TENANT MOBILIZATION AND THE 1907 RENT STRIKE IN BUENOS AIRES*

In September of 1907, the residents of a large conventillo, or tenement house, in Buenos Aires protested a 47 percent rent increase by striking against their landlord and refusing to pay. The strikers called on the residents of other rental buildings to join with them and organized a central committee. The strike spread quickly. By October 1 tenants from more than 750 buildings had joined in the strike. That number increased to nearly 2,000 buildings before the end of 1907. Neighborhood and building committees arose throughout the city as nearly one tenth of the total population of Buenos Aires, and tenants in several other major cities as well, joined the strike in one of the largest and most unusual forms of working-class collective action in early twentieth-century Argentina.

This important but little understood event underscores the need to focus on consumer issues, such as housing, in mobilizing members of the working class for collective action. The rent strike is an excellent example because it recognizes rent as a key element in the cost of living; the role of the landlord as a class enemy; women as active participants and leaders in a collective action.

* The author would like to thank Vincent Peloso and James Riley for their encouragement in the preparation of this article, and several anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions.

1 This study uses an occupational definition of worker because census records, labor statistics, and other government figures are listed by occupational categories. The following sources have been used for occupational information: Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Anuario estadístico de la ciudad de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sudamericana de Billetes de Banco, 1891-1914); Dirección General de Estadística, Censo de la ciudad de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires, 1887, 1904, and 1910); República Argentina, Dirección General de Estadística, Censo de la República Argentina (Buenos Aires, 1869, 1895, and 1914, and Departamento Nacional de Trabajo, Boletín (Buenos Aires), Número 4, 11, 16, and 21. Thus, immigrants and native Argentines who labored in many unskilled, semi-skilled, or skilled occupations have been identified as workers in this study. Although there was a range of income, they all worked for wages and shared many experiences of working-class life. One such experience was the need to confront the problem of expensive and overcrowded housing.
response; and tenant relationships to organized labor. In addition, rent strikes in Barcelona in 1905 and New York City in 1907, serve as reminders that these issues were not only local, but representative of the exploitation of urban working-class tenants, immigrant or migrant, in a market-oriented economy.

The 1907 rent strike raises several questions about the nature of working class response to this exploitation in Buenos Aires during the early 1900s. How was a seemingly isolated, spontaneous outburst of tenants related to the larger development of the Argentine working class? And how did a consumer issue—housing—mobilize large numbers of working-class tenants, women and men, who may not have been active in other forms of class protest?

The literature for this critical period of rapid expansion in an export-oriented economy includes many excellent labor histories which show how workers organized to respond to workplace-related issues, and challenged the governing elites. Fewer studies, however, have broadened the scope of inquiry to include consumer issues or used the rent strike to discover how it brought about a mobilization of tenants through ad hoc organization related to, but separate from, the formal labor movement.

Charles Bergquist, in his work on Latin American labor, recognizes the role played by the development of agro-export economies in the region after 1880. His study focuses on a labor force within a narrowly-defined relationship to the export sector. "The primary objective of early twentieth-century Latin American labor history," he writes, "should be the workers in export production." There are two problems inherent in this perspective.

2 The strike in Barcelona was reported in La Protesta (Buenos Aires), the anarchist daily, on May 25, 1905. For the tenant movement in New York City, see Ronald Lawson, ed., The Tenant Movement in New York City 1904-1984 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

3 "No sooner is the exploitation of the laborer by the manufacturer over, to the extent he receives his wages in cash, than he is set upon by the other portions of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker, etc.," wrote Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the Communist Manifesto. Lewis S. Feuer, ed., Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959), p. 15.


First, it ignores the majority of the working class in Argentina at that time because it assumes that mobilization can be measured best through union affiliation. And, second, it emphasizes discontinuity in the character of the Argentine labor movement in two periods of mobilization: pre-World War I, with its anticapitalist bias, and a later Peronist, anti-Marxist populism.6

This article seeks to identify consumer issues as a constant that links seemingly disparate periods. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address problems of adequate shelter or the cost of living beyond the first decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the examples given demonstrate the importance of housing and suggest it played an important role in working-class mobilization.

Hobart Spalding also focuses on labor history, but recognizes the limitations of formal organizations. “Most working-class people did not belong to any group or organization. However, when latent antagonisms between working and ruling classes exploded, they formed temporary organizations to deal with their problems.”7 Even so, Spalding limits his analysis to labor unions, and dismisses the tenant movement.8 For him the temporary nature of the tenant committees made them little more than incidental examples of worker protest unrelated to the development of the labor movement. After all, while the strike lasted several months, it ultimately failed, and the structure of the tenant committees disappeared. But if we seek a broader perspective on working-class protest, we will find that spontaneous and ad hoc organizations are an integral part of that history.

Juan Suriano understands that the rent strike was unique and changed the form of class action.9 This movement involved the working class not only as producers, assisted by organized labor, but as consumers, represented by tenant committees. Although Suriano indicates that the rent strike was a unique consumer movement not immediately related to issues of employment or health, and focuses on the participants, both women and men, he does not tie it to other forms of working-class collective action.

Other social historians, geographers, and students of urban development have studied the Argentine working class. Leandro Gutiérrez, Oscar Yu- jnovsky, and James Scobie provide useful studies on housing and neigh-

6 Ibid., pp. 137-38.
7 Hobart Spalding, Organized Labor in Latin America, p. 21.
9 Juan Suriano, “La huelga de inquilinos de 1907 en Buenos Aires,” in Sectores populares y vida urbana, José Pedro Barrán, Benjamin Nahum, Diego Armus, et al. (Buenos Aires: CLASCO, 1984); and Juan Suriano, La huelga de inquilinos de 1907 (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1983).
borhoods in Buenos Aires. Gutiérrez shows that high rents and overcrowding resulted when the pace of population growth exceeded housing construction.10 Yujnovsky focuses on government housing policies and how they influenced the economics of housing construction.11 Scobie uses manuscript census data to describe the character of working-class neighborhoods in Buenos Aires in the 1890s, showing how contacts among residents could foster a sense of identity.12

The role of women in working-class mobilization has been addressed in studies of Europe and North America.13 Less has been written about women and labor in Latin America.14 The 1907 rent strike propelled many women into positions of leadership and, like the striking mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912, feminine networks within the neighborhood need to be recognized.15

This study traces tenant frustration over housing costs and conditions in Buenos Aires through tenant committees in the 1890s and early 1900s, and puts the 1907 rent strike in Buenos Aires in perspective as an event which mobilized additional segments of the working class in a most dramatic, but not isolated, part of the process. Such a perspective will help us understand what motivated large numbers of workers who may not have belonged to labor unions. Some workers could not afford union dues, or were afraid of being fired. Others worked in small shops, and many women worked at home and were not organized. Government repression and lack of legal recognition also made union membership dangerous at times. In the face of such obstacles, tenant leagues provided an opportunity for working-class tenants to respond to housing as a problem they shared. Neighborhood

15 See Ardis Cameron, "Bread and Roses Revisited: Women's Culture and Working Class Activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912," in Milkman, ed., Women, Work, and Protest, pp. 42-61. Grocery stores served as social centers as well as forums for discussions about prices (p. 48).
committees helped individuals confront this problem as they became actively involved, some for the first time.

Organized Labor and Housing Issues

The years before World War I were a crucial time in the development of Argentina and its working class. Argentina's export economy boomed and tied the country closely to the economy of Western Europe, especially that of England. Wheat exports averaged about 2.2 million metric tons per year, stimulating economic expansion and increasing the gross national product by six percent per year.\(^{16}\)

Massive immigration filled the country with new workers for this expanding economy, increasing the population from approximately one hundred thousand to more than three hundred thousand new arrivals each year. Many of these immigrants settled in Argentina's major cities, and Buenos Aires grew from 600,000 to 1.5 million inhabitants between 1895 and 1914.\(^{17}\)

Jobs were plentiful, as laborers were needed for the busy port and in construction, as well as in shops and factories throughout the capital city. Labor unions, first organized in the nineteenth century, increased in number and size and began to challenge employers, striking for higher pay, shorter hours, and better working conditions. The labor movement in Argentina before the First World War had approximately 10,000 dues-paying members, although a more accurate picture of the number of workers who sympathized with labor's goals was reflected in the participation of additional thousands in the general strikes of 1902 and 1905.\(^{18}\) The participation of non-union workers continued to increase in the general strikes of 1907 and 1909: 93,000 and 200,000 respectively.\(^{19}\)

A brief history of Argentina's labor unions gives us an understanding of the evolution of working-class organization and how it influenced tenant mobilization. As instances of collective action by the working class increased, tenants responded first as members of mutual aid societies or labor organizations and, finally, by forming their own tenant leagues. Some mutual aid societies had addressed the need for housing. El Hogar Obrero,

\(^{17}\) República Argentina, Dirección General de Estadística, *Censo de la República Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1914).
established by socialists, attempted to provide low-cost mortgages. Its members paid a fee and became eligible for a mortgage loan. It offered interest rates that were lower than at banks, and home ownership was encouraged. However, workers who lacked the resources to take advantage of these low-cost mortgages remained as tenants.

The first unions in Argentina were formed to ameliorate difficult working conditions in the middle of the nineteenth century. These unions eventually sought shorter hours and better wages, organizing strikes to back up their demands. At first, strikes occurred sporadically. The printers first struck in 1878 and again in 1887. After that, strikes became more common. There were two in 1888, three in 1889, and four in 1890. In 1891 there were two, seven in 1892, and three in 1894. When economic conditions began to improve after 1895, there were correspondingly more strikes—nineteen in 1895 and twenty-six in 1896.20

The spread of strikes and the increasing importance of anarchist labor unions at this time is related to the growth of the export sector. However, Bergquist's assertion that "All social classes on the pampa benefitted, as consumers, from Argentina's comparatively advantageous position in the international division of labor that prevailed until 1930,"21 is not borne out by housing and living conditions among the urban working class. Indeed, an increasing concern in both the Socialist and anarchist press was the cost of housing.22 Although consumer issues were not the focus of union activity, working-class tenants, both union members and others, began to adopt labor tactics. On June 3, 1893, during the aftermath of an economic crisis that resulted in reduced exports and unemployment, a Catholic newspaper, Voz de la Iglesia, reported the establishment of a tenant league.23 The first meeting was held at Lavalle 1165, in the central part of the city where many working-class tenants lived, in an attempt to seek ways to lower rents.

The league reported that a study of rent increases was underway. This study, and the league itself, were not long-lived. For unexplained reasons, the league simply did not continue. More than a year later, in November 1894, another article in the same newspaper reported that the league's activities had been interrupted, but a new attempt was under way to reestablish

20 Oddone, Gremialismo proletario argentino, provides many statistics on strike activity.
21 Bergquist, Labor in Latin America, p. 92.
22 See La Vanguardia (Buenos Aires), Nov. 21, 1896, and La Protesta (Buenos Aires), Sept. 26, 1905, Sept. 29, 1905, July 1, 1906, and August 5, 1906, as examples of the on-going concern housing costs and conditions in the working-class press.
23 Voz de la Iglesia (Buenos Aires), June 3, 1893.
It proved unsuccessful; there was no further mention of tenant organizations until after the turn of the century.

Tenant action in the 1890s seemed to rise out of anger and frustration during economically difficult times. Economic conditions improved later in the decade: the average rent was reduced to 15 pesos and rent costs declined to about 30 percent of a peon’s and 18 percent of a skilled worker’s wages (see Tables 1 and 2). When rent was lowered as a percentage of wages, it became more difficult to focus tenant anger on landlords and organization ceased. In addition, without the support of a strong labor movement, tenants alone could not sustain collective action.

Several changes in the first decade of the twentieth century would affect tenants. The average rent rose by at least eight pesos between 1905 and 1907 (see Table 3). While the percent of wages needed for rent did not return to levels as high as in the 1890s, overcrowding grew in the central districts of the city as per room density in conventillos rose from 2.5 in 1883 to 3.1 in 1904 (see Table 4). In addition, organized labor had established powerful national organizations that supported tenants.

By the beginning of the twentieth century there were two central confederations that dominated organized labor: the socialist Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) and the anarchist Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA). In 1902 several large strikes, including Argentina’s first general strike, raised labor’s collective action to a direct confrontation with the state. The government responded in November of that year, enacting the ley de residencia (Residency Law), allowing authorities to deport immigrants who were suspected of being agitators and labor organizers.

Fear of government repression provided common ground for both tenants and members of labor unions, perhaps because both groups were predominantly immigrant. The anarchist FORA in its Sixth Congress in September 1906 pledged to overturn the ley de residencia, as well as foster a “tenant strike movement.”

As labor agitation increased, working-class collective action focused on the strike as a key tactic in resolving labor problems. In 1905 another general strike was called. The government responded with a state of siege,

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24 Ibid., Nov. 5, 1894. There is little information about this first attempt at forming a tenant league outside of this citation.
TABLE 1

COST OF RENTING ONE ROOM IN A CONVENTILLO AS A PERCENT OF INCOME FOR AN UNSKILLED WORKER (PEON) AND A SKILLED WORKER (OFICIAL) AT TWENTY-FIVE DAYS EMPLOYMENT PER MONTH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Peon %</th>
<th>Official %</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5 &amp; 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Adrian Patroni, Los trabajadores en la Argentina (Buenos Aires, 1898), p. 120.
4. República Argentina, Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, Boletín, Número 8, 1907.
5. República Argentina, Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, Boletín, Número 4, 1907.
6. La Prensa (Buenos Aires), Sept. 24, 1907, p. 9.
7. República Argentina, Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, Boletín, Número 7, 1907.
8. República Argentina, Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, Boletín, Número 18, 1911.

a condition it imposed five times between 1902 and 1910.26 This heated atmosphere created the background for tenant mobilization by anarchists and socialists.

Tenant leagues provided an opportunity for working-class tenants to respond to a problem they shared, regardless of employment or ideological preference. The organizations that tenants created in the 1890s and early 1900s had the support of both socialists, whose locals assisted the tenants,

26 Alba, Historia del movimiento obrero en América Latina, p. 221.
and anarchists, who encouraged tenants to organize leagues. The socialist labor confederation sought political solutions for the difficulties facing workers. On November 21, 1896, an article appeared in the socialist newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, entitled “Los Alquileres en Buenos Aires” (Rents in Buenos Aires), which estimated the average salary at about 90 pesos per month while rents ranged from 20 to 30 pesos per month. The author of the article then asked, “What can we do against this evil? We know that the definitive answer to this problem lies in socialism.”27 The author proceeded to list several intermediate steps that could be taken: (1) taxing unoccupied rooms; (2) organizing the construction of working-class housing; (3) reduc-

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27 *La Vanguardia* (Buenos Aires), Nov. 21, 1896.
TABLE 3

RENT INCREASES BETWEEN 1900 AND 1907

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rent Cost (in Pesos)</th>
<th>Increase (in Pesos)</th>
<th>Increase (Pesos per Year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>2 pesos</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>8-10 pesos</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: La Prensa (Buenos Aires), Sept. 24, 1907, 9.

ing the cost of transportation. However, he cautioned, municipal authorities would respond to these problems only if the workers made their voices heard in the city council.

The anarchists, as could be expected, expressed a very different attitude toward methods of resolving the issue of worker housing. On Tuesday, May 30, 1905, a headline in the anarchist paper, La Protesta, read “Tenants and Landlords: Our Campaign Against the Exploitation of the Propertied Classes.” The goal of the anarchists was to unite workers. “We set out on this campaign to overcome the villainous exploitation of the tenants and

TABLE 4

POPULATION DENSITIES

CITY AVERAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Per Hectare</th>
<th>General Building/Room</th>
<th>Conventillo Building/Room</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9/-</td>
<td>—/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—/-</td>
<td>29/2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—/-</td>
<td>34/2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>13/1.7</td>
<td>41/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—/-</td>
<td>—/-2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>13/-</td>
<td>—/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>13/1.9</td>
<td>56/3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>14/-</td>
<td>—/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

need the support of all.' Referring to a rent strike occurring then in Barcelona, they called tenants to action.

La Protesta, in May 1905, indicated that a Liga de Inquilinos had been created the previous February by the Sociedad de Resistencia de Tipógrafos (typesetters union). This was to be one of many instances during the next two years of labor’s efforts to encourage tenant organization regarding housing issues.

The Liga had eight articles outlining its goals and organization. These articles called for a 50 percent reduction in rents and stipulated that the leadership of the league would be separate from that of the Sociedad de Resistencia de Tipógraficos. Other articles created an ad hoc commission of twelve members and informed the FORA, the UGT, the Socialist Party, other unions and mutual aid societies that they could nominate delegates to the commission.

Article 5 said that a federal committee would be created by a general assembly. Delegates would be permitted to attend and vote at committee meetings. Article 6 called upon all members to refuse to pay their rent unless rents were reduced by 50 percent. Article 7 said the federal committee would inform the property owners of their demands. If the demands were not accepted within forty-eight hours, tenants would begin to pay 50 percent of their rent into an escrow bank account set up in the name of the owner, but pay nothing directly to the owner. Finally, Article 8 indicated that each participating union would pay 5 pesos dues each month.

The list of participating unions is extensive and shows the level of labor support. More than forty unions joined, including representatives of barber shop owners, kitchen and domestic workers, shoemakers, electricians, commercial employees, and mutual aid societies, such as the Asociación Obrera Socorro Mutuos, Italia Socorros Mutuos, and the Centros Socialista numbers 8 and 20.

Even though the planned rent strike did not occur, the Liga continued to exist, meeting at the socialist center at Mexico 2070. By August 1905, La Protesta indicated that the Liga itself was not enough. There were calls for boycotts that, like the rent strike, were recognized as a consumer’s weapon.

28 La Protesta (Buenos Aires), May 30, 1905.
29 Ibid., May 25, 1905.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., June 21, 1905, 1. [This issue lists all the articles of the new league.]
32 Ibid., August 25, 1905, 2.
Still nothing happened. An article in the paper on Friday, September 22, 1905, said that since the Liga was unable to take decisive action, each tenant should resolve to pay only as much rent as seemed just and reasonable.33

*La Protesta* continued to publish articles on housing and high rents into 1906. By August, as rents continued to rise, there were new calls to form a league. On August 29, 1906, a manifesto was published calling on all tenants not to pay rent until it had been reduced by 50 percent. The manifesto ended with “Viva la huelga de inquilinos!” (Long live the rent strike!).

In October 1906, the *Liga contra alquileres e impuestos* (League Against Rents and Taxes) was created.34 The following month a provisional committee was formed and eighteen groups joined, including Conductores de Carros (drivers), Zapateros (shoemakers), Obreros Maquinistas (machine operators), Juventud Radical (youth of the Radical Party), Nuevo Centro Inquilino (New Tenants’ Center), Comité Liberal (Committee of the Liberal Party), and Artes Gráficos (graphic arts workers). The provisional secretary was Tomás de los Santos.35

Later in November a federal committee was formed and, in a meeting, speaker Félix Nieves expressed the desire to create twenty subcommittees citywide, perhaps one for each census district. When they met in December 1906 at the local of the Conductores de Carros, so many attended that the crowd spilled out into the street.36 Other groups joined, including the port workers, tobacco workers, match makers, waiters, machinists, and carpenters; there were subcommittees from La Boca, Barracas, Villa Crespo, and San Cristóbal, all in the southern sections of the city where many conveníllos were located (see Map 3). Five hundred people attended the meeting of January 5, 1907, new sub-committees joined, and a new biweekly publication, *La Igualdad*, was launched.37

Internal squabbles brought this growth to a halt in early 1907. The secretary of the general assembly, Tomás de los Santos, resigned after the secretary of the federal committee accused de los Santos of being a police spy.38

33 *Ibid.*, Sept. 22, 1905. “Pensamos que lo mejor es que cada inquilino se haga fuerte en su derecho y pague el alquiler hasta el precio que le parezca justo y razonable.”
The federal committee called for an extraordinary meeting at the end of January 1907. A second call was followed by a third unsuccessful attempt on February 5. The dissension moved downward into the ranks. By March, one subcommittee reported that various officers had been accused of representing political parties rather than workers. The subcommittee published a list of the officers along with their occupations in an attempt to dispel the rumors.

After March, the Liga was not active, although the structure of inoperative section subcommittees had influenced tenants. Working-class tenants were becoming accustomed to active participation and, when rents shot up in August 1907 in response to new city taxes, these tenants were quick to use a new form of collective action: the rent strike.

Participants in the 1907 Rent Strike

The strike began in one conventillo and spread quickly in a pattern that demonstrates how tenants were mobilized for action. At the end of August 1907 the rent at the conventillo at Calle Ituzaingó 279 was raised from 17 to 25 pesos per month, a 47 percent increase. The residents of this conventillo were upset. One tenant, Antonio Rinaldi, organized a tenant committee that sent a note to the landlord to ask for a reduction in rent.

Dear Sir;

In light of the high cost of rent in this building . . . and the tenants being in general agreement . . . we have decided to ask you, as the owner, to reduce the rent by 30 percent.

That is our only request. We await a prompt and favorable response to our request.

Yours truly,

The Tenants

The response Rinaldi and his fellow tenants received was unfavorable and they decided to withhold their rent from the building's owners, the Holterhoffs. Tenant solidarity and cooperation was evidenced as they organized to operate the building and held nightly meetings on the patio, where they divided the upkeep chores among themselves.

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39 Ibid., Jan. 27, 1907, 2.
40 Ibid., March 13, 1907, 2.
41 La Vanguardia (Buenos Aires), Sept. 15, 1907.
Antonio Rinaldi, his wife, and several other tenants at Ituzaingó organized a commission to seek support from other tenants and spread the word to other conventillos. This was the start of the rent strike.

Within a week several other conventillos in nearby sections of the city joined. By October 1 more than 750 buildings were on strike. At one time or another perhaps 120,000 people participated in the rent strike. This figure represents nearly one-tenth of the population of the entire city of Buenos Aires.

Information about tenants who participated in the rent strike helps us recognize the influence of residency, employment, ethnic background, and gender on tenant mobilization. Individuals who appeared in newspaper accounts will be used as examples. While the information about individual strikers from contemporary newspapers cannot be assumed to be representative and gives insufficient data to form broad generalizations, some observations can be drawn from these examples.

The residents of the striking conventillos tended to live in larger buildings and in more crowded conditions than average. Newspaper accounts regarding striking conventillos have identified thirty-seven conventillos by the number of rooms per building. The fewest was seven, while the greatest was ninety-two, with an average of twenty-seven rooms per building. In addition, the list of twenty-three striking conventillos surveyed by the Department of Labor in 1907 indicates an average number of rooms at thirty-one (see Table 5). These statistics, when compared with information regarding the average number of rooms per conventillo in the 1904 Municipal Census of Buenos Aires (eighteen per building), indicate that the striking conventillos generally were much larger. While the Municipal Census listed 3.1 persons per room in 1904, the Department of Labor found 4.0 persons per room in the striking conventillos three years later. Thus, we see how increasingly crowded conditions in their buildings influenced the strike participants.

Striking tenants who shared similar employment circumstances were likely to be familiar with labor organizations and goals. Those joining the strike were, for the most part, employed as workers and laborers. Josefina Rinaldi, treasurer of the Central Strike Committee, was a laundress. La 

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43 These include *La Prensa*, *La Protesta*, and *La Vanguardia*.
TABLE 5

23 STRIKING CONVENTILLOS SURVEYED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR IN 1907

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Rooms</th>
<th>Number of Persons</th>
<th>Average Persons per Room</th>
<th>Average Price per Room (in Pesos)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
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<td>19.</td>
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Average 31 136 4 21.69

Source: República Argentina, Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, Boletín, Número 4 (March 31, 1908).

Prensa, a daily newspaper, identified three men who were shot during a march to protest evictions in San Telmo by their occupations: a carpenter, a barber, and a worker in a mosaic tile factory. Others may have worked as peons or day laborers, as did many who lived near the city's center.

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45 La Prensa (Buenos Aires), Oct. 23, 1907.
Connections made through work or union halls extended the tenant network based upon neighborhood, making it more likely that the strike would spread to many parts of the city.

Ethnic ties, as well as neighborhood ties, influenced tenant participation. Speeches were sometimes given in immigrant tenants’ native languages, and many conventillos joining the strike were in neighborhoods where there were Russian, French, and Turkish immigrants. This suggests that many immigrants who may not have spoken or understood Spanish well and, therefore, might have been less likely to participate in other forms of collective action, were recruited by fellow conventillo dwellers from the same country.

Participation by the whole family was important because it mobilized individuals who were not otherwise involved in working-class conflicts. Women and men participated in strike committees, in marches, and as speakers. While most of those whose names were listed in the newspapers were men, many women took active roles. Three spoke at rallies; four were arrested. Josefina Rinaldi was an officer in the central strike committee, and Obdulia Amable was the president of the neighborhood subcommittee at Estados Unidos 276.

Women responded to the issue of housing because it affected their lives in many ways. Some worked at home, taking in ironing or washing, which often was prohibited by the owner’s rules. Most felt the pressure of keeping the family functioning in small, cramped quarters. Many willingly responded to the need for lower rents and improved conditions by withholding rent from the landlord or by defending neighbors who were to be evicted. They were defending more than their homes; they were protecting their families and preserving their means of employment.

Four women were arrested during a violent demonstration in which a young man was killed and several others were wounded. All four lived in the same neighborhood—San Telmo, where there were many conventillos. These women, like those of Chile seventy years later who banged on pots

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46 *La Protesta*, Oct. 6, 1907. One announcement regarding the strike read, “‘To Russian tenants: You are invited to a meeting for information about opposition to high rent, today, Sunday, at 2 p.m. in the Plaza Lavalle. There also will be fellow workers speaking in Spanish.’”

47 See *La Protesta*, Sept. 25, 1907.

48 See article by Juan Suriano, “‘La huelga de inquilinos de 1907 en Buenos Aires,’” in Barrán, et al, *Sectores Populares*, 223-224. Suriano recognizes the importance of women in the strike, and cites several examples.

49 *La Protesta*, Oct. 23, 1907.
and pangs in an anonymous protest to government repression or the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who marched steadfastly in front of the presidential building holding photographs of their missing children, responded with action to important issues crucial to their lives.

Two women, Juana Buela and Maria Collazo, who represented the Centro Feminista Anarquista, spoke at the rally in the Plaza San Nicolás on October 28, 1907. Many others took part in protest marches, where they symbolically swept away the owners and their high rents in "broom parades." Some helped defend individual conventillos from the police seeking to evict tenants. When police attempted to evict Ramón Bermúdez, Francisco Martínez, Francisco Fernandez, and Pedro Garcia at Peru 973, a crowd gathered. Some of the women in the conventillo tried to bar the police from entering. They closed all the doors and windows to the street. Those officers who did get into the building were attacked by broom-wielding women and had boiling water poured onto them from the patio above. The police left without evicting the tenants.

Tenant Organization and the Labor Movement

As other conventillo dwellers joined the strike, the original committee at Ituzaingó became the city-wide central committee for the rent strike. Antonio Rinaldi was chosen president and his wife, Josefina, became treasurer. The first acts of this committee were to create subcommittees for publicity, a negotiating committee to meet with the mayor, and section committees from each neighborhood where tenants joined the strike. To my knowledge, there is no information available on how this house committee was transformed into the central committee or whether its leadership had participated in earlier tenant committees. Most likely the individuals who initiated the strike were recognized as its leaders. In any event, meetings were held nightly at the meeting hall of the Drivers’ Association at Montes de Oca 972, one of the locals originally supporting the tenant leagues, located just a few blocks from Ituzaingó 279.

Members of the Drivers’ Association announced that they would help move belongings of anyone evicted, while the tenants affected said that they

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50 Ibid., Oct. 28, 1907, 5.
51 La Prensa, Oct. 22, 1907.
52 The names of the central committee members were gathered from various newspaper accounts during the rent strike.
53 La Vanguardia, Sept. 21, 1907, 2.
were ready to move into the porticos of the Paseo de Julio in the center of
the city if they had no other place to go, an indication that most expected the
issue to be resolved quickly and favorably.54

As the strike spread, lists were read each night of the buildings joining the
strike. Section subcommittees were set up in Balvanera Oeste, Balvanera
Norte, Balvanera Sud, San Telmo, San Nicolás, and other districts (see
Map 1).

54 La Prensa, Sept. 25, 1907, 9.
Other committees met at union halls or in socialist centers. The Almagro subcommittee, representing Balvanera Oeste just west of the central part of the city, met at the local of the Society of Shoe Machine Operators (Sociedad Maquinista de Calzado) at Loria 353. The subcommittee for Balvanera Norte y Sud met at the socialist center at Mexico 2070, while the San Nicolas subcommittee met at Carlos Peligrini 282. The subcommittee for Monserrat met at Salta 657.

The relationship between organized labor and tenant committees was more than the use of union halls. The newspaper La Prensa wrote on September 17, 1907:

Yesterday, it was reported that the Unión General de Trabajadores and the Federación Regional Obrera Argentina are thinking of intervening in the strike by recommending that their member unions assist the movement. The newspaper concluded, "As can be seen, the conflict threatens to take on greater proportions."

There were several aspects to the role of organized labor in the rent strike. Abad de Santillán describes the role of the FORA in 1907 as more visible than that of the socialists in the rent strike. The FORA authorized member unions to create tenant committees to work for lower rents. "So that this action may become a reality and be successful the local unions which are members of the FORA ought to create a central committee for the reduction of rents . . . ." Additional support from the FORA came through the use of its newspaper, La Protesta, to publicize the rent strike and the demands of the tenants. It also issued directives to member unions to provide support. Columns headed by women and girls holding aloft the red banners of the Women's Anarchist Center marched to the October 27 rally at the Plaza San Martin.

Nevertheless, the influence of the anarchists on the rent strike seems to have been limited. The anarchist belief in direct action may have helped place them in the forefront of the strike movement at first. But anarchist calls for sabotage and violent confrontation with police went unheeded. The committees of strikers never seemed to be on the point of launching a strike.

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55 La Protesta, Sept. 25, 1907.
56 Ibid., Sept. 24, 1907.
57 Ibid., Oct. 4, 1907.
58 La Prensa, Sept. 17, 1907.
59 Abad de Santillán, La F.O.R.A., 147.
60 Ibid., 148.
61 La Protesta, Oct. 27, 1907.
that would bring down the old order, and the anarchist unions, despite some sympathy, never called for strikes in support of the tenants.\textsuperscript{62}

The Seventh Congress of the FORA in December 1907, during the rent strike, called for a general strike for January 13 and 14, 1908, not in support of the tenants, but to protest deportation of anarchists who were involved in the rent strike.\textsuperscript{63} The limited influence of the anarchist labor movement became evident in January when the strike failed. By January 15 most workers were back at work and the police had still more prisoners to deport.\textsuperscript{64}

The socialist UGT gave some support to the striking tenants. The socialist central urged its member unions to help the tenants, and many locals did assist the strikers. The Maquinistas de Calzado offered their hall at Lorea 353 to the local strike committee, as did the socialist center at Mexico 2070. The Sociedad de Sombrereros met on September 29 to discuss the rent strike, and the socialist center at Salta 657 was the site of the local strike committee. These union halls offered a place where hundreds, and even thousands, of strikers met.

The support of the member unions was there. The contacts had been made. But when the strike came, it was organized by the tenants apart from the national labor federations and the focus was limited to rents. While the larger issues like the ley de residencia were raised, they never became central to the tenant movement.

\textit{Tenant Mobilization}

Tenants mobilized for action displayed an impressive solidarity in the face of opposition. The participants pressured each other and supported each other when necessary. Groups of tenants sometimes formed a core of hardliners who made sure that wavering tenants supported the strike. Names, such as \textit{carnero} (ram) for the man and \textit{obeja} (sheep) for the woman, who, intimidated by their landlord, had refused to join the strike, were terms labor militants used for strikebreakers.\textsuperscript{65} At other times, neighboring tenants defended those who were to be evicted, and let neighbors stay with them.

\footnotesize{62} Antonio Maimo created a comité pro huelga general de los inquilinos (committee in support of a general tenant strike). But no action was taken to implement such a strike. \textit{La Vanguardia}, Sept. 28, 1907.

\footnotesize{63} Abad de Santillán, \textit{La F.O.R.A.}, 172.

\footnotesize{64} Ibid., 174.

\footnotesize{65} \textit{La Protesta}, Oct. 23, 1907.
Residents at Ituzaingó 279 were ready to assist the Rinaldis when they were threatened with eviction. When another tenant, Enrique Almada, was evicted on October 1, 1907, he moved in with friends in the same building. The tenants stood together against their common enemy: the landlord.

Tenant mobilization produced a clustering of participating conventillos as the strike spread from the older neighborhoods south of the Plaza de Mayo to areas north and west of the center. Map 2 shows how the rent strike spread. The first division represents those buildings that were reported on strike before September 25, 1907. The majority of the conventillos first declaring themselves on strike were in the area to the south of the Plaza de Mayo and bounded by the streets Moreno on the north, Martin Garcia on the south, Buen Orden (now Bernardo de Irigoyen) on the west, and Paseo Colon on the east. This area was centered on the parish of San Telmo, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city, marked by high population density and many run-down buildings.

The next division shows those joining the strike between September 26 and October 5. This date provides a benchmark of support as conventillo dwellers joined the strike by refusing to pay their rent, due on the first of the month. The third division shows those buildings that joined the strike after October 5. While some buildings continued to join the strike throughout the period, these first locations reveal that the focus of activity correlated with those areas high in cost and crowding, two elements out of which tenant frustration grew.

San Telmo provides a good example of the environment within which the tenants were mobilized to strike. San Telmo was south of the Plaza de Mayo, where rents were among the highest and the strike began (see Map 3). The neighborhood of San Telmo, the area bounded by the streets Independencia on the north, Peru on the west, Juan de Garay on the south, and Paseo Colon on the east, contained more than fifty striking conventillos (see Map 4). Of these, most contained between twenty and thirty rooms, although the largest had sixty rooms.

Contemporary newspaper accounts give the addresses of striking conventillos as well as the dates their tenants joined the strike. Numerous conventillos were located on the same block. For example, on the single block formed by Independencia, Bolívar, Estados Unidos, and Defensa, the 800 block, ten buildings were on strike. The inset of Map 4 shows the locations and the dates for these buildings. The tenants of the first to join, Defensa

La Protesta, Oct. 22, 1907.
845, struck on September 9. Neighboring conventillo dwellers soon joined: Defensa 809, with thirty rooms, on September 22; Defensa 819, with twenty-two rooms, on September 23; number 815 on September 25. Since a member of the Central Strike Committee, Manuel Lopez, lived on this block at number 830, he may have helped influence his neighbors to join the strike.

Around the corner, at Bolivar 872 with twenty-five rooms, tenants went on strike September 24, while those at 866 and 867 joined two days later.
The residents of the last one on the block, number 880, followed on October 1.

This cluster pattern was common and suggests that personal contacts among tenants were effective in gaining adherents to the strike. Strike committees were built on the relationships among residents, resulting in many buildings joining the strike within days of each other. The tenants of three conventillos on the 900 block of Defensa struck on the same day. The residents at Peru 951 joined the strike on September 24, while those at 985 and 973 joined on October 1 and 21 respectively. Two conventillos in the 300 block of Independencia and three in the 200 block of Cochabamba also joined the strike.

Feminine networks may have contributed to tenant mobilization. While such experiences have not been documented in contemporary accounts, studies of women and protest point to the importance of family, ethnic, and
neighborhood contacts among women. Ardis Cameron, in her study of striking mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 says, “The street, which allowed for public scrutiny, as well as space for personal exchanges; the tenement stoops, where mothers patrolled their blocks and supervised community activity, and kitchens where nurturance and communal cooperation occurred daily—all sustained close-knit female-centered networks.”

These examples have demonstrated how tenants were mobilized by the rent strike. They supported each other, opposed evictions, and tried to obtain lower rents. However, as October closed, the evictions and police intimidation took their toll. The strike seemed to have reached its peak. There still were some houses reported joining the strike, but most of the

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news was about evictions. A reporter for *La Prensa* attended a meeting of the strike committee at the end of October 1907. He heard a list of evictions read: Buen Orden 757—two evicted; Mexico 1156—one evicted; Europa 280—six evicted, and so on. He wondered at the enthusiasm of the strikers who still were determined to pursue their goals, even if on an individual basis.

By December there were more evictions and the tenants’ organization became less effective. There still were occasional meetings. But the disruption caused by eviction and the fear it engendered sapped the strength of the leadership. Many tenants began to compromise with their landlords. The Rinaldis had been evicted and probably were more concerned with finding a place to stay than leading the tenant committee.

The rent strike was considered over by the end of 1907, except by a few diehards who still called for worker action. There were attempts at meetings into January 1908, but the tenant committees were not active. The citywide organization created by the strike had ceased to function.

**Conclusion**

Working-class tenants in Buenos Aires felt exploited by the relatively high cost of rent which, in a market-oriented economy, rose with the rapid population growth and increasing value of property. Conventillo dwellers created their own organization to resolve housing problems and, like tenants in Barcelona and New York City, resorted to a weapon of producers—the strike—over a consumer issue—housing. This focus on consumer issues among the working class is helpful in understanding its response to crucial problems not addressed by formal labor unions. The perspective of tenants toward housing costs and conditions gives us a more complete picture of the growth of working class consciousness and solidarity.

Tenant organization had many points of contact with organized labor and drew on that experience. Nevertheless, it remained separate from the unions. Committees and leagues appeared and disappeared with changing conditions, although they are more accurately perceived as building on earlier experiences rather than purely ad hoc. Working-class tenants, some union members, and others, especially women, who may not have been, developed methods of organization and collective action. These methods were incorporated into existing networks among women, neighbors, and ethnic groups.

The rent strike of 1907 demonstrates how tenants were mobilized through neighborhood contacts, and influenced by ethnic background and gender.

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68 *La Prensa*, Nov. 1, 1907, 8.
Strike committees were organized by building and by neighborhood, focusing on residence, not the workplace. Many women became active members, if not leaders, of these committees and in the strike. Tenants helped each other, and showed a solidarity that encouraged participation.

Our understanding of the Argentine working class is increased by looking at tenant response to housing problems in a manner that links the development of labor unions with issues outside the workplace. This study suggests a continuity of struggle that bridges various periods defined by the political implications of labor agitation. Many women and men became active, perhaps for the first time, in this period of anarchist-led general strikes. And, once active, they were more likely to pursue their interests collectively. Indeed, while the number of workers who participated in strikes recorded by the Department of Labor after 1907 vacillated between 5,000 and 27,000, more than 200,000 people participated in the general strike of 1909. Such numbers suggest that many working-class tenants mobilized by the rent strike remained active.

Later transformations of the labor movement ought to be viewed partly as an on-going working class response to critical consumer problems. The rise of syndicalism after the First World War, the eclipse of the Socialists in the 1920s, the quiescence of the CGT in the 1930s, the rise of populism under Perón, as well as current political and social struggles, may appear to be discontinuous responses by organized labor. They will be understood more completely, however, through the study of working class mobilization in response to the continual crisis for basic needs like food and shelter.

Alexandria, Virginia

James A. Baer

69 República Argentina, Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, Boletín, Número 30 (Buenos Aires, 1914), 68, lists strike activity in Buenos Aires as follows:

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Number of Striking Workers</th>
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<tr>
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<td>95</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

These official figures contrast greatly with the estimates of Baily, Labor, Nationalism, and Politics in Argentina, 21, and the events described by Abad de Santillán, La FORA, 177-179, and indicate that “unofficial” participation continued to grow, even if officially recorded strikes did not attract increasingly large numbers of participants.