

RECUPERATING
A WORKPLACE,
CREATING A
COMMUNITY SPACE:
THE STORY OF
COOPERATIVA
CHILAVERT ARTES
GRÁFICAS

BY
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Experiences of workers spontaneously revolting, sabotaging machines, occupying or taking over the businesses that employ them, or establishing alternative self-managed work arrangements, are as old as capitalism itself. Think of the recurring food riots by working people in eighteenth-century England, the Fenwick Weavers' Society in Scotland in the 1760s, the Luddites of the early 1800s, the Rochdale Cooperative Pioneers of the 1840s, the Paris Commune of 1871, Italy's *Biennio Rosso* of 1919–1920, Catalonia's self-managed economy of 1936, Hungary 1956, Paris 1968...the list could go on.

One of the most recent cases of spontaneous worker resistance, alternative practices of production, and workplace occupations is Argentina's *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker-recuperated enterprises, or ERTs). ERTs are formerly capitalist businesses that were in trouble, taken over by their workers, and reopened as cooperatives. They began to emerge in the early 1990s as a result of the country's sharp neoliberal turn, and they surged during the social, political, and financial crisis of 2001–2002 as more and more businesses began to declare bankruptcy, not pay workers' salaries, and dismissed employees without severance. This moment in Argentina's recent history was marked by a stark anti-labour climate, the multinationalization of much of its national economy, exorbitant abuses by bosses, and, eventually, an economic system imploding in on itself as the country defaulted on its massive national debt in December 2001.

Some workers began taking matters into their own hands by tapping into the long history of working-class militancy in Argentina and forging it with

the community activism and new social movements of the marginalized that were intensifying against the callous neoliberalism of those years. Today, almost 9,500 workers self-manage their working lives in over 200 ERTs across Argentina. As a testament to the extent of the neoliberal assault on the country's working people in the 1990s and early 2000s, ERTs can now be found throughout its urban economy in diverse sectors such as printing and publishing, media, metallurgy, education, food production, waste management, construction, textiles, tourism, and health.¹

While in some ways an extension of the country's history of working-class militancy, something unique also occurred: ERTs became one of the first broad-based movements of workplace takeovers to emerge as a direct response to the inequalities, enclosures, and crises of neoliberalism. The thoroughness with which this system was destroying local economies and communities in the Global South compelled workers in Argentina to respond to this assault on their lives in a new way, merging the struggles

of the workplace with the struggles of the broader community. They, in short, re-territorialized the struggle over dignified and secure work, putting into relief the always already deep connections between the exploitations inside of a factory with the conditions of life outside of it.

**FROM THE NEOLIBERAL
ASSAULT TO "THE OPEN FACTORY":
LABOUR-POWER TURNED INSIDE-OUT**

This account hones in on the story of how the mistreatment of workers throughout Argentina's neoliberal era touched down at one workplace in a once-prosperous and now so-called "developing" country in Latin America. It is a story told through the words and lived experiences of the workers of the print shop Cooperativa de Trabajo Chilavert Artes Gráficas, in the Buenos Aires neighbourhood of Nueva Pompeya, a story that encapsulates what thousands of workers across Argentina suffered at the hands of a neoliberal system run amok, and what some of them did about it. It is a story of the recuperation of one workplace by its workers *and* the communities and neighbourhoods that surround it. It is about the re-territorialization of a productive entity emerging from the struggle with the neoliberal order, turning a once-private shop into what in Argentina is called *la fábrica abierta* ("the open factory"). This concept vividly suggests how "the capitalist secret" that remains inside the walls of a proprietary shop is blown wide open when a private workplace becomes something else.² When workers take over the places that employed them, a for-profit business transforms into community enterprise. When workers seize and democratize their labour process, when they share their physical workspace with community centres, free schools, and culture spaces, and when they begin to re-direct portions

of their surpluses to the local community, they create new kinds of workplaces, something other than merely "a place to work." They convert a *workplace* into a thriving community *space*.

The currency in question in the story of Chilavert is, at its core, the commodity *labour-power*: who buys and sells it, who controls it, who ultimately owns it, and how these workers recuperated it. For labour-power put to work—expended labour-power, as Marx called it—is the enabler or source of valorization for capital, as well as the locus of struggle for all workers who labour under capitalism. One site where this commodity is "exchanged," where it is bought by capitalists and sold by workers, is the proprietary capitalist workplace. When workers recuperate their places of work and self-manage them, we witness a moment of re-calibrating labour-power towards the self-valorization of living labour rather than capital, and the repurposing of the products of expended labour-power for the social wealth of the community, rather than the private wealth of shareholders and managers. When workers take over and then self-manage the places that formerly employed them, they monkey-wrench capital's moment of valorization, redirecting the workplace, the labour process, and their labour-power for themselves and the economic, social, and cultural needs of the community.



Eating lunch together with visitors



The shop floor on a quiet Saturday afternoon, July 9, 2005



Cooperativa Chilavert Artes Gráficas

A WORKER COOPERATIVE PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT

Nestled in amongst dense, modest working class homes at Martiniano Chilavert 1136, in the *barrio* of Nueva Pompeya, Cooperativa de Trabajo Chilavert Artes Gráficas is a small print shop that has punched well above its weight since its eight remaining workers occupied it in 2002. Since then, Chilavert has become one of Argentina's most emblematic ERTs.

Today, inside its walls, one not only finds a self-managed print shop, but also a vibrant community arts and cultural centre known as Chilavert Recupera (Chilavert Recuperates). Various art classes take place right on the shop floor on weekends. Between Monday and Friday, anyone can also go to the ERT Documentation Centre, run in partnership with researchers from the University of Buenos Aires's Open University Program of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters

and used often by national and international researchers.³ There's also a primary school and high school equivalency program, run by a teachers' cooperative committed to popular education that emerged in the midst of the ERT movement and which works closely with other worker-recuperated firms in Buenos Aires. Chilavert's workers have also been instrumental in founding the Red Gráfica Cooperativa (Graphic [Workers] Cooperative Network), a cooperative association consisting of 18 graphics ERTs and older print shop co-ops (some pre-dating the era of ERTs) formed in 2006 in order to strengthen the cooperative graphics sector's market clout, make collective purchases, lobby for better national laws for self-managed print shops and other enterprises, and share customer orders and marketing needs. However this diverse centre of community engagement was built in the face of great adversity.



The Chilavert Recupera cultural centre

"SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY"

chilavert was originally known as Taller Gráfico Gaglianone, a family business founded in 1923 and mainly involved during its first 50 years in the design and printing of packaging for the pharmaceutical sector. By the 1980s it had transformed into a printing and binding shop for the prestigious art book, theatre, and government sectors under the trademark Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone. Its clients at the time included Buenos Aires's world-renowned Teatro Colón opera house, Argentina's National Museum of Fine Arts, Buenos Aires's Museum of Modern Art, the General San Martín Municipal Theatre, as well as corporate and public sector clients such as the Casa Rosada,⁴ Bank Boston, Banco Ciudad, and numerous national and international foundations. These were the business's most lucrative years, and it employed around 50 workers, including graphic designers, pre-press specialists, offset printing

machine operators, binding specialists, various shop managers, administrators, and sales and marketing staff. In the midst of full expansion, the company hired about 20 new workers in the 1980s, though most employees at the time had been working at the shop since the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Microeconomic problems began to surface at the shop in the late 1980s in the midst of the hyperinflationary crises of the era. Current co-op president Plácido Peñarrieta, who was one of the employees hired during the expansionary phase in the 80s, illustrated a common business practice of the time in Argentina:

The wearing down of the workers here began at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, in the days of hyperinflation... years before 2001, when the owner, Gaglianone, would decide to sometimes pay us every two weeks, which was what

our contract stipulated, but was increasingly two or three days, even a week, late. But this wasn't because the firm wasn't making money, no, no. It was a financial game, a trick that he was playing with us as pawns in order to make more money because, you see, during that time, the longer you delayed making payments like salaries, the cheaper it was for the guy paying because the peso would devalue on a daily basis. The same with paying creditors back and such. We workers had become a mere business transaction for him, a way of cheapening his costs of doing business.

Although the crisis of hyperinflation supposedly ended in 1991 under the one-peso-one-dollar "convertability" regime installed by then President Carlos Menem, and paycheques were again received on time for a few years thereafter, the early 1990s was to be Gráfico Gaglianone's last period of relative success under owner-management. It proved to be short-lived, as owner-employee relations began to deteriorate again as the decade wore on. This time, in a turn that captured the neoliberal spirit of the times in Argentina, rather than share the firm's growing earnings with the print shop's workers, Gaglianone, like thousands of other bosses in Argentina, decided to maximize profits by forcing workers to work longer hours while not compensating them for the extra effort. "We worked overtime and put our shoulders into our work," Plácido recounted to me of the workers' situation at the print shop during this period, "but rather than raising our salaries or paying us overtime, he just told us to work harder! It was always 'for the good of the *empresa*.'"

Seeing the possibilities of making more profits (now in US dollars), Gaglianone seems to have either consciously or unwittingly followed the individualist zeitgeist of the Menem era. In any case, he took advantage of the *plata fácil* (easy money) that came from the ready credit of the time, always promising newer and better printing machines, new customers, and new books to print, while often saying that any day now he would have to hire more workers. But his capitalization plans never came to fruition, customers failed to materialize, and employees seemed to be working more hours for less pay as the decade wore on. Moreover, with a recently opened national economy, the printing and publishing business witnessed a rapid flow of foreign capital, saturating local markets.



Plácido Peñarrieta at one of the two two-colour printers.

The sector was concentrated in the hands of fewer paper suppliers and larger print shops and editorial firms. All of these factors meant that small print shops like Gráfico Gaglianone could not compete effectively. "Menem's Miracle," it seems, was only so for some.

By the late 1990s the print shop would never again reach the profits and successes it had enjoyed in earlier decades, following the downward cycle that engulfed most of the Argentine economy during this period. Labour conflicts intensified at the shop and Gráfico Gaglianone's market conditions deteriorated. The shop's workers began to realize that the strategies of increasing work intensity, lack of compensation for overtime, and other managerial games, were simply ways for the boss to extract more profit from them. Increasingly, workers at the shop reacted to the increased rates of exploitation by carrying out small acts of shop-floor sabotage, soldiering,⁵ and engaging on occasion in walkouts, what Plácido terms as "a series of personal strikes by us workers, right on the shop-floor." However, some of them also began to understand that Gaglianone's strategy at this time, and the workers' uncoordinated reactions to it, was breaking the workers' solidarity.

In response, a group of the workers began to hone tactics of resistance. Some eventually began to feel as if they co-owned the shop. As Plácido explained:

By then, we felt we were part owners of the shop because we were owed so much backpay... So, one day, in a conversation with the boss, I told him: "Look, we're no longer your employees, we're really shareholders now, because you owe us so much unpaid wages and because we've been working hard here with little in return." And the guy looks at me

like I'm crazy and says to me: "*Pibe, vos no entendés nada*" ("Kid, you don't understand anything").

The beginning of the end for Gaglianone arrived when the print shop lost its lucrative Teatro Colón contract in the late 1990s. By 2000, the business's final crisis was underway. Rather than experiencing a "normal" downturn in its business cycle, those remaining workers who had not retired, left voluntarily, or been laid off by 2000, were living through a slow and painful dismissal. Not only were accounts payable in arrears, workers' wages were not being paid either. For example, by 2001, the González brothers, Cándido and Fermín, who had both worked at the firm for over 35 years, were each owed around \$33,000 pesos in backpay.⁶ "And again," Plácido continued, "the guy comes and asks us to help him save the business, to wait a bit more, that he would eventually pay our wages. But we didn't believe him anymore, it was as if we were now sleeping with the enemy, you know? And that is the moment we stopped accepting his false offers."

"PROMISING NEW MACHINES REALLY MEANT EMPTYING THE FIRM"

Indeed, by 2000 the *vaciamiento* (emptying, or asset stripping) of the firm—when owners take assets from a troubled or bankrupted firm and sell or use them elsewhere for personal gain rather than for paying back debts—had turned into Gaglianone's main project. By 2001, the business formally entered into debt restructuring proceedings, called *concurso preventivo de acreedores* (preventive hearing of creditors) in Argentina, the phase before a firm officially declares bankruptcy.⁷ And, in what was becoming a common practice at the time and is now a regular part of the history of

many ERTS, the *vaciamiento* continued even while the *concurso de acreedores* was talking place, which for Gaglianone meant attempting to sell the shop's printing machines. This amounted to a flagrant, but widespread, violation of Argentine bankruptcy law, and was, in essence, owner-led theft of assets legally belonging to Gráfico Gaglianone's creditors. When the workers went to plead to Gaglianone to not sell the machines, to keep the shop open at all costs, and that the workers would be willing to work for free for a time in order to keep the shop open, Gaglianone told them that everything was under control and that production would improve again once he bought the new machines he had long been promising.

But by April 2002, four months after the "Argentine December" of 2001 and in the depths of the country's debt default crisis, it became clear to the remaining workers that the situation was very different than what Gaglianone had told them. As Cándido explained to me in 2005: "The equipment that Gaglianone had already sold was not in the books of the insolvency hearings." Eventually, the workers caught on to this manoeuvre and blocked the machines from leaving the shop. "He began selling the machines under our noses and during the insolvency hearings, during the bankruptcy process! So, we took them over, protecting them, sleeping next to them, because we knew if they left we were finished." Indeed, "promising new machines," Cándido stated in a 2003 interview, "really meant emptying the firm."

This situation was not only one of shared trauma at the shop level for the remaining workers, it was also intertwined with the implosion of the Argentine economic system and political establishment, as well as the explosion of new social movements throughout the coun-

try. The wave of social protests emerging around them, especially the road blockages of the unemployed workers' movement (known as the *piqueteros*), strongly influenced workers like Plácido, Fermín, and Cándido. At the same time, these contemporary expressions of social resistance "from below" were mixing with the past activism of some of Chilavert's workers. Social justice issues and workers' rights activism, for instance, had dominated the lives of both Cándido and Plácido for some time: Cándido had been a shop steward for many years at Gráfico Gaglianone with the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense (the Graphics Federation of Buenos Aires), while Plácido had been an influential housing rights activist for a *villa de emergencia*,⁸ where he still lives. Cándido's brother Fermín sums up this period and the intermingling of the problems inside the shop with the sociopolitical tensions on the street: "On the one hand, it was like the ice age in here," Fermín vividly put it to me in 2009, alluding to the fact that production had stopped and that the machines were obsolescing, "while *out there*, on the streets," he contrasted, "the situation was on fire!"



Five of the original eight founders, September 2009.

"JUMPING THE HURDLE": THE CHILAVERT WORKERS' TURNING POINT

"Up to that moment," recalled Cándido, "we just wanted to collect our pay for the year." And as was the case in almost all ERTS, the Chilavert workers' original intention was not to take the firm from the boss but, rather, to force Gaglianone to pay their overdue salaries. At one point in early 2002, "out of innocence maybe," as Plácido qualified, the workers had even proposed forming a cooperative with Gaglianone as a way for him to get out of his financial problems and as a way of also collaborating to save the shop from closure.

But all changed for the remaining eight workers on April 4, 2002, the day the machines that had been sold were to be taken from the shop. That night, after convening a hastily called assembly, the remaining eight workers decided to begin

to keep permanent vigil over the shop's machines. As Cándido expressed it, it was on that day that they "jumped the hurdle" of deciding to "fight" for what was rightly theirs.⁹ Gaglianone finally declared bankruptcy on May 10, 2002, while the workers were still camped in the shop, sleeping next to the machines. It was during these weeks that the Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas (MNER, National Movement of Recuperated Enterprises) came to assist the workers' resistance, recommending to them the tactics that have since become par for the course for ERTS: "occupy" the factory and don't leave... 'resist' because it [is] after occupation that the law... arrive[s]," and form into a worker cooperative, as. Eduardo Murúa, former president of MNER, told me in 2006.¹⁰ "*Ocupar, resistir, producir*" ("occupy, resist, produce") was the slogan used by MNER, borrowed from Brazil's Sem Terra landless peasant and workers' movement, and

concisely capturing their strategy. Producing as a worker co-op was at the time in Argentina (and still is) the best way “to ensure that the factory would be able to continue to function...because it would permit workers to self-manage their enterprise, enable decisions to be made within an assembly, and ensure that revenues would be distributed equitably.”¹¹

The eight resisting workers formed a worker cooperative in May 2002, calling it Cooperativa de Trabajo Chilavert Artes Gráficas after the street they were located on, named after the leader of the Argentine wars of independence. Their move to form a cooperative was to become for Chilavert, as for most ERTs in Argentina, a defining act that consolidated their self-managed production, giving them several important legal protections and helping to form the specific, directly democratic and horizontal labour processes that distinguish ERTs from privately owned companies.

At the same time, the Chilavert workers decided to continue to occupy the plant in shifts of two, until the bankruptcy issue was resolved and they could work freely once again without fear of repression or eviction. This strategy of permanent occupation was necessary, particularly in the evenings, because it was at night that they were at greater risk of forced eviction and the continued *vaciamiento* of the firm’s assets and machinery by Gaglianone and his hired thugs.

During this period, the Chilavert workers began to receive assistance from many community groups and workers from other ERTs such as the metal shop IMPA; members of neighbourhood assemblies from Palermo Viejo, Congreso, Parque Avellaneda, and Pompeya; countless local neighbours and the workers’ wives and families, who provided them with food, bedding, and a larger physi-

cal presence outside of the shop. This was to be an often-repeated strategy at other ERTs in Argentina, later called by Murúa “the war of bodies,” pitting workers and the community against police and owners’ repression.

On May 24, 2002, the workers first eviction notice arrived with a heavy state presence that was to set the militant tone for the ensuing seven months of the shop’s occupation: the eight occupying workers were met by *eight* police cars, *eight* assault vehicles (one for each worker!), two ambulances, and a fire truck. In response, over 300 neighbours and supporters mobilized outside the shop, while the workers set up barricades of tires and scrap paper at the main doors, prepared to use the paper as tinder to light the shop on fire if they had to! “We were going to go down with the shop if we couldn’t work here. We had no other option. There was no work anywhere else for us and we had invested our blood and sweat into this place,” Cándido recounted to me in tears one afternoon in 2005.

The standoff was over within 24 hours when, with the presence of the throng of supporters and closely followed by local media, the Buenos Aires police commissioner intervened to convince the judge presiding over the bankruptcy case to temporarily rescind the eviction order in order to preserve the peace and not risk shedding blood. The workers won two major victories within the span of two months: they had prevented the machines from leaving the shop, and they had successfully stood down a potentially violent eviction order.

THE FIRST BOOK GOES TO MARKET THROUGH A HOLE IN THE WALL

MNER’s suggestion to keep on producing during their days of occupation was taken seriously. This was important both for the livelihoods of the workers, and for

their psychological wellbeing. One way they did this was by selling scrap aluminum from the printing plates they used to the ERT metal shop IMPA, who recycled them into toothpaste tubes. But, more importantly, they continued to print books, brochures, and pamphlets, mostly for progressive publishers and authors, a group that has since become Chilavert’s main customer base.

The most poetic moment in the history of Chilavert, is the story of the very book they were printing and binding during the first days of occupation, which also became the first book they produced as a worker cooperative, a book of collected essays by some of the most well-known progressive Argentine commentators of the period called *¿Qué son las asambleas populares?* (*What are Popular Assemblies?*). For the two-month period immediately after the first eviction order, police officers guarded the shop,

under court order to, “impede suspicious activity from taking place inside, fundamentally [the activity] of working,” as the journalist collective Lavaca cheekily put it.¹² The workers inside eventually took the book to market, by passing it through a hole they carved in the wall connecting the print shop to a neighbour’s house. The neighbour, in turn, placed the books in the trunk of his car and drove them to the publisher for distribution, past the unwitting police contingent keeping guard outside the print shop. This story is now legendary throughout Argentina’s radical social movements. The outline of the hole in the wall, now covered up with unpainted brick, is still visibly on display at Chilavert, surrounded by a sober picture frame—another symbol of the struggle that its workers had to traverse on their road to self-management.



The framed hole in the wall.

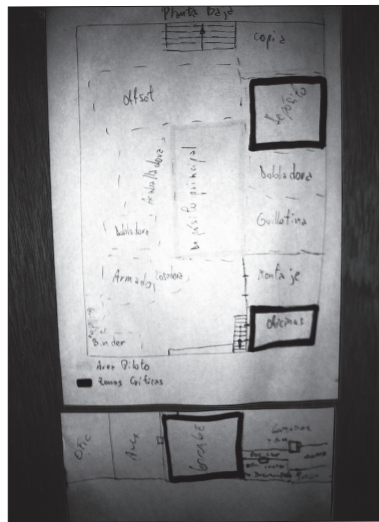
Two more related victories would soon follow for the Chilavert workers that would resonate for other ERTs in the ensuing years. In October 2002, after dem-

onstrations at the municipal legislature to lobby politicians and gain public support, and with the assistance of MNER, the factory was temporarily expropri-

ated on behalf of its workers by the city government, becoming one of the first ERTs to be expropriated in Argentina. And on November 25, 2004, Chilavert became one of the first permanently expropriated ERTs in Argentina. The shop was theirs!

FROM EXPLOITATION, TO A HORIZONTAL WORKPLACE, TO A COMMUNITY SPACE

Since these harrowing days, the Chilavert workers have fundamentally re-organized the way the shop is run, horizontalizing it from within, and opening it up to the community beyond its walls. At almost all ERTs, both decision-making and production processes are fully democratic. Chilavert is administered by a *consejo de trabajadores* (workers' council), made up of a president, a treasurer, and a secretary elected from *socios* (members), and each position has a mandate of two years. As well, the *asamblea de trabajadores* (workers' assembly) meets on a monthly basis, or when issues that affect the entire co-op arise. Management responsibilities are not taken up by hired managerial staff, as they are at many larger coops, but are rather divided amongst the workers' assembly and the workers' council as they are at most ERTs and many smaller co-ops. The council takes on the role of administering the business on a daily basis, engaging in duties such as signing cheques, following up accounts receivable, keeping the books up to date, and dealing with suppliers and customers. Also, and significantly, members of the council can be removed from office at any time if a majority of the workers' assembly decides to do so, emulating in practice, as Chilavert's Ernesto González put it, the anarcho-sindicalist and council communist model of recallable delegates.



Drawing up new workflows.

Communication flows on the shop floor are now informal, open, and flexible. Day-to-day concerns relating to production issues are worked out on an ad hoc basis on the floor via reworked production processes organized around temporary work teams and consensus. These teams are led by the expert in that product line or task, on a per-project basis. While larger and more complex ERTs deploy more formalized or hierarchical production processes, this is not the case at Chilavert, or other small ERTs in Argentina. At Chilavert, one *compañero* (comrade) might temporarily relieve another from a work task when attending to a personal matter or when learning new skills. Also, unstructured moments of play and rest are incorporated into the working day. The Chilavert workers' transformation of the pace of work suggests yet another way that ERT protagonists are re-conceptualizing work. I observed many instances of *compañeros* eating and playing together, such as their daily communal lunches or weekly soccer games or barbecues; varying work hours on the basis of specific deliver-

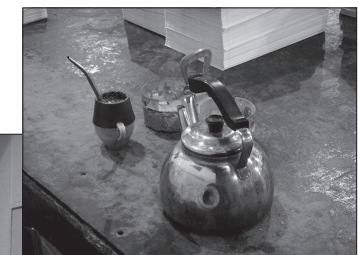
ables, contracts, or jobs; and taking many breaks throughout the day. Workers have told me on numerous occasions that these production processes function well with their fluctuating work demands, accommodating the non-work life needs of workers, such as attending to personal matters or medical visits during working hours on slow days, and generally helping ease the tensions and stresses that come with the daily routines of work.

Another poignant, if simple, practice highlights the importance of the incorporation of play and rest into the new labour process at Chilavert. As with all of ERTs I have visited in Argentina, the country's cultural tradition of collectively sipping *mate*, the bitter green herb that is consumed from a shared gourd with a metal *bombilla* (straw), is alive and well: *mate* stations are visibly located at several prominent places in the shop. At Chilavert one sees workers making *mate*, meeting at the station, and drinking together throughout the working day. I have had the recurring pleasure of partaking

of the *mate* break with them, sometimes with the delicious *factura* (baked sweets) Cooperative. I was told by several workers at Chilavert that this particular act is not only a way to break up the monotony of the working day, but also a symbolic gesture that reclaims and fosters their working-class culture, reminding them of what they could not readily do when working for Gaglianone. This practice is another seemingly modest and unpretentious act that has the powerful effect of prefiguring another pace to working life, showing how Argentina's ERT workers are recuperating their *time*—the source of "real wealth," according to Marx. It is a small moment in the re-conceptualization of work as a social act, and the production of one particular dimension of social wealth that suggests ways of uniting cultural practice with economic chores, breaking down the capitalist obsession with dividing work time from the rest of life.



A barbecue outside of Chilavert: The neighbourhood and the workers meet visitors from the North.



Mate and pages to be bound.

Indeed, the rest of life has seeped into this *fábrica abierta* in many other ways, as well. During one of my weekend visits to the print shop in recent years, volunteers from the community were giving a class on an art form called *fileteado*, the typographic aesthetic of the tango bars and bordellos of early-twentieth century Buenos Aires, while workers and visitors from the community were playing ping-pong in the cultural centre. On another occasion, in July of 2007, I attended a community play about the ERT move-

ment right on the shop floor, in the midst of stacks of papers and printing machinery.¹⁴ On any weekend, one can participate in a number of cultural and social events at Chilavert, as it changes from a print shop to a cultural centre. Many of Argentina's ERTs act as centres of cultural and social revival for their neighbourhoods, which have suffered since the neoliberal governments of the 1990s closed community spaces to replace them with strip malls and commercial outlets.



A play in the midst of Chilavert's machines on the shop floor.

For ERTs like Chilavert, hosting cultural and community spaces within the workplace is not an exercise in self-interest, public relations, or "corporate social responsibility." Rather, workers from ERTs that host community projects tend to eventually see their workspaces as *continuations and integral parts* of the neighbourhoods they are located in. ERTs that host community spaces and participate in the social and economic development of the surrounding communities also view these projects as ways to give back to the communities that assisted them during their most harrowing days of struggle. Moreover, as Chilavert's

workers have told me, such projects within a once-private factory or business have valuable pragmatic and political ramifications: By ensconcing the ERT deep into the heart of the community, it becomes much more difficult for the state to close it down, while increasing its social value within the neighbourhood.

Underscoring the importance of the concept of *la fábrica abierta* for countering the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism, and for prefiguring another mode of economic life that merges the production of culture with the production of other forms of social wealth within the otherwise strictly economic entity

of a factory, Murúa articulated this multi-pronged community strategy:

When we [create ERTs such as Chilavert], we set out to open the factory up to the community and that's why we [generate] cultural centres [in ERTs]...Here—in the middle of the city, and against the one-sided discourse in favour of globalization and neoliberalism that existed in the country at the time—in...recuperated enterprises we said, "OK, we are going to dispute the discourse of globalization." That's why we [open] cultural centres [which become] a *factory of ideas* where people...go and discuss another discourse, create new cultural expressions, and generate...a space of resistance against the model. Having a cultural centre in a factory is a unique development in the world in a fully functioning factory...At the same time that the factory is producing, it has a cultural centre that is also producing—but *producing culture*.

Chilavert is now a living testament to what workers can do—even in the midst of dire socioeconomic crises—to take back control of their own productive lives. As Cándido evocatively suggested: "We have been awakeners of consciousness."¹⁴

The story of Chilavert foregrounds

the recent experiences and struggles of workers across Argentina. It is a story of overcoming challenges collectively, and of a new way of producing social wealth. The Chilavert workers have managed to take back their labour-power for themselves, seizing it from the old wage-labour contract that held them "indebted" for part of their weekdays to their employer—Boss Gaglianone. They have "humanized" their work life, practicing more open and democratic labour processes, controlling their working and personal lives more fully, sharing the wealth produced inside the shop with the neighbourhood, and co-creating new forms of social and cultural value with surrounding communities.

Chilavert's story resonates powerfully with similar struggles of workers and communities attempting to take back control of their economic, social, and cultural lives as a new, global financial crisis continues to unfold unabated. ERTs like Chilavert have become beacons of hope for workers and activists the world over, struggling for non-exploitative and non-alienating socioeconomic realities. As workers in dire need recuperate their own work, ERTs like Chilavert eventually extend productive activity beyond the walls of the factory and the proprietary business, symbolically tearing down these walls and creating something new from crisis—promising community spaces. ○

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Andrés Ruggeri, ed., *Las Empresas Recuperadas: Autogestión Obrera en Argentina y América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2009), and Marcelo Vieta, *Taking Destiny into Their Own Hands: Autogestión and Cooperation in Argentina's Worker-recuperated Enterprises* (Unpublished PhD diss, York University, 2012).
- 2 The term "the capitalist secret" in relation to ERTs was first coined by Andrés Ruggeri (*Las Empresas Recuperadas*).

- 3 Indeed, much of my archival research for my work with Argentina's ERTs has taken place at the ERT Documentation Centre.
- 4 Or, the Pink House, the colloquial name for the official offices of the President of Argentina and seat of the national government's executive branch.
- 5 That is, slowing down the pace of production.
- 6 The equivalent to \$33,000 US dollars, since these remuneration debts had accrued in the thick of the convertability years when the Argentine peso was still pegged to the greenback.
- 7 The *concurso de acreedores* is made up of insolvency hearings and creditors' meetings with the bankruptcy court in order to re-organize debt repayments before a firm declares bankruptcy, perhaps most similar to the US's Chapter 11.
- 8 Literally "town of emergency," these precarious neighbourhoods made up mostly of migrants from the interior of the country are also known more derogatorily in Argentina as *villas miserias* ("towns of misery" or shantytowns).
- 9 Quoted in Lavaca Collective, *Sin Patrón: Fábricas y Empresas Recuperadas por Sus Trabajadores: Una Historia, una Guía* (Buenos Aires: Cooperativa de Trabajo Lavaca, 2004), 115.
- 10 Eduardo Murúa (2006), personal interview with the author.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Lavaca, *Sin Patrón*, 180.
- 13 This was the play about the recuperation of the ERT Gráfica Patricios entitled *Maquinando: La Historia de la Lucha de la Gráfica Patricios* (2007), collectively written by the popular theatre troupe Grupo Olifante and directed by Argentine playwright, actor, and director Norman Briski. It has been shown in numerous ERTs across Argentina since 2007.
- 14 Interview with Cándido González (2003) from the archives of the Centro de Documentación de Empresas Recuperadas (Buenos Aires: Programa Facultad Abierta, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires).

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