Alternate Routes: A Journal of Critical Social Research, 36(1), 148-155 (2026)

Reckoning with the Past, Grappling with the Present: Social Struggles, Authoritarianism and Democracy in Argentina

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ABSTRACT: March 24, 2026, marked the fiftieth anniversary of Argentina's 1976 military coup, a turning point that inaugurated both a brutal dictatorship and a profound political, social, and economic transformation. The anniversary coincides with the presidency of Javier Milei, whose far-right agenda has renewed debates about the long-term legacies of authoritarianism and neoliberal restructuring. This article examines the historical trajectory linking the dictatorship (1976–1983) to contemporary Argentina, focusing on the working-class struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that became central targets of military repression. Rather than emphasizing only the victimization of those killed, imprisoned, or exiled, it highlights their political agency and aspirations for a more just, post-capitalist society. By analyzing the destruction of labor militancy and popular power, the discussion explores the dictatorship's enduring economic, social, and political consequences, the conditions that enabled Milei's rise, and the challenges facing contemporary movements seeking to resist his attacks on workers and recover transformative political horizons.

KEYWORDS: Argentina; Military Dictatorship; Working-Class Struggles; Neoliberalism; Javier Milei

Introduction

March 24 2026 marked the 50th anniversary of the 1976 military coup d'état, a watershed in the modern history of Argentina. The coup was the starting point not only of a bloody dictatorship but also of a structural shift that thoroughly transformed the country politically, socially and economically. This year's commemoration is particularly meaningful both because what happened half a century ago remains such a vivid memory for many of us and because the anniversary finds us struggling to find ways to counteract President Javier Milei's (2023-2027) cruel far right experiment. It is in this context that questions seeking to clarify the trajectory that goes from the dictatorship to Milei's presidency become urgent. So does the need to focus not simply on the victimhood of the tens of thousands of activists killed, imprisoned or forced into exile by the dictatorship but rather on their political determination and their search for a more just post-capitalist future.

In the discussion below, we focus on the transformation of working class struggles during the 1960s and 1970s, struggles that became emblematic of a period of widespread political contestation and experimentation, and the main target of the 1976-1983 dictatorship. We do so to ask what forms of power had become so threatening that the dictatorship would destroy them by fire and sword. A few more questions guide us through the historical trajectory of the last 50 years: What have been the economic, social and political legacies of the dictatorship? What historical processes help us make sense of the election of Javier Milei? More important, what is necessary to stop Milei's offensive against workers and regain the initiative to imagine a better society?

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The Trajectory of Working-Class Struggles Before 1976

The transformation of working class capabilities in Argentina since the mid-1940s had made workers critical political actors. As such, they played a key role in shaping politics throughout the following decades. Their support for President Juan Perón (1946-1955) was pivotal in the extension of individual labour rights and the consolidation of a powerful organized labour movement (Patroni 2018). After the overthrow of Perón in 1955 and with the Peronist party banned from politics and in disarray, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and its unions became the most effectively organized segment within Peronism. In this position they led negotiations with the military and other political parties, and, until Peronism was allowed to compete electorally again in 1973, they became the brokers of the Peronist vote. During the period between Perón's ousting in 1955 and his return to the country in 1973, the CGT's political might was central in the development of several political and economic crises as well as their resolution. Such was the case with the three military dictatorships (1955-1958; 1962-1963; and 1966-1973) and the two civilian governments (1958-1962 and 1963-1966) that governed the country during this period.

The CGT's and its member unions' strategy was a delicate balancing exercise demanding the capacity to express, respond to and control workers' demands. As highly centralized and bureaucratized organizations, they were able to fulfil these tasks because they acted as vehicles to impose internal discipline, suppress grassroots dissent and manipulate union elections. When necessary, they resorted to violence to stifle demands for union democratization. The openly anti-labour stand of the 1966 dictatorship substantially complicated this balancing exercise (James 1988). With the expectation of reducing the power of national unions, which was seen by the governments and MNC as a main obstacle to improve productivity, the government encouraged the creation of smaller and less centralized unions.

In a twist unforeseen by employers and the military regime, this fragmentation opened up new opportunities for contestation at the grassroots that bolstered an emerging anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and substantially more democratic labour movement (Raimundo, 2015). The growth of this democratic unionism represented a challenge to employers and the state, but also to the orthodox CGT which systematically tried to neutralize or destroy this grassroots insubordination. Along with other movements (among them, students and shantytown dwellers), grassroots unionism had connections to the left of the increasingly polarized Peronist party and with left-wing organizations of various Marxist persuasions. These connections in turn were central for these unions' political radicalization. Moreover, a number of these organizations and groups coincided in their understanding of armed struggle as intrinsic to struggles for national liberation and socialism.

Several city-wide uprisings bringing together these mobilized sectors defined a most consequential moment in the transformation of the country, gradually limiting the dictatorship's room for maneuver and forcing it to end the proscription of Peronism and call a general election in 1973. For large segments of the popular organizations connected to the Peronist left, demands for elections and the end of the proscription of Peronism were framed as essential conditions to achieve much wider objectives connected to social justice, national liberation, anti-imperialism and social change. At the same time, part of the revolutionary left was skeptical about democracy as a viable way to pursue revolutionary change. After all, the elites of the country had justified military coups, the proscription of Peronism and the repression of most forms of dissent in the name of democracy. Yet, as we mentioned before, democracy had entered the lexicon of labour struggles through grassroots union militancy which emphasized union democracy as the means to foster leadership accountability and grassroots engagement in decision making.

Unfortunately, both progressive political organizations in general and combative unionism in particular faced a number of challenges, central among them a tendency to dogmatism and in-fighting that both deepened divisions among them and undermined their capacity to respond to the mounting right-wing offensive.

While Peronism won the 1973 presidential election, the party had become the arena of increasingly violent political disputes, particularly with the consolidation of its right wing as the dominant faction after the death of Perón in July 1974. In a time of unprecedented social and labour mobilization and expanding political radicalization, action and reaction succeeded each other at perplexing speed. Anticipating the transformation of the state into an instrument of terror during the dictatorship, right wing government-sponsored paramilitary violence acquired a new prominence both in its wide utilization and its brutality. Before March 1976, more than 1500 people had been assassinated, many of them floor-shop delegates and union leaders. Meanwhile, as government's isolation grew, political conflict and violence mounted, and the perception of chaos engulfed society, the military reasserted its political clout through a nation-wide campaign to fight 'subversion' and restore order. In this context, the 1976 military coup came as no surprise to anyone. What certainly most Argentinians did not expect was the brutality acquired by the military regime from its very first day.

State Terror and the Working Class

Crushing working class power was the top priority for the military regime since day one. At the core of the problem was an industrialization pattern that had created the objective conditions for unions' expansion and power. Thus, to discipline labour the dictatorship pushed for a structural change of the economy that would reduce the size of its industrial sector (Forcinito and Schorr, 2026). Besides deindustrialization and economic slowdown, and the growing unemployment associated to them, legal and institutional changes were introduced with the same objective of undermining the capabilities of working class organizations and ultimately imposing a more regressive distribution of wealth and power. These included dissolving the CGT and placing most unions under military control. Basic individual and collective labour rights were outlawed, among them, the right to strike. Nonetheless, particularly in the short term, violence remained the ultimate instrument to quell working class resistance.

Union activists, shop floor delegates and other members of the internal democratic bodies at the plant-level were the main target of this violence. Probably between 40% and up to 65% of the estimated 30,000 people disappeared during the dictatorship were factory workers belonging to militant unions or dissidents within the orthodox labour organizations. Tragically, the more politically progressive, innovative and democratic forms of unionism succumbed under the weight of state terror, a defeat that, together with the structural changes the Argentinean economy experienced during the dictatorship, would shape the role of organized labour during the transition to democracy in 1983 and beyond.

Despite the scope of repression and the climate of terror that permeated every sphere or society, workers actively and collectively resisted the dictatorship particularly through sabotage, work to rule and other plant-level actions that didn't need high levels of coordination (Pozzi, 2014). A year after the coup, some more militant sectors within the CGT were already organizing. By 1979 they were strong enough to call a nationwide general strike; two more general strikes were called in 1981 and 1982 respectively. The latter was particularly significant as workers defied brutal repression to expose the magnitude of the economic crisis and workers' loses.

With the clear purpose of shifting attention away from the crisis and relegitimizing its rule, a few days after this protest, the government embarked on a war adventure to recover the Malvinas (Falkland) Islands from British colonial rule. However, the swift military defeat that followed forced the dictatorship to accept the transition to democracy and call a presidential election.

The Democracy of Defeat

In December 1983, a democratically elected president took power and newly elected members of Congress assumed their legislative functions. The democracy that emerged in 1983 was highly limited. It was what some authors have called a democracy of defeat because it was the immediate outcome of the 1982 military defeat—rather than a direct result of struggles for democratization—but, equally important, because the dictatorship had been quite effective in defeating the social forces that in the 1960s and 1970s had posed radical challenges to the existing class rule (Rozitchner, 2011).

Moreover, major political forces, unions and ample sectors of Argentinean society saw the moderation of expectations, or in other words the abandonment of aspirations of radical social transformations, as necessary to protect democracy against the threat of another military coup. *Nunca Más* (Never Again), the rallying cry of the transition to democracy, was meant to indicate never again to dictatorships and state terror but also, and more subtly, never again to attempts to pursue revolutionary change. In line with this, former revolutionaries became memorialized solely as victims. Indeed, those who had survived state terror and were able to give testimony of the atrocities they experienced were stripped of their radical politics and thus neutralized as potential challengers to the new status quo (Stulwark, 2025). Thereafter, social struggles would be framed within the confines of the democracy of defeat (Horowitz, 2012), as well as those imposed by the structural transformation of the economy started by the dictatorship.

Early on in the transition to democracy, democratization had raised expectations not only about the definitive eradication of violence but also of expansive social and economic rights. Nevertheless, soon after the coming to power of the democratically elected government, it became clear that the legacy of the dictatorship was a much more pervasive structural transformation of the Argentinean economy. Austerity and growing inequalities had come to stay, workers would not recover their lost purchasing power and organizational strength, and the interests of international and local capitalists, creditors and the International Monetary Fund would be prioritized in policymaking. The neoliberal economic, legal and institutional reforms of the 1990s intensified workers' losses through formal labour reform and the de facto deterioration of working conditions, while inequality and impoverishment were on the rise. Under these conditions, democracy became increasingly hollowed out and a crisis of political representation – that is, disillusion with politics and politicians, and the gap between them and ordinary people – grew.

CGT and several unions were also affected by this crisis of representation because they mostly focused on protecting their institutional power amidst workers' loses, and also because a growing number of workers were losing their employment and, with it, their affiliation with unions. By the second half of the 1990s some unions broke away from the CGT to take a firmer stand against neoliberal reforms. Concurrently, unemployed workers started to organize in the so called piquetero movements using road blockades and other forms of highly visible street action to call attention to their plight and demand state support (Bascuas et al, 2021). Yet, except for some piquetero groups who tried to retain some autonomy from the state, their demands onto the state tended to be circumscribed to the expansion of workfare programs.

A mass uprising took place in 2001 against the devastating economic and social impacts of neoliberal reforms. The main demand of demonstrators was *qué se vayan todo*s (all of them must go), where 'all' referred to the government of the time and also to opposition politicians who were seen as equally responsible for austerity, unemployment and the impoverishment of more than half of the population. For a brief period, the democracy of defeat seemed to be left behind as new forms of popular organization and mobilization were able to block austerity and push for alternatives to neoliberalism. By 2003, a centre left Peronist government came to power and was able to turn the existing rebellion into support for policies that took distance from the neoliberal blueprint. In the following years, the economy grew while unemployment, poverty and inequality dropped. Just as importantly, social confidence in politics and politicians was somehow rebuilt. Amidst robust employment creation, the mobilization of unemployed workers slowed down.

Nonetheless, labour informality and precarity persisted in what was clearly becoming a structural feature of labour markets. Recognizing this change, the government gradually started to implement more ambitious social assistance policies, which lifted many precarious and informal workers out of extreme poverty. Meanwhile, in the early 2010s, drawing from the experience of the piquetero movements and having achieved substantial levels of organization, a large number of these workers converged in a new union. Other movements also acquired a growing political and social significance, most relevantly among them feminist movements. By the end of the 2000s, these various movements were establishing mutual connections, and gaining social recognition and new rights, particularly sexual and reproductive rights, and the expansion and innovation in social assistance policies, etc.

But these positive transformations in the economic, political and social conditions of the country were not long-lasting. By the end of the 2000s, economic growth slowed down, inflation accelerated, and the state confronted growing budgetary restrictions to respond to escalating social demands. For many, the contradictions between a state attempting to expand the recognition of rights and social inclusion and the realities of increasing economic hardship, precarity and inadequate social protection were particularly vexing. At the same time, the expanding recognition of rights was seen by many others as sanctioning unjustifiable privileges.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the isolation caused by the lockdown intensified the sentiments of frustration and anger among many who found themselves deprived of their livelihoods. The pandemic was also an opportunity for far-right groups to manipulate these sentiments. Particularly, their narrative struck a chord among the most vulnerable by blaming those who still had something to protect (being their formal jobs, social rights, recognition of identities, organization and struggles, etc.) for the predicament of those who did not have anything left to lose (Stulwark, 2025).

Furthermore, Javier Milei's—then an anarcho-capitalist influencer and media figure—frontal attack on conventional politics and the state, the lockdown, and social rights connected with the frustration of many workers, and with the class, gender and racial resentment of some sectors of the population. He was particularly persuasive in offering a path for dismantling what he has characterized as undeserved prerogatives. He has posed the economic, political and social predicaments facing the Argentinean society as a "cultural battle", a dilemma between good and evil, between individual hard work and restrain, and the waste and privileges allowed by morally corrupt elites that had taken control of the state.

The Far-Right Experiment and the Prospect for Social Struggles

Without denying the significance of progressive governments in the country and their attempt to find some way of compensating for the most deleterious consequences of neoliberalism, their initiatives felt short of representing a lasting break from the constraints of the democracy of defeat. Accordingly, Milei's election in 2023 expresses the closure of the cycle of progressive politics opened in the early 2000s and the starting point of a brutal class offensive against workers and other popular sectors. Hardline austerity policies and pro-market reforms—including the elimination of entire areas of state actions through legal reform, bureaucratic restructuring and/or budgetary cuts, and the deregulation of key areas of the economy—have all been central to his aggressive "neoliberalism in steroids".

This neoliberalism in steroids has been accompanied by challenges to democracy with a direct impact on the current landscape of social struggles and their prospects. First, there has been a legal or de-facto loss of individual and collective rights (workers' rights, women's and LGBTQ+ rights gained in the previous decades, the rights of the victims of the 1976-1983 dictatorship, protections and assistance for vulnerable sectors of the population, etc.) (CELS 2024). Second, spaces of negotiation and compromise between the state and social movements and organizations around the demands of those most affected by austerity have been practically nonexistent. Moreover, up until now, the government has also refused to offer any form of social assistance to somewhat compensate these sectors for their losses.

Finally, the criminalization of protest—which is in no ways new—has become more systematic and brutal. Legislation was passed making the right to protest virtually illegal; journalists covering demonstrations have been targets of harassment and violence; and the government has taken pains to give intelligence agencies new faculties to investigate anyone seen as a threat to natural resource extraction, to the interests of international investors, and to the relationship between Argentina, the US and Israel. All in all, Milei's agenda is nothing but advancing the drive to disciplining Argentinean society, making organizing and collective action more difficult. Beyond doubt, this agenda will not address the causes of the economic and social crisis of the last years. Rather it aims at creating scapegoats while making the crisis governable and also an opportunity for furthering the regressive distribution of wealth and power.

Since Milei took power, there have been a few massive demonstrations around various issues (the commemoration of the coup d'etat, women's day marches, protests in defense of public universities, anti-homophobic demonstrations, etc.), four nation-wide strikes and several workers mobilizations, and a very large number of more localized protests. As we mentioned before, so far though, the government has refused to address their demands. Social struggles have been mostly defensive not only because of the moderation that has characterized most demands since the transition to democracy but also because the current more hostile context of austerity, lack of channels for negotiation and repression poses new challenges for the organization and mobilization of workers and other social movements.

To make sense of this political conundrum confronting popular organizations it is important to keep in mind that the election of Milei is more than an unfortunate accident. Rather, it is the outcome of "tectonic movements" of the Argentinean democracy, which has been characterized by its limitations both to address the expectations that accompanied its early years and, more recently, to manage the economic, political and social endgame of neoliberalism. Moreover, we are now in a new political terrain where the forms of collective action, narratives, goals and leaderships that emerged in the transition to democracy and developed over the last four decades have so far fallen short to stop a novel form of authoritarianism. Unlike 1976-1983

dictatorship, this new authoritarianism has taken power by democratic means and with widespread social support.

It is still difficult to predict the future of social struggles, and the events or processes that may alter the balance of forces in the near future. Many have started to pin hopes on the defeat of Milei's bid for reelection in October 2027. Unfortunately, a change of government would hardly be sufficient condition to change course as by itself does not address either the structural transformations or the balance of power between social forces cemented since the dictatorship. At the same time, the ongoing loss of key democratic rights and freedoms, the criminalization of protest, and various other forms in which the government has tried to crush dissent—including the vindication of the dictatorship, its goals, its methods and its crimes—creates a more dangerous scenario for organizing and fighting back. Yet, this is the scenario within which those who had been targeted by Milei and his policies must build social and political forces able to move beyond defensive (and not particularly successful) struggles to protect what is left.

Central to this is overcoming the defeat of the 1970s and march instead in the direction of a post-capitalist future. This in turn requires finding forms of effective organization and collective action which go hand in hand with three further elements. First, the development of political practices capable of overcoming unprecedented levels of social fragmentation. Second, the envisioning of new ways of accounting and making political sense of the different and even contradictory experiences and expectations of the many sectors and groups affected by Milei's experiment. Third, and critically, the consolidation, through these actions, of a way out of decades of frustration and disillusion with the functioning of democracy and politics. But the main challenge is that there are no recipes to move from defensive struggles to more radical post-capitalist aspirations. Recreating a post capitalist alternative to the devastating agenda of the far right requires a combination of rigourous analysis of situations and capacities to invent desirable futures that can only emerge from the very learning of organizing and struggle.

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