

The fall and rise of Uruguay's trade unions

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Uruguay: Building trade union power

A case study by Álvaro Padrón and Achim Wachendorfer

Trade unions in Uruguay enjoy an enviable strength in the Latin American context. The only trade union confederation in the country, the Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores Convención Nacional de Trabajadores / PIT-CNT (Inter-union Workers' Plenary-National Worker's Convention), counts an impressive membership of 40% of the country's salaried employees. Its numbers give it great weight in collective bargaining, and even include members in cabinet, parliament and other institutions.

The PIT-CNT's central position in Uruguay's political life is largely due to its links with the coalition of left-wing and progressive parties which has ruled the country for three consecutive terms since 2005: the Frente Amplio / FA (the Broad Front).

"The FA and the PIT-CNT are animals born from the same placenta," according to José Mujica, the country's president from 2010 to 2015. "The role of organized workers was and always will be crucial in society's transformations, and never more so than under a left-wing government," he explained. "Each plays their role, but is aware that their future is at stake, and bad times for one means bad times for the other," he said of the relationship between politicians and the unions.

In the case of the FA and PIT-CNT, theirs is an old one. As early as 1984, when the FA was an opposition force and many of its leadership were banned from politics, CNT president José D'Elia was also the vice-presidential candidate for the FA, as well as later leading the PIT-CNT. Ever since, the history of the two organizations has been closely connected - including in the run up to the FA's victory in 2004 elections.

The trade unions' years in the wilderness

Before the golden age they are enjoying now, Uruguayan trade unions had to endure their time in the political wilderness. Unions were banned during the brutal military dictatorship, which ruled from 1973 to 1985. After that, a succession of conservative governments carried out a series of neoliberal policies that deregulated working conditions and introduced more flexibility into the labour market. This weakened the union movement, and caused union membership to fall.

But the injury to Uruguayan trade unions was not fatal, and they found ways of making their voices heard in spite of the circumstances. Their key tools were the referendums, binding popular consultations defined in the national constitution, which allowed the PIT-CNT a central role in slowing down the government's privatization efforts.

"At a time when trade unions were diminished in practice as a consequence of their persecution, there was no collective bargaining," explained Juan Castillo, General Secretary 2 in the PIT-CNT between 2008 and 2012. "Unemployment was high and the government didn't represent us, but they enjoyed wide popular support and we realized that the mechanisms of popular consultation were the

way to counter the most negative aspects of the right's neoliberal policies.”

The keys of Uruguayan unionism's success

Two factors explain the survival of Uruguayan unionism during its harshest years, and the good health it enjoys now: the strong democratic tradition in the country, at least compared with other nations in the region; and the institutional solidarity that the PIT-CNT preserved against all odds.

Uruguay is a small country with fewer than 3.5 million inhabitants, which has been able to combine a strong democratic tradition with a solid trade union culture. Since the early 20th Century, trade unions have been beneficiaries of a welfare state and democratic system, and have in turn been instrumental in cementing and deepening those institutions.

While the governments of its two giant neighbours, Argentina and Brazil, were launching topdown social and labour reforms while strictly regulating union activity, Uruguay accomplished something unique in the region: to build a welfare state from early on, and to lay the foundations for a democratic culture endowed with a solid party system, as well as representative and militant trade unions.

The solidarity of the country's trade unions was forged in the 50s, with close cooperation and alignment between organizations. This was consolidated in 1965 with the Congreso del Pueblo (People's Congress), a meeting of representatives from the most important social and cultural organizations. The CNT was formally established the following year, at an event attended by virtually all trade unions. In 1983, towards the end of the military dictatorship, workers' organizations held a popular demonstration on May 1st which drew 250,000 people, and founded the PIT.

This institutionalized solidarity between Uruguayan trade unions was not imposed by government policy or regulation, but was built by the trade unions themselves. The principle of a single, indivisible movement of trade unions is based on the sentiment of “one for all, all for one”. Moreover, trade unions' cooperation and solidarity were part of the inspiration for the 1971 creation of the FA, as an alliance of centre-left and left-wing political parties.

“Arguably it was the left, during its period of unification in the late 60s and early 70s, who took on almost completely the approaches that organized civil society had articulated in the 60s - most notably in the case of the so-called People's Congress,” said Milton Castellanos, leader of the PIT-CNT and director of Instituto Cuesta Duarte.

The golden age of trade unions' power

Given this historical background, the alliance between the Frente Amplio and the trade unions comes as no surprise. Eduardo Bonomi, labour minister in the first FA government and one of the key people in the design and implementation of the alliance, explained: “Since the very formation of the team which drafted the FA platform for the elections in 2004, it was assumed that the relationship with the trade unions would be crucial and strategic, as a consequence of their historic political commitment, but also due to electoral dynamics.”

“Most of the electoral platform, and not only those aspects related to working conditions, were discussed and agreed with the trade unions, and actually several of them became flagship policies of the first left-wing government,” he said. “This also explains the high number of union leaders who ended up occupying important positions in the new government, including several ministers.”

After the crisis that engulfed the country and the region in 2002, the first priority of the FA government was to reestablish decent employment and salaries. It passed more than 50 labour-related laws, notably: collective bargaining laws for public- and private-sector employees; protection of trade union activities; regulation of domestic employment; an eighthour workday for rural workers; and regulation of outsourcing.

But not everything is a bed of roses for Uruguay's trade unions. Conservative media, speaking for a large segment of society, has labeled them "one of the populist state's three powers," alongside the government and the FA. And the ongoing economic problems could put a strain on the unions' alliance with the current FA government, as pressure increases to cut budgets and deregulate, against the traditional interests of the trade unions.

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