

Nature and limits of trade unions' mobilisations in contemporary Argentina¹

Maurizio Atzeni²
Pablo Ghigliani³

1. Introduction

Capitalist restructuring have posed serious threats to trade unions worldwide since mid-1970s. De-industrialisation, labour market flexibility, managerial assault on labour process epitomise capital offensive; so does, the virulent anti-union policies embedded in new managerial practices and unfavourable labour laws. This context has been conducive to a process of atomization and segmentation of the labour force that has severely affected trade unions' capacity to recruit and mobilise workers' and represent their interests both at the workplace and in society. Thus, within this situation of profound crisis, retreat and post 1989' ideological defeat, it shouldn't be a surprise that several scholars sympathetic with the labour movement, particularly in the USA and the UK, have framed their analyses on the future of the trade unions movement in terms of a 'revitalisation' (Heery et al.2000). Far from looking at the labour movement and its emancipatory potential, and within a constant deficit in terms of growth and union density, the idea was to envisage practical strategies aimed at the re-establishment of at least a minimum critical mass of power, building first of all on the need for unions to recruit new members (Heery et al 2003) and fight for recognition (Gall 2003).

Although the word 'revitalisation' is currently aimed at identifying strategies for unions and more broadly has been used to indicate the recovery of strength of the labour movement in different national contexts (Craig 2007), we consider the concept still embedded in a one-sided, mainly pessimistic view, of labour and workers potentiality as agents for social change, a view that consequently underplays the importance of workers and trade unions as actors in the political arena (Hamann and Kelly 2004).

Once we broaden our analysis of labour unrest both internationally and historically, as Silver does (Silver 2003), there appears how the recurrent rises and declines of the world labour movement is both cause and effect of capital geographical re-location and changes in the models and types of production. As she puts it:

Revolutions in the organisation of production and social relations may disorganise some elements of the working class, even turning some into "engendered species" - as the transformations associated with contemporary globalization have doubtless done. But new agencies and sites of conflict emerge along new demands and forms of struggle, reflecting the shifting terrain on which labor-capital relations develop (Silver 2003, p.19).

Thus, our reading of current labour unrest in Argentina, is inserted within a broad socio-political and historical context. In this perspective, the neo-liberal capitalist restructuring that started in Argentina at the end of 1970s and went trough the 1990s was both a cause and effect of previous workers' struggles and was re-adapted and re-formulated as a result of the reactions of the working class as a whole.

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² Loughborough University- Labouragain

³ Universidad de la Plata/Conicet- Labouragain

While in recent years Argentina, in coincidence with the 2001 financial crisis, has been the site of a range of diverse and alternative labour protests, mainly led by the unemployed movement (the so-called *piqueteros*), after 2002 and in a context of economic growth and political stability, labour struggles have resumed with trade unions and formally employed workers as the main protagonists. Understand the nature and limits of these struggles are the main scope of this paper and a useful way to introduce the case studies that constitute the dossier.

2. Indicators of trade unions growth

Objective indices of trade unions strength are often contentious (Kelly 1998). Yet, union density, labour conflicts and collective bargaining are among the indicators that scholars have frequently used to substantiate its existence. Indeed, the reunification of the main workers confederation of Argentina, the Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT), is arguably another index of unions' re-gained political relevance. Each of these aspects will be briefly evaluated in the following sections.

Union Density

Reliable figures on union density are problematic in Argentina. Trade unions have usually overestimated membership levels, public authorities have not kept periodic records, scholars have used very different sources and methodologies, and thus their research outcomes are hardly comparable. Yet, available estimates suggests that while total membership has fallen, the decline in union density has not been dramatic in the last two decades, despite the wide-ranging process of state and capital counter-mobilisation

Table 1: Trade Union Density in Argentina

Year	% union density (Lamadrid and Orsatti 1991)
1954	48
1963	40
1974	43
1979	42
1982-83	41
1989	44
	% union density (Marshall and Perelman 2004)
1990	47

1991-94	44-47	
2001	42	
	% union density	
	ETE	EIL
2005 ⁴	37,6	37

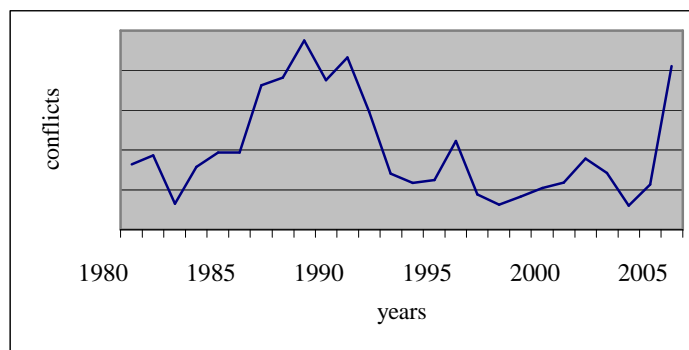
This is surprising in a country where incentives for organising are scarce: union finances do not depend exclusively on members fees; there is a legal monopoly of collective bargaining representation granted by public authorities to the largest union (*personería legal*), which reduces the likelihood of inter-union disputes; collective agreements apply also to non-union members; demands are often channelled through institutional mechanisms of political exchange; and the mobilising capacity of trade unions goes far beyond their memberships. Even incorporating in the series the lowest estimations, that is those provided by ETE and EIL for 2005, union density remains well above most industrialised economies, where the decline have been much more marked (Visser 2006).

Labour Conflicts

The first positive sign of trade union strength in Argentina is the increasing rate of labour conflicts, although not all such conflicts necessarily involved unionised workers.⁵ 2005 witnessed a peak in labour conflicts, only

surpassed twice since 1980 – in 1988 and 1990, both of which were periods of high inflation.

Table 2: Labour Conflicts, 1980-2005



Source: Nueva Mayoría.

It is important to stress that the analysis of labour conflicts is also highly problematic due to the lack of historical series of official data (the MTSS have resumed to produce statistics in 2006). Current series are often the outcome of information taken mainly from newspapers. Table 3 shows how difficult is to assess absolute figures using these sources. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the general trend can be known through this methodology accurately.

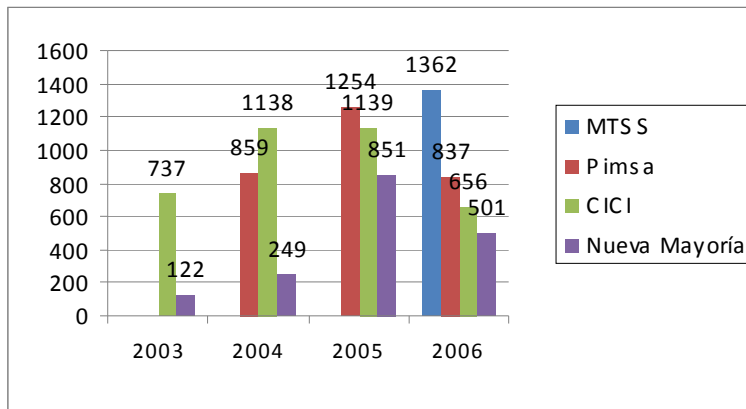
⁴ Unfortunately, there is no historical series of these rates measured by Encuesta a Trabajadores en la Empresa (ETE) and Encue Indicadores Laborales (EIL) carried out by the Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social (MTSS) both in 2005. These correspond to registered wage-labourers employed in private firms with 10 or more workers; that is, they incorporate neither reg workers from firms with less than 8 employees, nor public sector workers (8 % and 38 % respectively of the total registered employ 2001 – figures form MTSS and the National Institute for Statistics, INDEC).

⁵ But according to official data, 90 % of the total labour conflicts in 2006 were driven by trade unions (MTSS 2007). It is well-known weaknesses of the rate of labour conflict as a straightforward index of trade union power: an industrial action threat by a powerful union (energy unions, for instance) could be enough to obtain their demands; in turn, public unions in Argentina, comparatively weaker in to industrial unions (see for instance the unequal capacity to keep their respective wage levels), head strike statistics since Nevertheless, as the issue at stake is the recovery of union activity, this is an important index; moreover, when its decline was t evidence for pointing towards the demise of unionism.

In this sense, diverse series of data show that the trend slowed down during 2006 and 2007 but kept above the levels of 1990s.⁶

⁶ Pimsa, an independent research centre set in 820 the number of conflicts between January-August 2007 (Taller de Estudios Laborales 2007); MTSS recorded 339 labour conflicts between January-February (MTSS 2007) against 231 registered by Pimsa.

Table 3: Labour conflicts since 2003: comparing different sources



Source: Taller de Estudios Laborales (TEL 2007), Nueva Mayoría y Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social (MTSS 2007).

There is however a discordant note to take into account. There were 12 general strikes launched by the labour movement between 2000 and 2002 in the midst of the longest economic recession in Argentinean history, whereas there was only one since 2003 despite the growth in sector conflicts.⁷ This fact raises questions about the unity of the labour movement, the range of solidarity across the working-class and the character of the current cycle of labour protest.

Collective Bargaining

2006 witnessed a new record regarding the number of collective bargaining agreements (Table 4a/b), and the trend carried on into 2007, as between January-September, 719 agreements were recorded by the MTSS. Then, this aspect points, in principle, to another index of trade union growth.

⁷ It was called by the CTA and other organisations (and supported by the CGT through a one-hour general strike) after a teacher was assassinated by the police during a road-block.

Table 4a Collective Agreements Classified by Scope

Year	Scope of negotiations		Total
	Activity / sector	Firm	
1991	79	18	97
1992	165	44	209
1993	127	91	218
1994	98	104	202
1995	71	125	196
1996	45	107	152
1997	41	167	208
1998	30	189	219
1999	32	152	184
2000	12	64	76
2001	22	128	150
2002	27	181	208
2003	56	338	394
2004	112	236	348
2005	203	365	568
2006	278	494	772

Source: Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social (MTSS).

Although decentralisation still prevails, there has been a recent increase in sector level agreements. Collective bargaining at this level has a direct positive consequence in the scope of coverage. During 2005 for instance, 36 per cent of such agreements comprised 92 per cent of the wage-labourers who benefited from collective negotiations. Moreover, 93 per cent of these agreements resulted in wage increases against 78 per cent of the agreements reached at firm level.

The exponential increase in collective bargaining however, is not only the outcome of the growth of *Convenios Colectivos de Trabajo (CCT)* - integral negotiations over the employment relationship, the labour process and work organisation and the place of the union in the framework of industrial relations, but mainly of the *actas*, that is, a particular type of agreement concerned with just few clauses of a CCT (Table 4). Most of the *actas* nowadays are simply wage adjustments - 80 % of them for the period 2003-2007 (CTA 2007).

Table 4b Collective Agreements Classified by Type

Year	CCT	Actas	Total
1991	5	92	97
1992	23	186	209
1993	49	169	218
1994	60	142	202
1995	70	126	196
1996	67	85	152
1997	62	146	208
1998	87	132	219
1999	94	90	184
2000	n/d	n/d	76
2001	n/d	n/d	150
2002	75	104	179
2003	129	265	394
2004	85	251	336
2005	102	451	553
2006	131	641	772

Source: CTA (Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina) y Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social (MTSS).

The Reunification of the CGT

Finally, the reunification in 2004 of the principal Argentinean confederation, the CGT, has been regarded as a political-institutional index of trade unions renewed importance by journalistic sources. Since the mid 1940s, the unity of trade unions in a single CGT was the main strategic aim of union leadership. Still, governmental interventions, dictatorial prohibitions and transitory divisions of the CGT were commonplace after the 1955 *coup d'état* against Perón. In this regards, 1992 witnessed a true novelty, the rise of a permanent rival organisation, the, by then, *Congreso de Trabajadores Argentinos* and today, *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA), in opposition to the hesitant or even critically supportive attitude of the CGT in the face of the deepening neo-liberal agenda.⁸ The challenge of the CTA contributed to fuel tensions within the CGT, which in 1994 led to the rise of the *Movimiento de Trabajadores Argentinos* (MTA) in opposition to governmental policies. This internal struggle ended in 2000 with the effective division of the CGT into a dialogue-oriented CGT (*CGT dialoguista*) and a more contentious CGT (*CGT rebelde*), the latter built upon the MTA faction.

Overall, the 1990s was a period of political division for the Argentine labour

movement – a Marxist oriented grouping, the *Corriente Combativa y Clasista* (CCC) won also some prominence in the period. Thus the recent reunification of the two CGTs, although far from achieving the old unity of the labour movement might be considered a major event in the Argentine political scenario. However, the reunification of the CGT has not translated into unified and wider actions as shown by the aforementioned data about general strike occurrence since 2000. Indeed, during 1991-1999, in spite of the division, the CGT, the MTA, the CTA and the CCC, mostly joining their forces, were able to bring about 9 general strikes (Iñigo Carrera 2006).

3. The Socio-Economic and Political Context of Trade Union Revitalisation

⁸ The CTA obtained partial recognition (*inscripción gremial*) from the Government in 1997. While the *inscripción gremial* falls short protection guaranteed by the *personería gremial*, it is often a first step in the struggle for full recognition. Despite favorable expectations the Kirchner Government denied the *personería gremial* to the CTA backing the leadership of CGT.

Since 2003, after the end of the recession, the country has experienced a steady economic recovery with rates of growth oscillating around 8 to 9 per cent annually. This fact is key to contextualising trade union growth. For trade unions there are three important consequences of this recovery. First and foremost, unemployment fell to 8,5 per cent in 2007 after climbing in October 2001 to 21.5. Second, the number of workers employed in the private formal sector has increased 22,4 percentage points since 2001(TEL 2007), thus allowing unions to maintain their positions in certain strategic industries (such as automotive, telecommunication, energy, transport) that although affected by the 1990s restructuring where among the first to take advantage of the post 2003 favourable business climate, thus strengthening trade unions associational power (Etchemendy and Collier 2007). Third, capitalists have been inclined to concede workers' demands in the face of potential disruptions to the productive process in the midst of growing profits and backward wage levels (wage-labour participation in the gross aggregated value fell from 38,2 per cent to 28,8 due to currency devaluation after the peak of the crisis in December 2001) (TEL 2007). Thus, this positive economic cycle has been fertile soil for trade union demands for higher salaries, both through collective bargaining and industrial action. Indeed, trade union negotiations and struggles succeeded in raising real wages in the formal private sector above those of 2001, though within an uncertain climate due to inflationary pressures. However it is important to note that in the public sector and among unregistered wage-labourers (according to INDEC 57,7 % of the total numbers of workers and employees), real wages levels still remain below those of 2001 (TEL 2007).

Table 5: Gross Domestic Product, real wages (July's rate), unemployment, underemployment and people under poverty line (May wave)

Year	GDP at constant prices 2001=100	real wages/private registered labour 4th quarter 2001=100	Unemployment	Under employment	people under poverty line
2003	108.3	84.4	15.6	18.8	51.7
2004	118.0	96.2	14.8	15.2	44.3
2005	128.9	99.9	13.0	12.7	33.8
2006	139.8	108.6	11.4	11.0	31.4
2007	-	117.7	8,5	-	23.4 ⁹

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (INDEC), TEL (2007).

This economic recovery, however, should not make us lose sight that its effects are still modest as far as the participation of workers in the added value is concerned (Table 6).

Table 6: workers share in added value

1993	43.9
1994	42.5
1995	39.9
1996	36.1
1997	36
1998	38.1
1999	38.7
2000	37.4
2001	38.2
2002	28.8
2003	26.3
2004	27.7
2005	28.6
2006	30.8

Source: Taller de Estudios Laborales (2007).

Trade unions also took advantage of a changed political scenario. The Peronist Government, which assumed office in 2003, showed, comparatively, a greater openness to trade union claims. At least initially, it exhibited a

certain tolerance towards social protests, particularly labour conflicts. However, this attitude has been gradually changing since the second half of 2005, as police suppressed labour protests, sit-down strikes and factory occupations in the provinces of Neuquén, Chaco and Santa Cruz, and picket lines of meat workers in Buenos Aires. Since then, in the face of intense labour conflicts or grass-roots defiance to the power of either employers or union bureaucracies or both, repression and criminalisation of workers protests have been

⁹ This last figure is incorporated here for completeness, but bearing in mind that INDEC has been manipulating data in to show lower levels of inflation rates. This manipulation affects poverty measures.

commonplace (casino, undergrounds, teachers, health workers, fishing, wood, textile industry, among others).

In turn, the government decreed minimum wage increases too, which stimulated the demands of highly paid workers. The Ministry of Labour has encouraged collective bargaining as well as monitored the *Consejo del Salario Mínimo, Vital y Móvil*, a tripartite body for social dialogue, which agreed, though not unanimously as CTA rejected the offer, another rise in the minimum wage. It has also decreed in 2003 and 2005 wage increases, which were to be incorporated into the CCTs' salary scales. All these policies have been part of a hegemonic project by which the government initially sought to deactivate the mobilisation of the *piqueteros*, obtain support from popular organisations, and re-establish gradually some institutional channels for political exchange with part of the labour movement. At the same time, these policies were a governmental attempt to control through consensual means the distributive struggle. For instance, in 2006 and 2007 the Government sets out standards for wage dealings through the agreements dealt by the lorry drivers union (*Camioneros*), the leading faction of the CGT, and other emblematic unions. According to the administration, this is a strategy directed to avoid skyrocketing inflation. The new Peronist Government, headed by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, follows identical guidelines and alludes openly to the need of a 'Social Pact' for 2008, while Moyano, leader of the CGT and *Camioneros*, already predicted a ceiling on salary increases of 13 per cent for the negotiating round of next March.

In short, the end of the long economic depression, the increase of production and economic activity, the decline of unemployment, and the political and economic project of the Government, while functioning to restore the hegemonic control upon the broader process of social mobilisation manifested in 2001 and 2002, contributed to re-empower trade unions' and fostered their willingness to mobilise the rank and file.

4. The Nature of Trade Unions growth: The Old and the New

What lies behind these signs of unions' growth? In much of the English literature on revitalisation, discussion has focused on innovation in union policies, rooted in the adoption of a partnership, a servicing or an organising profile or a combination of these. In Argentina, by contrast, trade union revitalisation seems to be associated primarily with traditional practices. With that understanding, let us resume the analysis of the above described indicators: union density, labour conflicts, collective bargaining and the reunification of the CGT.

At first sight, *union density* is still statistically high. Yet, it is necessary to take into account the number of unregistered wage-labourers since it is unlikely that these workers are equally able to join trade unions. As we have seen, recent statistics by MTSS on union density focuses only on formal enterprises with 10 or more employees. At the beginning of 2007, however, 41.6 per cent of the total number of wage-labourers corresponded to unregistered labour, whereas from 1992 to 1996 the rate of unregistered employees oscillated between 22 and 25 per cent. Thus, surely, union density among unionisable workers remains relatively high, whereas more and more wage labourers are outside the reach of trade union organisation. Moreover, union density says nothing about why (or how) trade unions have maintained their relative position. Neither union density says about the actual weaknesses of workplace structures. According to the MTSS, although 62.8 % of firms recognise to have unionised workers, approximately 85 % of them do not face shop-floor structures of representation. The official data also shows that while a reasonable percentage (52.5 per cent) of shop stewards operates in the larger companies (with more than 200 employees), their

ability to represent workers in medium firms (between 40 and 200) and small enterprises (less than 40 employees) remain very low (27.7 per cent and 7.5 per cent respectively). This explains that the workforce of the 15 % of firms, where the survey found shop-stewards, comprised 39 % of the total workers (ETE 2005).

In terms of conflicts and strikes, the number of workplace structures (the so-called *comisiones internas*), which have led industrial actions based on the mobilisation of workers through grass-roots mechanisms of decision-making, have increased. Some of them have passed through long conflicts with significant media impact in various activities, including the Buenos Aires underground (Bianchini and Torme in the dossier), hospitals, communications, airlines, casinos, and the textile, tyre and meat industries. Besides this, several trade unions have been campaigning for the inclusion of outsourced workers on equal terms and conditions with core workers, not only in the above-mentioned sectors but also in transport, oil, railways and various branches of the provincial, municipal and national state. Some of these campaigns involved solidarity action and strikes. This is a far cry from most union tactics during the 1990s, when the affiliation of outsourced workers was usually negotiated to compensate membership loss, by conceding lower terms and conditions and in this manner contributing to the division of the working class.

Difficult to evaluate is the subtle though noticeable growth of rank-and-file activism, manifest by mounting, though scattered evidence: building of workplace structures in previously union-free companies (messengers, casinos, call centres, supermarkets), struggles for recognition (telecommunications, public sector, call centres, petrochemical, fishing industry - on this industry, see Nieto and Colombo in the dossier); and electoral challenges to well-established leaderships mainly at the level of *comisiones internas* (undergrounds, textiles, tyres, banks, food, fishing). It is evidence of this activism too, the existence of more and younger activists, new though scattered and very small radical union groupings and the enlargement of the repertoire of actions.

However, it is important not to exaggerate this trend. On the one hand, traditional leaderships conduct most conflicts in a context of economic growth through traditional practices. On the other, as shown above when discussing union density, workers' ability to confront employers at the shop-floor is very limited. Yet, it would be equally unfair to neglect these episodes of lively grass-root activity.

Furthermore, an evaluation of trade unions' prospects should take into account their place within the broader picture of social protest in Argentina. In this regard, the leading role of trade unions declined in comparison to that of other organisations of the civil society during 1990s. While in 1989, trade union protest represented 74 per cent of the total protests recorded, in the early 1990s this proportion fell to approximately 54 per cent, and only 31 per cent of the social protests have corresponded to trade unions' initiatives between 1998 and 2003 (Schuster et al. 2006). While alternative data on strikes suggests the beginnings of recovery in 2004, the point remains that the ability of trade unions to build coalitions with other social movements seems to be a relevant strategic question. In this respect, the persistent hegemony of the traditional leaderships over the labour movement might be an obstacle as they have always been reluctant to such coalitions.

Moreover, given the monopoly of representation, the growth in the number of collective agreements, which might be taken as another index of unions' growth, implies an opportunity for traditional union leaderships to recover from a decade of retreat that had damaged their reputation. In the past, collective bargaining did involve the top-down mobilisation of workers, a sort of implied threat in order to achieve better terms and conditions. But genuine rank-and-file participation in collective negotiations has often been severely limited by the deficit of internal democracy. Moreover, although the participation of shop-stewards in

negotiations at firm level is granted by law, workplace representatives participated in only 66 out of the 151 CCTs of this type signed in 2006 and 2007 (43,7 %) (CTA 2007). Indeed, today, collective agreements usually function to prevent the confluence of workers' mobilisation and the broader trend of social protest through a consensual dynamic. Thus, important as it is, the invigorating of collective bargaining might soon be reversed following changes in economic and political variables, as it does not express new organisational strengths, new tactics or new attitudes on the side of organised labour. Indeed, it seems to point to the favourable conjuncture in which old tripartite mechanisms of political exchange are promoted by public authorities in the face of a process of mobilisation of the subaltern classes, which has posed serious challenges to traditional leaderships.

In this regards, academic and political analysts agree that the Government favoured the reunification of the CGT to empower traditional union leaders as a safeguard against the mobilisation of the unemployed and the growth of rank and file's demands for wage rises. Moreover, the decision by public authorities to continue with the denial of the *personería gremial* to the CTA, an important actor in the mobilisation against the neo-liberal agenda during 1990s, comes to reinforce this impression. So far, the CGT has fulfilled the Governmental expectations backing the official policy to put ceilings on salaries deals, and thus, revitalising among scholars corporatist approaches to union-state relationships (Etchemendy and Collier, 2007).

5. Conclusions

The main conclusion to be drawn from the above sketch is that, today in Argentina, there are concrete signals of trade union recovery but very few of renewal. Trade unions old practices and sectionalism, that are partly a product of the economic growth, partly a product of governmental policies, still dominate the scenario. Yet it is also true that the combination of economic and political factors has opened new and real room for the emergence of labour conflicts and workers' mobilisation outside the hegemony of the traditional leadership. Indeed, it is possible to find evidence of the latter in the series of grassroots democratic actions that have characterised several of the most important labour conflicts since 2005.

But besides this, with roughly half of the country's population below the poverty line, an 8.5 per cent rate of unemployment and 41,6 per cent of wage-labourers unregistered, the relationship between trade unions and the broader process of social mobilisation seems to be a relevant issue for the long term prospects of the labour movement. Incidentally, trade unions' direct involvement in the total number of social protests has shown a decline and the relationship between trade unions and other organisations of the civil society is still very limited.

This description thus reveals a complex picture for trade unions, in which the prospect for long-standing renewal seems to depend on the multiplication of the experiments in grassroots democracy and coalition-building, rather than in the replication of the old trade union practices which have prevailed thus far.

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