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CALENDRIER
2018-2019
SÉMINAIRE SPÉCIALISÉ

LES GAUCHES & L'INTERNATIONAL THE LEFT AND THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Séminaire mensuel, 17h-19h

Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po
56 rue Jacob
75006 Paris
Salle du Traité

Responsables :

MICHELE DI DONATO (Sciences Po, CHSP)
MATHIEU FULLA (Sciences Po, CHSP)
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Ce séminaire propose d'explorer l'histoire des familles politiques socialistes, social-démocrates et communistes dans la perspective des relations internationales et transnationales. Le séminaire permet de soulever des questions nouvelles tant du côté de l'histoire politique que de celle des relations internationales. En croisant les perspectives, il tente d'internationaliser la première et de souligner le poids de la seconde dans le façonnement des cultures politiques nationales et régionales. Cette perspective apparaît comme un outil particulièrement fécond pour saisir tant l'histoire des socialismes et des communismes que nombre d'enjeux auxquels ces mouvements doivent aujourd'hui faire face. Les tensions entre la dimension nationale de la politique et la dimension globale de l'économie constituent en effet des composantes majeures de la crise « structurelle » des gauches européennes et extra-européennes, quelles que soient leurs attitudes vis-à-vis de la mondialisation.

This seminar proposes to explore the history of the socialist, social-democratic and communist political families by looking at their international and transnational relations. Combining different focuses and approaches, the seminar will try to analyse political history in a larger international perspective, and to emphasize the importance of international and transnational relations in shaping national and regional political cultures. This framework can help us understand crucial aspects of the history of socialism and communism, and clarify present-day political developments. In spite of diverging attitudes vis-à-vis the globalization process, the tension between the national dimension of politics and the global dimension of the economy is in fact a major component of the current 'structural' crisis of the Left, both in Europe and world.

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CYCLE DE SÉMINAIRES
LES GAUCHES ET L'INTERNATIONAL
Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po / Fondation Jean Jaurès

“An Early Experience of Socialist Internationalism in the ‘Global South’. The Socialist Party of Argentina during the years of the Second International, 1890-1914”

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Introduction

The Socialist Party is one of Argentina’s oldest political formations and played a key role in the national political scene since its foundation in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, during the years of the Second International (1889-1914), the party was the most important socialist organization in Latin America, closely related to the development of socialism in Europe and the United States. Delegates representing Argentine social democracy participated in all the congresses of the Second International, from Paris, in 1889, to Basel, in 1912.

As a matter of fact, the history of socialism in Argentina cannot be written but as a chapter of the international history of social democracy. The history of the first socialist groups in Argentina goes back to the 1870s, with the activity of French *communards*, and the early 1880s, when exiled members of the German *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* created the first permanent organization, called *Verein Vorwärts*. At first they represented small and isolated groups. Through their agitation and propaganda, however, they insisted on highlighting the class antagonism that arose as a result of capitalist development and struggled to spread their ideas among the young working class. In the

last years of the 1880s, these small groups found a bigger audience and recruited new followers.¹

In the following decade, they started a process of unification and growth that led to the founding congress of the Argentine Socialist Party in June, 1896. Although it remained relatively small when compared to other socialist parties of the time, the organization increased its size and experienced a process of growth in the years that followed. The party developed a political stance that called workers to organize themselves in an independent organization along clear class lines. At the same time, the activity of the party was definitely reformist and strongly oriented towards the “political struggle”—that is, the participation in elections in order to get parliamentary representation.

For a long period, the history of Argentine Socialism attracted little attention from academic scholars and the first studies were published and promoted by the party itself. Highly partisan, this “militant historiography” was mainly a history of the leadership: less attention was paid to the history of the rank-and-file, let alone the social experiences of party members (the best example is Oddone, 1934). The first contributions by professional historians came from foreign scholars (Walter, 1977; Adelman, 1992). A renewal in Argentine historiography took place after the demise of the last military dictatorship, in 1983, when labour history of the pre-Peronist period flourished. This new literature represented a renovation in terms of perspective, as it contributed to enrich the knowledge of social and cultural aspects of workers’ lives. However, at the same it moved away from histories of labor parties and trade unions —as a consequence, a new and global study on the origins of the Socialist Party was not undertaken as a research project. Rather, the most important contributions came from scholars interested in intellectual history, and were therefore mainly focused on Juan B. Justo’s thought (Aricó, 1999; Tarcus, 2007).²

In the last fifteen years, however, studies on the history of the Socialist Party are experiencing a new impulse. New research has dealt with different problems and topics: the reception of Marxist ideas in the country and the evolution of socialist ideas (Tarcus, 2007; Zeller, 2007; Tarcus, Zeller and Carreras, 2008; Graciano 2010a, 2010b; Martínez Mazzola, 2011; Herrera, 2015), the link between the party and the labor movement (Camarero, 2011; Martínez Mazzola, 2011; Belkin, 2007, 2018), its development in different parts of the country (Bisso, 2007; Barandiarán, 2010; Martocci, 2014; Ferreyra, 2015), the characteristics of its press and other aspects of its cultural life (Martínez Mazzola, 2005; Buonuome, 2015; Reyes, 2016), its relationship with other political parties (Martínez Mazzola, 2008), the organization of female workers and the struggle for

¹ For an assessment of this early period, see Ratzer (1970), Klima (1974), Tarcus (2007), Falcón (2011), Poy and Gaido (2011), Poy (2014). I am currently working on a detailed study of the texts of the Second International that were translated and published by the Argentine socialist press (Poy, 2019).

² For an overall assessment of labor historiography in Argentina, see Poy (2016).

female suffrage (Barrancos, 2005; Valobra, 2008; Becerra, 2009; Scheinkman, 2017) are some examples.

Summarizing more than five years of research in Argentine archives and the International Institute of Social History, in Amsterdam, this paper provides an assessment of both the organizational and political characteristics of the Argentine Socialist Party, against the context of its international links with European social democracy, in the period before the First World War. It draws upon different articles published over the course of these years and material from my forthcoming book on the history of early Argentine Socialism.

Juan B. Justo's socialism

The main feature of the organizational and political leap that Argentine socialism experienced between 1894 and 1896 was the hegemonic role played by Juan Bautista Justo (1865-1928). He was a young and prestigious physician who became acquainted with socialist groups as late as 1893 but showed, in the years that followed, a remarkable ability to shape them in political and theoretical terms. He did so through the pages of *La Vanguardia*, the journal he founded and would become the official party organ for several decades. In these early years, Justo had a leading role as editor and left his mark in dozens of articles and editorials that exposed his fundamental theoretical and programmatic perspectives.



Juan B. Justo in 1890

“This country is being transformed” (“Este país se transforma”): that was the classic start of the leading article in the first number of *La Vanguardia*, published in April, 1894. In this famous article, Justo argued that this transformation process was the consequence of the country’s integration in the global development of capitalism. Indeed, Argentina had experienced major changes, in social and economic terms, in the last third of the nineteenth century. A massive population growth, spurred mostly by European immigration, combined with the arrival of foreign investments and the expansion of agricultural exports, shaped a highly unstable but definitely capitalist labor market that posed a new working class as a central actor in the country’s scene (Poy, 2014a, 2014b). According to Justo, the main reason for a working-class party to be created in this context was the unstoppable and tumultuous expansion of the capitalist economic system from the center to the peripheries. The world was rapidly changing, and so was the country. In the new

interconnected world, capital and labor were the two main opponents, and Argentina was no exception.³

The progressive character of the country's entrance into capitalist modernity, however, was delayed by the "ineptitude and rapacity" of the Argentine ruling class. In Justo's characteristic view, the typical *criollo* ruler was "ignorant", a "mixture of merchant and *cacique*", and his "lack of intellectual discipline" made him completely incapable of acquiring "clear and positive ideas about the social question". Things would therefore only change with the intervention of the working class, which would have a progressive effect on the country's society as a whole. In what was also a clear demarcation with their Anarchist rivals, increasingly rooted in the more exploited layers of the working class, the Socialists called the Argentine proletariat to organize itself in a political party, in order to "make the first important step in the path of its emancipation, [and to] give a great impulse to the historical evolution of the population".⁴

Drawing upon these ideas, between 1894 and 1896 Justo managed to lay down the basic theoretical and political foundations of Argentine socialism. In the first place, it was an interpretation of society based on its economic evolution; Karl Marx was thus evoked less for his revolutionary perspectives than for its contribution to an "economic conception of history". Secondly, and as a consequence, the main feature of the situation of the country was the development of capitalist relations and the predominance of a particularly "inept and rapacious" bourgeoisie. Finally, Justo's interpretation concluded with an appeal to organize the "intelligent and sound" segment of the proletariat, in order to achieve immediate reforms, which could only be obtained through political action. The political organization of the working class, in his perspective, would have a beneficial effect for society as a whole.

Overall, his interpretation was tinged with an evolutionary and positivist perspective, typical of the period and shared with broad sectors of the ruling class. His confidence in science as a means to understanding the "laws of the evolution of society" paved the way for an interpretation that saw capitalist development, "progress" and, ultimately, socialism, as non-contradictory but complementary and necessary stages in the development of societies. Moreover, Justo's socialism developed a proud vindication of ideological syncretism as one of its most characteristic elements. According to him, socialism, "as a social doctrine, needed above all an economic and historical basis" and it had been the merit of Marx and Engels to provide it. However, "scientific progress" had continued: "Darwin and his predecessors have revolutionized the theory of the organic world. Comte and Spencer have definitely established the basis of the method." Also them

³ *La Vanguardia*, 7 April 1894. All quotes from sources in Spanish were translated by the author.

⁴ *La Vanguardia*, 1 September 1894.

had “contributed to sustain the socialist doctrine, giving it a biological basis, and preparing the intelligences for its final triumph.”⁵

An explicit rejection of dialectics helped shape this gradualist and reformist perspective. Although this was a characteristic element of a large segment of international social democracy at the time, in the case of Justo it was explicit and outspoken. In a well-known article, published in mid-1896 in the commercial newspaper *La Nación*, Justo took up accusations made against him because of his defense of Enrico Ferri and argued that

... what is taught in national schools under the name of philosophy is something I could never grasp — and I remain refractory to it. A friend of mine, who has the misfortune of believing himself to be a “dialectical materialist”, is convinced that I am a mechanical materialist; but I do not believe it. I do not know what that will be, and it distresses me to think that I could ever adorn myself with such a title, because I would have lost something that most men have: common sense.⁶

Party structure, development and composition

Armed with these theoretical and political foundations, Argentine socialists set out to organize the working class and build a political party. Although the organization was still very weak, with no more than a couple hundred members, most of them concentrated in Buenos Aires, the founding congress of 1896 approved an ambitious set of resolutions, including a party program, a declaration of principles, and detailed statutes, that would shape the development of Argentine Socialism for several decades.

Formally, the party was to be built as a federation of socialist groups and a variety of labor and union centers. The founding congress established that the organization was “constituted of every political group, trade union, circle of social studies and propaganda, mutual benefit society and cooperative, with more than ten members, that formally declares its adherence to the program and method of action of the party” (Oddone, 1934: 67). In the first congress, more than a dozen trade unions had indeed participated in the debates over the “economic program”. In the following years, however, this very broad list of potential members was in practice much more limited. Trade unions, mutual benefit societies and cooperatives, even when created or influenced by members of the party, were not formally part of it.

⁵ *La Vanguardia*, 28 December 1895.

⁶ *La Nación*, 27 June 1896. For further assessments of Justo’s philosophical standpoints, see Dotti (1990), Franzé (1993), Aricó (1999), and Tarcus (2007).

As a result, the party turned out to be a federation of openly *socialist* centers, to which members were individually affiliated. Even though its development and growth during the last years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th is the story of increasing consolidation and relative centralization, it would always remain a federative organization. As Madeleine Reberieux has pointed out for the case of the French *SFIO*, the elimination of any kind of collective membership contributed to create a party that

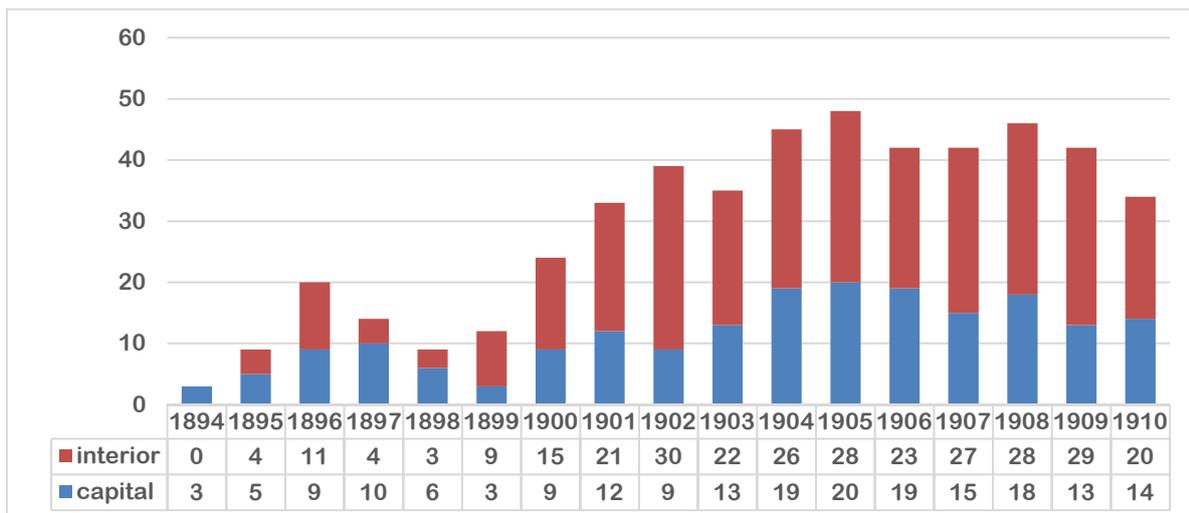
saw itself as a *party of citizens* rather than a proletarian's party (1983: 19).

Unlike the case of other European parties, and due to the decisive importance of Buenos Aires in political, social and economic terms, provincial and regional federations did not exist in this early period. Roughly, half of the sections that constituted the party belonged to the capital (see **Figure 1**). As shown in **Maps 1 and 2**, the party managed to deploy socialist centers in many of the interior provinces, and especially in the fertile and prosperous hinterland of the Buenos Aires province.



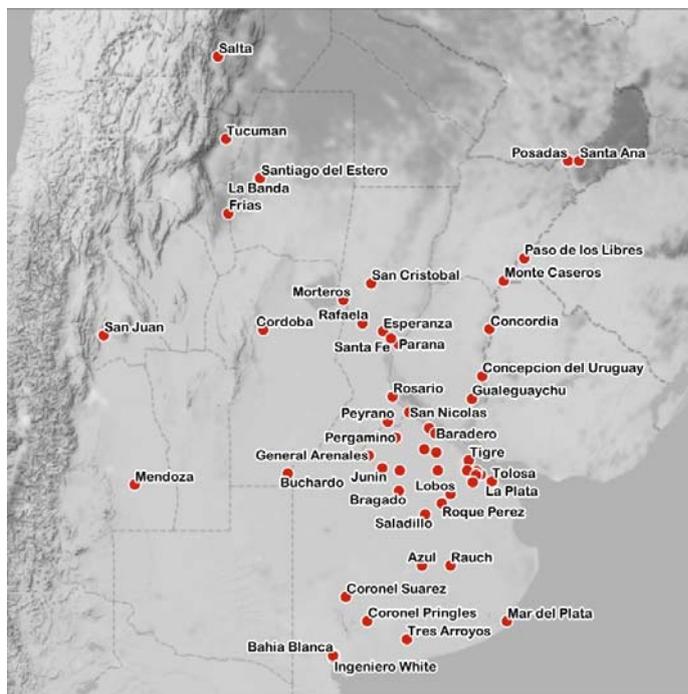
A local of the Socialist Party

Figure 1. Socialist centers, 1894-1910.



Source: *La Vanguardia*

Map 1. Cities and towns that had a socialist center, 1895-1910



Source: *La Vanguardia*

Map 2. Socialist centers in the rural hinterland of Buenos Aires province



Source: *La Vanguardia*

According to the statutes, the “general vote”, an instance where all party members were summoned to participate in an internal election, in order to decide upon different matters, was the most important source of authority. In second place came the national congress, the formal occasion for the groups and sections that constituted the party to gather and discuss the political course to be taken. The congress would, in turn, elect the members of the executive committee, who actually controlled the daily activity of the party, and also the editors of the party organ. Between 1896 and 1910, the party held nine congresses. While the first three were held in Buenos Aires, later on the event was summoned in other cities, as was traditional in many European social democratic parties of the period. Thus, the fourth congress was held in La Plata, the sixth in Rosario and the seventh in Junín. In 1910 an extraordinary congress convened in Montevideo, Uruguay, as it was impossible to do it in Buenos Aires because of the state of siege imposed by the government.



The editorial office of La Vanguardia, circa 1910

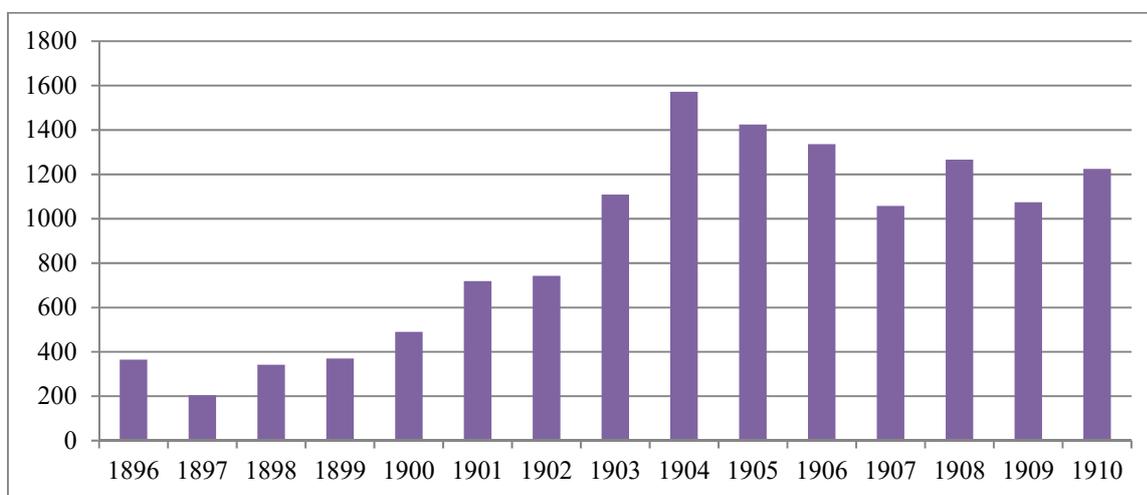
Before 1910, the party had a humble financial and organizational structure. Its main sources of income were monthly fees that party members paid to their local organizations, a percentage of which were transferred to the party's central treasury. These regular contributions were supplemented by a myriad of extraordinary donations, in the form of special subscriptions for electoral campaigns, revenues from the sales of brochures and books, etc. The situation changed between 1904 and 1908, when the election of a socialist national deputy created an abrupt distortion in party revenues, as long as the statutes established that a percentage of his salary was to be given to

the party. This distortion became the rule in the following decade, after the 1912 electoral reform, when the growing number of socialist deputies and senators completely reshaped the financial structure of the party: in 1913 83% of the party revenues came from parliamentarian's contributions and only 6% from member's fees (Cabezas, 2015). In the previous period, however, the party still had low incomes and therefore lacked a strong apparatus of paid officials equivalent to that of other social-democratic parties of the period.

Even considering the financial information about the collection of monthly fees, it is not easy to measure the size of the party during these years. Sources do not provide detailed information: it was common to come across complaints by the party leadership, regarding the lack of accurate information sent by local centers, the instability of member-fee

payment and the absence of any reports whatsoever. Some conclusions can be drawn, however, by taking a look at the information of the party's treasury, published monthly in *La Vanguardia*, as well as reports presented at party congresses. Although the monthly average of contributors (**Figure 2**) can underestimate the total number of active members, it provides a useful overview. Taken together with the evolution of centers represented in **Figure 1**, the information shows that between its foundation and 1910, the Socialist Party experienced a process of growth dotted with years of crisis and stagnation.

Figure 2. Party membership (monthly average of contributing members).



Source: *La Vanguardia*

The starting point were the 300-400 members that paid their fees in 1896, a year that crowned a cycle of growth of socialist groups in Buenos Aires and the interior provinces. After that initial impulse, however, a period of difficulties emerged in 1897 and 1898, in line with a cycle of decay of labor unrest, and the average number of contributing members came down to about 200 in 1897. This first crisis was particularly important in the interior provinces —almost all centers outside Buenos Aires that were represented in the 1896 congress disappeared in the following months. The third congress, held in 1900, showed an upturn in the number of groups from the interior provinces, but a drop in those from Buenos Aires, which is related to the schism of several local centers, known as “collectivists”, who temporarily left the party in 1899. It was only in the fourth congress, after the return of these dissidents, that the number of represented sections exceeded that of the founding congress (Poy and Asquini, 2015).

A slow recovery in membership took place with the turn of the century, and it gained strength in 1901, 1902 and 1903. This sustained growth reached a peak in 1904, when the

average monthly contributors numbered almost 1,600. But in the years that followed, a new and important downturn took place, directly related to the political crisis that led the “revolutionary syndicalist” faction to break with the party. This faction, strongly influenced by French and Italian syndicalist leaders, as Georges Sorel and Walter Mocchi, had managed to control the socialist-oriented labor federation —the *Unión General de Trabajadores*— and to gain important positions in the executive committee of the party itself, and was finally expelled in the seventh congress, in 1906.⁷ By the end of the period under study, the party had an average of 1,200 monthly contributors.

During this early period, in sum, the Socialist Party of Argentina increased its size and experienced a process of growth, although it remained a relatively small organization when compared to other (European) socialist parties of the time. Its oscillating membership was a consequence of the ups and downs of labor unrest in the country and also an outcome of internal tensions that often led to organizational crises and splits. Moreover, it was related to the local labor market’s characteristics, constituted as it was by an extremely volatile migrant workforce.



Female workers leaving a Socialist local during a strike, 1919

It is worth noting that the data collected and published by the party never informed if the contributing members were men or women. In the few cases in which this information was included, for example when the contributors to special fundraising were listed, the overwhelming majority of names were male. But it would be misleading to deduce from this that women did not play an important role in the material support of the Socialist Party. First of all, obviously, because a precondition for many male activists to participate in political activities at the end of their workday, or during the weekends, was that others —almost always, women— took up domestic chores, cleaning the home, feeding

and taking care of children. But, secondly, it is also evident that the importance of female participation in socialist ranks has been systematically under-represented in the sources. For a working family, the contribution to a trade union and political organization could mean a significant expenditure that could not be duplicated: in any case, what the sources

⁷ By a vote of 822 to 222, the congress approved the following resolution: “The seventh congress would be pleased to see the group of affiliates titled Syndicalists constitute themselves into an autonomous party, with the object of realizing the experimental proof of their doctrine and tactics”. On the history of Revolutionary Syndicalism in Argentina, see Del Campo (1986), Bertolo (1993), Belkin (2007, 2018). For a global overview of this current, see Thorpe (1989).

reveal is that the contributions made by a working household —whose monetary income, in most cases, was generated by adult men and women and by children of both sexes— were almost always registered in the name of the adult male.

It is also not easy to answer the question about the social background of rank and file members due to the lack of sources. Some conclusions, however, can be drawn about the social background of the leadership in this early period, by constructing short lists of those militants that most attended party congresses, were chosen as candidates in more occasions, and served as members of the executive committee for longest periods.

In the first eight congresses, between 1896 and 1908, the total sum of 256 delegations was fulfilled by 157 members, all of them men except for Fenia Cherkoff Repetto, who represented the *Centro Socialista Femenino* (Socialist Women's Center) in 1903 and 1908, and Juana Beggino, who did so in 1906. More than a third, i.e. 54 militants, participated as delegates in more than one occasion. A shorter list of 27 party leaders (17% of the total sum) who acted as delegates in more than two congresses shows a significant parity between workers and professionals. Twelve of them were manual workers: four wood workers, four typographers, a mechanic, a shoemaker, a painter, and a tinsmith, while twelve came from an "intellectual" or professional background: five physicians (including Justo and his closest political friend, Nicolás Repetto), two students, a lawyer, a book keeper, two journalists, and a school teacher.

Consistent results come up when assessing the information of electoral candidates. As shown in the last section of this paper, between 1896 and 1908 the Socialist Party went to the polls seven times in the city of Buenos Aires, presenting a total of 70 nominations, covered by 44 militants: almost all the leaders included in the previous short list were party candidates at least once. Again, one-third, in this case 15 out of those 44, represented the party in more than one occasion. In this case, a larger proportion of this shorter list came from an intellectual background —it is however, barely more than half of the list. Indeed, there are three physicians, three lawyers, a school teacher and a journalist, whereas candidates of working-class origins are the remaining seven.



The Executive Committee of the Socialist Party in 1912

A last sample —the members of the executive committee— provides similar results. Between 1895 (the date of its creation) and 1908, a total of 56 militants served as members of these body. A short list of fifteen of them, those who served for more than 24 months, usually not continuously but in different periods, shows consistent results with the previous information. Apart from José Lebrón, the party treasurer, all of them had regularly attended party congresses and most of them had been party candidates in the

elections, at least once. Regarding the social background, there is again parity between manual workers and intellectuals. Seven of these long-lasting members of the executive were workers and seven came from professional or intellectual backgrounds.

Taken together, these lists allow us to build a set of around thirty leaders of the Socialist Party in this early period. While it remains clear that Juan B. Justo exerted a strong influence and contributed to shape the party with his ideas, it is not true that it was guided only by intellectuals, as it has usually been noted. Rather, the different structures of party leadership showed a consistent mixture of militants from middle-class and working-class origins, all of them male, and the rank-and-file showed an overwhelmingly working-class composition.

In sum, between its foundation and the beginnings of the second decade of the 20th century, the Socialist Party found its way to develop as an important actor inside the labor movement, becoming a relatively small but well-structured party of workers, which considered itself as such, even though its leadership included an important number of intellectuals and despite the fact that it also saw itself as a party of citizens committed to gradual, non-violent reforms. To understand why this was not seen as a contradiction we need to move from an analysis of the social and organizational structure to an assessment of its stances regarding economic and political struggles.

Socialists and the labor movement

In a letter sent to the International Socialist Bureau in 1905, in which he asked for solidarity measures to be taken by European longshoremen against ships carrying Argentinian products, the national secretary of the Argentine Socialist Party made a brief and succinct description of labor unrest in the country, closely related to the characteristic traits of its export-oriented economy:

In the summer, when the crops are harvested and shipped to Europe, the economic and commercial activity reaches its climax. In the winter, when the work of agriculture is ended, this activity is at its lowest ebb. (...) For the majority of labourers of Argentina, the only reason in which they can demand any improvement is that their hands are demanded for the harvest, that is to say, in the summer time. Ever since a small labour organization has existed in our country we have great strikes every year, beginning in the month of November and ending in the month of March. In the first years in which the working class followed this strike tactics during harvest time, the capitalist class of Argentina was taken by surprise and had to acquiesce to the demand of the laborers. But when these strikes continued and reached their climax in November, 1902, especially in the capital, the capitalist class quickly brought pressure to bear on the government and at the end of the year had a law passed exiling all strangers who had taken a conspicuous part in those strikes. And when this did not suffice to break the strike of 1902, the government declared martial law and crushed the movement”.⁸

Argentine socialists were closely involved in these struggles. The important cycle of strikes that shook Buenos Aires in 1888 and 1889 showed a significant involvement of the *Verein Vorwärts*, the group founded by German Social Democrats *émigrés* in 1882. Moreover, the socialists faced a fierce press campaign against them, when several commercial newspapers attributed the strikes to the action of “foreign leaders”, and specifically the members of the Verein. On this occasion, socialists developed for the first time a position towards strikes, as a way to confront these accusations. In their newspaper, also called *Vorwärts*, they argued that the causes of turmoil should not be sought in their intervention but in the severe inflation and economic crisis, and characterized the strikes as “a necessary evil, a result of the current social circumstances”. They were inevitable under capitalism, as they often represented “the only way for workers to defend themselves from excessive oppression by capital”. The strikes were beyond the will of socialists, whose task was not to provoke them —indeed, sometimes they even “discouraged” them.⁹

After 1894, when *La Vanguardia* appeared and socialist activity grew in numbers and organization, the position on strikes was directly linked to the interpretation of the country’s economic development, and its consequence — the need for working-class economic and political organizations. *La Vanguardia* repeatedly argued that the progress of capitalism in Argentina had blocked the chances of upward social mobility for workers.

⁸ *International Socialist Review* 6 (1905/1906), pp. 123-124

⁹ *Vorwärts*, 17 November 1888.

This, in turn, explained the spread of strikes, which were fair and inevitable, and the expansion of unions.



A group of strikers reading *La Vanguardia* in front of a tenement house, 1903

On the one hand, therefore, strikes were an inevitable product of capitalist development, and should not only be defended from bosses' attacks but also vindicated as a symptom of class consciousness. On the other, they were at the same time a "backward" method of class struggle. Industrial action could temporarily improve the situation of certain groups of workers, provided that it was put forward "in the right moment and with intelligence", but political action was, in any case, the best way to "gradually reach more radical and permanent reforms, that would put workers closer to their beloved goal of economic emancipation". The superiority of "political action" was reinforced by the fact that it consolidated the unity of the whole working class, while any improvements of a particular strike would only benefit the

trades involved.¹⁰

According to Juan B. Justo, strikes were a first step in the proletarian struggle. Even if they ended up in defeats, they were "good for the working class, in principle", as far as they would draw workers from passivity and contribute to strengthen "the feelings and habits of solidarity" and to experience to what extent the government just "slavishly served the bosses". However, strikes were only "a rudimentary form of struggle". Instead, political and cooperative actions were "active efforts" through which workers were able to acquire "the knowledge and discipline they need in order to reach their emancipation".¹¹

By the end of the 1890s, with regards to strikes the Argentine Socialist Party had developed a perspective that was coherent with the orthodoxy of international Social Democracy. Socialists would only promote partial strikes, put forward by solidly structured unions, capable to face the resistance of employers. They were supposed to be non-violent strikes, based upon the worker's unity and consciousness, and directed towards the goal of obtaining reforms, either by defeating the employers or through negotiation. These economic and limited strikes would strengthen existing trade unions

¹⁰ *La Vanguardia*, 12 January and 21 December 1895.

¹¹ *La Vanguardia*, 3 October 1896.

and stimulate class consciousness, always bearing in mind that the ultimate expression of that consciousness was the incorporation of workers to the party ranks, in order to make a decisive intervention in political life.

Political action and electoral participation

Indeed, for turn-of-the-century Argentine socialists, “political action” was the keyword, the main task of their organization, and the quintessential difference with the anarchists. Political action was understood as a set of interconnected tasks: building a party to spread socialist ideas, organizing and educating the workers, and participating in the polls, in order to get parliamentary representation. Justo made clear that the conditions were ripe for the structuring of a working-class party in Argentina, but by no means this reasoning led him to the conclusion that this new organization should face a frontal struggle for power and overcoming the capitalist regime in a near future. Political action, thus, was understood in the sense of the struggle for gradual reforms, mainly to be obtained in Parliament. In the first issue of *La Vanguardia*, Justo had avoided any reference to the ultimate aspirations of overcoming capitalist society and merely said that the objective was “to represent the intelligent and wise proletariat in the press” and to “promote all reforms aimed at improving the situation of the working class”, such as the eight-hour day, the abolition of indirect taxes, the protection of women and children, “and other parts of the minimum program of the international labor party”. At the same time, he made clear that the goal of the party was “to promote the political action of Argentine and foreign workers as the only means to obtain those reforms”.¹²

In short, political and parliamentary action played an educating role for workers: in this sense the struggle for reforms and the organization of socialist forces within the framework of capitalist society were seen as the only concrete tasks that could be undertaken in the immediate horizon. Socialists had to participate in electoral struggles in order to educate workers, “to prepare the revolution, and to create the force that has to carry it out”.¹³ This was, of course, a common characteristic of socialist parties at the time, and in this respect the history of the Argentine Socialist Party needs to be assessed as part of the much broader development of the international socialist movement. In order to understand some important peculiarities —and problems— that socialists had to face in Argentina, however, a brief look at the political regime of the country needs to be taken.

Unlike their comrades in other countries, during this period Argentine Socialists did not have to face a system of restricted suffrage or property-based franchise. “Universal” suffrage —excluding women— had been established as early as 1820 in the province of Buenos Aires and included in the national Constitution sanctioned in 1853. Nor they had

¹² *La Vanguardia*, 7 April 1894.

¹³ *La Vanguardia*, 24 November 1894.

to face military interruptions of constitutional order, as their heirs in the twentieth century would be used to. Between the 1860s and the 1920s, elections were promptly conducted to choose provincial and national deputies, electors for president, and members of municipal governments. According to 1909 figures, however, only 15% of the country's total population had the right to vote. The reason was that not only women and children under 18 were disenfranchised, but also foreigners. In a country that had relied on a huge migrant labor force since the second third of the 19th century, this restriction meant that a big portion of the working class did not have the right to vote.



Electoral meeting of the Socialist Party, 1908

Thus the Socialist Party's bid for political action faced a complicated conundrum. On the one hand, it acted in a formally liberal and republican political regime, with universal suffrage for native men over 18 years old and the legal right to obtain the Argentine citizenship for those migrants who had resided more than two years in the country. On the other, the party had to face an openly fraudulent electoral system, dominated by the political machines of the ruling classes and with no

minority representation, a regime that seemed to provide no attractive for foreign workers to engage in political participation.

It comes as no surprise, in this context, the prominent place that socialists gave to the appeal for naturalization of foreigners. Given the characteristics of the political regime, the call for workers to become Argentinian citizens so to gain the right to vote was a key part of the broader campaign to promote political action as the most desirable tactic for the working class. Moreover, since those who actually participated in the polls were mostly workers and people of humble condition, who responded to patronage networks of the ruling classes, calling for workers to obtain the right to vote went hand in hand with inviting them to cast their ballot for the socialist ticket —that is, to *independently* intervene in the political arena, breaking up with bourgeois parties (Botana, 1977; Sabato and Palti, 1990; Poy, 2015).

According to *La Vanguardia*, a conscious worker was the one who not only recognized himself as such but who also understood the need to assemble in a class-based party and, above all, was aware of the importance of carrying out political action. Obtaining electoral rights by becoming an Argentine citizen was therefore a duty for any class-conscious worker — socialists insisted in the fact that restrictions for getting electoral rights were much milder in Argentina than in other countries. The party leadership even established

that only Argentine citizens would be able to participate in the internal assemblies who would choose socialist candidates in the elections. Moreover, it was the task of every member to help “awake” the mass of workers, to let them realize that “becoming citizens” was “the best way to have an influence on the country’s progress and in the awakening of the whole working class”.¹⁴

Indeed, the socialist press would put forward a rather polemical ethnical concept, and go on to argue that migrants were actually bound to play a decisive role in the struggle against the fraudulent electoral system (“*la política criolla*”), dominated by corrupted native politicians. In 1894, *La Vanguardia* pointed out that the proletariat of the cities, “mostly of European origin”, represented “the most intelligent and learned element of the Argentinian working class”. These migrants were precisely those “workers without ties to the existent [bourgeois] parties, because they still did not take part in politics”.¹⁵

In this early period, the socialist campaign for the naturalization of foreigners did not have any relationship with some kind of patriotic vindication of the Argentinian state. On the contrary, it was a campaign against any traces of nationalistic feelings that workers might still had towards their European homelands. According to *La Vanguardia*, those who opted to become Argentine citizens showed that they were “free of patriotic worries, and at the same time willing to struggle for the betterment of the society they are now living in”.¹⁶

And, indeed, socialists were facing problems in their campaign for naturalization and political action among the mostly foreign milieu of the Argentine working class. In a country characterized by the extreme volatility of migration flows, where it was not uncommon for migrants to return to their countries of origin, or at least to be uncertain about their future, many newly-arrived workers saw no reason to lose links with their homelands. Whereas they did not need to become Argentine citizens in order to live and work in the country, there seemed to be no real incentives to obtain political rights, in a context of fraudulent electoral practices.

In order to promote this campaign —and at the same time showing that the resistance they encountered had to do with the links many workers still had with their countries of origin— the Argentine party requested Spanish and Italian socialist leaders to send a written collaboration, stating their position on this matter. In August 1897, *La Vanguardia* published a letter from Pablo Iglesias, leader of the Spanish Socialist Party, which celebrated the development of socialism in Argentina and considered that this progress would be much greater if activists could “influence more directly than now the affairs of the country through their own representatives elected in the elections”. He made clear that it was necessary to fight against “the indolence that a large part of immigrant

¹⁴ *La Vanguardia*, 21 April 1894.

¹⁵ *La Vanguardia*, 9 June 1894.

¹⁶ *La Vanguardia*, 21 April 1894.

workers show with regard to naturalization”. European socialist migrants, according to Iglesias, “were obliged to acquire naturalization immediately, both to be able to immediately take part in all political acts, and to give an example to other workers.”¹⁷

The response of Italian socialists was less reassuring. On February 3, 1898, a lengthy article signed by the “Italian Socialist Parliamentary Group” appeared in *La Vanguardia*. It was addressed “To the Italian workers emigrated to the Argentine Republic”, and was signed, among others, by Enrico Ferri, Andrea Costa and Filippo Turati. The article addressed the difficulties that Italian emigrants had to face, expelled from their country of origin due to economic hardship and forced to endure exploitative conditions in their country of destination. However, the Italian socialists acknowledged that in Argentina it was easier for workers to participate in political life and “exercise the influence that corresponds to them by their number and by their moral value”. The way to organize that participation, of course, was through the Socialist Party, “natural representative of your class.” Unlike Iglesias, however, they were reticent to openly recommend all Italian migrants to apply for an Argentine citizenship. The letter established a difference between those who planned to stay permanently in Argentina and those who wanted to return to Italy. The former were openly called to opt for naturalization, as Argentine socialists wanted. But they could not “recommend the naturalization of those of our compatriots who emigrate with the naive hope of making a fortune abroad, leaving the family in their country, to which they hope to return sometime, bringing them a little well-being and happiness.”¹⁸

The remarks made by this groups of Italian socialist leaders poured salt on the wound and addressed one of the main problems that Argentine socialists faced at the time. In a country characterized by the extreme mobility of migration flows, where the return to the country of origin was common —or at least some level of uncertainty regarding the immediate future— they were highlighting an extended feature among immigrants who lived and worked in Argentina: their resistance to definitively lose their bonds with the country of origin.

Against all these setbacks, however, the Socialist Party insisted in the necessity of political action and struggled to improve its performance in the polls. Since 1896 and with no exception, the party intervened every two years in all the elections held in Buenos Aires to choose deputies to the National Congress. In the course of the following decade, the party began to participate in other cities of the interior provinces, as well as localities surrounding the capital city.

Chart 1. Votes of the Socialist Party in the city of Buenos Aires

¹⁷ *La Vanguardia*, 21 August 1897.

¹⁸ *La Vanguardia*, 3 February 1898.

Year	Percentage	Votes
1896	n/a	134
1898	n/a	105
1900	n/a	135
1902	1.1%	204
1904	6.3%	1254
1906	5.3%	2136
1908	29.2%	7575
1910	25%	7945

Source: Walter (1977).

As showed in **Chart 1**, the performance of the Socialist Party in the parliamentary elections over this period can be divided in two phases. Between 1896 and 1902, its results were completely negligible. Moreover, the figures were not taken seriously even by the party itself, as it repeatedly denounced, in the days following every election, the scandalous fraud put forward by the political machines of the ruling parties. The socialist newspaper would report —and socialist leaders would restlessly denounce in the public tribune— that many party members did not even have the chance to cast their own ballot, as the polling places were fiercely controlled by the ruling political groups.

After 1904, however, things slowly started to change. The result of the 1904 election shows a meagre 6% of the vote, but in that occasion the Socialist Party managed to win one seat in Parliament. After an electoral reform in the previous years, the capital city —and the whole country— had been divided into electoral sections, each of which would choose one deputy. Thanks to this electoral change, to its progress in the working class neighborhoods and, last but not least, to internal struggles among candidates of bourgeois parties that led some factions to vote for the socialist candidate, Alfredo L. Palacios, a lawyer, was elected as “the first socialist deputies of the Americas”, in representation of the neighborhood of La Boca, in southern Buenos Aires.

In the years that followed, even though the Socialist Party was not able to elect more deputies —the uninominal system was suspended soon after the 1904 election— it is possible to see an increase in the number of votes. Unlike the previous period, socialists were now able to seriously compete with the political machines of the ruling parties, especially in the southern neighborhoods of La Boca and Barracas, which concentrated strong working class constituencies. In election days, the party would put in action hundreds of activists and militants, confronting the ruling classes “*caudillos*” and their armed groups even in the physical terrain. Although they did not have the right to vote, socialist women played an important role in the party’s electoral campaign, a fact that was brought to the attention of commercial newspapers, usually hostile to the labor movement. In 1906, *La Nación* emphasized that in La Boca “the female element has taken

an active part under the socialist banner, carrying out propaganda works in favor of its cause". In Barracas, according to the same newspaper, the socialists had introduced "a Yankee way of recruiting followers: by means of beautiful working-class girls who, dressed in red, occupied cars that travelled the most frequented points, fighting for the triumph of their candidates".¹⁹

"The first Socialist deputy of the Americas": Alfredo Palacios in Congress, 1904-1908

The election of Alfredo Palacios as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, for the period 1904-1908, played a key role in the early development of Argentine socialism. Even though they had only one member, socialists understood the entrance in Parliament as a big reward for all the efforts deployed in previous years. Moreover, it placed the Argentine Socialist Party in the "elite" of international social democracy, as noted in the report prepared by the International Socialist Bureau for the Amsterdam congress of the Second International, which included the Argentine organization in the not so lengthy list of socialist parties with parliamentary representation. For Socialists, the entrance of Palacios in Congress confirmed the correctness of a strategy aimed at "political action" and electoral participation. Obtaining a parliamentary diploma also gave the socialists an impression of seriousness and respectability in the eyes of the ruling class and a whole sector of the local *intelligentsia*.



Alfredo Palacios in 1912

From the very day in which he was sworn in as a deputy, in May 1904, until the end of his term, in early 1908, Alfredo Palacios developed an intense activity in the chamber. He attracted a lot of attention in the first weeks, when he confronted the minister of Interior with regards to the role of the police in the repression of labor movement activities. Apart from this type of initiatives —focused on denouncing and criticizing measures taken by the government—, Palacios also devoted a lot of time to prepare a remarkably lengthy list of bills, which laid the foundations of protective legislation for workers in the country. Some of them are well known, as they generated a broad debate and, in some cases, ended up being approved, such as the initiatives of progressive taxation on inheritances, donations and bequests (which became Law 4.855, in September 1905), Sunday rest (sanctioned in August of the same year as law 4.661), limitation of the working day to eight hours, or regulation of the work of women and children (converted into law 5.291, sanctioned in

¹⁹ *La Nación*, 12 March 1906.

September 1907). He also worked on many other bills and initiatives, such as plans for the regulation of work accidents, the abolition of the death penalty, divorce, against women trafficking, civil rights of women, tax reduction for articles of first necessity, modification of the police jurisdiction, prohibition of meters for the collection of water in tenement houses (that was approved), elimination of taxes to worker cooperatives (also approved), prohibition to public officials to be deputies or senators unless they resigned three months before their election, increase of patents to the dispatches of beverages, and prohibition of the import, elaboration and sale of absinthe.

As explained in previous sections, Argentine socialists devoted a great deal of attention to criticize the corrupted and fraudulent practices of the local bourgeoisie. Of course, their arrival in Parliament provided an excellent opportunity to expose these practices and to show, in sharp contrast, the honest figure of the first deputy who represented the workingman, the first one who had been elected to promote a clear political program. It is not surprising, therefore, that criticisms of the “ignorance” of the bourgeoisie and its politics were customary in the discourses of Palacios in the chamber, hastily reproduced in the socialist press. *La Vanguardia* would portrait parliamentary sessions as a “sad exhibition of rottenness”, or as “regrettable jousting of declamation and lying”. The chamber was dominated by “decomposed elements, ailing men”: they were “the vulgar frauds, the inconvertible negations that the country has seen parading with intermittences by ministries, governorships and magistracies”. Nothing could be expected from these “regressive elements that do not experience the changes of the moment in which they live”.²⁰

The opposite of these corrupt politics—which the socialists referred to as “política criolla”—was the “scientific politics” of the socialists. When denouncing the repressive measures of the Argentine state, Palacios argued that they were nothing but a demonstration of the “ignorance” of the country's bourgeoisie and a corollary of its inability to understand scientifically that labor struggles were nothing more than a symptom of the progress and development of Argentine society. He would explain to his fellow deputies that “the secret of social evolution, according to the most modern scientific concept” resided in “the class struggle”. Trying to reason with them in what he thought was the common ground of science and progress, Palacios would argue that “everyone knows today that the labor movement is the agitation that promotes a class to fight for its conservation and elevation, obeying biological reasons.” And that these agitations, on the other hand, had given rise to “an improvement in the means of production, which determines a favorable current for the evolution of bourgeois society.” To attack the labor movement, according to Palacios, was therefore “to ignore the general laws of evolution” and even “to harm the interests of society” and the government.²¹

²⁰ *La Vanguardia*, 9 May 1906.

²¹ *Diario de sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados 1904*, vol. I, 231, 530.

Indeed, this kind of gestures towards other members of Parliament was a characteristic feature during the four years of Palacios' first term as a national deputy. As a consequence, the critique of the "ignorant" ruling class, of its inability to adapt to the needs of the new times, and of the repressive measures against the labor movement, coexisted with a permanent tendency to build bridges towards the reformist members of the government on the grounds of "science" and "progress". Palacios and the Socialist Party constantly celebrated reform initiatives that came from other parliamentarians or government officials. This confluence with reformist initiatives of the ruling class was seen as a key point of the socialist political strategy, and even as a confirmation of the success of its political program.

Although it was not seen as a contradiction, this political stance placed the party in an uncomfortable position. Socialists vindicated some progressive segments of the ruling class, while at the same time suffered governmental repression as part of the labor movement. This awkward position was evident throughout the parliamentary debates. Time and again, the chamber proceedings show Palacios searching for a common ground with his fellow deputies. On occasion, he even sought to reinforce this convergence insisting on the gradual, non-violent and peaceful character of the socialist doctrine. Quoting Enrico Ferri, Palacios once told his colleagues that he was aware that "the term class struggle" could "cause a first impression of antipathy (which I even confess to having had when I had not yet understood the scientific spirit of Marxist theories)". He insisted in pointing out that they should not worry, because it was nothing but "the first law of human history"— a struggle of "class against class and not individual to individual", in which "all hatreds, all grudges, all personal violence" were banned. "The Socialists", therefore, "do not deserve anathema, on the contrary, they deserve the applause of all good men".²²

In sum, the entrance of a socialist deputy to Parliament played an important role in the consolidation of a reformist and gradualist political stance. With a representative in Congress, the party felt that it had entered the true terrain of politics, thus achieving a long-desired impact. In the second place, this impact provided the party with a prestige that was directly related to the fact that government officials would often praise the socialists' endeavors, seeking to emphasize the contrast with the role of anarchists. Moreover, the daily interaction with other members of the political elite, in the parliamentary sessions had profound political and social consequences.

Final remarks

²² *Diario de sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados 1904*, vol. I, 505.

The Argentine Socialist Party was established in an early period —the last decade of the 19th century— contemporaneously with the formation of the first social, economic and political organizations of the local labor movement. Unlike other countries, especially European, the making of Argentine modern labor movement was not preceded by a long tradition of artisan and craft organizations but rather developed rapidly in the last years of the century. It was a period of hasty economic growth, fueled by massive European migration and a big amount of foreign investments that contributed to shape the subordinate and long-lasting relationship between the local and mostly agrarian bourgeoisie and British imperialism. In this context, the first socialist groups, first, and the unified Socialist Party, soon thereafter, contributed to —and were at the same time shaped by— this process of working class formation.

As part of a political dispute with anarchists, and also with syndicalist tendencies that appeared at a very early stage, Argentine Socialism under the leadership of Justo defined a political line whose main elements were: a) a vindication of the necessity and possibility of organizing a working class party, independent from all the existing bourgeois factions; b) an assertion of “political action”, mainly understood as parliamentary participation, as the main tool to develop workers’ interests and to struggle for their emancipation; c) a characterization of “economic struggle” as an archaic and inefficient method of struggle, therefore destined to play only an ancillary role; d) a strongly evolutionist interpretation of capitalist development, which emphasized gradualism and therefore questioned the use of violent means. This perspective, in turn, reinforced the appeal for parliamentary political action and the critique of economic struggles, and especially the tactic of the general strike. The preference for political action *vis-à-vis* economic struggle (i.e. strikes) was understood as a logical conclusion of the historical development of capitalist society, and as an ideological choice that set them apart from anarchist currents.

Fourteen years after the founding congress, in 1910, when Justo himself represented Argentine socialists in the Copenhagen congress of the International, the party was able to show an important development to their comrades in other countries. The average of monthly fees paid by members had increased from 742 in 1902 to 1,200 in 1910, whereas the 19 local centres represented in the founding congress had turned into 35 in 1908. A couple of months before the first congress, in March 1896, the party had made its first electoral presentation in Buenos Aires, with a very disappointing result. Fourteen years later, the party reached almost 8,000 votes in the capital city.

Despite this promising signs, Argentine socialists could not hide that their political development was also facing important difficulties. Membership had increased, but the party was still small compared to others of the time. Electoral figures showed some improvement, but progress was concentrated only in Buenos Aires and was very far from the striking successes that many European parties could show in the polls and in Parliament. More important, they had to confront with the increasing forces of its rivals inside the labor movement, namely a strong anarchist current and a newly formed

“revolutionary syndicalist” tendency. Although the socialists did have influence among the working class, even controlling some trade unions, anarchists and syndicalists unquestionably dominated the country’s main labor federations.

After these formative years, marked by strong internal tensions, sometimes explicit and sometimes larval, the Argentine Socialist Party had emerged with a defined political profile and organizational structure. Unlike the German case, its reformist practice did not include a consistent theorization but was rather concentrated in practical and everyday matters. In a report sent to *Die Neue Zeit* in 1903, the old German Socialist German Ave-Lallemant—who had been deeply involved in the first years of the movement but was now less active, in the remote province of San Luis—strongly criticized the party orientation. “The congress”, he said, “adopted after great discussion a long new party program with a so-called minimal program to which every half way liberal and radical party can subscribe with good grace (...) Of actual socialist demands and principles the program contains absolutely nothing, and they were also wholly lacking in the proceeding, and the party organ shows very little socialist tendency”.

Lallemant also lamented that “the great majority of the Argentine laboring class have permitted themselves to be driven to anarchism through their hatred of the despotically governed state and have rejected the political tactics advocated by the socialists, which, to be sure, can only be of a purely platonic character since a government according to popular election is absolutely non-existent. The union movement is wholly under anarchistic influence”. His conclusions were certainly an exaggeration, but he was right in pointing out that, as this paper intended to show, spreading their word among the militant working class was not an easy task for local socialists. As in France, Spain or Italy, and due to a strong presence of anarchism and—later—revolutionary syndicalism, the Socialist Party was not the hegemonic force inside the working class.²³

This paper has argued that—apart from the common trends that defined the social democratic parties of the period—the peculiarities of the Argentine society and political regime also contributed to shape the politics and pitfalls of this first local socialist experience. Following the example of its European counterparts, the Argentine Socialist Party made completely clear that insurrectional action was out of the question, as it was considered an anarchist method, completely alien to socialist tactics. But, at the same time, the bid for political action was not providing encouraging results. Fifteen years after its foundation, the socialists did not have any representatives in Parliament, let alone any chance of participating in government. By 1910, the goal of creating a party to politically represent the working class of the increasingly modern Argentine society, dreamed by the delegates of the mid-1890s founding congress, was now a reality. But the task of convincing the workers that the party was theirs had proven to be more difficult.

²³ *International Socialist Review* 4 (1903-1904), p. 309.

A major electoral reform, put into practice since 1912—with secret and mandatory vote for all adult Argentinian males at its core—, would change the rules of the political regime and help the Socialist Party make very significant gains in the electoral terrain in later years. However, the First World War and, shortly thereafter, the Russian Revolution, would also introduce major shifts in working class politics. Many of the characteristics that the Socialist Party developed in its first two decades would reveal themselves highly problematic in the new context of the post-war years.

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