

Organising and innovating – the winning strategy of Argentina’s pharmaceutical trade union

The Trade Union Struggle to Overcome the Obstacles of Transnational Capital: The Pharmacists’ Union in Argentina and its Current Challenges

A case study by Bruno Dobrusin

On Bayer Argentina’s 100th anniversary, a group of company employees mobilised at a celebration event being held at the exclusive San Isidro Racecourse on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

While half of them dressed as guests in cocktail attire, the other half carried drums and whistles pretending to be performers. They were demanding that Bayer’s manager rehire a colleague that was fired. “Okay, I’ll sign the hiring [papers] right now, but please leave the event,” was the manager’s response.

This group of workers were part of the Association of Pharmaceutical Sales Representatives of Argentina (*Asociación de Agentes de Propaganda Médica*, or AAPM in Spanish), a union that, in spite of an increasingly hostile environment towards unions in Argentina, has been able to gain new members and improve the working conditions of its existing members over the past decade using a set of key strategies.

“The AAPM was able to reorganise its base, widen its framework of alliances, and rethink the union’s role in a transnational industry,” writes Bruno Dobrusin, a member of the national trade union centre, the Argentine Workers’ Central Union (*Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina*, or CTA in Spanish), in a recent report titled *The union struggle against the obstacles of trans-national capital. Argentina’s pharmaceutical sales representatives union and its current challenges*. “For the past decade, the union has gone through a significant transformation and has kept a strong base of affiliates in an industry that increasingly needs fewer pharmaceutical sales representatives,” says the report published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Germany.

AAPM currently has more than 8,000 members, which represents 73 per cent of the total number of pharmaceutical workers in Argentina. By comparison, median union density for other industries in Argentina is of 40 per cent. The AAPM’s union density is particularly impressive for a growing and significantly transnational industry. In 2011, 38.9 per cent of Argentina’s pharmaceutical market was represented by multinational companies.

Key to the AAPM's growth has been a strategy of political realignment. When the union was founded in 1935, it participated in the General Confederation of Labour (*Confederación General del Trabajo*, or the CGT in Spanish), one of the largest labour federations in the world, currently representing 3 million workers. Historically, unions like the AAPM and those that are a part of the CGT have been politically aligned with *Peronismo*, Argentina's most prominent political movement which is often associated with workers' rights and social justice. But, after political changes pushed the CGT towards a new direction, the AAPM decided it was time to leave the federation.

"The labour situation completely changed in the 1990s with the neoliberal model that took root in Argentina during the government of Carlos Menem. There were more privatisations, dismissals and increasing job precarity. Traditional unions couldn't address the needs of the working class within this new model," says Ricardo Peidro, general secretary of the AAPM.

The AAPM thus joined a new alliance, the CTA. Amongst its main distinctions, the CTA promotes a wider organisational model that allows direct affiliation of workers, regardless of union membership or employment situation.

"We knew that a union model that only accepted workers who were formally employed wasn't enough," says Peidro. "A union should also represent workers in the informal sector, the retired, the ones who don't have a job — these people are also the working class. It's unacceptable that if a worker is let go from his job, a union won't represent him any more. That's why we joined the CTA."

Relationship building

Since its incorporation into the CTA, the AAPM has been able to widen its scheme of alliances, building relationships with different social movements, tenants organisations, workers at recovered factories and other groups that had previously considered out of bounds. This allowed the AAPM to increase its coalition power.

"To incorporate the strength and assertions of colleagues who are left out of the formal labour market gave us much more power when presenting our demands to our employers. When there is a certain conflict with the employers and we're able to surround them with different sectors, we are much stronger than if we were divided or were only representing one sector," says Peidro.

Besides its political realignment, the AAPM also decided to focus on minimum wage negotiations. While the minimum wage in the pharmaceutical industry had been constant at 682 Argentine pesos (about US\$44 at the current exchange rate) for years, average salaries for workers in the industry had been increasing and were significantly higher than the basic salary. This was mainly due to a growing industry — between 2005 and 2013, pharmaceutical sales more than doubled in Argentina from US\$1,903 million to US\$4,952 million. Nonetheless, union leaders at AAPM understood that negotiating a minimum wage would benefit the union as a whole.

“Focusing on minimum wage negotiations allowed the AAPM to gain a lot of legitimacy over the most vulnerable workers, the ones that are just entering the industry, who are usually younger and less interested in unionising,” says Dobrusin. “It also improves the situation in terms of firing, since firing costs are calculated based on the minimum wage.”

“Firing employees was a daily practice for the pharmaceutical industry. Firing a worker that had worked for 20 years for a company was extremely cheap, so for us it was indispensable to negotiate the minimum wage,” Pedro says in agreement.

Thanks to these negotiations, the AAPM minimum wage in 2014 was 15,700 pesos (US\$1019), compared to the national minimum wage of 4,700 pesos (US\$305).

Innovation disruption methods

The AAPM is known not only for its negotiation tactics, but also for its mobilising efforts and innovative disruption methods. Between 2006 and 2014, the union organised 39 industrial disputes. Of these, only six escalated to strike action. The rest involved different tactics like the disruption of Bayer Argentina’s 100th anniversary event.

“We had to think of new disruption methods different from the traditional ones like striking. We’re not like the oil refinery unions that can block the refineries and inflict million dollar losses to their employers,” says Pedro. “But the pharmaceutical industry really cares about its image, so that’s why we started mobilising to international conferences organised by the industry, or writing reports that revealed fines that the businesses were issued for breaking regulations.”

While the AAPM has been able to strengthen its influence in Argentina, Dobrusin believes that in order to maintain this power, the union needs to start thinking global.

“The AAPM needs to be more active in building transnational alliances. That’s going to be key for it to build more resistance in an industry that’s totally transnational. Even the smaller labs need to think about their strategies in a global framework,” says Dobrusin.

“The key will be to join international federations and to seek alliances with similar unions that are organised in the same companies abroad. The AAPM is slowly incorporating these practices, which will be key for the union’s future,” he says.

by Lucia He