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Long Live the Women's Committee

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Description:

A dispatch from an embattled worker-run factory in Buenos Aires, where a militant women's committee has linked the fight in the factory to the broader feminist struggle beyond its doors.

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[MadyGraf](#) is an occupied and self-managed printing factory in Buenos Aires. The factory was formerly the property of RR Donnelley, a US corporation with headquarters in Chicago. Workers and their families occupied the factory in 2014, when after announcing the dismissal of 123 workers of a workforce of 400 the management decided to shut down in response to the workers' resistance.

Following the occupation, ex-Donnelley workers formed a cooperative (MadyGraf), which is currently affiliated with the printing workers union (Federación Gráfica Bonaerense, FGB). Today the factory is facing an uncertain future, due to the austerity policies implemented by Macri's government, which have thrown the economy into recession, and to the skyrocketing inflation, which is making energy and raw material costs prohibitive for the cooperative.

A Pillar of the Struggle

One of the pillars of the occupation is the MadyGraf women's committee, which was originally formed in 2011, when the management threatened to dismiss around twenty workers. At the time the entire factory workforce was male, and the women's committee was formed by the workers' partners, wives, and sisters, who came together in order to support them in their struggle against the management.

While initially the women's committee was simply meant to be a support group, it rapidly evolved into something else. It became a place where women could come together and discuss not only the factory's situation, but also their own lives and needs as working-class women. The dynamic further changed in 2014, when the workers occupied and took over the factory, with the women's participation. One of the greatest changes occurring at that moment was that a number of women wives, partners, and relatives entered the factory's workforce. Many of the committee's women had been housewives until then, while others had been employed as nurses, domestic workers, and teachers.

As Veronica, a member of the women's committee, recounts this moment:

We started organizing with our husbands to defend their jobs. The workers' resistance was so strong that the company decided to shut down. We occupied the factory together with our children: we would have our meals together in the factory, we had a lot of support from the community, we had a fund, we received gifts for our children. We also started reaching out to the other wives, because there were workers who did not want their wives to participate in the struggle. At some point there was the need to employ more workers to manage the occupied factory: it is at this moment that several wives, mothers, and sisters started working in the factory as well.

A Space of Radicalization

The decision-making body of the cooperative is the workers' assembly. It was the workers' assembly that decided to reduce production on March 8, 2017 and 2018, in order to allow the women workers and some men to take part in the feminist strike and marches against gender violence and for the right to abortion. [1]

The women's committee was key in putting forward this proposal, as well as other proposals that were approved by the assembly: the institution of a "woman's day" (a day of leave during menstruation), wage equality among men and women as well as six month paid maternity leave and a sick day for children. The assembly also challenged a strict division of roles within production: workers are allowed to change their task, and the division between "female" and "male" jobs has been abolished. As a consequence a number of women started working as machine operators. Monica recalls how she "learned to operate the machines by observing how they were used and asking many questions. At some point I was asked if I wanted to try to operate the machine and I said I did". She is now a regular machine operator.

Even before the formation of the women's committee in 2011, the ex-Donnelley workers had to go through a process of discussion and revision of a number of sexist prejudices. One of the workers, Tamara, is a woman who transitioned before the factory shut down. As she explained to her co-workers, she used to come to work dressed as a man, because she was afraid she would lose her job otherwise. But the beginning of the struggle around the factory gave her the courage to transition. When she made the decision, she spoke with her co-workers and told them about the enormous difficulties she was having in her family. This was the beginning of a deep discussion, which forced the factory's workers to think about sexism and the way they had naturalized it. As a result, Tamara's co-workers started fighting for her rights too: the right to dress as she wanted or to use a women's bathroom. This was a prelude to the formation of the women's committee.

The women's committee rapidly became a space of radicalization and politicization, encompassing the fight around the factory, but also participation in the feminist mobilizations against femicides and for free abortion. Within this process, the committee's women came to develop awareness of their double oppression, as women and as workers.

One of the leaders of the committee remembers how this process entirely reshaped her sense of herself and of the world in which she lives:

When we organized as women's committee we started with the support to our men, however we began discussing other issues too. At the beginning I had no idea that women had rights. I was against abortion, but I was against because I didn't know that this is women's decision. In the women's committee in 2011 we started discussing abortion, domestic abuse, gender violence, sexism. The word "sexism" was not part of my vocabulary, but when we started discussing it I realized how sexism operates within society. I always say that the women's committee changed my life as a woman. There were also conflicts within the factory around our participation in the feminist movement, but I kept saying: "I'm part of the green tide" [green is the symbol of the movement for free and legal abortion in Argentina]. When we became aware of our oppression as women, although as members of the working class, our first task was to discuss with the others, including our partners. We presented our own program in the factory assemblies. We explained that our struggle as women also concerned our men, and little by little they started being more open. We also explained that our oppression as working women is not the same as that of other women. It was a long and deep debate, because we wanted to involve them in the "green tide," we wanted them to take to the streets with us, because these issues concern our bodies, our lives: we die of illegal abortion.

The Movement Continues

Once women started entering production, the women's committee had to face the problem of childcare. Before the occupation, when they were demonstrating outside the factory, they would organize childcare duties among themselves. But once they occupied the factory and entered production, it became clear that this was not going to be a solution. Ultimately, the committee persuaded the assembly to create a free childcare facility in the factory, in order to allow mothers not only to be active in production, but also to participate in political activities.

Long Live the Women's Committee

There were other obstacles to overcome as well. When the cooperative demanded affiliation with the union (Federación Gráfica Bonaerense), the union at first resisted, as the union leadership was against the occupation of the factory. Once affiliation was accepted the union leadership proposed as a condition that only male workers could be affiliated and be allowed to participate in meetings. The argument was that women had entered the workforce only after the occupation, as cooperative workers, and had not worked for a boss.

In spite of these challenges, for the women participating in the women's committee, this has been a life-changing experience. Lucrecia, another member of the committee, remembers when she first decided to join the struggle:

I was a housewife. I knew of the existence of the women's committee, my partner had told me about it, but I didn't have a desire to get involved in it. When the management's attack started in 2014 I decided to get involved in the struggle. I met the comrades of the women's committee when I participated in an assembly of the families, at the beginning of the occupation. What struck me is that, while we were very worried and sad about the situation, the women of the committee were strong and combative. I and other wives decided then to join the committee.

While speaking of the way this experience changed her life, one of Lucrecia's co-workers says through tears:

I'm a mother, this changed my life as a woman and I hope it will change it for our children. I cannot express the way in which I have changed thanks to this experience, I don't find the words for it. It is a lot of work to go to marches and demonstrations, but I don't care, I'm doing this for my children and to change this shitty society.

Maria adds:

It gives us enormous strength that women can organize together, can strike and leave their workplace to fight for our lives. The women's committee is a pillar in the factory. We are equal to our men comrades in the struggle. It gives me enormous strength to feel that I have so many women comrades supporting me in, and men too. Our struggle is not just for ourselves, it is for our class, for all workers. We are in a very hard moment, but we keep going so that our children can have a home and food. And we are happy to receive solidarity, but it is not enough: we want to change this society. We don't want people to suffer the way we are suffering, and we know that there are people who are suffering even more than us. This is why we want to change everything. We are also now organizing a workers' club, where there will be sport, painting, milonga, and other activities, so that our families and the families of other workers can come here to MadyGraf to socialize.

Over the course of the year, the committee's women have participated in the country's massive feminist mobilizations and become aware of the enormous potential of this movement. Maria is also aware of its difficulties: "From the viewpoint of working women we have a big problem: the union bureaucracy, which refused to support our struggle for our lives, for example on March 8. Working women have this obstacle. Many women do leave their workplace to participate in the strike and the march. But if we consider that workers are the majority of the population, can you imagine our power if our unions were truly supportive of our struggle?" She then continues: "We had eight years of Cristina Kirchner government: women were initially galvanized because it was a woman's government. But nothing changed during her government. We have been occupying this factory for four years: this means that our factory was shut down under her government. Eight years of a woman's government were not sufficient to realize the right to abortion, to fill the gender wage gap. Yes, her government made it possible for our demands as women to be visible, but Cristina's strategy was not the liberation of women." [2]

On February 20, MadyGraf workers were repressed by the police during a demonstration in front of the Congress. They were distributing free notebooks, produced as part of their campaign denouncing the corruption of the Ministry of Education which, in a government's call for bids, unlawfully favored the monopolistic printing industry to the

Long Live the Women's Committee

detriment of cooperatives and public schools. This action was a way to show to the community what a cooperative can do in support of public education. MadyGraf has also delivered more than three million notebooks free of charge to different schools in poor areas of the province. However, the hardships they are facing are not discouraging MadyGraf workers, who are promoting a [donation campaign](#) in support of their experiment in workers' control.

Source [Jacobin](#).

PS:

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[1] *Jacobin* 8 March 2019 "[Argentina's Popular Feminism](#)" and 25 April 2018 "[From the Underground to the Mainstream](#)".

[2] *International Viewpoint* September 2018 "[Argentina's Anticapitalist Feminism](#)".