

To Feed is to

Unión de
Trabajadores y
Trabajadoras
de la Tierra





Resist

Verdurazos and the Struggle Toward Food Sovereignty

From the depths of Argentina, the cries of thousands of families resound across its land. Time appears to have stopped in these rural areas, oblivious to digital technology and the dizzying and mundane features of modern life. Here, on rented plots known as *quintas*, male and female comrades, entire families of small-scale farmers, pass the working day in adverse climates, fighting for a better life. They all have stories to tell and face uncertain futures due to economic policies and social systems that generate more anxiety than assurance.

Walking through the fields, almost never their own and almost always far from home, farmers hold individual stories that together become a collective account of suffering. Every day, they toil the land to sow fruits and vegetables that will reach thousands of tables after a long process of production. The Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Tierra (Landworkers' Union, UTT) was born out of this scenario: the need to extend a helping hand towards a path of equality.

After a decade of tenacious militancy, there is a path that connects the regions with concrete action. Our organization was born in Greater La Plata, capital of the province of Buenos Aires, a traditional fruit and vegetable growing area that supplies multiple larger and smaller markets

throughout the state. We also support victims of Argentina's difficult history; those who cannot cover their most basic needs. We respond to the urgency and need to organize collectively. Many of our comrades represent social organizations that emerged from the social unrest in 2001, a milestone that deepened an unprecedented crisis, when more than half of the population fell into poverty.

These comrades have joined peasant families uprooted from their places of origin: *peones golondrinas* – dislocated farmers – working on plantations and harvesting crops on the outskirts of the big cities, living in precarious wooden shanties with dirt floors.

There are still entire families who live on rented plots of less than three hectares,



cultivating seasonal fruits and vegetables. They wake up, work, and rest – after long days of suffocating heat and bitter cold – paying costly rents, uncertain about how long they will be able to stay. This situation is replicated in every corner of Argentina, whereby thousands of farming families, producers of 60% of the country's food, must rent a piece of land. Moreover, their expenses are not limited to renting the *quinta*. They also include the construction of greenhouses, complete with shade cloth, wooden posts, hundreds of meters of wire, irrigation equipment, and water pumps, all at ever-increasing and dollarized prices. Farmers are also forced to purchase seeds, a vital

element commercialized by large agribusiness companies. An endemic evil that puts the rural communities of our continent on edge through evictions and agro-toxins, this model involves the plundering of bodies and territories, consented to by governments in power. Also complicit are mass media and passive societies that avoid the urgent actions that our planet desperately needs.



Enhancing the flavour of food by a thousand colours

To counteract this situation, our comrades, despite the suffering and manipulation, use natural elements that fortify both crops and hope. Through a long process, they are freeing themselves from pesticides, – a euphemism for the strong poisons that cause harm to farmers, but more subtly harm our general urban populations as well. The People's Technical Consultancy (COTEPO) is the result of years of research and training to create a definitive path toward agroecology. This process enhances the flavour of food by a thousand colours; glimmers of hope. Each furrow represents part of the struggle

toward food sovereignty, which includes the decisions of what to produce, how, where, and when to do it – without impositions or poisons.

UTT's development in commercialization is based on internal and horizontal discussions regarding pricing, driven by the concept of fair trade, which proposes a new trading paradigm that excludes intermediaries. By avoiding the middle man/woman, some of the inflationary pressure on food is controlled. The produce is sold in supermarkets, as well as in wholesale markets that hold seasonal fruits and vegetables, as well as products of hundreds of cooperatives with similar interests. This way, the UTT avoids the speculation that threatens the quality and price of food.

Giving our food as anti-authoritarian counterstrategy

The organization has had further achievements. Given the enormous demand for food, resources were created from the ingenuity and collective commitment that we continue to raise every day. We are also dedicated to the legacy of historic struggles in sectors subjugated to the powers that be. This is the origin of the *Verdurazos*, collective actions in public spaces that take place in urban centres to support marginalized areas: Dozens of crates are quickly taken down from trucks and placed on sidewalks that surround key transportation centres, where railroad, subway, and bus stations intersect. The action often takes place metres away from the Casa Rosada, the office of the president, or in the vicinity of the National Congress, from whom we demand a Land Access Law that would definitively grant us the rights we deserve.

Born several years ago, the *Verdurazos* are a form of direct connection between the needs of the people and the people themselves. In the midst of the socio-economic crisis, a result of the exclusionary policies of former President Mauricio Macri, the UTT gives away vegetables to workers on their way home, as well as to soup kitchens that feed children, the unemployed, the homeless, and the elderly with inadequate pensions. In that period of dystopia and uncertainty, the collective gathering around food was a concrete response to authoritarian intervention. It was also a response to an intolerance of national security forces. This was captured in a photograph that resonated nationally and internationally: an elderly woman picking up an eggplant from the ground, leaning on her shopping cart, surrounded by uniformed men. Just as hundreds of others who came to the *Verdurazo*, she walked blocks for a couple of kilos of fresh food, under the threatening gaze of the police and the total disregard of a government uninterested in alleviating the effects of its brutal economic policies. The photo is a visual example of a crisis with a devastating economic impact.

That afternoon, the activity was paralyzed due to the refusal of the Buenos Aires city government to permit the *Verdurazo*. The situation was aggravated by the arrival of more police officers, which only added to the tension and the scorching heat of that day, 14 February 2016. The *Verdurazo* was the only thing standing between the government and street demonstrations. The situation soon got out of control, and comrades were forced to disperse. Not even fruits and vegetables were spared: the police threw tear gas at the crates, rendering the produce inedible, and then proceeded to confiscate some of it. The love and collective effort between the farms, the solidarity of each family willing to donate some of their produce to those in need, as well as the human and logistical effort to make the produce available, was torn to pieces in a few minutes.

In spite of this, through persistence, the *Verdurazos* were replicated in other cities, and later morphed into the *Feriazos*, where fruits, vegetables, and products from cooperatives are sold at fair prices. The *Feriazos* are a partial solution to the cyclical inflation and insufficient public policies that have plagued Argentina for five decades.

The *Verdurazos* and many other activities replicated throughout Argentina represent an act of resistance in support of the thousands of homeless people in the streets. These



activities respond to the same need and the same gratitude, strengthening bonds that spread by word of mouth toward new social constructs. Promoting a movement of land, work, and social change is more than a slogan. It is a political conviction that, through concrete actions leading to a paradigm shift, produces rooted and sustained development, fair trade and healthy food. Beyond speculation or personal interests, it is the collective engine that activates struggles from below, toward a dignified life.

Illustrations

p. 128: Photograph by Bernardino Ávila.

p. 130: Photograph by Bernardino Ávila.

p. 131: Photograph by Pepe Mateos.

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