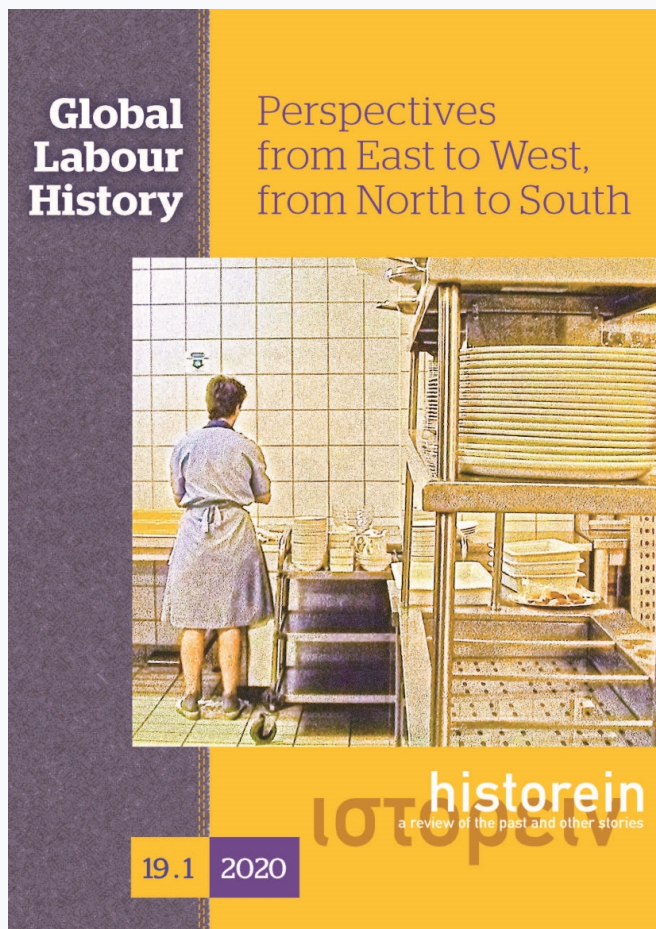


Historein

Vol 19, No 1 (2020)

Global Labour History: Perspectives from East to West, from North to South



Labour Policy and Diplomacy: Argentina's Labour Attachés under Peronism

Maria Damilakou

doi: [10.12681/historein.18709](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18709)

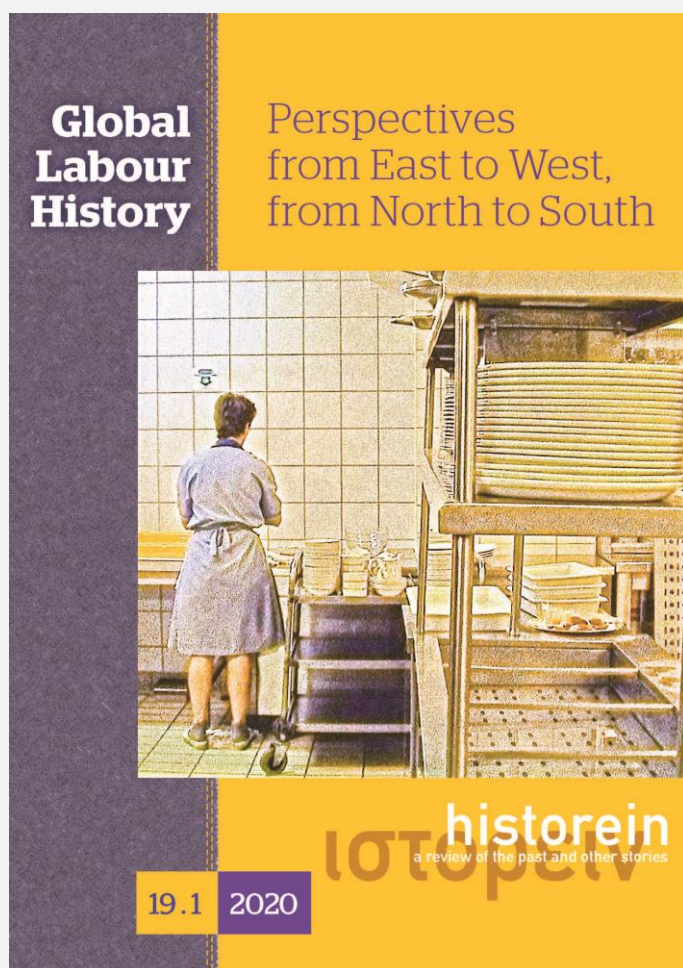
Copyright © 2020, MARIA DAMILAKOU



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Damilakou, M. (2020). Labour Policy and Diplomacy: Argentina's Labour Attachés under Peronism. *Historein*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18709>



**Labour Policy and Diplomacy:
Argentina's Labour Attachés
under Peronism**

Maria Damilakou

doi: 10.12681/historein.18709

To cite this article:

Damilakou, Maria. 2020. "Labour Policy and Diplomacy: Argentina's Labour Attachés under Peronism". *Historein* 19 (1).
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.18709>.

Labour Policy and Diplomacy: Argentina's Labour Attachés under Peronism

Maria Damilakou

Ionian University

In 1946, a few months after his election as president of Argentina, the populist leader Juan Domingo Perón established an ambitious labour attaché programme that became the heart of his energetic labour diplomacy from 1946 to 1955. The establishment of such a service of “plebeian” diplomatic attachés, who made contact with the local labour movement and publicised Argentina's corporate model in the countries to which they were assigned, reflects Perón's political programme, which was based on the privileged relationship of mutual support he built up with trade unions as well as on his internationalist aspirations. This article examines the social, ideological and cultural characteristics of this special labour attaché corps, its working methods and practices as well as its action plan for the promotion of Perón's labour diplomacy. It also shows the serious constraints the attachés faced due to the very nature of the Peronist regime and the dynamics of the confrontational Cold War political context.

Perón's labour diplomacy and the state machinery created to support it can only be properly understood if studied within its international political context. At the end of the Second World War, a new kind of diplomacy emerged that was oriented towards control of the international labour movement. Although labour diplomacy was not something new, in the late 1940s it obtained an official character and gradually a more interventionist aspect. The growing strategic importance of organised labour, the postwar development doctrine and the rapidly intensifying Cold War dynamics were interpreted by the leading powers of the so-called Western world as demanding a strong political response to attempts by the Soviets to exercise ideological control over the labour movements in Europe and in Third World countries. Thus, the US government began to practice aggressive labour diplomacy in the countries of Western Europe and Latin America, having at its disposal for this purpose a newly established labour attaché corps. A large bibliography exists on the US State Department programme of labour attachés and on the labour diplomacy of the two leading American labour organisations – the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) – focusing on their interventions in Latin America. From Robert Alexander, the scholar with the strongest influence on US officials dealing with Latin American labour matters,¹ Serafino Romualdi, who was the AFL's

representative in Latin America,² and many scholars who stressed the connection of American labour with US state agencies³ to the most recent literature that has adopted a rather revisionist approach to the subject,⁴ all relative analyses agree that labour diplomacy was a crucial tool for the postwar US hemispheric projects and the construction of the Cold War inter-American system.

On the other hand, only few studies have focused exclusively on Perón's labour diplomacy and the incorporation of Argentine workers into foreign affairs, despite the vast bibliography concerning Peronist populist politics and its impact on regional and hemispheric affairs. From this large literature, many classical and recent studies have dealt with Perón's foreign policy and Argentina's relations with the US as they oscillated between strong nationalism and pragmatism, and between confrontation and dialogue;⁵ with Argentina's role in the Cold War dynamics that developed in Latin America as a battle between hemispheric and regional political projects and a struggle between liberal and nationalist economic models,⁶ but also as a clash of civilisations and different historical legacies;⁷ and with Perón's "Third Position", which rejected both capitalism and communism, as a combination of strategies that reflected Argentina's regional ambitions as well as domestic transformations that took place during the Peronist era.⁸ These wide-ranging transformations extended from public policies in matters of social rights and labour regulations to changes in habits, perceptions, imaginaries and identities.⁹ In what refers to Perón's labour diplomacy, some scholars have focused on his attempts to create in Latin America a regional labour movement inspired by Peronist principles¹⁰ while others have explored the relationship between Peronist labour activism and foreign policy.¹¹

Yet Perón's labour attaché programme did not receive any academic attention until recently, perhaps due to the fact that the military dictatorship which ousted him from power in 1955 destroyed some records about the worker attachés, whereas other documents have remained confidential up to this day. The first article about Perón's labour attachés, written in 1994 by the Argentine historian Claudio Panella, offers an overview and general analysis of the programme until its dismantlement in 1955.¹² The recently published monograph of Argentine historian Ernesto Semán has opened new paths in the approach to the subject.¹³ From an enriching transnational perspective, Semán studies the confrontation between Peronist and US labour diplomats for the conquest of Latin America's labour movement and the larger competition between liberal and populist projects that shaped the postwar Western hemisphere and made Peronism a central protagonist of the Cold War in the Americas. His book places emphasis on labour activism and examines the changes, conflicts and tensions that characterised the activities of Argentine's labour attachés as a result of what the author interprets as a conservative shift in Perón's foreign policy from the end of 1948 and as a distancing from radical labour activism.

This article moves the gaze from the base to the top and focuses on the very

concept of Perón's labour diplomacy – a combination of state policies and state-controlled working-class activism – as he conceived and designed it to be put into practice by labour attaché corps. It covers the period from 1948, when the programme was fully established, to Perón's fall from power in 1955. In this analysis, the programme of labour attachés is viewed as a radical project that broke with more conventional forms of international labour diplomacy and challenged US plans for the Western hemisphere; as a laboratory for mass politics and social change embodied in the transformation of genuine workers into diplomats; and finally as a window from which to approach Peronism through two of its basic aspects: first, the incorporation of the working classes at all levels of Argentina's public life and, second, the centrality of organised labour in Perón's plans for ideological expansionism, inherent to his political project. From this perspective, the article looks at the continuities of the programme during nearly all the above-mentioned period and sees the acceleration and slowdowns in the activity of the labour attachés as a mirror of the inner duality of Peronism in matters of mass mobilisation and demobilisation and as part of its permanent tension between a hardcore ideology and pragmatism in international affairs. These oscillations and ambivalences can be distinguished in the programme throughout the whole period of 1948–54, reaching its radical peak in 1951–52 with the emission of an extremely confidential "Plan of Action" that promoted aggressive labour diplomacy. Only in 1954 can we talk about an official "deactivation" of labour attachés due to the improvement of US–Argentina relations in mid-1953, after Eisenhower assumed the US presidency.

My analysis is based on largely unstudied and mostly confidential documentation included in the archival collection of Argentina's labour attaché programme that belongs to the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Argentina. This collection includes important documents about the activity of labour attachés, who during the late 1940s and early 1950s carried out their duties in Argentine embassies in several countries of Latin America, North America, Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and other parts of the world, where they tried to disseminate Perón's political and social project. This material, which is very rich in its double character as document and as text, permits us to delve deeply into the language, the concept, the aims and the ambivalences of the programme that became the very heart of Perón's labour diplomacy and an important tool for the expansion of populist politics in Latin America.

Preachers of the Peronist gospel

Peronist labour diplomacy was designed in the postwar historical conjuncture as a response to the emergence of competing political projects for global hegemony. Perón's strategic decision to establish, in 1946, an ambitious labour attaché programme and to incorporate trade unionists in almost all Argentina's diplomatic representations abroad, was connected to his internationalist plans in which an "alternative" global unionism, close to Peronist ideals and opposed to both capitalism and communism, played a key role. Perón's

decision was largely a reaction to US new international labour diplomacy: in 1942, the US government had created a labour attaché programme whose initial inspiration came from the British labour attachés who performed their duties in the US during wartime.¹⁴ This new American service, along with other American governmental agencies and the labour organisations AFL and CIO, aimed to exercise ideological influence on the labour movements of other countries, foment anticommunist activities and publicise American values of liberal democracy. At the same time, Britain's labour attachés were deploying their activities abroad and would soon be involved in their own Cold War crusade.¹⁵

Wishing to avoid copying foreign patterns, Perón pretended to give a proper character to the Argentine institution of labour attachés. For this purpose, he blended several models and ideas about new forms of diplomacy that circulated in the aftermath of the Second World War. For example, Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary in the postwar British Labour government, talked about the need for a new diplomacy "from peoples to peoples".¹⁶ In Perón's plan, several of those ideas circulating worldwide were moulded into a new shape whose central concept was that of a novel diplomacy "from workers to workers". In the words of the 1951 "Plan of Action", "the best way to gain peoples is through the working class. This must be our means of action."¹⁷ For this purpose, in contrast to other labour attaché programmes that generally recruited specialists in labour matters, Perón created a real "plebeian" diplomatic service, manned by simple trade unionists, who were selected and nominated by their respective unions. Most of them had anarchist, socialist or communist backgrounds and had joined Peronism during its formative period of 1943–46.¹⁸

Almost 500 trade unionists, including about 60 women, participated in the compulsory training courses from 1946 to 1955. The training programme included courses on oratory, sociology, political economy, the history of Argentine trade unionism, social legislation, universal history, geography, etc. The course lasted three months in 1946, which was extended to two years in 1951.¹⁹ Until 1955, 108 labour attachés, including four women, exercised their duties abroad, covering almost all the approximately 50 Argentine embassies in the early 1950s. The dimensions of this expansion can be better evaluated if we take into account that in 1946, Britain had established a labour attaché service in 19 British embassies²⁰ and by 1953, there were 33 fulltime US labour attachés posted around the world.²¹

Due to their humble social background, Perón's labour attachés became the live image and symbol of the new, "just" Argentina that dignified the working class and transformed it into being the most "genuine" representatives of their country before other nations. Indeed, despite their lack of experience in foreign affairs, these new brand officers were supposed to become the preachers of Perón's "truth": to diffuse the "new reality" of Argentina, namely, the economic progress and social achievements of organised labour, personified in their own accomplishments and upwardly personal trajectories; to explain

Argentina's version of corporatism in which the state was responsible for guaranteeing political and social rights to the working classes and for imposing compromises between management and trade unions;²² to spread abroad the Peronist recipe for "social harmony", a concept used as a synonym for social order and perceived as a vision of a corporatist society that could prevent the rise of popular extremism; and generally to publicise Peronist ideology and make known Argentina's international Third Position that rejected both capitalism and communism.²³ In order to fulfil their duties, the labour attachés were supposed to skilfully use different kinds of mass media in the host country – newspapers, magazines, radio programmes, trade unions bulletins – and to "penetrate" discretely into popular social spaces such as sports and social clubs, in order to disseminate Perón's truth to the "authentic" working classes and to denounce the manipulation of people by capitalism.²⁴

The figure of the labour attaché was generally considered by the Peronist apparatus as the "spearhead" of the propaganda basic unit established in Argentine embassies abroad, who would clear different obstacles and accomplish the most delicate missions.²⁵ The personal behaviour and lifestyle of those special diplomats were supposed to be in full accordance with their important office: they should live in moderation, not provoke, avoid publicity, extravagance and excessive spending, stay away from any illicit economic activities and avoid getting into debt.²⁶ Also, according to the instructions sent to them in 1949 by director Anselmo Malvicini, "Labour attachés have the obligation to make any kind of sacrifice in the name of their institution". Loyalty to the leader and readiness to sacrifice were the necessary qualities for a successful working-class diplomat who served the "Peronist revolution" as a soldier.²⁷

The more routine tasks of Argentina's labour attaché corps consisted in the writing of reports every 15 days, with detailed descriptions and comments about the situation of trade unions in the host country, the influence of political parties on them and their affiliation to international labour organisations; about labour conditions, social legislation, strikes and lockouts, cooperatives, salaries and cost of living, working-class living conditions; and, of course, the political situation in the host country, including special reports on communist activities and foreign influences. Labour attachés had to be watchful observers of the working classes in all the countries they were assigned to and take useful lessons from their situation, problems and demands. As expected, special emphasis was to be put on the attitudes of the host country's government, political parties and press towards the Peronist government and its Third Position; for this reason lists of Argentina's sympathisers needed to be prepared and sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a regular basis.²⁸

Although those humble diplomats considered themselves as the most faithful interpreters of Perón's "truth", they had to perform their tasks under the strict control of Argentina's state bureaucracy and in a uniform and disciplined way that left little margin for personal initiative. This was in consonance with Perón's basic deal with trade unions: in line with this deal, the Argentine labour movement – one of the largest and most powerful in the

American continent – reinforced its bargaining power, but it passed under state tutelage and it was supposed to loyally second Perón's political project. This structure was reflected in the labour attachés' "Plan of Action" of 1951. According to this document, in order to avoid any discrepancies and competing discourses, their propaganda activity should be based exclusively on material elaborated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For this purpose, a special Secretariat for Diffusion was created in 1951 that provided all labour attachés with Perón's speeches and texts. At the same time, the ministry's Department of International Organisation of Labour (DOIT), created in 1947, managed all issues related to international labour and coordinated the labour attachés' service, frequently sending them strict instructions and receiving all correspondence and reports. This department was in close contact with the International Department of the General Confederation of Labour of Argentina (CGT), also created in 1947. The centralisation and verticality proper of the Peronist regime dissipated – or at least reduced – territorial disputes among government, state agencies and labour unions, which characterised the labour diplomacy of other countries whose trade unions maintained greater autonomy from the state.²⁹

The official duties of Argentina's labour attachés overlapped with their covert operations. These dangerous missions, which became a source of tension with foreign governments and within Argentine embassies, were outlined in the highly confidential 1951 "Plan of Action". This plan was delivered to all of Argentina's embassies in December 1951, one month after Perón's second election as president and at a moment of increased tension in relations between Argentina and the US: in the second half of 1951, Perón's government escalated its anti-American propaganda throughout Latin America while US officials put into practice a new set of tactics to neutralise Argentine anti-American activities, especially in the field of labour diplomacy.³⁰ A product of that period, this plan overshadowed previous official instructions delivered in 1948, according to which labour attachés had to respect diplomatic rules and not to intervene in domestic matters of the host country. Reflecting a different climate, the 1951 plan prepared Argentina's attachés for battle in the field of organised labour. Written in a martial language, it developed methods and strategies for their fight against the two big enemies: firstly, capitalism, identified with the US and, secondly, communism. The war against capitalism should be active, "in its own redoubts", whereas communism was expected to gradually lose its force thanks to the "new consciousness" of the working classes and the eradication of poverty, as had happened in Argentina.

Naturally, these covert operations were planned to be realised basically in Latin American countries in which Argentina had strategic interests and aimed at the expansion of the Peronist ideology in the regional labour movement. For this purpose, Argentina's labour attachés were supposed to penetrate secretly the highest echelons of the local labour movements, promote as labour leaders candidates close to Peronism and support

strikes. Their mode of action had to be subtle and discrete, however. According to the “Plan of Action”, “the labour attaché should not seem like an agitator but he should be one.”³¹ First of all, each attaché had to create a network of confidants and local Peronist agents who would promote Argentina's internationalist plans and combat American agents. For this purpose they used different methods, from secret propaganda tools to subsidised trips of foreign delegations to Argentina, which included visits to trade unions and factories as well as interviews with Perón and his wife, Eva, and several social events.³² Those trips took the character of “missions”: the “missionaries”, fascinated by the social reality of the “new Argentina” and the achievements of trade unions, were expected to spread Peronist values and ideals to their countries.³³

“Our America”: Labour diplomacy in Latin American countries

As expected, Perón's labour diplomacy was particularly active in Argentina's neighbouring South American countries, but Central America too became part of Argentina's political plans. Perón tried to build cultural and economic ties with Central American countries and transform the region into a battlefield between Argentina and the US, especially in the field of labour diplomacy where he could develop his antiimperialist rhetoric.³⁴ In general, Argentina supported economic nationalism for Latin American countries and defended progressive governments such as that of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala, who introduced a land reform and promoted the rights of workers in the plantations of the United Fruit Company, or the nationalist Bolivian Revolution of 1952, in which organised labour played a major role. However, Argentina's diplomacy was to be carried out mostly in the field of labour internationalism.³⁵

In the early 1950s, the Latin American labour movement was divided in two big regional organisations: the Confederation of Latin American Workers (CTAL), under communist influence and the leadership of the Mexican Lombardo Toledano, and the Inter-American Confederation of Workers (ORIT), which was headed by the AFL and a member of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).³⁶ The ICFTU, a byproduct of the Cold War, was founded in 1949 by “Western” trade union federations that had withdrawn from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) after disagreements with the communist-led unions within it. The chief founders of the new organisation were the AFL and the British Trades Union Congress.³⁷ The stated purpose of the ICFTU, which became an important part of the Cold War international institutional apparatus, was to ensure “collaboration between the free and democratic trade union movements throughout the world”. After its clash with the AFL in 1947, Argentina's General Confederation of Labour (CGT) did not become a member of the new international federation (ICFTU) or the regional ORIT, which, since its creation in 1951, set itself in opposition to the Peronist movement.

As a counterattack, in 1952 after long preliminary negotiations, Perón achieved the creation of a Peronist-oriented Latin American labour federation, the Agrupación de

Trabajadores Latinoamericanos Sindicalistas, more popularly known by its acronym, ATLAS, under the umbrella of the Argentine General Confederation of Labour (CGT).³⁸ ATLAS' programme included articles inspired by Latin American social reality such as the equality of rights for native and black people, and condemned both imperialisms expressed by CTAL and ORIT, in alignment with the Peronist Third Position.³⁹ The recruitment of trade unions that would affiliate with the new Latin American confederation was based on two strategies: the establishment of Peronist-friendly central labour federations in countries where none of them existed and the encouragement of splits in already-existing labour federations for the creation of new ones that would join ATLAS. By 1954, ATLAS, apart from its hemispheric organs and executive committee, had national committees or delegations in almost all Latin American countries. Its leaders claimed it had about 18 million members, but probably its actual size was much smaller. Besides Argentina's CGT, which was its backbone, ATLAS had in its ranks the CROM (Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers), formerly Mexico's largest central organisation but which in the 1950s was only of secondary importance. In Colombia, as a result of a split in the previously existing Colombian Confederation of Workers (CTC), the newly formed National Confederation of Workers (CNT) affiliated with ATLAS.⁴⁰ These splits, supported economically by Argentina, were common in several Latin American countries. Elsewhere, Argentina's labour diplomacy with regard to ATLAS focused on trade unions of specific regions of some Latin American countries or on certain economic sectors such as transport. It also achieved the affiliation – more “moral” than real – of the Federation of Graphic Workers of Canada, which was very highly publicised by the ATLAS leadership.

Argentina's labour attachés played a crucial role in the expansion of the new regional organisation. In fact, in all Latin American countries to which they were assigned, they functioned as ATLAS secret agents: they had the mission to encourage affiliation by all means – intrigue and bribery included; they intervened in the election of members to the ATLAS national committees, offered assistance and, most importantly, distributed significant amounts of cash, which mainly came from Argentina's CGT and other Argentine state dependencies and agencies. Of course, they also orchestrated the negative campaign against the ORIT and AFL for being tools of the US State Department. Apart from money, Argentina's labour attachés offered the newly founded trade unions and federations “education” in labour policy, guidance in political matters, assistance in bargaining methods and tried to “implant” in the local labour movement Peronist “rituals” such as the selection of the working-class beauty queens for the May Day celebration.⁴¹ In several Central American countries, Argentina's labour attachés organised “expeditions” to the provinces where they tried to organise rural workers who worked under feudal working conditions in the plantations owned by American companies. Somehow, they felt like agents of modernisation in societies characterised by backwardness. In one of his reports, in 1953

the labour attaché in Panama, Víctor Gosis, complained about “the indolence proper of these tropical zones”.⁴² Their concrete purpose, though, was the formation of new trade unions that would affiliate with ATLAS. That's why Central American rural zones became battlefields in the war between Perón's labour attachés and ORIT agents, who offered generous sums of money to the local labour organisations and fought against each other to “gain” rural workers.

In spite of these efforts, whose real impact is hard to measure, ATLAS never acquired sufficient strength as several noncommunist Latin American trade unions, largely under American influence, were reluctant to break relations with the AFL. Still, Argentina's labour diplomacy challenged US hemispheric plans, especially in the early 1950s, and it became the main path for the expansion of populist politics in the region.

Between US hegemony and domestic pressures

In contrast to his internationalist plans for Latin America, Perón's labour diplomacy in Western Europe was much less ambitious and more realistic as it never put into doubt the indisputable hegemony of the US over the region. After the Second World War and the announcement of the Marshall Plan in 1947, many European countries depended on American aid and the US spent much effort on influencing the Western Europe labour movement. The aim was not only to fight communism and strengthen the “free” trade unions, but also to promote among the labour movement attitudes that would permit the rise of productivity and contribute to the social and political stabilisation of Europe.⁴³ Consequently, Argentina's labour attachés faced serious constraints due to the direct interference of the AFL and CIO in the European labour movement. Also in countries such as France and Italy, they had to face not only the American influence, but also strong communist parties and trade unions.⁴⁴

In that context, the main available tool in the hands of Perón's labour attachés was Argentina's “example” in matters of social progress. Its diffusion could gain the sympathy and admiration of trade unions. Numerous reports written by labour attachés in the early 1950s underlined the hard working and living conditions of the working classes in several European countries; in their dispatches, Argentina, with its good alimentation and social benefits for everybody, was presented as a paradise on Earth and as a model for the expansion of the social rights of the working classes. This image was transferred to local trade unionists with whom Argentina's attachés had established contacts. In the meetings that David Merelli, the labour attaché in Greece, had with members of the union of doorkeepers, he informed them about palpable changes in the daily life of the working classes in Perón's Argentina. He talked about public institutions providing housing, education and healthcare, and about powerful trade unions owning or managing hospitals, nursery schools and hotels where the workers could enjoy paid vacations. All this was presented through the words of a worker who had become a diplomat. For Merelli and his

interlocutors, the “harmony” between capital and labour that reigned in Argentina was the path to eradicate communism from Greece, a Cold War hotspot.⁴⁵ Merelli also publicised the donations in clothes, shoes and food sent to the Greek population by the Eva Perón Foundation in 1950 and 1951.⁴⁶

In most European countries, such efforts were not likely to go much beyond formal contacts. For this reason the major task of Argentina’s labour attachés became to improve, through discrete publicity activities, the image of Perón’s government, generally presented as dictatorship. In the Soviet Union and the other countries within its political orbit, Argentina’s labour attachés faced serious limitations on the part of the political authorities, which did not allow them access to trade unions, factories and social clubs.⁴⁷ The same happened to Amaranto Garro, the labour attaché in Syria, during the dictatorship of Adib Shishakli (July 1953–February 1954): the head of the Syrian Confederation of Labour sent personal letters to Perón and his foreign minister accusing Argentina’s labour attaché of breaking the unity of the Syrian labour movement.⁴⁸ Similar situations arose in Canada: the Canadian chief of protocol asked that Argentina’s labour attaché Ángel Araujo cease his activity, accusing him of misconduct and undiplomatic behaviour, of intervening in internal matters of Canadian trade unions and of acting as intermediary between ATLAS and the Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada (CTCC).⁴⁹

But without any doubt, it was in Latin American countries where Perón’s labour attachés faced open war from several governments due to their dependency on American political and economic support and to regional rivalries in Latin America. For example, Brazil’s foreign policy during the presidency of Eurico Dutra (1946–51) was aligned closely to that of the US. Even during the second presidency of the populist leader Getúlio Vargas (1951–54), the rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil promoted by presidents Perón and Vargas faced strong opposition from Brazilian diplomatic sectors and trade unions. In that context, Argentine labour attachés were treated with suspicion and encountered serious difficulties in their effort to establish contacts with Brazilian trade unions.⁵⁰ The same happened in Peru, under Manuel Odría’s dictatorship (1948–56), which was aligned with US diplomacy. At the same time, the pro-US military governments in most Central American countries were particularly hostile towards Peronism: local political authorities treated Argentina’s labour attachés and American officials as a threat and as “sinister” figures. Paradoxically, they were accused by American officials and labour leaders in Central America of developing communist propaganda; in the beginning of the 1950s, nationalism and communism were still used as synonyms in the American analysis of Latin American affairs.

Neither in Árbenz’s Guatemala (1951–54), whose land reform and communist support increasingly alarmed the US government, were Perón’s labour attachés welcomed. Árbenz’s personal ties to some prominent figures of the communist Guatemalan Labour

Party, which was legitimised during his government, must have played a role in that. In 1953, Árbenz asked that Argentina's labour attaché, Francisco Moggia, be removed due to his intervention in the Guatemalan labour movement.⁵¹ Generally, labour policy was considered politically very sensitive and foreign interference generated reactions. In Colombia, for example, the activity of Argentina's labour attaché and the financial support he offered to the CNT for being ATLAS's central organisation in Colombia provoked reactions in the press, which referred to a "mockery of national sovereignty" and "humiliation of Colombian unionists and workers".⁵²

How did Perón react to these accusations? Generally, when such diplomatic incidents occurred, labour attachés were removed from office and transferred back to Argentina or to other countries. They were the most exposed piece in the mechanism of Argentina's labour diplomacy and the first to fall when their covert operations became apparent and generated reactions. After all, they were soldiers who could be sacrificed when the political project they served was endangered. It should be noted that Perón's labour attachés also faced the increasing opposition of Argentina's foreign service traditionalists, who were largely anti-Peronist and hostile to the very concept of labour diplomacy. Several ambassadors condemned labour attachés' modus operandi and saw their presence as harmful to Argentina's foreign relations. Many diplomats took a negative view of the "invasion" of workers in diplomacy and treated them as "intruders" in a field traditionally reserved for the elites. Cultural gaps, huge class-based style differences and, of course, questions of power and established hierarchies provoked conflicts between career diplomats and labour attachés in Argentine embassies.

Despite these external and domestic pressures, Argentina's labour diplomacy remained active and maintained its aggressive aspects, as these were outlined in the confidential 1951 "Plan of Action". Only in April 1954, according to new instructions signed by Foreign Minister Jerónimo Remorino, was this controversial plan urgently withdrawn from all Argentina's embassies. This decision reflects the improvement of US–Argentine relations from mid-1953, after Perón, in need of foreign investment for the realisation of his industrialisation plans, moderated his anti-American campaign, and US President Eisenhower decided to recognise Perón as a partner in his anticommunist crusade in the Americas.⁵³ Following these new instructions, the direct intervention of labour attachés in the internal political affairs of other countries was strictly prohibited and they had to avoid any kind of contact with ATLAS union leaders. Literally, the labour attaché had to act "in accordance with his diplomatic status and under the direct responsibility of the Argentine government".⁵⁴ Generally, from the end of 1953 Perón tried to impose discipline on the syndical base, control its propaganda activities and avoid frontal war with the US.⁵⁵ This decision reflects the conservative shift that characterised Perón's diplomacy in 1954–55. But it was also the prelude of the conservative restoration that would take place in Argentina's politics and society in the following years.

The experience of Argentina's labour attachés ended with the overthrow of Perón's government by a military coup in September 1955. Most of those officials were forced to retire; others were excluded from all public services and some others jailed.⁵⁶ Making an assessment of Perón's labour attaché programme is more complicated than at first seems. Without any doubt, its practical and concrete results were short-lived and rather limited. There are many explanations for this: Argentina's labour attachés, with their inexperience in international affairs and secret agency and devoid of any real backing from the Foreign Ministry's machinery, had to keep a very difficult balance between direct and covert action and operate in hostile political environments under the expert eyes of American secret agencies. In any case, Perón's labour internationalist plans had little chance of success and to go beyond opportunistic alliances. This was due to the fact that many noncommunist trade unions were reluctant to break with American influence; others viewed with suspicion Perón's plans for a regional unionism under the umbrella of Argentina's state-dependent CGT and defended their "sovereignty" over national labour matters. From a larger perspective, these shortcomings were the result of the existing global asymmetries and reflect the impact of the polarised Cold War context on the international labour movement and the practical impossibility of any "alternative" labour policies in that period.

However, the balance of that challenging programme must go beyond its immediate gains and take into account its deeper meaning, real and symbolic, for Peronist populist politics. The figure of Perón's labour attaché, a genuine worker who became a diplomat, personified the "essence" of populism and the big social changes that took place in Argentina from 1946 to 1955, with the incorporation of the working classes in all spaces of public life. The labour attaché programme shows how Perón's foreign policy was strongly connected with those deep social transformations. This connection is clearly reflected in Argentina's labour diplomacy that became the main tenet of Perón's plans for regional leadership and global ascendancy. Also, as a combination of state policies and state-controlled labour activism, that programme was a mirror of Peronism in terms of working-class mobilisation and control: until the end of 1953, it became the institutional framework for an aggressive labour activism that combatted American hegemony, whereas in 1954, when Perón's political priorities had changed, it passed through a demobilisation process in consonance with the improvement in US–Argentine relations. In any case, it was a radical programme that challenged social hierarchies, established ways of exercising diplomacy and US plans for the postwar inter-American system. From a global perspective, this interesting Peronist institution clearly shows the power and strategic importance of labour in the post-Second World War era as it became an essential partner, more or less successfully, in any internationalist projects.

- ¹ Robert J. Alexander's (1918–2010) scholarly activity was influenced by a clear political agenda. In the 1950s he was a combative opponent of both communism and Peronism and he travelled to Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America sent by the American Federation of Labour. See, among other studies, Robert J. Alexander, "Labor and Inter-American Relations," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 334, no. 1 (March 1961): 41–53; Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Argentina* (Westport: Praeger, 2003); Robert J. Alexander and Eldon M. Parker, *International Labor Organizations and Organized Labor in Latin America and the Caribbean: A History* (Santa Barbara: Praeger/ABC–CLIO, 2009).
- ² Serafino Romualdi, "Labor and Democracy in Latin America," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 3 (1947): 476–89; Romualdi, *Presidents and Peons: Recollections of a Labor Ambassador in Latin America* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1967).
- ³ Kim Scipes, *AFL–CIO Secret War against Developing Countries: Solidarity or Sabotage?* (Lanham: Lexington, 2010).
- ⁴ A comprehensive and updated study of the US labour diplomacy is Robert A. Waters Jr. and Geert Van Goethem, eds., *American Labor's Global Ambassadors: The International History of the AFL–CIO during the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- ⁵ José Paradiso, *Debates y trayectoria de la política exterior argentina* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1993); Carlos Escudé and Andrés Cisneros, eds., *Historia general de las relaciones exteriores de la República Argentina*, vols. 11–13 (Buenos Aires: CARI–CEPE–GEL, 1998); David Sheinin, *Argentina and the United States: An Alliance Contained* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).
- ⁶ For the particular characteristics of Cold War in Latin America and a critical view on US Cold War policies in the region, see Stephen Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Cold War in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Gilbert Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- ⁷ For a view of the Cold War in the Americas as a political and cultural clash between Pan-Americanism and Pan-Latinism and an analysis of Perón's ambitions for regional leadership, see Loris Zanatta, *La internacional justicialista: Auge y ocaso de los sueños imperiales de Perón* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2013). For a more general vision, see Greg Grandin, "Your Americanism and Mine: Americanism and Anti-Americanism in the Americas," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 4 (2006): 1042–66.
- ⁸ For an enriching analysis that connects Perón's foreign policy with social and economic domestic transformations, see Mario Rapoport and Claudio Spiguel, *Relaciones tumultuosas: Estados Unidos y el primer peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2009).
- ⁹ Eduardo Elena, *Dignifying Argentina: Peronism, Citizenship and Mass Consumption* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Natalia Milanese, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012); Elisa Pastoriza, *La conquista de las vacaciones: Breve historia del turismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2011).
- ¹⁰ Teodoro Blanco, "ATLAS, la proyección sindical peronista en América Latina," *Todo es historia*, no. 199–200 (1993): 40–53; Claudio Panella, *Perón y ATLAS: Historia de una central latinoamericana de trabajadores* (Buenos Aires: Vinciguerra, 1996); Manuel Urquiza, *CGT y ATLAS: Historia de una experiencia sindical latinoamericana* (Buenos Aires: Legasa, 1988).
- ¹¹ Raanan Rein, *Juan Atilio Bramuglia: Bajo la sombra del líder. La segunda línea del liderazgo peronista* (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2006); Loris Zanatta, "Perón y el espejismo del bloque latino," *Revista de Ciencia Política y Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad de Palermo* 2, no. 2 (2005): 7–52.
- ¹² Claudio Panella, "Los agregados obreros: Una experiencia inédita de la diplomacia argentina," *Todo es historia* 28, no. 328 (1994): 34–60.
- ¹³ Ernesto Semán, *Ambassadors of the Working Class: Argentina's International Labor Activists and Cold War Democracy in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

- ¹⁴ Hugh Wilford, "American Labor Diplomacy and Cold War Britain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 1 (2002): 45–46.
- ¹⁵ Peter Weiler, *British Labour and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
- ¹⁶ Caroline Anstey, "Foreign Office Publicity, American Aid and European Unity: Mobilising Public Opinion, 1947–1949," in *Power in Europe? Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany in a Postwar World, 1945–1950*, ed. Josef Becker and Franz Knipping (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), 376.
- ¹⁷ "Plan de acción para el movimiento justicialista internacional," December 1951, 4. Folder AH 0001, Agregados Obreros, Archivo de Cancillería (hereafter AC).
- ¹⁸ Semán, *Ambassadors*, 29.
- ¹⁹ Panella, "Los agregados obreros," 38.
- ²⁰ Anstey, "Foreign Office Publicity," 377.
- ²¹ Philip M. Kaiser, *Journeying Far and Wide: A Political and Diplomatic Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 1992), 117.
- ²² This was one of the main differences between the Argentine corporatist model and American tripartism (Business–Labour–State) that American labour diplomacy tried to export worldwide. According to the American model, organised labour was supposed to maintain its independence from the state and the emphasis was put on managerial projects, efficiency and technology within a generally liberal economic context: Dustin Walcher, "Reforming Latin American Labor: the AFL–CIO and Latin America's Cold War," in *American Labor's Global Ambassadors*, 123–35; Bent Boel, *The European Productivity Agency and Transatlantic Relations, 1953–1961* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), 27.
- ²³ "Instrucciones a que deberán ajustar su cometido los señores agregados obreros," November 1948, and "Plan de acción para el movimiento justicialista internacional," December 1951, 2–4. AH 0001: Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ²⁴ Circular no. 13 al Agregado de la Legación de la República en Grecia David Merelli, 6 July 1951. AH 0002: Circulares DOIT, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ²⁵ Manuel Loimil, Ambassador in Panama, to Minister for Foreign Affairs, 25 August 1953. AH 0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ²⁶ Circular no. 10/52 a David Merelli, Agregado de la Legación de la República en Grecia, 2 July 1952. AH 0002: Circulares. DOIT, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ²⁷ Letter of director Anselmo Malvicini, 17 November 1949. AH 0002: Notas recibidas, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ²⁸ AH 0002: Circulares, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ²⁹ In the American case, although in the early Cold War era the two leading labour organisations, AFL and CIO, became linked to the state apparatus, they continued to develop their proper labour diplomacy, tried to extend their own influence over the American Labour attachés programme and competed hard between them over the appointment of attachés. Wilford, "American Labor Diplomacy," 50.
- ³⁰ Carlos Escudé, "Radiografía de una política de derechos humanos: los Estados Unidos frente a la Argentina, 1950–1955," *CEMA Working Papers: Serie Documentos de trabajo* 352 (2007): 19; Sheinin, *Argentina and the United States*, 105.

- ³¹ "Plan de acción para el movimiento justicialista internacional," December 1951, 2–4. AH 0001, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ³² Alexander, *International Labor Organizations*, 177.
- ³³ Subsidised trips were common in the labour diplomacy of the Cold War period, but they took a different character depending on the country that financed them. Whereas Argentina counted on the appeal of its new social reality and bet on the Peronist social experience, the US put emphasis on subsidised educational programmes for foreign unionists who would receive, in several American cities, education in modern production methods, bargaining techniques and become familiarised with American values. Wilford, "American Labor Diplomacy," 5; Boel, *European Productivity Agency*, 27.
- ³⁴ Zanatta, *La internacional justicialista*, 109, 153–54, 237–38.
- ³⁵ Circular DOIT 22/52, 31 December 1952. AH 0002: Circulares, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ³⁶ Julio Godio and Achim Wachendorfer, "Las internacionales sindicales," *Nueva Sociedad* 83 (1986): 81–88.
- ³⁷ R.F., "The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions," *The World Today* 9, no. 1 (1953): 38–45. Anthony Carew et al., eds., *The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000).
- ³⁸ Blanco, "ATLAS"; Urquiza, *CGT y ATLAS*.
- ³⁹ ATLAS, *Declaración de principios y reglamento* (Buenos Aires, 1952).
- ⁴⁰ Alexander, *International Labor Organizations*, 192.
- ⁴¹ Note no. 51/53 by Víctor Gosis, labour attaché in Panama, to Francisco Gartner, 7 September 1953. AH0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Obreros, AC. For the working-class beauty queens and the meanings of this ritual festivity, see Mirta Z. Lobato, Maria Damilakou and Lize Tornay, "Working-Class Beauty Queens under Peronism," in *The New Cultural History of Peronism: Power and Identity in Mid-Twentieth Century Argentina*, ed. Matthew B. Karush and Oscar Chamosa (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 171–207.
- ⁴² Letter of Víctor Gosis to Francisco Gartner, 30 September 1953. AH 0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ⁴³ Boel, *European Productivity Agency*, 149.
- ⁴⁴ Ronald L. Filippelli, *American Labor and Postwar Italy, 1943–1953: A Study of Cold War Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).
- ⁴⁵ Letter of David Merelli to DOIT, 21 November 1949. AH 0002: DOIT 1949, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ⁴⁶ Several relative articles were published in Greek newspapers: AH 0002: DOIT 1950–1951, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ⁴⁷ Panella, "Los agregados obreros," 40.
- ⁴⁸ The authority and political influence of Syrian trade unions had been expanding since 1946, but the military rule in the early 1950s put them under state supervision and limited their rights. Weiler, *British Labor*, 121.
- ⁴⁹ Letter of Ambassador Galigniana in Ottawa to Minister Remorino, 20 November 1953. AH0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ⁵⁰ "Acta de apertura del sumario del Secretario Gremial Jorge Héctor Lupo," Río de Janeiro, 8 September 1953. AH0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Obreros, AC.
- ⁵¹ Code cable dated 26 September 1953. AH0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Obreros, AC.

- ⁵² Letter of Ambassador Martínez Luque to Minister Remorino, 9 November 1953. AH0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Oberos, AC.
- ⁵³ Escudé, "Radiografía," 24; Stephen Rabe, *Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anti-communism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988).
- ⁵⁴ "Circular telegráfica a todos los países del mundo. División Organización Internacional del Trabajo," April 1954. AH0001: Actuación de agregados obreros, Agregados Oberos, AC.
- ⁵⁵ Zanatta, *La internacional justicialista*, 369.
- ⁵⁶ Panella, "Los agregados obreros," 57.