CHAPTER SEVEN

Labor in Córdoba in the 1960s: Trade Union Consciousness and the “Culture of Resistance”

Mónica B. Gordillo

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the particular characteristics of the new social actors who appeared in Córdoba following the establishment of the automobile firms, Fiat and IKA (Industrias Kaiser Argentina), between 1954 and 1955, firms that generated an important industrial growth in the city. A major concern is to try and explain the reasons for the special role played by the Cordoban working class during the 1960s and the high degree of militancy displayed by the Cordoban unions at the end of the decade, culminating in their participation in the great social protest, the Cordobazo of May 29–30, 1969. In the process, the chapter will hopefully establish some interpretive framework with which to better understand the continuities and therefore the radicalization of the 1970s, when there began to take shape clasista positions among Cordoban autoworkers.

Obviously there were multiple factors that intervened to make all this possible. Among those factors, the importance of the special political-economic conjuncture during the military government of Juan Carlos Onganía and its social effects should not be underestimated. However, the hypothesis presented in this chapter is not conjunctural, but rather attempts to explain a longer historical process during which a new trade union tradition and consciousness among the autoworkers were taking shape, with particular
characteristics derived, in part, from the period when their unions were first organized. This organization occurred within the context of “the Peronist Resistance”—the SMATA (Sindicato de Mecánicos y Afines del Transporte Automotor)—representing the IKA workers and Fiat unions being established in 1956 and 1960 respectively—which implied a new kind of relationship between the leadership and rank and file given the sacking of the established trade union leaders that occurred in these years. In addition to these factors, there must be taken into account the policies adopted by the automotive multinationals who showed themselves disposed to make certain concessions on wages that, by increasing the buying power of their workers, also provided a model for other collective bargaining agreements that contributed to consolidate the domestic market for automobiles.

In this respect, the establishment of the big capitalist enterprise and the struggle over wages and trade union demands within the firm itself were fundamental in consolidating a trade union consciousness and new union tradition based on more democratic practices and a constant mobilization and participation of the rank and file. The consolidation of this new union tradition was favored by the fact that, although with the election of President Arturo Frondizi in 1958 collective bargaining procedures and the legal recognition of unions began anew (thereby beginning a process of readjustment in the country’s power structures and with it the integration of the unions with the state and bureaucratization of the labor movement), in the Cordoban autoworkers’ unions this process was never fully consummated. This was also true of the light and power workers (Luz y Fuerza), the other leading union in Córdoba in this period. In fact, throughout this period, these unions were acquiring an increasing autonomy with respect to their union centrals, being favored by a system of internal organization and the kinds of relations practiced with management.2

Starting with the assumption that a trade union consciousness is not the mere reflex of the worker’s condition but the result of a complex web of relations between different social actors and of a particular historical experience, this chapter presents the fundamental connection between two levels of analysis: that which makes reference to the function of the union and trade union struggles as they relate to the realm of production, thereby influencing the formation of a union consciousness and a specific trade union tradition, and that which emphasizes a more broader cultural dimension. The latter refers to the meaning of the symbolic, of the values, motivations, and interpretations of reality that cannot be always classified by what is commonly understood as “ideology.” These combined influences go on to comprise what I propose is the development of a “culture of resistance” in