



Institutional violence: persecution and stigmatization of youth

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Summary

Organized youth collectives in union structures that are part of the Argentine Workers Central (CTA) have developed different forms of protest, processes of struggle and organization in the face of the “institutional violence” developed by Argentine state institutions. They have had to do as much during the political and social processes of winning rights, as during the current context in which the state has reactivated mechanisms of repression and criminalization in its deployment of anti-grassroots policies. In this article we describe three experiences that illustrate how the more militant youth wing of a national workers organization approaches this problem, and this article will detail some current political policies that reveal the current context that the youth of our country exist in.

Introduction

The increase of violence, repression and persecution against youth is a phenomenon that concerns and preoccupies us as the Argentine Workers Central (CTA). For many years, from within social, political and union organizations we have been working to understand the social phenomenon that we have identified as “institutional violence”: a framework of acts that range from detention “due to background check” to extreme forms of violence such as assassination (the so-called “trigger happy”) and physical and psychological torture. This violence went from being isolated cases to becoming part of a systemic and structural problem that involves public officials and creates contexts in which autonomy and freedom are restricted.

In this situation, and concurrent with the consolidation of “youth” as a category of new political and social actors, “the *kids*” (*pibes* – as they are usually called in Argentina) have turned into the scapegoats of a large part of today’s social problems. During recent years, youth have been key political actors in the development of the social fabric in neighbourhoods, holding the public administration of the State accountable, and the organization for the defense of rights that have been won. Together with the classic conception of youth as “divine treasure” for the development of a national project, the state succeeded in a process of stigmatization, persecution and judgment of certain youth in terms of work, mandatory education, sexuality, political participation, and collectivization, among others. In this way, little by little concepts and common attitudes about youth have come to consider them “dangerous” as a way to sustain social peace. Two emblematic cases are those of the “ni-ni” (youth that neither work nor study) and the debate around the necessity of lowering the age of criminal responsibility from 16 to 14 years.

Biases against youth associated with criminality — whether due to a criminal record or even simply their socioeconomic background — face challenges entering

the labor market or obtaining an education. This is part of a phenomenon that is replicated on a global level and to which there is no magic solution. These are constant problems and to date they do not have a firm, grassroots solution, given that related policies implemented in the recent years have not resulted in desired outcomes.

With the rise of a neoconservative government to the national state in December 2015, the process of punitive policies and the dismantling of preventative public policies have intensified. The situations of persecuted youth have been aggravated – especially for those who belong to the non-professional sectors – in terms of physical violence and criminalization of different protests by this social group.

In what follows, we present statistical information and stories about organized youth in the CTA in the provinces of Santa Fe, Córdoba and Buenos Aires, the three most populated jurisdictions of our country, that most rigorously reflect, in our view, the situation described above.

Buenos Aires Province

The province of Buenos Aires is known for having the security force with the greatest number of complaints for corruption. In the 90s, when neoliberalism was brutally implemented in Argentina, the Buenos Aires police force was accused of having links to “drug trafficking, asphalt pirates, large bands of bank and armoured truck robbers, taking bribes for prostitution and clandestine gambling, ‘arrangements’ with delinquents and the attempt against the AMIA” (1). In addition to the disappearance of Miguel Bru, a student from la Plata, there is also the assassination of Cristian Campos in Mar del Plata and a number of acts that were not covered by the mass media. This was how the Buenos Aires police got the title “the Damned Police.”

According to a report from the Buenos Aires section of the CTA (2), in the first year of the Alianza Cambiemos (*Let’s Change Alliance*) government, with the presidency of Mauricio Macri, there were at least 824

cases of attacks on human rights. If we look at these acts according to *type of attacks*, institutional violence occupies first place with 275 registered cases; and if we consider the *origin of attacks*, 73.44% come from the state apparatus, with 202 being originated by the police. The organized grassroots militancy has carried out a lot of work in order to reverse this situation including: judicial accompaniment in cases, demonstrations in the streets to demand the necessary actions by the state, and the organization of family members of the victims of institutional violence in order to monitor the cases and to develop prevention strategies. One such strategy was the “in case they detain you” campaign carried out by the CTA Buenos Aires youth.

This campaign, that has been carried out since 2009, is made up of a printed flyer that aims to inform youth about the rights that exist in the event they are detained by police on the street, whether for what is most commonly called a “background check”, or in the event of detention for some crime in a police station.

According to the CTA Buenos Aires report, in this province during the first year of the Mauricio Macri government at the national level and the María Eugenia Vidal government at the provincial level (same political party), there were 298 cases of human rights violations, among which 77% included institutional violence and political persecution.

Cordoba Province

The problem of institutional violence in Cordoba, carried out by the repressive political apparatus of the province’s government, is one of the most important security problems in recent years. Police “arbitrariness” is a current tool in the Code of Coexistence updated in 2016, but it is a practice inherited directly from the police doctrine of the last civic-military dictatorship in Argentina.

Within the most important points of this “manual of social coexistence” that governs Cordobans, are the most well founded critiques from those who fight for another model of security, linking respect to rights and

freedoms. *Suspicious behaviour*, which is in Article 70, opens the door to persecution and arbitrary detention. It is one of the worst articles in the new code. It is the tool for detention “for carrying a face”.

A study carried out by the National University of Cordoba, establishes that the majority of detentions for contravention of the Code of Coexistence are related to this provision, and include as victims youth between 18 and 25 years of age from vulnerable sectors, thus criminalizing poverty. The youth detained by the application of this standard spend a maximum of two days imprisoned (in the case of the higher classes), a maximum of two months (in the case of the middle classes), and up to six months behind bars (in the case of the lower classes). In all of these cases, 95% of those arrested do not have access to a lawyer. Some youth claim to have been detained up to 30 times due to application of the provincial code. In this case, the study carried out signals discrimination against people with lower incomes, since this group represents 75% of the cases of youth detained five or more times. According to data shared by the Cordoba Province Police, 70% of those detained due to application of the Code of Coexistence are male youth between 18 and 25 years. On the other hand, the Observatory of Human Rights of the National University of Cordoba (3) registered 59 cases of the use of lethal force by the security forces. In the face of this situation, for the past 10 years “La Marcha de la Gorra” (*March of the Cap*) has been carried out. It is a demonstration organized and led by youth collectives, *kids* from the city’s marginalized neighbourhoods, secondary and university students, young workers — all who suffer police violence daily. This space of resistance and occupation of the streets is one of the most important demonstrations at the social level that is carried out every year. The central themes of this youth action include the demands of justice for the “trigger-happy” cases and the energetic call for the creation of a Code of Coexistence that guarantees rights and does not repress poor people.

Despite the modifications to the Code of Coexisten-

Photo: Sixth march of the "gorra". Overexposed City, Córdoba, Argentina



ce, the actions and contributions of state institutions in the discussion for a model of citizen security, police judgment continues to stigmatize youth, which essentially is the criminalization of poverty and the state of youth as a problematic factor for the law.

Santa Fe Province

In the province of Santa Fe, increasingly youth find themselves in vulnerable situations in the streets, and this is related to a political system that infringes on rights. While it can be observed that the percentage of youth without access education is increasing, there is greater difficulty in accessing a first job in dignified conditions, and every day stigmatization grows, with youth who are most in need being characterized as agents of insecurity. This latter idea contributes to a very strong sense that the "kids" (*pibes* and *pibas*) should be eliminated from the system or be deprived of their freedom, such as occurs every electoral year when the debate to lower the age of at which minors can be tried as adults (from 16 to 14 years) is revived.

It is well understood that this is not a problem that can only be resolved in one way, and much less that has one trigger. This is where the security system, the political apparatus, the judicial power, and the mass media enter into play. These systems use everything at their disposal to distract attention and change the real focus of insecurity that really has specifically to do with the security forces themselves. In the city of Santa Fe, provincial capital, the CTA Youth, that groups together different sectors of workers, decided to tackle these subjects with the actors themselves, developing some activities. One of them was the screening of a film, "G. An official crime", that makes visible the corruption and institutional violence of an

era. The workshop activity included the film's director, Daniel Otero, in attendance as well as students from the School of Secondary Teaching for Youth and Adults (night schools). At this event, the kids from "The Voice of the People" were present — neighbourhood artists who recount their own reality using rhyme and hip hop. Also, together with different groups of students from the night schools, a variety of workshops were carried out in which the situations of institutional violence were addressed using theatre with performances and debate afterwards. For the workers organization it was interesting to be able to work with youth on this subject so that they could know their rights, make visible their issues and not normalize discriminatory practices.

Final words

The accounts and statistics presented about some jurisdictions in our country describe the profound problem of institutional violence against youth that worsens under the political and economic conditions of a new national government that clearly does not favour the inclusion and attention to this sector of society. To the contrary, today we see in Argentina a government that promotes individual competition, finger-pointing, discrimination and stigmatization, persecution, repression and criminalization of social protest, added to a lack of interest in generating policies that contain and solve the most serious situations of social vulnerability. In response to the structural exclusion experienced as humiliating personal failure, to the configuration of labels and stigmas, to the isolation of social identities, the CTA Youth assume the struggle and resistance to the different forms of institutional violence with a politics of protest in defense of all human rights, with organization of the social, student and labour movement, and with processes of class and popular culture awareness-raising.

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