up by most recovered enterprises throughout Argentina, and in lobbying to change the mentioned aspects of the Argentine constitution to favour the control of workspaces by workers. In addition, the degree to which he has personally risked his life on numerous occasions in order to stand in solidarity with workers and assist them with the recovery of countless places of work throughout Argentina cannot be minimized.

² The Montoneros were a left-leaning and, for much of their existence, a pro-Peronist youth-based movement involved in guerilla tactics, clandestine paramilitary activity, and political lobbying throughout the 1960s and up to the mid-1970s. They were effectively liquidated by the military dictatorship of 1976-1983 during the infamous "dirty war" of that period. During the mid-1980s, a small group of former Montoneros and new militants attempted to resuscitate the movement by forming a short-lived Montonero spin-off organization known as the 17th of October group, named after the day in 1945 when Juan Perón was released from prison by the military junta of the day. Murúa was involved with this latter iteration of the movement.

³ A *piquetero*, or picketer, is the commonly used term for a member of the organized unemployed workers that began to emerge circa-1996 across Argentina and that use tactics of road-blockages as their principal protest strategy. *Piqueteros* are usually, but not always, members of the myriad groups belonging to the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados* (Movement of Unemployed Workers, or MTD).

⁴ “*Autgestión*” is the Spanish word for “self-management.”

⁵ The noun *compañero*, literally “companion” or “partner,” loosely translates into “comrade” or “comrade-in-arms.” In Latin America, the concept also evokes a sense of deep friendship and inclusion between individuals who have shared in common struggles or otherwise share some sort of deep experiential affinity.

⁶ The “dollarization” of the peso refers to the fixed-rate exchange policy (officially called the *ley de convertibilidad*, or “convertability law”) introduced by President Carlos Menem’s administration, and specifically spearheaded by his now vilified Minister of the Economy, Domingo Cavallo, in 1991 in order to stem the tide of acute inflation and hyperinflation that had plagued much of Raúl Alfonsín’s government, Menem’s predecessor, throughout the 1980s. While inflation was curtailed by this monetary strategy, an overpriced peso caused exports to gradually decline throughout the 1990s. As a result, a chronic trade deficit took hold by the middle of the decade as cheaper imports saturated local markets. Unable to do business in such an economic environment, an escalating number of once-profitable small and medium sized businesses, faced with dwindling national and international markets, went bankrupt.

⁷ The verb “*acopiar*” means to gather together and, in an economic sense, to buy up in order to create a monopoly. Here, Murúa’s use of the derogatory expression “*acopiarismo*” alludes to the systemic strategies and practices of monopolization that have plagued Latin America for the past three decades.

⁸ In Argentina, “assistentialism” (*asistencialismo*) refers to the practice by the state and other institutions of offering assistance programs linked to work (i.e., work-for-welfare) or providing social assistance payments to the most needy and marginalized in order to, on the surface, meet their basic necessities but that, in reality, serves to co-opt, corral, and contain these groups and behold them even further to the establishment. Autonomous groups such as MNER and some MTDs view the practices of assistentialism as blatant attempts by the state and other institutions to co-opt unemployed, the impoverished classes, and the indigent in order to minimize their political capacities. It is also closely associated by some observers and activists with the practices of “clientelism.”

⁹ One of the proposals that Murúa discussed at length in his talks and with protagonists of the fair trade movement from Mexico, Peru, and Canada in his recent trip to the Toronto area was the strategy of branding products produced by recovered enterprises “fair work” products, or “*producto de trabajo justo*.” This proposal is inspired by and parallels the marketing strategies and production criteria of the fair trade movement.

¹⁰ Murúa and MNER call their tactics of resistance – of “occupying” workspaces, “resisting” repression and the dictates of the capitalist system and lobbying governments with their physical presence in courts and regional legislatures, and “producing” under the tenets of self-management – “the war of bodies.”

¹¹ Over the past two years Murúa has been spearheading a working relationship with Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez. Mainly through the efforts of Murúa, in August 2005 and later in October 2006 as part of the First Encounter of Recovered Enterprises in Caracas, MNER managed to strike a favourable loans deal with Chavez by piggy-backing on a greater regional economic accord negotiated between the Venezuelan and Argentine governments to more closely integrate the two economies. This greater accord between Argentina and Venezuela is part of Chavez’s alternative to the US-backed Free Trade Zone of the Americas (FTAA). Chavez has dubbed this alternative regional social economic initiative the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas and the Caribbean (*La Alternativa Bolivariana para América Latina y el Caribe*, or ALBA).

In addition, thanks to Murúa’s own lobbying, Argentina’s most recent experiments with worker self-management have played a crucial role in both inspiring other recent worker recoveries in other countries in the region and in the recent push for an intercontinental social economy articulated at the October 2005 Caracas meetings. Furthermore, because of the legitimacy of the Argentine movement, gained through its long struggles for worker self-management, it is not surprising that Murúa was one of

the key players in organizing the first meeting of Latin American recovered enterprises in Caracas. And because Argentina also has the most ERTs by far of any country in Latin America, it perhaps is also no surprise that the 300 Argentine worker delegates that attended the Caracas meetings represented the gathering's largest contingent of workers. Consequently, the Argentine delegation managed to secure the largest number of work contracts and memoranda of understanding of any of the national delegations in Caracas, despite the lack of participation by Argentina's national government.

¹² "*Barrio*" is the word for "neighbourhood" in Spanish, especially used in Venezuela and the Southern Cone.

¹³ The ONC is Argentina's Office of National Contracts, which is the national executive branch's body responsible for national purchases and requests for proposals for the Argentine state. It operates within the Headquarters of Cabinet Ministers' Sub-secretariat of National Management.