

# Zanon – A factory in the hand of the workers, Argentina

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*This was published by Wildcat in December 2003 but has only now (June 2006) been translated into English, and a short introduction added. Although it is a bit old, it still contains unique insights into the situation, hopes, difficulties and dynamics of the occupation process and many personal interviews. It has also been translated into Polish and is in German and Polish at [www.wildcat-www.de/wildcat/68/w68inhal.htm](http://www.wildcat-www.de/wildcat/68/w68inhal.htm).*

*The Neuquén province, where Zanon is located, was one of the epicentres of the protests that swept Argentina in the 1990s. It was here that the piqueteros first emerged in the town of Cutral-Co, and there are many militant trade unionists. Unlike in most of Argentina, many of the attempted privatizations of state owned enterprises were defeated. In May 2006, teachers won a 40% pay rise following a month long strike. But most famous, is the successful takeover of the Zanon tile factory and its subsequent worker-run management. In 2000 the workers went on strike. The employer implemented a lock out and the workers responded by occupying the factory. In October 2001, the workers officially declared the factory to be 'under worker control'. By March 2002, the factory fully returned to production. In April 2003, the courts ordered the police to forcibly take the factory out of the hands of the workers. In response the workers developed a broad based campaign and as the police began to move in over 3000 citizens of Neuquén formed a picket in front of the factory. During the period of worker control, the number of employees has increased from 300 to 470, and wages have risen by 100 pesos a month, and the level of production has increased. Accidents have fallen by 90%.*

*The workers of Zanon are currently demanding that the provincial and national governments officially recognize the factory as a workers cooperative under state ownership. This is an increasingly common legal status for the many occupied factories in Argentina and would mean that they could stop worrying about eviction and also trade their goods more easily. The move is being resisted by the right-wing MPN leadership of the provincial government, and Kirchner's government has shown little interest in the resolution of the issue. However, the proposal has widespread public support in Neuquén, with a petition achieving 9,000 signatures in support of the workers proposal, and the issue is due to be debated in the near future within the provincial congress.*

*Further information on the Zanon factory can be found at the web site <http://www.obrerosdezanon.org>.*

*For more on the factory occupation movement in Argentina there is also a recent documentary called 'The Take' <http://www.thetake.org/>*

## **Introduction**

A whole booklet about Zanon? So many words about a single factory somewhere in South America? Yes, we think that this unusual factory occupation deserves at least this much attention.

Zanon is not a backyard workshop, but a very modern factory with a highly automated production process. Hardly anyone believed that the production workers would be able to get the plant running under self-management. They showed that it is possible. Instead of begging for jobs in times of crisis or trying to make ends meet in informal niches they took over the precious machinery and organised work in such a way that as well as producing tiles there is still always time for drinking mate and having a chat. In that way they are better off than their comrades from the occupied textile factory Brukmann, who have to work much harder at their sewing machines in order to secure their income. The Zanon workers not only showed their capability to run the production 'under workers control'. They were also able to mobilise so much solidarity that all

attempts to evict the factory failed. This occupation was not a short episode like many others. For two years now there has been a process of self-organisation and direct democracy developing within the factory, with constant discussions and changes. The Zanon workers did not simply content themselves with their initial gains. They want more. Inside the factory people discuss what a different society could look like and how we could get there.

As everywhere, in Argentina a fundamental change seems difficult to achieve. The uprising of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2001 was the signal for a social awakening. It was an uprising against politics: state and politicians lost their legitimacy. Everywhere people started to take matters into their own hands. Since then Argentina has been seen as a laboratory for social movements. Unfortunately it remained a laboratory. The virus stayed in the test tube: so far it has not spread beyond the frontiers. The situation in Latin America is tense, but movements still primarily stay within national boundaries. About two years after the uprising politics seems to begin to gain ground again. The new president Kirchner invites the movements to come together at a big round table. The political attempts of this Peronist to tie the movements to his political project are showing initial signs of success. And whoever does not play the game will get acquainted with the old repression.

For Zanon the development of the general situation will be decisive. In the case of the movement stagnating, and the factory occupations remaining isolated, they will have difficulties maintaining their dynamic and radicalism. Without the political dynamic the self-management runs danger of being caught up in the capitalist 'business as usual' (see below: "These guys up there..."). What might remain is a source of income for the workers involved – something very crucial in Argentina today – but not a project which hints towards a different future.

Nevertheless, the workers of Zanon and Brukmann gave an example which is not only of major importance for the movement in Argentina, given that the crisis was not an accident confined to a single country. The slump was an expression of a global crisis of capitalist development. The question that the Zanon workers are being forced to face might be asked in a much bigger framework in the near future. It will help to have a closer look at what is already happening in the remote region of Patagonia today.

### **Brukmann and Zanon under workers control**

In Argentina more than 150 factories are occupied, from workshops, to service companies, to factories and a four-star hotel. Most of them were bankrupt firms or had been about to go bankrupt when the occupations started. In all these companies major changes and developments took place, but only few handled the situation as politically as the workers of Brukmann and Zanon. A lot of occupiers are up to their ears with trying to get their own company running, so that there is not much space left for political activities. The workers of Brukmann and Zanon make clear again and again that for them it is about more than just saving their own work-places and they demand that the means of production be left in their hands without further stipulations. That is the core of the demand of "nationalisation under workers' control", which the Brukmann and Zanon workers brought forward. Most of the occupied companies formed cooperatives. Cooperative sounds more like autonomy and self-management than nationalisation. Actually 'cooperatives' are the current model in Argentina today, with which the state tries to contain the movement. The occupiers are supposed to give themselves a legal framework, to act according to the logic of economy and to recognize private property. Because at the end of the day they are supposed to buy the company from the owner once they managed to get it running. A lot of occupiers rely on this form of legalisation, because thereby at least they can avoid the pressure of eviction.

The Brukmann workers were evicted in April 2003. After months of protest in the streets they finally formed a cooperative in order to fulfil the precondition for the legal process of dispossession. At the end of November 2003 the town parliament of Buenos Aires decided to dispossess the company and hand it over to the workers for two years. After half a year on the streets they are now able to go back in. Zanon still produces “under workers control” without any legal status. (On the process of dispossession and the discussion on “cooperative or workers control” see the part “The dilemma...”).

### **In the laboratory**

In April 2002 I went to Argentina the first time, in order to get to know more about the new movements. Four weeks in Buenos Aires and there was not a single day without demonstrations, blockades or assemblies. Pensioners, tenants, neighbours and unemployed, all kinds of groups protested, including previously unknown groups like the 'betrayed money-savers' who rioted in front of the banks. But at that point there was not much coming from the factories or other workplaces, in a country with a long tradition of class struggles (see “Class struggles in Argentina...”). One exception was the occupied textile factory Brukmann from where several actions were initiated, e.g. the first “meeting for the defence of the occupied factories”, organised by Brukmann and Zanon workers with 700 participants assembling in the street.

In March/April 2003 I went to Argentina again, this time I wanted to see what was happening in the occupied factories whose numbers had increased. The plan was to work in one of these companies, because generally that is the best way to find out what is really going on. After some enquiries people said that it would not be possible to work at Brukmann, but at Zanon. After initial doubts as to whether it would actually be a good idea to travel to this remote area where I did not know anyone, to a factory where mostly men worked, my curiosity finally won and I set off to Neuquén.

After the first tour in the factory it became clear that it would be difficult to get me a job there. As an unskilled casual worker without experience in tile production all I could have done was sweeping the shop-floor, a rather unpleasant thing in such a dusty plant. But the comrades were fine with letting me take part in their experiment as a visitor. A mattress converted a corner of the laboratory into a visitors room and made it possible for me to stay in this unusual factory for three weeks.

In this booklet thirteen comrades from Zanon are quoted directly. I recorded interviews and conversations with them. A lot of more people showed me around in the factory, explained things, told stories and discussed every possible and impossible thing with me. First of all I took a lot of optimism back home from these encounters. “Se puede...”, that is what the comrades told me again and again, we can, together we can do it, nothing is impossible. In the case of Zanon these are not slogans, but experience. Previously Zanon had been a factory where a graveyard silence ruled and where the bosses felt free to make any kind of arbitrary decisions. Solidarity had been an unknown word. At the beginning the comrades who had started discussing how to change things were doubtful: “With these fellow workers we will not be able to start anything, with this working class we will not get anywhere”. Today they stand in the front line of the movement together with these very fellow workers. They first took over the factories workers commission, then the union. They enforced the right to assemble in the factory and started fighting back. Against the threat of closure they occupied the factory and got it running. They were able to get the population to support them, they created sources of income and a network of occupiers, combative workers and unemployed. They prevented eviction. They are still there. This is a part of the story of the Zanon workers, told by themselves.

### **Zanon-Workers who have a say in this booklet...**

**Rosa** and **Delia** are two of the few women in the factory, they work at the end of the production-line, in the quality control department, for the last fourteen and twenty years respectively. They do not have any official positions in the union, but they speak as representatives in public meetings and press conferences. **Ana** has worked in the canteen since the end of 2002, she is the mother of Daniel Ferras who died in the factory in July 2000. **Mario** and **Eugenio** are mechanics, both have been in the factory for eleven years now. Both adjust machines in the press-shop. They were not involved in the organising process before the occupation and were rather caught by surprise by the conflict. **Ricardo “Fredy”**, has been at Zanon seven years, had previously been a production worker and has now a job in the department where sieves for the glazing are manufactured and special tiles are produced by hand. He has used the computer in his department for putting together an exact chronology of the struggle, using press articles. **Rolando** has been in the plant for twenty one years, he is a production worker without a union or any other official position. **Natalio “Chicho”** used to be a production worker and now works in the laboratory where the glazing is mixed and new tile models are developed. **Daniel** started working in the plant in 1981, he is a mechanic for maintenance, he takes part in meetings with coordinators and is a unionist without having an official position. **Julian** has been employed at Zanon for seven years, he used to work at the glazing-line and was elected as a coordinator for his department after the occupation. **Carlos “Manotas”** is a former foreman who chose the side of the workers during the conflict and was elected as the main coordinator of the plant. **Eduardo** was active in the youth organisation of the MTD, the movement of the unemployed workers. He started working at Zanon in mid-2002 together with the first group of MTD people who were integrated into the plant after its occupation. **Raul** came to Zanon in 1993 as a production worker, having had to work in the most uncomfortable environment right under the window of the managements office and next to the office of the management friendly union. He belonged to the first group of Zanon workers who started to organise themselves and took over the workers’ commission. He is now the chairman of the SOECN, the ceramic workers union of Neuquén

*Alix; Cologne, Germany; November 2003*

## **Zanon – A factory in the hand of the workers**

It takes fifteen hours by bus from Buenos Aires, through the endless plains of the Argentinian pampa. The last part of the travel to Neuquén, the northern part of Patagonia, leads through the vast apple tree plantations in the valley of the Rio Negro, followed by desert like plains and mountain ranges. At the bus station a comrade from Zanon welcomes me, easy to spot in a brown boiler suit with the union logo. Another eight kilometres by bus towards Centenario, the factory is situated by the highway, next to another tile factory, a few other companies, a prison and a small settlement at the foot of a hill. That is it. A huge billboard announces that Zanon is in the hands of the workers.

In the small office building in the yard of the factory the Zanon workers installed their department for “press and public relations”. There is a constant coming and going between computers and telephones, drums and other demonstration utensils, piles of posters and newspapers. In a corner people drink mate and discuss, two comrades write a declaration on the occupation of the small brick factory, Ceramica del Valle, which they plan to support the next day by blocking the

highway. Right from the beginning the Zanon workers made the conflict about their factory public. Since the first strike in March 2001, when they marched through all districts of Centenario and Neuquén in order to collect food, they took to the streets again and again, made their project known and linked up with other movements. Due to the factory's high degree of automation they can afford to free up several workers for political activities and public relations.

The workers take one group of astonished visitors after another on a tour through the extensive and ultra-modern factory. Most of them like doing this, sharing their detailed knowledge of the production process, displaying a certain pride of ownership and an enthusiasm for the political project. Cepillo, who shows me around, had previously worked at the mills. Back then he only knew the work in this particular department. By being active in the workers' commission he gained an overview of the production process and after occupation was elected as the coordinator. Together with another comrade he now coordinates the entire production process: *"though I did not even take A-levels"*. I will hear this sentence quite a few times in the following weeks.

**Daniel:** *Only now, due to this conflict, have I really got to know the factory. Previous to the occupation when I left my department an engineer would come up to me and ask me what I was doing there. If you did not have a good explanation you even might have got a warning. Today I run around in the entire factory and get to know everyone. During twenty years of working here I had not seen how they work at the atomisators and mills over there. Today I can go to the comrades over there and ask them how things work. But I ask as if I had just started working here. Only now can you capture the whole dimension of the place where you had worked.*

Zanon manufactures glazed tiles for floors and walls and other ceramic goods at a high technological level. The factory opened in 1980. The line for ceramic goods which is the most modern of the twelve production lines, was only set up in 1993 and extended in 1997. The starting point of the production process are the huge mills where the earth is ground down. From there the clay is processed through a system of pipes, sieves, pools, drying installations and air pipes and ends up in silos, which supply the press-shop with material. From the press-shop the raw tiles are transferred to another drying installation, from there they pass atomised stations via various production lines. At the stations the glazing is applied, patterns are printed and the backside is covered with stuff that prevents the tiles from sticking in the ovens. From the lines the tiles are transferred to frames which automatically move around the shop on tracks and which serve both as means of transport and temporary means of storage. They are transported to the ovens and finally end up in the quality control and packaging department. The tiles are automatically taken off the frames, put on a conveyor belt and pass various machines which test their durability and correct size. Up to this point the whole production process mainly consisted of controlling, maintenance, adjustments and re-filling. In the quality control and packaging department there are some permanent manual jobs. Here is where the few women of the factory work. They sit at the control conveyor belt and classify the passing tiles, marking them with bright-colour pens, categorising them as first, second or third class quality. The marks are read by a machine and according to their quality the tiles are automatically stacked and packaged, the model name, quality category and control number is stamped on. On one line the cartons have to be taken off by hand, on the other lines they have a robot to do that. Compared to the hectic atmosphere in the office building in the factory things seem relaxed. During this first visit the plant even seems deserted given that due to lack of raw material only one line is in use. But also during the following days the calm attitude at work is conspicuous, the atmosphere is pleasant, friendly, people help each other.

**Rolando:** *Now no-one pressures you, this is one of the fundamental changes that took place. Before the occupation things were bad. The bosses sat on your head, the foremen were at your back. The more you worked, the more they wanted you to work.*

**Eugenio:** *You had to meet the production target, the quality norms AND you were supposed to work safely. They made us work long hours. After an eight-hour day we had to stay longer, they forced us to.*

**Mario:** *They were always following you around. When you had been out of their sight for more than half an hour they started searching for you. They could not stand seeing us standing around.*

The comrades installed areas in the corners of the shop where they sit and drink mate. Previously this was strictly forbidden. In the shade of the trees on the factory premises people discuss about problems of the production, politics and, of course, football. They asked the former company gardener if he wanted to return to his old job, now he takes care of the lawn, the trees and receives the new standard wage. Everyone at Zanon gets 800 Pesos (about 270 US-Dollars) – the production workers, the workers in the laboratory, the people on paid leave, the union secretary, the women in the kitchen, the comrades of the unemployed organisation MTD, who meanwhile work in the factory, the doorman and even the lawyer.

In October 2001 the workers occupied the factory. In March 2002 the comrades started producing under 'workers control' with 270 people (262 men, 8 women). In the meantime they were able to extend the staff to 320 comrades. The 'factory prison' was turned into a experimenting collective for workers self-management and direct democracy.

**Delia:** *When we were on strike and had our strike tent in front of the gate I went there with my daughter one night. We drank mate and talked: that would be a dream if we would get the whole thing producing again. And why do we not just enter and get the press-shop and the mills and the lines running again? It was a dream. We all had doubts whether we should do it.*

## **We do not need bosses in order to produce**

In October 2001 the Zanon workers occupied their factory – after yet another period of unpaid wages and after more and more things indicated a possible factory closure. In the labour tribunal they achieved an unusual verdict: The employer is sentenced for illegal lock-out and 40 per cent of the stock is handed over to the workers as compensation for unpaid wages. In January 2002 Zanon management presented a plan to re-start production with 62 staff. The factory occupiers refused this plan. Up to this point they survived on donations and by selling material from the stock. At the end of February they decided to take up production under self-management. Of the former 370 workers 270 join the project. The technicians, the engineers, and administration employees on the whole did not take part. Only two former foremen were on the side of the workers.

**Manotas:** *I was one of the 82 foremen. In 1999 there were already protests concerning workers rights and health and safety. That happened together with the first combative workers' commission in this factory. As foremen we were not able to take part in these struggles, they would have kicked us out just like that. Then problems occurred concerning unpaid wages. Every now and then they gave us 100 Pesos, the exact time of payment was never clear, you never knew when you would get your next wage. I got fed up with this and started to talk to other foremen about it. First they agreed on taking action, but they said that we should do it as foremen, that we could not do it together with the other workers. But later on they came down a peg or two and nothing happened. After work I started to talk to some people from the workers' commission. It was not possible to do that in the shop. If they saw that you were talking with people from the workers'*

*commission they would have given you the sack on the spot. In 2000 I joined the union. They dragged me in front of the management because of that. There I said that I was not involved. I had no legal security but the comrades of the union knew that I was a member. The problems continued over months, no pay on pay day. In March 2001 I had had it, I had ten months of unpaid wages. There was an assembly about the unpaid wages and I asked if I could come along. That created some fuss in the factory because it was quite a difficult thing that a foreman wanted to be with the comrades. I told them that I agreed with their demands and that I wanted to join the struggle. I also said that I was alone, that there was no-one besides me. Then another foreman joined and we were then two out of 82 who joined the struggle.*

To get the production lines running was no big deal for the workers. No-one missed the foremen. The opposite was true.

**Fredy:** *The most important thing is that we make the plans now. If previously us workers had a proposal and wanted to change the production process – not on a whim, but because we who did the job also knew best about it – then a foreman or director would come and say “No, not in this way”. Everything had to be done the way they wanted it to. Today we do things we always had wanted to, but there was no way, because the boss did not let us. The boss and all the foremen who acted according to his command. Today things are based on mutual help. Yesterday I had a little problem with the material, so I went to the line where I had worked in former days and asked the comrades what was the matter. I told them what I knew from my experience working there and they said “Good idea, we could try it that way”. They took it on. Then another comrade came and said “Why not change it at the other machine at the same time?”. Previously it was different. You only saw the folder with the control slips for the production. The foreman, an engineer, was always skimming it and signing, without controlling anything. At one point a lot of valuable raw material was spoiled because of a wrong letter. The control slip said 15 kg instead of 15g – and we are talking about pigments here. The comrades knew that it was wrong. If you are on the job every day then you will know what 15g and 15 kg are. But we had ironed out their mistakes for too many times already. “So you want us to put a 15 kg sack in there then, aye, here we go...”. They tried to retrace things afterwards and found the signature of the engineer under the 15 kg...*

**Julian:** *When we re-started production everyone knew what their job was. But we also had to learn a lot of new things which we had not done before. There you could see the creativity of the ceramic workers. We have shown that we are creative enough to take on all different tasks in order to develop new production models and models of tiles. That was a significant change. We became better through it. Not in a competitive sense, but in the sense that we worked for everyone and we tried to give the best for everyone. We have developed hidden capabilities which previous, if at all, we only showed in our families. This creativity is suppressed if a boss gives you orders all the time, demands more and more, but gives nothing back. Then you keep to yourself and think: “I will not give him more”. In this period all the creativity blossomed, the pleasure to do things and learn new things. Because we had to learn loads. First of all we had to learn to structure ourselves. We had to learn that we can not bounce about like pin-balls. We could not all run around in the factory without knowing what had to be done. We learnt to do everything. First you started to do what you already knew. But then we wanted to learn other things, doing administrative work, organising the sales. When the company previously had asked you to do that you had said: “Nope, I do my job, the rest is your business. I am already oppressed enough, I will not take on more responsibility, only to be slammed by you even worse afterwards”. But this creativity emerged, we learnt a lot.*

After the workers had taken up production without any hierarchical functions they decided some months later to elect coordinators in each department.

**Fredy:** *This was a fundamental step that we took. The coordinators provide us with information and founded on that we run the production. After a meeting of all coordinators they come to us five guys afterwards and they would say: "Folks, we have to stop production now because we are lacking a pigment. What is the score, can we continue tomorrow with the other model"? Each coordinator checks that back in his department and tells the coordinator assembly next day. There are also production workers taking part in the assembly, everyone who wants to can take part.*

**Manotas:** *Each and everyone knew their work and was able to perform his task. But it was not organised. How were we supposed to move around in the factory, how were we supposed to organise things in order to avoid that although everyone is doing a good job, all efforts are in vain at the end. In July last year it became clear that we had to organise ourselves better. On a assembly we decided that we had to elect coordinators for each department. The factory is divided into different departments – pulverisation, press shop, oven, quality control, sales. Because everyone only knew about the work in their own department, we said: on each production line there are for example twelve comrades working, they should elect a coordinator. The same in the pulverisation, at the ovens, in the sales department. Us coordinators met twice a week and the change was palpable very soon. The production ran much better. We were able to plan better. I became plant coordinator, the assembly decided. That is a huge responsibility, which requires some hours extra, but I do it with pride.*

**Julian:** *I am coordinator for the press-shop and the glazing process. I was elected in a democratic procedure by the comrades and I am still one of them. Before, that was different. Once someone started to climb the ladder, they would have looked down on you.*

More difficult than the work at the production line were the areas of the specialists to which previously the workers had no access at all: the administration with the purchasing and sales department, the print-shop and the laboratory.

**Chicho:** *In the laboratory we were facing the problem that the technicians who had worked for Zanon had left. We contacted some comrades who had worked in the laboratory and some of them were up for joining again. Because I knew them I started to work with them in the laboratory. Before that I had worked in the production. We are still learning. Meanwhile we managed to get the basic knowledge, but every day new problems pop up. We learn bit by bit.*

**Eduardo:** *I have never worked in a lab before. I loaded and unloaded. I stuffed fridge parts into mills for recycling. I delivered post. But now that I am here and able to think about which product numbers to mix, I work creatively...*

**Daniel:** *Hardly any of us had previously worked in the organisation of the company. We are all production workers. This is a difficult task for us. But we held meetings and talked about it, and we had support from people from outside who knew about the matter. Various accountants and admin guys came and supported our struggle. We learned from those people and we organised ourselves.*

For the purchase of raw material they are supported by the Mapuche. The Mapuche had contacted them before because the employer Zanon had extracted the clay in their area without paying for it. After the occupation the Mapuche offered the comrades delivery of raw material and cooperation. The comrades thanked them with the new tile model "Mapuche". They also produced a model "Obrero" (worker), which is robust and cheap. Today the Zanon tiles are sold under a different name: FASINPAT. This name reveals an indication of where the tiles have been produced: in a factory without bosses, a FABRICA SIN PATron. The tiles are sold at the factory gate. Because they do not have a legal status they are not allowed to sell anything on account and therefore they

cannot supply wholesalers. The human rights organisation “Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo” helps out by offering their organisation for the dealing with bureaucracy.

**Rolando:** *Who knows how many sacks of money Zanon made off our backs. Even with the few machines which run at the moment we make our income. If we got the whole plant into full gear we would make loads of money. We could have 1,000 workers here and all would have a good income. Because a lot of money comes in, we have seen that. At Zanon twenty trucks came and went every day. He only sold to wholesalers. Twenty trucks each day, they started loading them at six in the morning and at ten in the night they were still being loaded. A lot of stuff was exported, as well. And today we make a living by selling them by the pack.*

The illegal status creates a lot of bureaucratic problems as well as a high level of insecurity: the threat of eviction. On the other hand there are advantages for the comrades: they took over the expensive machinery, which is estimated to be worth 120 Million US-Dollars, but they do not have to pay interest for it. They were able to avoid this capitalist constraint of accumulation. For the comrades a legalization which would re-establish the profits of Zanon in any form would result in an enormous increase of work pressure. They proved that it is possible to run a highly complicated production process without bosses, based on a direct democratic structure of coordinators and assemblies. An increased pressure to intensify work (for the market and profit) would certainly embody the danger of re-enforcing the old hierarchies. The future of this production without bosses in a capitalist world is everything but certain.

**Fredy:** *In case these guys (Zanon) want to come back then we all want to work here again, everyone of the old crew, exactly the same people. When they accept this then we can discuss it. We will have to give in at certain points, but the fundamental thing is that we can all work here again. But the employer would not like it, because he would never reach his goal again, to rule over the people, to pay them like he wants to and to kick them out as he pleases. Today we have a totally different say in this factory.*

### **“that we got to know each other...”**

...was the most common answer to the question of what has changed after the occupation.

**Daniel:** *I belonged to this particular shop and we were not allowed to go anywhere else. Everything was divided into different departments, we had to wear working clothes in different colours so that they could identify us.*

**Julian:** *You were not able to have a calm five minutes chat with a comrade. They did not want us to get to know each other. Not knowing your comrades leads to individualism. They did not allow us to come closer to each other.*

**Fredy:** *What changed through the struggle: We are united and we know each other better. Before you clocked in and went to your department. You only knew the comrades of your department. Maybe by chance if you had to get something from a different department you met someone else. Today you go to an assembly and sometimes you stand next to this guy, sometimes next to another. We go somewhere in a group and thereby get to know each other. You get to know the comrades and you agree that we have to proceed with this struggle...*

The first thing they did after the occupation was to rip out the partition walls between the departments. Unknown work colleagues became comrades and the hated factory a place where you enjoyed being. The walk from the workplace to the gate sometimes takes several hours –

because on the way there are many comrades with urgent things to be talked about, you might end up in another round of mate or in the laboratory, because someone brought meat along and they re-use the Bunsen burner for a barbecue. But often also problems with the production require that the comrades stay in the factory for longer hours.

After the occupation they kept the old shift model (early-late-night) on the shop-floor. The night-shift is necessary because the ovens can not be switched off. Only few people work night-shift. Early and late shift rotate, the early shift works Saturdays, as well. The special departments, maintenance people and coordinators work from 8 am to 4/5 pm, but actually often stay longer.

**Daniel:** *Back then I used to do my eight hours and then left. That was monotonous, only an obligation in order to bring an income back home. Today it is difficult given the situation we are in. During the meetings we often talk about the fact that some comrades are at their limit. For me it is different, I get motivated. Sometimes comrades tell me “Look, how late it is already, and you are still here”. But I like it. If there is a problem and I can solve it today then I finish it today, even if I have to be here for 15 or 16 hours. Other comrades leave after 8 hours. They say that they cannot stand the long hours any more. So we are all different, we think differently, we have our peculiarities.*

## **New Horizons**

Before the struggle over the factory the Zanon workers had been “normal workers”, they talked about football, only very few were interested in politics. Today the factory is a space for discussions. Words like class struggle or revolution are used without sounding as if they come from outer space. Structures of direct democracy and frequent assemblies resulted in a situation where politics is not a thing of few cadres, but of everyone. The horizon widened. New contacts to people from outside the factory were made. Visitors from other towns and other countries came to the province of Neuquén and the workers of Zanon travel around.

**Daniel:** *A delegation will go to Rosario in order to take part in the meeting. The unionist always say that other comrades who might not go to meetings frequently should go too, so that they can also gain new experiences. They should go out and see how the struggle is perceived from the outside. Otherwise we run the risk of isolating ourselves without being aware of how things are seen from the outside. A lot of comrades who travelled to other regions talked about their experience after coming back: We never thought that so many people were interested in us, that we are seen as idols, because we are practically making a revolution here.*

In 2002, Chicho and Mariano, the lawyer, travelled together to Italy, London and Paris.

**Chicho:** *The travel to Italy was a big thing. Everyday in a different town without understanding a single word. It was difficult to find your way around. During the meetings we talked about the history of our struggle, the take over of the union, about other factories, about the regional coordination, the Coordinadora del Alto Valle. About the cooperation with Brukmann and the meetings of the occupied factories. We discussed the question: why workers control and not cooperative? We had our talk, then discussion started, they asked questions about the situation in Argentina, how long we can continue with the struggle. All kind of questions. We got to know people from all kind of backgrounds, some meetings were organised by the FIOM (big metal union), others by the COBAS (rank-and-file union), by the social centres, all kinds of groups. After half of the people we met whilst travelling already knew who we were and what we were talking about, so the discussions became more and more interesting, both the contributions and the*

questions. Information was exchanged, our tour was announced in the media, more and more people came and the meetings changed.

Then we visited FIAT in Sicily. The meetings changed direction, they became international. I would not have thought that it would happen, but it did when we met the guys from FIAT. At that point they were on a big strike. They did not occupy the factory, but they were on strike. It was not a struggle of 270 workers, but of thousands, which makes a slight difference! A slight difference in terms of numbers of workers involved, but not in what they did. The strike was about the crisis which FIAT claimed to be in, the struggle at Zanon was also triggered by an alleged crisis. In that sense there was no difference. We took part in one of their assemblies. Some radio and television station reported that. They asked us if FIAT could be occupied, as well. So there was a discussion about whether they could do at FIAT what we have done at Zanon. About what we would advise the FIAT comrades to do. We said: we can tell you about our experience and our message is unity. If they want to continue the struggle they have to do it together, though the bosses will try to divide them – this is our main message. We were in Italy for 30 days. Every day a meeting, sometimes two, even on Sundays. That was crazy. We talked to a lot of groups which are in favour of what we are doing and which also see the possibility of coordinating and organising themselves without the big unions and such apparatus.

Delia, one of the few women at Zanon, attended together with the SOECN union secretary Alejandro Lopez, the World Social Forum meeting in Porte Alegre at the beginning of 2003.

**Delia:** *The comrades actually elected me as their representative to go to the world social forum! The most important thing was not the trip itself, but that the comrades elected me. The first surprise was that they proposed me for the ballot. If it had been any other woman, I would have been as happy, because we are only few. This is a big step forward. At the assembly they said that there was a trip coming up and that someone should accompany comrade Alejandro Lopez. Six men and a woman were suggested. Then it was decided that not two union officials should go, but one unionist and one comrade from the rank-and-file. A comrade asked: “why not a woman”? “Yes, why not”, they said, then he suggested me.*

*My horizon widened enormously. I come from a family where politics is not talked about. Today every injustice gets on my nerves. Previously I kept silent, today I would like to do even more against it.*

### **Brukmann and Zanon: Projects or Trotskyist parties?**

If you deal with movements in Argentina you will not be able to avoid the numerous Trotskyist avant-garde groups. Traditionally Trotskyism has a strong position within the Argentinian left, therefore you will meet people from Trotskyist backgrounds wherever something moves. Within the social movements the organised comrades are often more articulate and therefore they catch more attention than those who just started to take first steps in political movements. From a superficial point of view the movement then seems to be the project of a party. In Argentina all Trotskyist parties try to make their parties benefit from the social movements and workers struggles, doing a lot of damage in the process. Spaces of debates like the Interbarrial, the weekly meeting of the various local assemblies, which took place in a park in Buenos Aires every Sunday since the uprising, were destroyed by the competition between the different political parties. Most of the participants ceased to attend the assembly, because the behaviour of the political cadre put them off. There is always polemic against Brukmann and Zanon claiming that the occupations are the creation of the party cadres of the Trotskyist PTS. It is correct and not a secret that Raul Godoy is a member of the PTS and some other comrades from Zanon are as well. In Buenos Aires two Brukmann workers were non-party member candidates on the list of the PTS and another party

during the provincial elections in September 2003. But it is an absurd idea that a handful of party cadres can oblige 300 workers to follow their political line. The influence of organised comrades is perceivable in the slogan “Nationalisation under Workers Control”, and present in some of the discussions about workers power and revolution within the factory. You do not have to share the view of Trotskyist parties on the creation of socialist states – but that is not what it is about. The important thing is that these questions are actually discussed: how should a different society should look and how do we get there? Do we need a party for the revolution, do we want a workers’ government or is it rather about counter power created by our own structures. Class struggle or multitude? At Zanon, discussions which normally take place in academic jargon in exclusive circles, happen next to the running production and they are based on concrete questions: what about the strategy of the unemployed organisations and how can the struggle at Zanon proceed. Also old terms are subject to re-questioning in collective debates. “Nationalisation under workers control” and “workers government” are on one hand the usual repertoire of Trotskyist notions of transition. On the other hand, these terms get a new meaning within an occupied factory. “We have shown that we can run the production without bosses, so we will also be able to run the country. We neither need politicians, nor bosses”. For a lot of comrades the slogan “Nationalisation under workers control” basically means: “We do not want to buy the means of production, we do not want to become owners. The state should place them at our disposal”. A factory, where no-one dared to raise their voice became a space of debates. This space was not created by a party, no matter how many parties try to pride themselves on this glory. The workers themselves conquered this space. Like Raul said in one interview: “If we create a space for democracy then the comrades themselves will decide how things should proceed”. And they do this, if necessary against the position of their organised comrades. During the provincial elections in Neuquén in march 2003 all lefty parties had the Zanon workers mentioned in their leaflets. The Zanon workers were offered to nominate candidates amongst themselves for election. During an assembly the Zanon workers decided to refuse that. For this election the PTS called for a boycott (out of tactical reasons, not because of a general refusal). The PTS fly-posted an election boycott poster in Neuquén, showing a Zanon worker and an unemployed of the MTD, the famous shirts and logos. The poster created a lot of outrage in the factory. The workers decided against listing a candidate, but they did not call for boycott, as the poster suggested. This question became a subject during a special assembly during change of shift in the yard, during which the workers made clear to their comrades from the PTS that they will not let themselves be used for party interests, by no-one. When critics of avant-gardists concepts denounce the factory occupations as “avant-garde projects” then they stick to the game of the want-to-be-avant-garde: they only concentrate on the alleged leaders. This booklet is meant to shift the focus in order to see the processes amongst the workers themselves, to see what happens on the rank-and-file level.

### **From workers aristocracy to workers avant-garde – The Zanon workers and the unemployed**

Formerly the Zanon workers belonged to a well paid workers elite. A lot of them live in their own houses which have been built as part of a social housing scheme. Whoever had employment was able to get such a house, paying a low monthly rate. In the factory car park heavy motorcycles and still numerous cars are testimonies of the past wealth. Today a lot of people are not able to pay the monthly rents for their houses any more – so far there have not been any evictions – and no-one can afford to fill up their cars. Before their bosses started to threaten bankruptcy the Zanon workers felt secure and part of the middle-class.

**Eugenio:** *When the factory was still producing in top gear the Zanon workers were fine. You never had a problem to get a credit. You were well respected, as a worker of Zanon. Then came the slump...*

**Daniel:** *Back then of course we saw conflicts all around us, but we worked at Zanon. We did not have any money problems, but we complained about those who had. I often cursed: "I have to get to work and you guys block the road". My only worry was not getting to work. I did not ask why these things happened, why they blocked the roads.*

**Rosa:** *Previous to this conflict I never did anything political. The opposite is true: when the unemployed blocked the roads I said that they should start looking for a job and stop creating this mess. When things went bad for us I realised that we have to support each other.*

**Delia:** *They had to touch the wallet of the middle class. When they see a road block today they understand, because now they are effected by crisis, as well. Unfortunately it first had to happen to us before we realised. Previously we had bank accounts and credit cards. If you then have to roam around and to start begging for food, that was tough for us. I had seen myself as middle-class or at least I wanted to get there. I sent my daughter to a private school and paid for that. I did not have any big luxury, but I wanted a good education for my daughter. I was not interested in struggling for better education. I paid for it.*

**Rosa:** *At the beginning it was difficult to take to the streets, somehow embarrassing, it felt funny. But finally it was about our rights, our dignity. At the beginning we were only a few who wanted to pick up the struggle. I thought that the right moment had come, but I was alone in my department. The old union guys who you never saw in the factory, they did nothing.*

In October 2001 the workers of Zanon occupy the factory and the unemployed organise themselves as MTD Neuquén.

**Eduardo:** *The conflict started on the 1st of October and on the 4th the MTD was founded. Previously the unemployed organisation was called Unemployed Commission of the Barrio San Lorenzo. The whole thing spread to other barrios and named itself MTD, movement of unemployed workers. At that time the Zanon comrades organised street blockades in the town centre, later they blocked the bridge which connects Neuquén with Cipolletti. The MTD thought that this workers' struggle is important because we do not want to have more people unemployed, we want jobs. They fought for the jobs and if they had lost they would have lost their jobs too. Then they would also have joined the MTD. We went to the occupied bridge and supported them. There were discussions about it, because some people in the MTD said: why should we support them, they have their jobs and their wages. And comrades here in the factory said: why should we support the unemployed, they jobless. At the beginning they looked down on us. But when we blocked a road, they came and when they occupied a road, we came to help. This is how we got to know each other.*

**Raul:** *The extension of the struggle beyond the factory was difficult. It did not come naturally to demonstrate together with teachers or to see an unemployed person as your comrade. Here inside the factory we fought a long battle in order to get to this point. At the beginning the assembly decided against us – like it happened recently again. All our proposals were refused, but when the problem became a practical one, the whole thing of extending the struggle gained a foundation. Then things changed and went in the direction of extending the struggle. The fact that the workers do not want to have anything to do with the unemployed is due to the politics of the government and the union bureaucracy. Most of the unions look down on the unemployed. They do not perceive them as part of the working class. It really helped that here in Neuquén a really independent unemployed organisation came to life and that it is a very progressive one. Because among the unemployed too it is not easy for the comrades to find people who want to support the struggle of factory workers. Unfortunately there are only few who want this. Most of them lead rather corporate struggles, each group for its own demands.*

**Daniel:** *At the beginning a lot of people refused the MTD, because it was an organisation of very violent people. After the first common actions this was the subject of a lot of debates in the assemblies: that we do not want to have that kind of ally. The people from the union said that they will ensure the non-violent character of future actions. They told the guys of the MTD that if they want to get support, they have to follow the line of the workers. They accepted that and did not make stipulations.*

Today the Zanon workers and the MTD form a strategic unity. Nowadays it is a common picture to see the workers overalls with the union button next to the shirts with the MTD logo: on demonstration, blockades, or regional or national coordinating meetings, which are meant as a starting point for new independent workers movement.

**Eduardo:** *A very beautiful demonstration was the one when when the comrades from Zanon decided to occupy the bridge again and we came for support. The comrades were already on the bridge and we arrived with our demonstration, with our white shirts with the MTD logo, which we always wear on protests. We sang the song which has now almost become an anthem: "Come here, come here, you will find a friend. As unemployed and employed together we will always win the fight". Both groups were singing this song and when both demonstrations met, people jumping and embracing each other – that was beautiful. Merging white and brown shirts, singing and embracing each other. That was really beautiful. I think that was the moment were we really found unity. The concrete synthesis of this situation was that the unemployed came here into the factory.*

Since the occupation more than fifty unemployed have been integrated into the staff of the factory. The workers of Zanon agreed on a standard wage of 800 Pesos. If the production yields more, the money is not spent on wage increases but on increasing the numbers of the work-force. In Argentina today 800 Pesos is a comparatively good wage, but still very little to live on. Therefore some comrades think that a wage increase should take precedence over too much solidarity. But so far no-one brought the issue up during assembly, which is why the old decision is still valid.

**Fredy:** *When the issue came up that we need support of more people and that unemployed people should get jobs here, a lot of people disagreed. Particularly for the older workers this was problematic. They had never experienced anything like this. Until the importance of it all was explained quite clearly at an assembly. This is how people understood why first of all it would be good for us to get this support and that it would also be a political success: that Zanon workers under self-management hire unemployed while the government is doing nothing.*

**Raul:** *Of course there were discussions about the issue. But we did not really talk in detail about the question if we should raise the wage a little so that we meet the level of the market basket (basic level of necessities), which is slightly higher than our wage. The most important question for everyone is the question of what will happen to the whole factory. The factory runs at only ten per cent of its capacity at the moment. If we manage to run it at 100 per cent we will make a real profit. And that is the concept: that this profit is not meant for an individual project, but for the good of all.*

### **"It all started with us developing things very slowly here in the factory".**

The occupation and the self-organised production at Zanon has a long prelude. Given that under the control of the management and the old union it was impossible to talk openly with each other inside the plant, people had to organise themselves outside. A small group started to organise

football matches on Sundays, in order to meet other comrades and talk. These football matches went on for one year. Each department had a team and each team a delegate. In this way they were able to keep in touch with all departments. This form of organising resulted in the establishment of an oppositional list of candidates which surprisingly was able to take over the works council (Comisión Interna) in 1998 and enforced the right to hold assemblies inside the factory.

**Raul:** *Initially we met comrades outside the factory, to drink beer and play football. This is how it started. Then things changed outside. The working class started to react. In Neuquén the first countrywide unemployed uprisings kicked off in 1996, in Cutral Co, only few kilometres away from here. These uprisings had an impact even in our factory, where everything was under tight control of the management. Things were discussed, opinions differed: from the usual opinion that this unrest was bad, that these people were lazy and only wanted money from the government without having to work; to the position that they were part of the working class and that their struggle is ours as well. At that time the old union bureaucracy was still in charge, there was no action, not even a declaration. So it was a combination of two things: firstly that we took the first steps, secondly that the situation inside the factory started to change. While we were still a small group we started to take part in demonstrations of the teachers, of the public sector workers and the unemployed. At the beginning we were only two, three or five people. Two guys carrying a banner and no one marched behind it. But we said: here we are. We told people in the factory about it and talked about it with the comrades. Within the factory we took the space to at least hold our assemblies here. It was tough work to achieve that. The management threatened us, there were legal charges. The assemblies were prohibited, they were only allowed in the union office outside the factory and after working-time. Legally this was controversial. All we achieved we mainly achieved because we broke the rules. It was a long struggle to enforce the assemblies. We first started to use the halfhour lunch-break in the canteen in order to talk to people. Each shift had half an hour, and we used this time. People did not have breaks together, while some were eating the others supervised the machines. Once we were more established we demanded common breaks. That was a blow to the company and they sued us over it. The enforcement of a common break was our first achievement. In hindsight it does not sound like much, but it was an enormous success. After that we had assemblies of one hour or as long as we needed for our agenda. These assemblies were then already part of the struggle.*

The workers started to resist the harassments and dismissals, which were common at Zanon. The management were creating pressure by using temporary contracts. But while trying to fight against this pressure, they discovered a legal clause saying that a copy of the terminated contract has to be sent to the union. Given that this did not happen they declared the termination of the work contracts as illegal and demand a permanent contract for the comrades, which they pushed through after a walk out. The first strike took place in July 2000 after the 22 year-old Daniel Ferras died in the factory after a heart attack, because the first-aid infrastructure had been scrapped. After nine days of strike the comrades made sure that the medical service was put back into place.

**Rosa:** *The trigger of the struggle was Daniels death. How can it be that such a company has not got the money for medical service!? Once you called in sick they sent a doctor to your home in order to check if you were really ill. They were able to spend money on that! There had been accidents before Daniel's death. A comrade fell onto the mills and was hurled against the wall. He ended up paralysed.*

**Ana:** *When the thing happened to my son they stopped production. Daniel was my son. He died because of the lack medical aid. At that time about 600 people worked here, I think. The doctor only stayed for two hours and the guy responsible for the first aid did not know what to do. There was no oxygen apparatus.*

*Then they called an ambulance, because they needed this apparatus. When the ambulance arrived from Neuquén, it was already too late.*

Daniel's mother Ana has been part of the Zanon staff since the end of 2002. She works together with two other female comrades in the kitchen where they make sandwiches and cakes for the early and late shift and cook lunch for the day shift, selling it at cost price.

**Ana:** *Previously I worked in the halls, where fruits are processed. I worked in a packaging company for 26 years. That was seasonal work. You only worked there for four or five months, during harvest time. The company was shut down ten or eleven years ago, simply overnight. I had worked there for 26 seasons. All people who had worked there became unemployed. Recently it got harder to find a job. Once you are over 40 you are seen as being too old and no one will employ you. When they offered me this job, I was very happy. I always supported the guys from the factory. When they were here, I popped by. When they organised the demonstration from the factory to Centenario, I went with them. When they did things, I was with them and they kept in touch with me. They also visited me and asked how I was and if I needed anything. I am grateful for this, because they never stopped visiting me.*

"You are the impetus which made us become the force which we are today" is written underneath the pictures of Daniel, which can be found on several walls in the factory. His death put the struggle against the murderous working conditions on the agenda. The dark side of the relatively high wages at Zanon was, apart from the prison like atmosphere, an unbearable work stress and frequent accidents.

**Raul:** *We started working here on four consecutive work contracts, each limited to six months. If you refused overtime you got the sack. If you had an accident or if you got sick, you got the sack as well. The factory was founded during the dictatorship and a despotic regime ruled inside. Any group which had anything to do with politics simply had no chance. A police-like company friendly union was in control. But seen from the outside it was a privilege to work in this factory. The first six months on the job were the worst of my entire working life, and I started working aged eleven. First of all I was shocked by the atomised machines, due to their deafening noise, which you had to scream over in order to communicate. The hellish work pace lead to accidents every other day, mainly hand injuries. And if you did have an accident it was always your own fault. They brought you in the office and finished you off. If you reacted to that in any way, you got the sack. They made us work double-shifts, sixteen hours, from six in the morning to ten in the night. For six months I practically had no day off. In every way this time of my life was miserable. In the factory your own colleagues made you work harder, because they were keen on the productivity bonus. Your very own colleagues told you: "the production runs poorly because this guy is not working well". That was an extreme pressure. I guess the underground work in the factory was the most revolutionary thing I ever did.*

**Fredy:** *The company was on the upturn, they sold loads. They paid us overtime, but they made a lot of money on our backs. Then they wanted to reduce the working hours and get rid off the time where we just sat and did nothing. They wanted to introduce a new working system, the flexible production. If I had nothing to do up there I was supposed to come down here and prepare the glazing. Or help a comrade. Or push a broom around. After they achieved that they allowed themselves to make people redundant. Because they did not want to pay overtime any more they started to increase the work intensity to the max. This is when the clashes between the management and workers started.*

**Julian:** *Daniel's death resulted in us becoming ever more united. Today there are hardly any accidents any more This is due to the situation and the way we work. If you work under pressure there are a lot of accidents. Under our control the number of accidents has decreased by 99 per cent. Sometimes accidents*

*occur, but no serious ones. Previously people got sprains, hand injuries. All due to the pressure. It was constantly on your mind that you have to meet the required work load, that otherwise they will give you a warning, that they can sack you.*

After the strike which followed Daniel's death the management opened the bankruptcy proceedings. It wanted to get rid of the rebellious work-force. The wages were frequently not paid on time and the workers did not receive the full amount. The comrades did not believe the employers were moaning about crisis and bankruptcy. They could see how many boxes of tiles were leaving the factory. They demanded that the company's balance was made public. After several short strikes the "34-days strike" claiming unpaid wages started in March 2001. The workers pitched a strike tent in front of the factory and survived on food donations.

**Rolando:** *In Argentina's past there was no situation like the one we experience today. We took the streets, blocked it and went around with a can collecting money in order to have something to eat. We went into the barrios and the people there helped us out a lot. We drove in the van, from house to house, and asked people for food which we then shared amongst the comrades. We distributed leaflets in the streets and collected money. I had never been a unionist or anything like it. I have always been a normal worker, but I thought that these activities were right, so I joined them.*

**Manotas:** *The conflict which lasted 34 days was the first one I took part in. For me it was the hardest of all. It was really cold, a lot of wind and rain. We had no food and no money. During an assembly we decided to form commissions amongst ourselves. I was in the commission which walked through the barrios, through all barrios of Neuquén Others made the conflict known in the whole country. Our task was to exchange leaflets for food, to explain the problem to the people and to appeal to their solidarity. Everyday we came back with a car load of food. Every comrade could at least take a bag of food back home, because there was no money. We established a strike fund, but only small change went into it. It was a difficult situation.*

The workers adopted methods of the *piqueteros*, of the unemployed. They blocked roads and closed the critical access points of Neuquén, which is enclosed by two rivers. They blocked the bridge leading to the neighbouring province Rio Negro.

**Manotas:** *Daily we went into town centre and blocked roads. In the part of town were the banks where, we blocked all streets. Our aim was to move the government to take care of the workers, because the government did nothing. One day we decided to block the bridge of Neuquén That was the biggest challenge we could come up with. We all went and blocked the bridge at eight o'clock in the morning. At seven in the evening they sent us a message that a meeting with the labour commission would take place and that the company wanted to negotiate. At eleven at night the company and the provincial government, which of course was on the side of the company, announced that the outstanding wages would be paid. We achieved what we had fought for and were proud of it. We celebrated it till three o'clock in the morning in front of the strike tent.*

*Then we went back to work. In June and July the company again started to talk about how bad the sales performance of the company was. We knew that the company sold 500,000 m<sup>2</sup> each month and that it made millions of US-Dollar returns. But they insisted on having no money. We had decided during an assembly that we would immediately go on strike if wages were not paid on pay day. And that was what happened, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October there was no money. We stopped production and thought: last time it took 34 days, this time may be two months. We repeated the same actions like during the 34-days strike. Collecting food, making the conflict known, some guys drove to Buenos Aires. A lot of organisations supported us. Comrades like you who were interested in the struggle and made it known helped us a lot.*

When Zanon switched off the ovens the workers saw it as a sign of imminent closure of the factory. They started the occupation in October. Due to a court sentence against Zanon for illegal lock-out the first eviction order was declared invalid. At the end of November Zanon sent letters of dismissal to all 380 workers. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of November the workers organised a demonstration to the provincial government building and burnt the letters. The building also nearly burnt down. A brutal chase through town kicked off and nineteen workers were arrested. But they had already won the support of the local population. The same afternoon 3,000 people took to the streets, the workers were released on the same day.

In December they started to sell stock which was granted by the court as compensations for the outstanding wages.

**Manotas:** *When we started selling we always asked ourselves how far it would go. We could only sell the stock. People supported us with food, but we did not want to be a burden on them for too long. So in February 2002 we decided during an assembly that we would take up production again and that everyone should get the same wage of 800 Pesos. The vote was unanimous. With some of the money we got from selling the stock we restarted production bit by bit. We began with 20,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Fortunately today we make more than 100,000 m<sup>2</sup> per month. But without neglecting politics. I think that production and politics go hand in hand. You cannot separate the one from the other.*

The prelude to this unusual occupation started rather traditionally: with taking over the works council (comision interna) and later on the leadership (comision directiva) of the little union SOECN. During the course of the conflict the former bureaucratic apparatus changed into something different.

**Fredy:** *Today it has become difficult to explain. Now that we have had the conflict you do not notice so much any more what each single committee does. Now we are a kind of core from which each activity initiates. The normal situation would be as follows: The union leadership sits in the union office and deals with all kind of problems of all factories. The works council works in the factory and takes its time in the works councils office. This would be the normal situation. But today we are all one core. Everyone has tasks, the union leadership and the works council, everyone has specific tasks, like making things public, union and other activities.*

**Eduardo:** *A comrade was once asked 'are you a left union?' 'No' he said. 'Not left, but we are also not right. We are a revolutionary union!'. He didn't want to describe himself as left wing, because the left, with their bureaucratic behaviour, had contributed to destroying processes like this one. We are against things like that. We have the trust in our capabilities as workers to do things ourselves.*

### **Assemblies, Over and Over Again**

The most important means to generalise the conflict within the factory and to make it an issue of everyone were and are the assemblies. Assemblies in the departments, of each shift, assemblies of the coordinators and general assemblies. Every now and then the workers organise discussion days, they reduce production to a minimum and meet in working groups in order to discuss. All decisions concerning production and politics are made within this structure.

**Mario:** *There is still a lot missing, it can still improve. But in general the way we deal with things is good, in the assemblies. Everything is decided rank-and-file, that is the most important issue. The majority makes decisions and according to that things are done.*

**Manotas:** *If this struggle has pushed things forward then it is due to the democratic ways it was and is led. The only authority is the assembly, the whole collective of the workers. It is not me in my position as coordinator, it is not Raul Godoy as the general secretary of the union who makes decisions, but the assembly of all workers decides what will be done and what not. The current union leadership has introduced this structure, this has to be acknowledged. Fortunately they were not bureaucrats. We did not have any experience with this structure. The people of the works council who later on took over the union leadership introduced the assemblies as a democratic method of decision-making. This structure is still valid and it is also much easier this way. In the assemblies we all have the right to voice our opinion and to vote – not in a secret ballot like the ruling class do and who after the vote does not want to remember anything. Here nothing gets forgotten. The assembly votes and the majority decides. I have lost votes in the assemblies. You have to stick to the decision, it does not matter if you lose or win, the important thing is that we decided together. This is the way we work. And there are the discussion days. The assemblies are important, but sometimes fluid communication cannot be achieved. During the discussion days we 270 people divide ourselves up into five groups. We debated all issues, like at the meeting of the coordinators: both politics and production. This helped us all to create consciousness. Because here in Argentina we have a major cultural problem, they killed our roots in the military dictatorship in the 70s.*

### **SOECN – Union of Workers and Employees of the Ceramic Industry in Neuquén**

In Argentina there are two main Peronist union umbrella organisations (CGT and CGT-d), they are bureaucratic organisations, true to the state and run by corrupt officials. The third umbrella organisation CTA was formed as an alternative ten years ago and has its main strongholds in the public sector. Its formation process was accompanied by combative rhetoric, but nowadays it hardly differs from the other two. The workers only ever call the unions “union bureaucracies” or shorter “the bureaucracy”. The SOECN was one of these Peronist employer-friendly unions. It organised 400 workers from four different factories: the tile producing factory Ceramica Zanon and the neighbouring Ceramica Neuquén, the brick factories Ceramica de Valle, which has also been occupied after long battles by its remaining seven workers in February 2003, and Ceramica Stefani in Cutral Co. Today the SOECN is an independent union. The workers who took over the works council in 1998 now makes up the union leadership. In December 2000 they managed to get the union out of the hands of the bureaucrats. Most of the workers see this fact as an important step in their struggle. The story of the decisive assembly is told again and again: the bureaucrats had set the time and place for the assembly, a Friday at 1 pm in Cutral Co, hoping that this way the Zanon workers would not be able to participate. The workers negotiations with the management to get leave for the day and to make up for the day later on failed. They decided to go anyway. Several buses carried the Zanon workers 100 km to Cutral Co, were they won the ballot. Some workers did not go to Cutral Co, but in solidarity they didn't go to work either.

The factory occupation gave the union a different role. It is not a workers representing body any more, which negotiates with the employers, but it leads a factory and a political process, together with the new structures of assemblies and coordinators. But even though now “everyone is one core” there are still union officials and works council members. Some of them have not spent a single hour at the machines since the occupation started. Even in an occupied factory such a division of labour bears the risk of bureaucratisation and “officialism's”. The criticism against

“those up there” does not target the coordinators so much, who still work in the production, but the unionists who use their position in order to not have to work and who hang out in the offices instead. The comrades at Zanon know about the problem. Currently a change of the statutes is being debated within the SOECN. A proposal has been made to reduce the duration of a position to two years.

**Julian:** *The rule is that no one can settle in a position. And there are no secret deals. If something has to be discussed, it is discussed to the end. It happened to me that I went past a group discussing politics and they asked me to join. You can take part in things and then you feel useful. You realise that your opinion is of interest. You can tell how you think things could be improved. This is why the department assemblies are held. The people in the departments are expected to think about how things should be run. For example in the sales department, there was a plan, but people wanted to do it differently. In the departments people talk and come up with things they disagree with, and in the general assembly all these opinions are gathered and we see what is best for all of us. It is not about what would be good for the union or certain people, but for everyone.*

**Daniel:** *Every two to three months we have discussion days. In smaller groups comrades find it easier to talk. Small groups are formed in the departments and comrades from the union leadership and coordinators come along and delegates from the respective department guide the discussion. They present things and people come up with their queries, draw conclusions and voice their opinion. All of it is written down. On the general assembly the outcome of all groups are gathered. This is quite democratic. Currently it is that some of the decisions that we made in the general assembly not been put into practice for various reasons. We keep on trying to find democratic ways to implement the decisions. The last discussion day was on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November. We talked in several meetings that we should have another one soon, probably in March. I acknowledge what the guys from the works council and the union leadership have done. They have done a lot of good things, here in the factory and outside, as well. This is why I joined the coordinators group, this group should be in line with the union. The discussion with the union guys about the fact that we have to organise ourselves better in order to proceed, results in all of us getting better. Some people say “We cannot do it this way”, then we say “OK, lets find a different solution”. And it works. You must not get stuck in your view of things. A lot of comrades from the union, the delegates or rank-and-file comrades have the same urge to constantly look for new solutions. If something goes wrong, we sit down and talk about how it could be dealt with in a better way.*

The assembly of the coordinators previously only dealt with question of the production but was then joined by comrades from the union.

**Manotas:** *We tried to work in an even more organised way. The meeting of the coordinators was good, but very separated from the political questions. We were cut off from that, so the urge arose that the union should also take part in the meeting of the coordinators. Now we meet every Monday at nine O'clock. The starting time is fixed, the end is not, because sometimes certain issues take a lot of time. At the meeting both production and politics are on the agenda: the general situation in the country, the local situation, the question of how we can proceed in the conflict and of what is the score in the production. The coordinators transmit all this to the comrades. Additionally a comrade of each department joins the meeting. This helped us a lot to work in a more organised way. Because we are normal workers. We have to run this factory, which is not an easy thing to do.*

Department and shift assemblies are usually called for by coordinators or unionists.

**Mario:** *The guys from the union leadership usually arrive with proposals for the agenda already prepared. They call for an assembly because there are several issues which have to be talked about. But there is always the opportunity to raise your voice, to talk and to ask questions about whatever you like. You have the freedom to not to stick to the agenda and to talk about something else. That happens as well. People got used to it. All kinds of issues are brought up. And the assemblies take as long as required, two, three, four hours, till anyone has any issue left which they want to talk about. Political issues are also dealt with. Some like it, others like it less. I do not like politics. Others do, then the discussions start. Some get involved more, some less. Sometimes you have to end up getting involved without having wanted to.*

### **“Those up there...”**

Besides all the enthusiasm for the political project, the main thing which happens in the factory is still work – an annoying necessity which, like anyone else, the comrades of Zanon like to escape from. At Zanon there are still factory guards, bags are controlled and people have to punch in and out – symbols of the factory regime which you would not expect in a self-managed factory. The guards main task is to secure the factory against attacks from the outside. During the initial period of the occupation there have been acts of sabotage like cut drive belts. Not all workers are fond of the politicisation at Zanon. Also in the self-organised factory they only do their job. The time clock was never been abolished in the first place, sensitive areas are still being locked up and the assembly decided to re-introduce bag controls after too many tools and cleaning material disappeared from the occupied factory.

**Rosa:** *Some comrades still do not get it, that it is our factory now and that they harm us all. They think that Zanon will come back one day and that therefore it does not matter.*

**Daniel:** *In the long run it will not be necessary to have a coordinator in every department in order to make it work. It is a question of mentality. It is not like in the past any more, when behind each worker a foreman had to make sure that work is done. The consciousness of “I do my job in order to earn my money” has to cease, instead we should be aware that “We all do our job in order to earn the wage for everyone and we all earn the same”. Some people still do not get this. They do not consider that we are all affected if they do not do their work. He might earn the same, but his comrade has to work double. There are not many people any more who think like in the past. And some are just tired.*

**Fredy:** *It does not happen often, but there have been cases of comrades who did not behave correctly. They leave work early without telling anyone or instead of doing their job they go to other departments. And the problem of lack of respect. May be it is due to all of us being quite tense. There are people who are very tense, who cannot cope and then take it out on other comrades.*

Due to the problems with the work discipline the workers decided on a catalogue of sanctions. Whoever comes late often or stays away from work un-excused or does not appear at their workplace after punching in has to expect wage reductions. The catalogue is displayed as a threat in a showcase but so far it has not been put into action. But there have been suspensions because of threatening other comrades.

Cepillo who has been elected as one of the main coordinators for the production tells that he is put into a hierarchical position. He spends a lot of time running through the factory trying to mediate in conflicts and disagreements in order to settle them before they become a big problem and a question of sanctions. At the production lines despite all rank-and-file democracy there is still talk and complaint about 'those up there'.

**Mario:** *Every now and then I have my little problems with those up there, with the union officials. Not with the comrades here in the department and there are also no problems with the coordinators. They are comrades, as well, they work next to you in the department. But the union officials are different, they do a different job. And there are some... but they are fortunately not all, they are only a minority. They proposed themselves that an official who does not work well can simply be recalled by the assembly. But that has not happened yet. Such a case has never been debated at an assembly. In my opinion this has to be debated.*

Theoretically everyone has the opportunity to voice all criticisms and proposals in the assembly. But even in an occupied factory, there are some annoyances that people complain about in small circles. Here too, a certain self-confidence is required to raise unpleasant issues in the assemblies.

**Fredy:** *If I have a criticism I can go and explain it, but there is also a difficult side to it. It's not all rosy here, as we often say. If I go and criticise, it could trigger an argument. Yesterday at the meeting we talked about a particular problem and a comrade said to me: "If the problem has already existed for two months, why did you not come earlier, we could have dealt with it a long time ago". And I tell him: "No, the whole story is quite different", then the argument starts, because I called a spade a spade. If you talk openly it can trigger arguments. But you cannot shut up either, because then everything might end up messy.*

The beginning of the year was relatively calm at Zanon. During the time before the renewed eviction threat in March 2003 there was not much pressure from the outside and relatively few political actions took place. During this period the internal conflicts gained all the more importance. "I am fed up with listening to everybody moaning that the other shift works too little or does not clean things after work", tells **Cepillo** annoyed after one of his tours through the factory. Again and again this kind of arguments had to be settled in the assemblies.

The dynamic of the occupation, which makes it a progressive political project, is less due to the fact that people work self-managed without bosses, but to the fact that the factory became a focus point of the movement. As soon as the movement loses drive, the annoyances of daily working life catch up with the comrades at Zanon. The self-management of such problems is tiring. Some comrades would rather hand over the whole responsibility again, particularly facing the reality that as a small minority in Argentina they are under constant threat.

**Eugenio:** *If you ask me about the future... I want that everything will sort itself out, that the boss, the owner, comes back and gets things running again. I want that we do not depend on the sales of tiles any more in order to get our wage. That I can hand over these worries. Today we worry double. Previously you only took care of your family, today you have to take care of the company, as well, that it runs and that you can take back something to your family. You have these double worries on your mind.*

**Mario:** *It would be good if there was a solution – does not matter if with Zanon, another owner or the government – mainly that we only have to deal with things that we know how to do, with work. That more qualified people than us do the management. Apart from the fact that we managed quite well ourselves.*

**Eugenio:** *Yes, but you get tired, as well. It is such a long struggle and we still continue struggling. The wheel turns more slowly. If you had asked me the question when the wheel was turning full gear I would have answered: Bosses, piss off, we manage well here, we earn our wage. But after things developed so slowly here, it is a little bit tiresome.*

**Mario:** *They just would not let us produce and sell in peace. There is always someone placing obstacles in our way, be it Zanon or the government. They will never let us simply continue. That is how I see it. Although it would be great if we could continue working like we do work now. But they will not let us. They*

*do not like it, all the changes. If we would have a better unity, if more factories would join the movement, if it all would gain power then things would become possible. But that is not easy, we are only few.*

Short after these conversations the next action for possession is remitted against the workers of Zanon. A lot of comrades struggle hard with the constant insecurity. They cannot make long-term plans or financial decisions. The struggle demands big personal efforts: some married couples broke up over it. Nevertheless the comrades at Zanon are convinced that they are doing the right thing and are determined to defend their project.

**Delia:** *None of us will simply accept being sent home. Whoever makes the decision to kick us out should know that we will not go just like that. They will have to get us out, and all the costs...*

**Fredy:** *Here are a lot of people willing to defend their work-place. It would be good if we would all be here if something happens. But I hope that it will not happen, otherwise it could have very bad consequences. Many are ready to sacrifice their life in order to defend their project. It is not about the material loss, but about the dignity.*

The Zanon workers have already proved that if necessary they are ready to defend their factory with counter-violence. The last time was in October 2002 when former Zanon workers who were active in the old union bureaucracy and who have always been and still are on the side of the owner, attacked the factory together with paid kids from the suburbs, trying to re-conquer it. The workers secured themselves and the factory behind barricades of pallets of tiles and the aggressors were driven away by sling-shots and a sortie of the MTD. After that the slings became a part of the common working clothes for a while. The munition is self-produced: stone pebbles rotated in the earth mills ground down to marbles – the famous white marbles which became a popular souvenir for visitors to the factory. In mid-March 2003 a new sentence concerning Zanon was passed which allows the liquidator the re-appropriation of the factory. The comrades started the mobilisation against the eviction immediately. Three buses full of supporters from Buenos Aires arrived for a day of action on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March. The supporters are lead by the “Mothers” (Madres de Plaza de Mayo), and their chair woman Hebe Bonafini. She declares that in case of eviction she will be inside the factory herself in order to defend it. The CTA, one of the three bureaucratic union umbrella organisation, announces that it will call for a general strike in the region against the eviction.

After a tour through the factory, a press conference and an open debate, about 1,500 people demonstrate in the town centre of Neuquén. Despite the general support, ranging from unemployed organisations to celebrities, members of parliament and the bishop of Neuquén, the eviction is fixed for the 8<sup>th</sup> of April. The night before all Zanon workers stayed in the factory. They declared that they are going to defend the factory with their lives. The factory gate was blocked with tile pallets. On the roof workers kept guards behind pallets. Groups with slingshots make their rounds on the factory premises. Despite the cold in Patagonia there were already a lot of supporters present during the night. During the morning the crowd in front of the factory grew to 3,000 people. The teachers and the employees of the public sector are on strike. At one o'clock, when the news came in that the liquidators are on their way to the factory, the drumming and singing ceased. But the company reps came without the police and after a short discussion with the workers and their lawyers they had to go again. Facing the determination of the workers and the wide-ranging support the provincial governor announces that due to the unforeseeable consequences he would not provide police force for the eviction. When it becomes clear that this eviction attempt failed too, the historical day ends with a big celebration. “Zanon writes history”, the

headlines of the local newspapers announce the next day and the workers share this view: *"I think we are writing a page in the history book now and I hope that this particular history will have a happy end when we turn the page"*, a Zanon worker said during the day.

After this story turned out well the workers wanted more.

*"The day today and its events shows us that we reached a turning point of our struggle. After the support we got from the people we are not afraid of a possible eviction any more We demand the only possible, long-lasting and reliable solution for this conflict: the nationalization of Zanon". "First we wanted to take over the works council, then the union. After the union we wanted the factory for the workers. Today we want a more just society for all workers and we will not move a single step backwards"*.

*(Raul Godoy and Alejandro Lopez, Zanon worker and chairman of the union SOECN, 8<sup>th</sup> of April 2003 in front of the factory)*

### **"We want more..."**

For a long time the struggle at Zanon has been about more than securing work-places. In this factory a different society is discussed, the comrades fight for it and take first steps in this direction. The aim of production is supposed to be not profit, but useful goods and a better life for everyone. Regularly the Zanon workers donate a part of the production for schools, hospitals, communal kitchens and social projects. This is also a way to thank the solidarity the Zanon workers received. In the initial phase of the struggle even the inmates in the neighbouring prison gave a part of their scarce food rations to the Zanon workers, using a human rights organisation as a transmitter. As a sign of gratitude the prison visitors now have a tiled waiting room.

**Manotas:** *We want to give something back to the people, by donating what we produce. Next week we will make a donation for a school for "children with other capabilities". They need help and we have a comrade here who has a daughter with similar difficulties. May be we can help them out with a tiled floor. But we also want to make sure that other people support them, as well. The government will not give them anything. We also made a donation for the hospital, to give something back after all the solidarity we received from people. For example the solidarity of the nurses and doctors who came here and worked voluntarily. They hitch-hiked to come up here or even came on foot. We will not forget that.*

**Raul:** *We understood these fundamental questions as the basis of the struggle, and we understood them at the right moment, when we had to struggle in order to defend the factory. Then we all grasped that we would not be able to do that on our own. It all came from the general solidarity, so we have to offer the factory's service to the common good. That is why people took the Zanon struggle up as their own struggle.*

*Everyone here in this factory knows that we cannot achieve anything on our own, that it is a big fight. Some want to go much further, some want to keep the achieved status, others say "this is how far I go". But everyone knows that it is a thing of the general public and that we have no chance without the general support. Not all have this consciousness, not all think that the unity between unemployed and workers is right, not all think that we have to topple the government, or that we have to build a workers' government. Of course not all think this way, but to all of us it is clear that we have to defend ourselves together.*

The Zanon workers are a tiny minority: the 15,000 to 20,000 workers of occupied companies are only a minority amongst the eight million wage workers in Argentina, and the combative faction of Zanon, Brukmann and a few other companies are only a minority within this movement.

**Eduardo:** *On the first anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> (uprising of December 2001) we were about 100,000 people on the streets. But we are 35 Million altogether! The employed working class are eight million, the*

*unemployed are five million – and then only 100,000 on the Plaza de Mayo. And those 100,000 do not have a unified line. Brukmann, MTD, Zanon, the occupied supermarket Tigre and some barrio assemblies and one of the other parties: we only managed to get 2,000 to 3,000 people on the street. This is all difficult, but one way or the other, we have to keep on trying.*

*The workers did not take part in the uprising of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup>, they did not feel part of the movement which toppled the De La Rúa government, like the middle class or the youth. The middle class said “Basta, it is enough” and started a huge mobilisation which toppled De La Rúa. The middle class is the social basis of the Radical Party. The working class is the basis of Peronism and it has not yet broken with Peronism. A stronger movement is necessary to create such kind of rupture. Clashes with the police, finishing off President Duhalde...Recently an old comrade told me during a conversation that in the 70s he had been in a very combative Peronist union. He still sees himself as a Peronist. A few days ago he went to the party office of the Peronists and cursed them for not supporting the Zanon struggle. He called them son of bitches and left. Although he sees himself as a Peronist, he curses the party. A rupture would mean that he would not see himself as a Peronist any more, that we get rid off the stuff that Peronism had put in our heads. The youth does not have this problem, but the working class has.*

The comrades of Zanon try to make their actions become a starting point of a broader movement. In Neuquén there is already the regional coordination *Coordinadora Regional del Alto Valle*, an alliance of occupied companies, unemployed, oppositional workers, social movements, left groups and parties. Similar coordinating initiatives exist on a country-wide level. These are first signs of a growing power which is able to go beyond experimenting with self-management in marginalised areas, and to attack the capital relation.

**Eduardo:** *We see ourselves in a historical process, not only the fact that we do normal jobs under self-management. We are workers of Zanon, we are part of the MTD, to be able to be here, to work here, to go to the demonstrations, to be part of it all, for me that is it... I know that I am part of history in the making. It does not matter if we lose or if we win, we want to make sure that the people who come after us will know: that is what the Zanon workers did. They won the support of the people, they demanded disclosure of the companies balance sheet, they occupied the factory and made it run, they created jobs. Like the comrade Lopez said on the Plaza de Mayo: We show on a small scale that we can self-manage the factory, why should workers not be able to run the country. These are words of a comrade who is not active in any party.*

**Raul:** *We are optimistic because although we are only a small group we have inspired a lot of people, we have been received with respect, we were supported. Our message is not: occupy the factories and make them run like we did, because other people might think that it would be too difficult for them. We propose that we start organising ourselves, that we create a network. We want to put across that things are possible, that we have to start to conquer the space for it. Like the half hour break which we enforced at the beginning: let us start to enforce things like that. Once we create a space for democracy the comrades themselves will say how things should proceed. But we have to start conquering the space for autonomy, for our own decisions. There is a lot of work ahead of us. You have to expand it, it will not happen automatically. The rest is done by the social conditions. It is not that a small group starts and bit by bit it grows and grows. There are spontaneous uprisings where new things are created. We have to be prepared.*

**Eduardo:** *After the uprising of the 19th/20th something big happened in Argentina. I was really impressed. I was in Buenos Aires during these two days. Also afterwards, during the big mobilisation which toppled Rodriguez Saa. I think these incidents really changed the consciousness of people, although now the situation is rather calm. Amongst the youth a lot has changed. I am very optimistic for the future. Since the 19th/20th it is not like it was before, when they called us the Generation X, which only watches telly and is only interested in consuming and becoming famous. I was in Buenos Aires, at a meeting of 170 young*

people, the initiation of the movement No Pasaran. There were youth of left parties, independent youth, a-level students, guys who had just met, who have a rock-band, who came together because they are rebellious. They were politicised. In the heart of the uprising an enormous politicisation took place. They wanted to do something. After the meeting they set off and made leaflets, they went on-line, they wanted to reach out to the youth, to the thousands of youth in the barrios, in the schools in the factories. Now it is the war (in Iraq), which is the really big issue for young people.

We defend the occupied factories, Zanon and Brukman are the avant-garde amongst the occupied companies. If we do not manage to reach the other workers, all this will not have a future. The future lies in the hands of those workers on whose heads the union apparatus is still stamping. But the country is in crisis. Those above cannot govern like in former days. And we down here do not want to continue living like in former days. A new 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> has to come, but on a larger scale. It must not result in yet another Duhalde, but in a workers government. This workers government is not yet on the agenda, as many thought. It was not a revolution. It was a kind of preparation. Something that tells you that something bigger is in the making. I am 28 years old and I am sure that I will witness much bigger movements – apart from the fact that I am already now with Zanon. In the future there will be big upheavals, Latin America is on this path.

### **Class Struggles in Argentina**

Argentina has a long history of workers struggles. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants from Europe brought anarchist and socialist ideas with them and founded the first unions in Latin America at the Rio de la Plata. But Argentina also has a long tradition of dictatorships and state massacres. A particularly Argentinian phenomena is Peronism, named after the military leader Peron, who came to power after a coup in 1943 and was elected three years later. With a mixture of nationalism and clever welfare politics he and his wife Evita became idols of workers and the poor. He managed to integrate the workers movement into the state and to transform the unions into corrupt bureaucratic apparatuses. At the end of the sixties workers rebelled against the union apparatus and the dictator. In 1969 an uprising of workers and students against the dictator Onganía took place in the industrial town of Córdoba. In the following years workers organised wildcat strikes and factory occupations. They enforced assemblies and rank-and-file democracy. Forty per cent of the big industrial companies were still state owned. Therefore the workers struggles immediately got a political dimension. In the streets students and workers fought together, “Neither coup, nor election – Revolution!” , was the slogan of the union at FIAT, which has been taken over by worker activists. Several guerilla groups appeared, amongst others the left-Peronist group Montoneros. Peronism had been criminalised in 1955. Now Peronism was supposed to help the state out of its difficult situation: Peron was brought back from exile. Nearly one million people greeted him at the airport. The right-wing Peronists carried out a massacre amongst the Montoneros, on the pretext that they had planned the assassination of Peron. Peron was re-elected in 1973 and immediately started to criminalise and persecute the left. Peron died in 1974, in March 1976 another military coup took place and the most brutal dictatorship in Latin America began. Between 1976 and 1983 the military made 30,000 people 'disappear'. Most of the victims were workers who were active politically or in unions. The shadows of the dictatorship are still acute in Argentina today, perceptible as widespread fear. Initially the military had the support of the middle class which hoped for a stabilisation of the national situation and an economic upturn. There was hardly any protest against the frequent arrests. “They will have got involved in something”, was the general excuse. Under the rule of the military a small circle got really rich, but a broader economic boom did not take off, so the trust in the dictatorship diminished. The military tried to save their image by starting the Falkland-War against Britain in 1982, over the Malwin-

Islands. The attempt failed, the resistance of the people grew and in October 1982 the military allowed elections again.

The ensuing civilian presidents continued the neo-liberal course of the military. They privatised the oil company YPF, the telecommunication company and other state-owned enterprises. By the mid-90s unemployment had risen to unprecedented 20 per cent. In 1993, ten years after the end of the dictatorship an uprising took place in Santiago del Estero after wages of public workers had been cut. The birth scenario of the *piquetes*, the road blockades which give name to the organised unemployed *piqueteros*, was the upheaval in Cutral Co, in the province Neuquén. In 1996 the inhabitants blocked the little town for days, in order to protest against the dismissal of oil workers. After the slump in 1998 the road blockades and local upheavals become more frequent. In December 2001, Argentina sees the Argentinazo, the general uprising. On December 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, the fear which had ruled the country since the dictatorship was collectively overcome. Despite a state of emergency people take the streets en-masse, they topple various governments and start to organise their lives themselves. In assemblies of the barrios (neighbourhoods) they experiment with rank-and-file democracy and they initiate various self-aid projects. Nevertheless the movement does not manage to develop a similar impact as did the workers struggles in the 70s. The situation in the companies stays calm. Since the uprising there have not been bigger strikes yet. The workers are still under the control of the union apparatuses. Today Peronism – the hope that the state or the right man at its top can provide for a better life – still has a strong influence in Argentina. Of course, workers take part in the protests, as neighbours in the assemblies or demonstrators in the streets – but they have not re-discovered their actual power as workers to disrupt production yet. So far this power has not been shown in the core of valorisation, only at its margins. The strongest figures in class struggle in Argentina today are the organised unemployed and the occupied factories.

### **Cooperatives, Nationalisation and Workers Control – Notes on the dilemma of self-management in capitalism**

Over half of Argentina's industrial capacity lays idle. In this dramatic crisis a lot of workers decide to occupy their companies and to continue production under self-management. The occupations are projects of survival in a defensive situation. But they raise questions which go beyond the immediate aim of sustaining ones own workplace. More than 10,000 workers in Argentina today question private property practically and they have to enforce themselves against the power of the state, sometimes violently. They have the experience that they are able to organise production themselves. In a company without bosses nothing is taken for granted any more, nothing has to be accepted as given. There are no foremen any more, workers change working times and work organisation according to their needs and they decide what and how things are produced in assemblies. The aim of production is not profit any more, but an income for as many people as possible, the production of sensible things under bearable conditions. Sounds like a little bit of communism already.

But self-managed companies like islands in the ocean of capitalist crisis are contradictory projects, which easily can get stuck and become self-management of misery. The mere fact that a few thousand workers work on their own account in derelict factories does not necessarily have general consequences. The capitalist magazine *The Economist* (9<sup>th</sup> of November 2002) worries a bit about the "erosion of private property rights", but is generally optimistic: "This movement does not threaten capitalist enterprises" – because the re-opening of factories under workers control

would not only help the workers, but also the employers, because it would save machinery from decay and vandalism. The Economist-journalist did not come to this conclusion themselves, they quote two representatives of the MNER, the national movement of self-managed companies. The MNER organises about 8,000 workers who work in about eighty self-managed cooperatives. Most of the occupied companies opted for forming cooperatives, thereby being able to at least avoid eviction and forced sale. A precondition for this legalisation is that workers take over the debts of the former owner. Consequently the pressure on the workers to produce productively and according to the markets needs is high. So far no cooperative has failed completely, but a lot of them can only pay low wages and see themselves forced to make cuts in social benefits and working conditions, or even to dismiss workers. In some cooperatives the wage is hardly enough to make a living. The occupiers are able to suspend capitalist command within the company, but they cannot control the market. On the market they are forced to compete with other companies which they can only undercut by increasing their own exploitation. There are numerous examples throughout history of the tendency of cooperatives to increase work intensity and to reproduce capitalist structures, reacting to the pressure of the general social relations. Facing the large numbers and tenacity of the occupations, the state introduced new decrees for expropriation in the city of Buenos Aires and the surrounding region. According to this decree companies can be "expropriated" and handed over to the cooperatives. These new expropriation decrees have two sides to them. The private property, which the workers have put into question by the occupation, is finally re-installed, because the machinery and buildings are handed over for a limited period (generally for two years, in some cases for longer). Meanwhile the state guarantees the owner a rent. After the termination of the period the workers are supposed to have the right to buy the company first. At this stage the company remains under supervision of a judge and a trustee, who take care of the interest of the creditor. In contrast to the owners, the workers do not get subsidies. By putting in their work they are supposed to turn the scrap metal, which lays idle in the factories, into capital. If they manage to do this, they have the right to buy it (thereby the creditor would re-appropriate their work). During the two years period they are not owners, but they carry the whole risk and they do not have any rights or wage claims which they previously had as workers.

The MNER demanded a trust fund to be set up and a change to the bankruptcy laws, in order to give these legal processes of expropriation an institutionalised framework. The MNER is supported by groups within the church, by fractions within the stateist union bureaucracy, by Peronists and centre-left parties. Given the character of these forces the suspicion that the main aim of their support is to prevent the movement from leaving the boundaries of legality, does not seem out of the blue. Their suggestion to the workers of the occupied companies is to legalise their status as cooperatives and to aim for "realistic solutions".

**Raul:** *The MNER is a mixture of unions, of deals with the government and a lot of sacrifice – from the side of the workers not from those in leadership. As more companies got occupied the government started a policy which was meant to curb this tendency. Suddenly a whole apparatus was unleashed from above comprising of judges, members of parliament, civil servants and lawyers. They try to handle the question of the occupied companies in the same way as they try to domesticate the workers movement using the union bureaucracy, or the piqueteros by negotiating with some of them and creating a piquetero-bureaucracy. They try to create a bureaucracy which is willing to negotiate and is distant from the workers. The MNER more or less fulfils this function. At the beginning when the MNER's character was not that clear, we suggested common meetings. But they did not want to join up with rebels who created chaos. They rather rely on the legal path. Although they talk a lot about struggle, their actual practise looks different. Most of the companies have been occupied out of an emergency situation. There was no previous plan to do it. In*

*most of the cases no organised people or comrades with a clear vision were involved. They acted spontaneously, out of necessity and anger. The next day they did not know what to do, for example if they are supposed to hand in a claim to the department of employment. Often the first reaction of workers in such a situation is to go to a lawyer. And if there is a lawyer with a visiting card who tells them that he would be there for them if any problem turns up... They provide a whole apparatus who very much takes care of all issues. Nevertheless there are a lot of comrades who belong to the MNER, but who individually or as a group take part in our meetings. They do not leave the MNER, but they are aware of the fact that we have to lead the struggle together. Cooperative or not, we are all dependent on the market. You have to face the competitors, you have to lower wages, cut costs, you become a competitor of the other workers. This is why we demand nationalisation, not because we think that the state is something nice. This is a state of the employers, a capitalist state, a repressive apparatus against workers and people, but we say that it should guarantee the basic conditions for production so that we can continue working and organise ourselves – exactly in order to destroy this state and create a different one.*

Zanon and some other occupied companies demand “nationalisation under workers control” instead of building cooperatives. They neither want to become employers nor employees of the state. They demand from the state the provision of a general set-up: the state is supposed to finally expropriate building, machines and patents without the workers having to pay compensation, to hand the company over to the workers in order to enable them to produce socially sensible goods under self-management. They do not want to buy the means of production. The state is supposed to provide them and otherwise keep out of it given that the workers themselves know how to handle the production. The propagated production of “goods for the common interest” is more than a moral demand. If the state would guarantee the purchase of products for public projects the pressure of market competition would at least be lessened. Under the pressure of the general situation the workers of the textile factory Brukmann finally decided to form the “*Cooperative of the 18<sup>th</sup> of December*”, named after the date of the occupation, one day before the general uprising. Over Easter 2003 they were evicted. Since then the factory in the *barrio Once*, right in the centre of Buenos Aires, has been fenced off with metal barriers and put under constant police surveillance. The attempt to re-occupy the factory ended up in street fights. After this failed attempt the workers installed a strike tent on the street in front of the factory. They stayed there during the whole Argentinian winter and protested in various forms for the hand-over of the factory. At the same time they were engaged in a legal process against Brukmann, aiming at expropriation. The expropriation was tied to two preconditions: the workers had to form a cooperative and the company Brukmann had to be declared bankrupt. Both things happened and on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2003 the town parliament of Buenos Aires decided to expropriate Brukmann. After the workers of Brukmann had refused this kind of legalisation for a long time and proposed more radical projects, it is on one hand quite a huge concession that one of the most famous exponents of factories “under workers control” now has finally become a cooperative. On the other hand it is a big success that after such a long time the workers managed to go back into the highly symbolic factory in the town centre of the capital. They did not let themselves be pushed into the outskirts and they can continue their project together. Without their tenacious actions this would not have been possible, but they would not have been able to continue sitting in the strike tent for an indefinite period of time, living on donations. Some kind of solutions had to be found and there was enormous rejoicing after the decision of the parliament, although the comrades surely know that this is no “solution”. The legal form which the individual company takes is surely less important for the future of the movement than the question of its potential to spread. Will the self-managed companies remain isolated, will they remain islands or will they form part of a wider (inter-

national) movement which is able to question private property and the relations of production fundamentally? The question whether the occupied factories will at some time enter the history books as a nice episode or whether they will actually be the starting point of something new, does not solely depend on the developments in Argentina. In any case, the workers have already won something: the experience which they make during the occupation cannot be taken away from them and we can learn a lot from them.

**Julian:** *I think the most important thing that we have demonstrated is the fact that it is possible. They have always discriminated against us. They have always said that a worker is not able to do anything else but work. We have proven that we can handle anything ourselves once we work together. It all started with the struggle for our jobs, for a dignified way to work instead of miserable social benefits. And this should be clear to other workers: that the struggle against the loss of jobs does not have to be a meaningless and insignificant struggle. This message is independent from the question of how the struggle at Zanon will end. The struggle could have various outcomes: may be the owner will return, may be he will sell the factory, a lot of things might happen. But our aim is clear: we want to offer the factory to the service for the common interest, we want to produce in a way which improves life for everyone. Sometimes I imagine how it would be if there were a lot of Zanons, in this country and anywhere else. That would be a completely different reality, we would all think about everyone, no matter if we are ten streets away from each other, ten kilometres or ten thousand kilometres...*

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### Timeline

1980	Opening of the ceramics factory, Zanon in Neuquén.
1983	End of the military dictatorship in Argentina.
1993	Advanced technology introduced in Zanon with the new porcelain line.
1996	Uprising in Cutral Co, Neuquén province, against the Privatisation of the oil company YPF.  Beginning of the <i>piquetes</i> , the street blockades as a form of action of the unemployed.
October 1998	At Zanon the opposition list candidate Marrón took over the works council (Comisión Interna).
July 2000	The death of Zanon worker Daniel Ferrás due to missing medical equipment in the factory. The 'nine day strike' enforced the reintroduction of the medical services.
December 2000	The opposition list took over the leadership (Comisión Directiva) of the union SOECN.

January 2001	Six day strike over unpaid wages
March 2001	In response to the complaints of financial crisis by Zanon, the workers demanded the open publication of the accounts sheets.
April / May 2001	The 34 day strike over outstanding wages, after the company and provincial government's commitment to pay the overdue wages.
June – September 2001	Wages outstanding, work stoppages, state substitution of overdue wages.
September 2001	Zanon begins to shut down sections of the factory.
October 2001	Occupation of the factory. The self organisation of production is stopped by the blockage of the gas supply.
November 2001	Judgement against Zanon management over the earlier lockout. The workers get stored produce as compensation for unpaid wages.
28 November 2001	Zanon sends dismissal notices to the entire workforce.
30 November 2001	Demonstration to the government, with heavy confrontations and arrests. The release of the arrested workers after a further demonstration on the same day.
December 2001	Tile sales begin at the factory gates.
19 December 2001	The Zanon workers donate tiles for the local hospital in Centenario. The tiles were laid by the unemployed workers of the MTD.
19 and 20 December 2001	Uprising in Argentina
January 2002	The proposal by Zanon to reopen the factory with a workforce of only 62 workers and with a cut in wages was refused by the workers.
27 February 2002	The workers assembly decides to take over the production with an equal wage of 800 pesos for everyone. They divide themselves into three shifts and form commotions for press, publicity, sales, buying, legal, security, production, planning and work security.
March 2002	The production starts again under workers control. The Mapuche offer the Zanon workers the clay from their land as raw material.
April 2002	First meeting with the occupied Brukmann factory in Buenos Aires. First edition of the common workers' newspaper 'Nuestra Lucha' (Our Struggle).
May 2002	First eviction attempt. The court permits the bankruptcy commission the seizure of the factory. The workers do not let them in.
June 2002	After a new Obrero (worker) line of tiles the Zanon workers bring out the Mapuche series, four models which they have developed in cooperation with the Mapuch community have called Mapuch-struggle Kalfukura, Meripan, Lexfaru and Puran.

26 June 2002	The Avellaneda massacre: After a blockade of a bridge in Buenos Aires by unemployed organisations the police shot two <i>piqueteros</i> Maximiliano Kosteki and Darío Santillán the the Avellaneda train station.
August 2002	Twenty members of the unemployed organisation, MTD Neuquén begin working at Zanon. Two eviction attempts. First meeting of the Coordinadora Regional of the Alto Valle.
September 2002	Second meeting with the occupied factories of Brukmann
October 2002	Third eviction attempt by the former company union with help from hired youths. Application for expropriation and nationalisation by Zanon.
February 2003	Thirty new workplaces in the occupied factory.
March 2003	New eviction threats via a new legal judgement. Days of action in the factory and in Neuquén, with the support of a caravan from Buenos Aires with the 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo'. Third meeting with the occupied factory in Rosario.
8 April 2003	The forth, and up to now last, eviction attempt is resisted.
June 2003	The production has risen to 120 000 m <sup>2</sup> per month. Which is 15% of the total factory capacity and 50% of the production before the owners left the factory.