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A tale of two cities: The tenants' strikes of 1907-1908 in Buenos Aires and New York. Exploring the global historical roots of tenants' organization

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Abstract

Labor and social historiography paid attention to tenants' strikes throughout history, but comparative studies remain scarce. Case studies are important to help us understand the peculiarities of past struggles, but broader assessments are also critical to evaluate the general trends that shaped working-class resistance in different times and places. Drawing upon a variety of secondary and primary sources, this article examines the 1907-1908 tenants' strikes in Buenos Aires and New York. Although most of the participants were unaware of the events taking place more than 8,500 km away, both strikes shared many commonalities. Thousands of tenants, many of them migrants, with a strong prominence of women, acted together in order to put an end to the voracious and predatory rule of landlords. Facing attacks from the media and the state, they were forced to build on their experiences of resistance in order to develop the necessary organizational resources to accomplish their goals. The article focuses on the peculiarities of urban development and working-class formation in both cities, on the motley population that filled its tenement houses and *conventillos*, on the role played by socialist and anarchist organizers, on the reaction of the state and the ruling class towards the tenants' struggles, and on the prominent role played, in both cases, by migrant workers and women. Its goal is to highlight similarities and differences of these two cases of tenants' strikes, in order to enrich our understanding of the global historical roots of the ongoing struggle against landlords and capitalist market forces.

Keywords

Tenants, strikes, Buenos Aires, New York, labor history

Introduction

The question of housing conditions—their physical characteristics but also their price and contracting terms—becomes critical if we want to understand the peculiarities of the material and social life of workers at different times in history, in different parts of the world. It is not just about showing how uncomfortable and unhealthy housing conditions were for millions around the world, in the most diverse periods, although that is still a very important task that should not be neglected. Studying working-class housing also implies examining broader questions, such as social relations within families, the dynamics of domestic tasks indispensable for workforce reproduction, the way in which childrearing is taken care of, and so on. It is essential to avoid an approach that reflects our contemporary biases and takes for granted the single-family home with several rooms, appliances, and comfort that, in recent periods, is relatively common in the ‘developed’ world. What is believed ‘normal’, of course, is something historically determined and conditioned by the action and struggle of the affected individuals themselves.

Moreover, research on the topic also means exploring the collective actions that, at many times and places throughout history, workers put forward to change and improve the conditions in which they lived. These include very diverse actions, ranging from formal petitions to measures of direct action and physical confrontation. We can distinguish conflicts and organizations linked to the housing problem from those that were set up in factories and workshops, but this should not lead us to turning both into unrelated compartments—and investigated by different specialists. In fact, there are many communicating links between them, as they are in every expression of working-class struggle to improve both living and working conditions. As I will show below, the experiences accumulated in workplace organizing, and the organizations created for this purpose, were very often used for organizing workers at their homes and neighborhoods. It also happened that both spaces of struggle showed significant differences—regarding, for instance, the role of women—that need to be assessed.

This article provides a comparative study that examines two tenant strikes that took place almost at the same time, in two cities very distant from each other: Buenos Aires and New York. In the final months of 1907, a spirit of struggle and activism spread among the impoverished working-class tenants of several multicultural neighborhoods in both cities. Thousands of tenants, many of them migrants, with a strong prominence of women, acted together to put an end to the ravenous and predatory rule of landlords. They all had to face attacks from the media and the state—they all had to build on their experiences of resistance to develop the organizational resources needed to accomplish their goals.

Both labor and social historiography paid attention to tenants’ strikes throughout history, but comparative surveys are still scarce.¹ How can we enrich our knowledge of specific case studies with broader and more comprehensive assessments? Is it possible, by

¹ For a historical account of tenant strikes in Britain, see Moorhouse, Wilson & Chamberlain (1972). For an overview of movements in the American continent, see Wood & Baer (2006). An overview of working-class housing in different cities of Europe and the US is provided by Dauntton (1990).

means of a comparative study, to discover general trends that shaped tenant resistance in different parts of the world? Drawing upon primary sources and reviewing the existing literature, this article argues that a comparison between these two strikes helps shed light on some commonalities and differences in working-class organization in rapidly developing metropolises of the Americas in the eve of the First World War. In general terms, it aims to show how transnational comparisons are a useful step toward a global history of labor and tenant struggles. More specifically, it argues that, in Buenos Aires and New York, tenant families developed significantly similar strategies in their confrontation with landowners, even if they were not aware of the events taking place over 8,500 kilometers away.

Although this article is clearly a scholarly text in the field of social history, it also intends to contribute to broader debates among housing activists. Housing constitutes a crucial aspect of people's lives—to have a roof, a place to sleep sheltered from the weather, a space to prepare and consume food and take care of children. Under capitalism, workers are supposed to rely on their wage income to ensure the reproduction of their labor force: of course this encompasses a wide variety of aspects, but housing is definitely a critical one. As Madden & Marcuse (2016) have pointed out in the introduction of their recent book, “the housing crisis is global in scope” and therefore the struggle for housing rights is global as well. Looking back to reconstruct the history of rent strikes, with a broad focus both in geographical and chronological terms, can empower the struggle of activists around the world by showing that they are standing on the shoulders of many generations.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The first section explores the situation of working-class housing in both cities in the first decade of the 20th century, showing many similarities that existed in terms of the experiences of (migrant) workers in *conventillos* and tenement houses, as well as stressing the importance of examining the question of housing in any assessment of the reproduction of workers' lives. The next section presents an overview of both conflicts, providing a brief account of their key characteristics which also show striking similarities. The third and fourth sections examine the decisive role played by women in both conflicts and highlight the different approach of the socialist parties of both countries in terms of its engagement with the strikes. The last section presents the conclusions and suggests lines for further research.

Working-class housing in Buenos Aires and New York at the dawn of the 20th century

Despite all their differences, by the end of the 19th century both New York and Buenos Aires, just like many other cities throughout the Americas, were going through a vast process of expansion and growth in which European immigration played a significant role. New York and Buenos Aires were cosmopolitan metropolises with crowded working-class neighborhoods wherein housing promptly appeared to be a decisive problem. As Wood & Baer summed up, ‘as newcomers flocked to urban centers, their need for shelter taxed already crowded neighborhoods and gradually overwhelmed local housing markets. In city after city, tenants faced rising rents and deteriorating conditions’ (2006, p. 865).

Argentina experienced a substantial population growth in the last third of the 19th century. In 1869 the total population of the country amounted to approximately 1.8 million people, whereas the following census, carried out in 1895, reported that it had exceeded four million inhabitants. The enormous increase in the population responded in the first place to the notorious surge in European immigration, which took a decisive leap in the 1880s: if in the period 1880-1886 the immigration balance was almost 380,000 people, in the following triennium no less than 465,000 people arrived in the country to stay. This process of growth was particularly important in urban areas, most of all the capital city of Buenos Aires. Between 1869 and 1887 the population of the city grew at an annual rate of 7.3%. According to the 1887 municipal census, 433,375 people lived in the city, of which 228,641, or 52.7%, were foreigners (Poy, 2014, p. 554). New York City was already the largest American city in 1860, but it would continue growing significantly over the next century. According to Edward Glaeser, the city's growth in the late nineteenth century was primarily caused by its role as an immigrant gateway, who 'stayed in New York in part for "consumption" reasons' and also because 'the traditional New York industries, especially the garment trade, were able to increase in scale to accommodate extra labor without a huge drop in wages' (2005, p. 7). 'The driving force behind the rise of New York City's population', he concludes, 'and the continuing growth of the city's economy was the steady influx of immigrants between 1890 and 1920' (ibid., p. 18).

It comes as no surprise, in this context, that an enormous increase in the price of urban land because of rapid demographic growth and property speculation made it almost impossible for workers to buy a home. In New York and Buenos Aires, as in many other cosmopolitan cities of the Americas, working families had to settle for renting a room in increasingly burdensome conditions. As early as 1881, Buenos Aires already had more than eighteen hundred *conventillos*, as tenement houses were called, and in that decade they expanded even further. According to Juan Suriano, 'the boom of this type of housing reached its peak in 1892, when its number rose to 2,192 and its inhabitants to 120,847 people, something like 21.8% of the population of Buenos Aires' (1984, p. 203). The proportion was much higher in downtown areas: by 1904, 94% of the *conventillos* were concentrated in the south and the center of the city.

In New York, in 1900, approximately 69% of the population of the five boroughs lived in tenements. According to a recent scholarly account, 'Gotham's notorious dumbbell tenements stood six stories tall and provided small four-room apartments with a kitchen, a living room (each about 10 × 11 feet), and two bedrooms (approximately 7 × 8 feet) on each floor. Residents shared a common hall toilet that often accessed an airshaft that doubled as an area for garbage disposal' (Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2006, p. 81-82). The *conventillos* of Buenos Aires did not offer better conditions in terms of space: 'Rooms were generally quite small, usually no bigger than 9 × 12 feet, and offered little ventilation other than the doorway opening onto a common courtyard' (Wood & Baer, 2006, p. 865). The similarities of *conventillos* and tenement houses are noteworthy, and they show a pattern of building subdivisoning in downtown areas in pursuit of rapid profit that is worth further comparison with trends in contemporary cities.

In this period, as it is still the case nowadays in many places throughout the world, ‘the price of rent became the major problem for workers’ budgets’ (Suriano, 1984, p. 208). According to James Baer (1993), renting a room in a *conventillo* in Buenos Aires, by the turn of the 20th century, consumed between 20% and 30% of workers’ incomes (assuming 25 days of work per month, which was not always the case). A 1901 study by *La Prensa*, one of the most important commercial newspapers in Buenos Aires, estimated that housing took between 30% and 35% of working-class household income, while mentioning studies by a French economist who pointed out that the proportion was 14% in Brussels, 15% in Hamburg, and 11.75% in Liverpool (cited by Suriano, 1984, p. 209).

In New York, according to a contemporary report published in the popular magazine *Harper’s Weekly*, ‘the greater part of the East Sider’s earning goes in the rent. He pays more, inch by inch, for his wretched, insanitary rooms than the inhabitant of the brownstone district. If he moves north he must allow for subway fares; and as a rule his business begins at daybreak and ends at bedtime’ (Rousseau, 1908, p. 16). The same thing happened in Buenos Aires: ‘Because of the workers’ need to live close to their work, the great majority of *conventillos* were located in the center and its environs’ (Gutiérrez & Suriano, 1992, p. 39).

Apart from demanding high rent prices, owners did not refrain from harassment and provocation. Jenna Weissman explains that, in New York, ‘some landlords had a minhag (custom) of determining the rent according to family size, charging 50¢ additional per child above the base rent. Still others routinely raised the rent after making alleged improvements in the building’ (1986, p. 40). In Buenos Aires, the ‘*encargado*’ or ‘*casero*’ [manager] of the *conventillo* became a much-hated character, a person who shared a part of the owner’s profits in exchange for their repressive role in day-to-day administration:

The landlord ceded part of his earnings to the *casero* or “main tenant”, in exchange for facing the multiple tasks of the house, from cleaning and collecting rents, to maintaining order. They rewarded his work with the best room (with a window to the street), management of the pantry and a position of power that made him the repository of the varied reactions of the inhabitants. His figure embodied abuse and arbitrariness. (Bellucci and Camusso, 1987, p. 56)

Conventillos and tenements were not only expensive, they also offered terrible living conditions, compromising the health of workers and their families. *La Vanguardia*, the main Socialist newspaper of Buenos Aires, protested in 1907 that ‘our worker pays a third of his salary for a *covacha* [tiny room] that looks more like a pigpen than a human dwelling’ (Rienzi, 1907). Likewise, a manifesto published in New York during the same period, also attributed to Socialists, denounced that, ‘exhausted by toil in dark and ill-ventilated shops, we return for our short rest to homes that are small, dark, and foul, unfit for cattle, much less for human beings. For these miserable holes in which we are forced to live we have to pay rent which takes the greater part of our wages’ (cited in Rousseau, 1908, p. 17).

Assessing the case of Buenos Aires, Gutiérrez and Suriano pointed out that ‘notwithstanding the relative differences in spatial distribution, the construction, and the number of inhabitants, these houses shared one thing in common: poor living conditions.

On the whole, they lacked basic elements of comfortable living' (1992, p. 39). Only a third of New York tenements had running water, according to an estimation published in 1900. It was normal for seven or eight people to share a single room—toilet facilities were scarce and in terrible condition. According to estimates from the Buenos Aires 1904 census, one latrine could be used by 70 people and one shower by 60.²

It is necessary to highlight these harsh living conditions, in the first place, to vindicate the struggles and resistance of those who inhabited these spaces. But it is also important to keep them in mind to develop further assessments and insights, for instance regarding social life in those buildings and common spaces, or how childcare was taken care of in circles that went beyond the nuclear family. Likewise, these housing conditions are a starting point for any analysis of sexuality among the workers of the time. As pointed out by two Argentine feminist historians, we must consider this 'reality of the *conventillo*-conditioned family life' where 'the customs of bourgeois society regarding accepted forms of coexistence suffered a drastic adaptation, as did eating patterns or hygiene' (Bellucci & Camusso, 1987, p. 46).³

The precarious living conditions of the working poor sparked a sense of concern among segments of the press, the state apparatus, and the bourgeoisie. The worries were mostly related to the public health dangers posed such a concentration of people in reduced spaces with very poor hygienic conditions. Argentine expert Juan Biale Massé spoke of 'the dirt in contact, the passions stalking behind every wall, in struggle and daily contact, the fights of the neighbors developing hatred among children since an early age, the continuous change that removes any idea of stability and kills patriotism... that is the *conventillo*, the focus of all evils' (1968, p. 245). In New York, a *Report of the Tenement-House Commission* (1901), warned that 'the greatest evil of the present day is the lack of light and air. As a result, (...) the dread disease, pulmonary tuberculosis, has become practically epidemic in this city' (Extracts from the Report of the Tenement-House Commission, 1901, p. 631). Another official report, in this case from the newly created Argentine Department of Labor, warned in 1908 that most *conventillos* were 'inadequate and unhealthy, and those that might do a bit better become unhygienic because of the accumulation of inhabitants in one room'. This favored the development of all kinds of diseases, especially considering that workers were 'predisposed to acquire them due to the fatigue of daily work, poor nutrition, and misery' (Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, 1908, p. 231).

Even though on certain occasions some suggestions of concerned lawmakers and reformers did find some ground—see, for instance, the Tenement House Law of 1901 and the creation of the Tenement House Department (Wallace, 2017)—in general tenants were left alone against market forces. Both in Buenos Aires and New York—and elsewhere, even today—the overcrowding of workers in dwellings with poor infrastructure and hygiene conditions was not an 'unforeseen event' but a consequence of the process of real estate speculation. Assessing the case of New York, Ronald Lawson talked about 'a speculative housing market in which buildings changed hands frequently, spurring increases in the rents

² For further details on the conditions of housing in New York, see Plunz (1990), Day (1999) and Hopkinson (2003). For an overview of the situation in Buenos Aires, see Armus & Suriano (1998) and Marimon (2017).

³ For a recent approach from the point of view of social reproduction theory, see Bhattacharya (2017).

that working tenants already found high because the market value of a property was directly related to its rent roll' (1984, p. 237). A study published in 1900 estimated an 8-10% rate of profit for landlords (Gould, 1900). The phenomenon was admitted even by the authors of Buenos Aires' municipal census (1889), who recognized that 'the existence of so many *conventillos*, even in the most central parts of the city, exist due to the great income they produce', which was disproportionate 'in relation to the low value of these constructions.'

The tenant strikes of 1907-1908: an overview

Difficult as they were, by the first decade of the 20th century these housing conditions had existed for quite a long time. What were the causes that sparked organization and strikes in a particular moment, both in Buenos Aires and New York? Sources reveal that, in both cases, what aggravated tenants the most was not only high prices but a sudden price increase. According to Juan Suriano, in Buenos Aires one cause was an increase in municipal taxes, announced in August 1907, which the owners immediately transferred to rent prices. The same thing happened in New York's Lower East Side in the spring of 1904, where a first rent strike had taken place following a rent increase of around 20-30%. According to Ronald Lawson, indeed, 'it was not the condition of their housing, but a series of sharp rent increases that eventually sparked tenant protest' (1984, p. 236).

The New York 1904 conflict lasted barely a month, as 'many landlords resolved the problems with their rent strikers, agreeing to reductions in the proposed rent increases' (Lawson, 1984, p. 237). Three years later, however, a much broader and bigger strike was going to take place. The achievements of the previous strike had not lasted—by 1907, prices went up again, and this time in a context of crisis and unemployment. 'Starting among the crowded tenements of the lower East Side, it has spread like a fire wherever the poor are clustered; northward along the river front to the new slums of Harlem, eastward across the Williamsburg Bridge to Brooklyn', noted a contemporary observer (Rousseau, 1908, p. 16). According to Ronald Lawson and Stephen Barton, this time it did not involve hundreds but thousands of tenants: from its core in the Lower East Side, the strike 'spread from building to building until 2,000 families were participating' (1980, p. 232). The commercial press characterized the conflict with expressions such as 'rent war', 'tenant uprising' or 'tenant rebellion'. A manifesto issued by the strikers read as follows:

We, the tenants of 3M, having realized our present misery come to the following conclusions. Whereas the present industrial depression has affected us most severely; and whereas the rent for the last two years has risen skywards ... therefore we resolve to demand of you to decrease the rent immediately (cited in Weissman, 1986, p. 44).

In Buenos Aires, the conflict began in September 1907 in a single *conventillo*, located on 279 Ituzaingó Street, in San Telmo, with around 130 tenants, after the owner announced a 47% rent increase. At first, only few other buildings joined the protest, but by the end of the month the strike included 400 *conventillos* and 20,000 tenants with their families. At the peak of the protest, almost 2,000 buildings were on strike. According to Baer (1993), at one point or another almost 10% of the population of Buenos Aires was involved in the conflict, which

also spread to other cities in Argentina's interior provinces. The core of the movement were the most crowded *conventillos* around the city center, in districts such as San Nicolás, Monserrat, Balvanera, Concepción, San Cristóbal, and San Telmo.

Both contemporary observers and researchers have pointed out that strikers borrowed many actions, discourses, and methods from more 'traditional' conflicts in factories and workshops. The very concept of 'strike' (*huelga* in Spanish) was clearly related to the vocabulary of industrial action—and it would be a matter of political discussion, as we shall see later. As Weissman sums up, 'referring rather self-consciously to themselves as "strikers", to their non-cooperating neighbors as "scabs", to building-level tenant groups as "tenant unions", and to the withholding of their rent as a "rent strike", Lower East Side tenement dwellers drew on familiar political rhetoric—on the language of the labor union—in conducting their protest' (1986, p. 41).

Refusing to pay the rent, of course, would lead to eviction. Physical confrontation to prevent strikers to be taken out of their houses, and new tenants to be put in, became a decisive component of the protest. Actions in the buildings were thus one of the most important features of these rent strikes. 'We are all pledged not to pay you the increase in rent,' New York striking tenants stated in a note to owners. 'If you wish to turn us out you can do so, but notice will be sent all over the East Side and no new tenants will move in' (cited in Weissman, 1986, p. 39). A typical organizational step was setting up campaigns to warn neighbors and tell them to stay away from certain buildings. 'In the name of your children we are asking you not to hire rooms in that house, as the house is on strike because the rent is raised every month and we want to put a stop to it once and for all. Keep away.' It is interesting to note—also regarding the challenges of tenants' organization nowadays—that some of these texts were bilingual, for instance in Yiddish and English for the case of New York. This cosmopolitan approach was a necessary step to unite the transnational crowd that inhabited the buildings. It also happened in Buenos Aires, where 'speeches were sometimes given in the immigrant tenants' native languages, and many *conventillos* joining the strike were in neighborhoods where there were Russian, French, and Turkish immigrants' (Baer, 1993, p. 358).

Just like it happened with conflicts in the workplace, the striking tenants also found it necessary to expand the visibility of their struggle by occupying public space. Buenos Aires witnessed a peculiar form of struggle—closely related to the prominent role played by women—when a '*marcha de las escobas*' [broom parade] filled the streets. As we shall see later, it was an event where women played a prominent role, and which raised interest and even sympathy among the commercial press. Of course, protest actions were not always so cheerful and pacific. In Buenos Aires, by the end of October 1907, public expressions of protest became more serious and clashes with the police occurred. 'Until yesterday the so-called tenants' strike had taken place amid a virtually complete tranquility. But yesterday the strike had its ungrateful, bloody, tragic note', read one of the major Argentine commercial newspapers.⁴ The day before, the police attacked strikers who were protesting in front of a

⁴ *La Nación*, 23 October 1907.

building in San Telmo, with an office firing a shot that hit the forehead of Miguel Pepe, a 22-year-old worker, who died immediately. The crime sparked outrage and encouraged mass mobilizations: on Sunday, 27 October, the strikers organized a huge demonstration throughout the city. Around 15,000 people took part, according to commercial newspapers, 40,000 according to the anarchist press.

Also in New York public parades were a crucial part of the struggle. In his study of the activities of New York socialists, and those in the East Side in particular, in the first decades of the 20th century, Charles Leinenweber stressed that ‘strikes in this period became social outpourings which fused workplace and neighborhood in massive demonstrations of the solidarity of the entire working class, men, women, and children’ (1977, p. 154). ‘The entire population of the East Side is in sympathy with the movement’, commented a socialist newspaper at the highest point of the rent strike, ‘thousands thronged the route and red colors were displayed at the windows as a truck with speakers slowly made its way thru the dense mass. This demonstration, like others, was broken up by the police’ (*The Worker*, 1908a).

Women and the rent strikes

Tenements and *conventillos* were places with an overwhelming presence of women. When *La Prensa* published a series of articles with information about the life in working-class neighborhoods, including a number of photographs, the editors explained that ‘the images have been taken in buildings, some of them with 90 rooms, at a time when most of the men were at work. Because of this, it will be seen that in almost all the illustrations children and women predominate’.⁵ Contemporaries were also aware of this ‘highly noticeable’ presence of women during the conflict, in meetings, rallies, and direct actions. Bellucci & Camusso explained the situation where:

public officials showed up in the *conventillos* with an eviction order. Although at first they manage to get the evicted person to move part of his furniture to the courtyard, within an hour the women would put the furniture back in the room. These procedures take place during factory working hours, therefore only women and children are in the houses (Bellucci & Camusso, 1987, p. 65).

Many observers pointed out the somewhat ‘natural’ role played by women, as household expenses were usually in their hands. The analysis of the rent strikes indeed helps us draw connections with other women-led consumption struggles. Madden & Marcuse (2016) explain that, in 1904, ‘Jewish women had led a boycott of kosher butchers and succeeded in reversing price increases for meat in the city. Having proven its effectiveness, the same tool was used to fight rent increases’. In the same vein, Weissman argued that East Side women drew ‘on their experiences as consumers and managers of the household budget [and] used the neighborhood as a staging ground for their anti-landlord protests’ (1986, p. 42). The *Jewish Daily Forward*, a local newspaper published in Yiddish, argued that ‘this strike can be as

⁵ *La Prensa*, 8 September 1901.

great as the meat strikes' and encouraged Jewish housewives to 'take the rent question into their hands as they did with the meat question' (cited in Weissman, 1986, p. 42).⁶ As Christopher Mele pointed out, 'the multiple social roles of immigrant women—as social club members, shoppers, and workers inside and outside the home—placed them in central positions of resistance. Women had key access to information and control of its dissemination throughout the neighborhood' (2000, p. 60).

It is also interesting to note how these women would very often refer to what was expected from them as women. '*I simply did what any sensible girl would do*', stated a New York striker, 'I am not a labor leader or a regular striker and I am also not a troublemaker. I simply joined the strike because I saw it was impossible to exist on a small salary these days and then pay exorbitant rents to the landlords' (cited in Weissman, 1986, pp. 44-45). The account of the strike published in *Harper's Weekly* insisted in the conspicuous presence of women, and added that 'when you attempt to exploit these as Joans of Arc everybody laughs at you, "It is the Socialist Party"', they answer. "We have no leaders" (Rousseau, 1908, p. 16).

Examining the case of Buenos Aires, Wood & Baer pointed out that 'in public displays, women often banged on pots and pans to dramatize their close connection to housing and related consumer issues, while others participated in actions in which they symbolically swept away the owners and their high rents in what they called "broom parades"' (2006, p. 869). It should not be forgotten, in any case, that for many women the home was not only the place where reproductive work occurred, but also the site for market-oriented work activities. As Bellucci & Camusso pointed out, 'for the working woman of that time, the room of the *conventillo* was the unit of production, since her family life and the reproduction of the conditions of existence of the family itself took place in that reduced space' (1987, p. II).

Moreover, during the rent strikes working-class women also intervened in more radical actions. The Anarchist newspaper *La Protesta* (1907a) informed about a *conventillo* 'whose manager wanted to show he was brave, beating barbarously a young boy of tender age. (...) These courageous women, after knocking him to the ground, preventing him from any movement, came up with the humor of taking off his underpants, throwing him into the street in such a way, provoking the laughter of all the spectators of this curious and amusing *sainete*' [a popular comic opera piece]. After the assassination of Miguel Pepe, the mass mobilizations that followed showed a very prominent presence of women—much more than was usually the case in labor activities in the city. According to a press report from *La Protesta* (1907b), when the funeral procession began, 'a woman with a red flag headed the column', and the coffin was 'driven by women'. Behind, 'no less than 700 women were following the coffin'.

In the Argentine case, the treasurer of the strike committee was a woman, Josefina Rinaldi. The treasurer of the Rent Protective Association in New York in 1904 was also a woman: Bertha Leibson (Wood & Baer, 2006, p. 867). Pauline Newman, a lifelong labor organizer who was only 16 years old in 1907, also played a key role in the organization of the

⁶ On the 1904 meat strike, see Hyman (1980). See also Frank (1985) for an assessment of the role played by women during the 1917 protests in New York over the cost of living.

strike. The question remains open, however, with regards to the consequences of this predominant role of women in the rank-and-file. Lawson and Barton have argued that ‘women pioneered as the organizers of protest in their buildings and took the lead in helping to spread it from building to building. Men, however, were at the forefront when the higher levels of the structure first emerged’ (1980, p.231).

Organizational structure and the role of Socialist parties

Just like actions went from grassroots (building) level to interventions in public space, like streets and main parks and squares, organizational structures were also shaped in different layers. It is important to note that in both Buenos Aires and New York there were several tenants’ organizations that preceded the 1907-1908 strikes. In New York, during the 1904 strike, ‘organization was initially informal, relying on networks among Jewish people’, but ‘when rapid mobilization revealed the issue’s potential, an umbrella organization, the first neighborhood organization, was formed by male members of the Socialist Party’ (Lawson & Barton, 1980, p. 232). An institution called New York Rent Protective Association provided striking tenants with a lawyer that contested cases on technical grounds in order to obtain adjournments (Lawson, 1984, p. 237).

The case of Buenos Aires shows some differences. In Buenos Aires, an organization called ‘Liga de Inquilinos’ [Tenants’ League] was created in 1905, although without great success, following the initiative of typographic workers. One year later the ‘Liga contra los altos alquileres e impuestos’ [League against high rent and taxes] was established, and from the very start of the 1907 rent strike, tenants in different *conventillos* elected delegates to participate in this organization. Research has shown, however, that the role played by more established organizations, like trade unions and parties, was less important than in New York. ‘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’ (Baer, 1993, p. 362). In a recent paper, Alejandro Belkin (2017) has shown how hesitant the powerful trade union organizations were with regards to fully supporting the rent strike.

Comparing the role played by Socialist parties in both conflicts allows to point out some interesting differences that might deserve further research. In New York, all contemporary sources, as well as scholarly assessments, stress that the Socialist Party of America—heavily influential among the Jewish segments of the working class which were the core of the strike— became one of the main promoters of the tenants’ conflict.⁷ The last issue of 1907 of *The Worker*, a Socialist organ of New York City, ran an editorial article with the headline ‘Socialists Guiding Revolt on East Side Against Landlords’ Extortions’ (28 Dec 1907). In particular, the Eight Assembly District branch of the Socialist Party, mostly constituted by Jewish workers, played a key role. ‘Their clubroom has been thrown open for the use of the

⁷ On the Socialist Party of New York, see among others Dubofsky (1968), Leinenweber (1981) and Frank (1985).

strikers, which is filled to overflowing with women and children who come for advice...’ (The Worker, 1908b).

The main rival social democratic organization, the Socialist Labor Party, was instead much more reluctant toward the strike. According to *Der Arbeiter*, a Jewish organ of the SLP, it was ‘laughable, were it not so sad, to see such a mass of people aroused to a struggle for the purpose of reducing their expenses twenty-five cents a week’ (quoted in *Weekly People*, 1908). The main criticism was the attempt to organize workers as consumers. As continued in *Weekly People*:

if this stupendous amount of energy had but been utilized to organize the workingmen as producers, not as tenants, to fight their battles on the field of industry, and to improve their conditions generally, how much good could have been accomplished? He who thinks that a rent strike is a Socialistic tenet is greatly mistaken. A rent strike, in which the chief participants are perhaps small middle-class people who simply want cheaper rent, is no labor strike

In Buenos Aires, the main Socialist Party local also became a main venue for the daily meeting of the protesters. *La Vanguardia*, the party’s newspaper, reported on the protest day after day. However, references to the conflict were mostly limited to the informative section of the newspaper, as the party was reluctant to openly support this method of struggle. Unlike the SLP, this was not because of a ‘workerist’ approach, as the Argentine SP was very much oriented to reformist electoral politics. Rather, it seems that the main reason is the violent character of the protests and the party’s preference for a cooperative approach.

On 24 November, while the strike was still in full force, the official party organ published a very critical editorial article signed by ‘Rienzi’, the pen-name of Enrique Dickmann, one of the most important party leaders. The housing problem, he argued, was indeed ‘the most serious, most pressing and most urgent’ for the urban working classes. The ‘tenant’s unrest’ (the Socialist press explicitly rejected to call it a strike) was not, however, a solution for this problem. ‘It has been an instinctive, thoughtless, incoherent and disorderly—not least sympathetic—outbreak of a large part of our working-class population’. The protest, according to Dickmann, had not made any contribution to solve the problem: ‘What does a one, two or three pesos per room reduction mean, which in a short time it will certainly return to its original price (...) leaving all the other terrible conditions of the house unchanged, or perhaps making them worse?’

The solution, according to the Argentine Socialist Party, was to increase the availability of houses for workers. They promoted housing cooperatives and municipal public policy action. At the national level, they demanded the suppression of taxes for building materials.

It is the cooperative and political action of the working people that will free them from the clutches of the landlord, as well as from the clutches of the merchant, the industrialist and the tax authorities. There is no other remedy or solution possible. A consumer strike is a contradiction and an absurdity. Tenants are consumers. Take

cooperative and political action with the extent and intensity that you have done “strike” and you will see the splendid results of such fruitful work. (Rienzi, 1907).⁸

Legacy

In the last months of 1907, rent strikers seemed to be succeeding with their demands, in both Buenos Aires and New York. Pressed by the force of the strike, many landlords were forced to yield: cancelling rent increases, suspending evictions, abolishing certain rules and obligations that were strongly rejected by tenants. The press reported that several landlords visited the organizing centers of the movement to put onto paper their acceptance of tenants’ demands. However, as had happened before, it proved very difficult for tenants to keep these improvements over time. The coercive measures of the state, which were expressed more directly in eviction orders executed with the help of the police, contributed to undermining tenants’ position.

On 6 December 1907, *La Protesta*, Buenos Aires’s anarchist newspaper, summed up the situation: “The bosses of *conventillos*, who, forced by the strike, agreed to the request of their tenants, now, after the moment of agitation, have again raised the rents to levels before the movement’ (1907c). By early January, the conflict had also come to an end in New York, where, according to contemporary sources, some 2,000 families managed to make improvements but failed to impose their demand to cap the rent at 30% of wages. As Jenna Weissman aptly summarized, tenant activity seemed to be:

ad hoc and temporary: once tenants secured what they regarded as gains or were simply unable to proceed any further with their protests, the “rental agitation” subsided (...) Ultimately, though, as one contemporary observed at the time, “no marked change in the condition of the East Side has been brought about” by the 1908 rent strikes (Weissman, 1986, p. 47).

In any case, it is clear that both strikes were going to become an important landmark in the long-standing struggle for the rights of tenants, in their own countries and at a global scale. The strikes in New York and Buenos Aires in 1907-1908 were not, of course, the only cases of tenant conflict in the Americas during this period, but they were both significant, and took place in big cities that had numerous aspects in common. Besides, their impact on public opinion was very important, and the struggles became part of the long history of workers’ struggle in both countries.

A comparative assessment allows us to enrich our knowledge of how thousands of workers, many of them migrants, organized themselves beyond national, religious, and ethnic lines to struggle against the rule of landlords and the state. Moreover, the overview of the harsh housing conditions experienced by those living in tenements and *conventillos*, as well as the main features of both conflicts, reveal some common patterns that can be found in other struggles over different periods and geographies. Remembering them — and learning from

⁸ For socialists, the model was the single-family home, accessible through socialist-oriented cooperatives such as *El Hogar Obrero*, established in 1905 (Yujnovsky, 2004, p. 127).

them — makes a contribution to current struggles by allowing activists to examine similarities and differences with the challenges they face today.

Conclusions

It was the goal of this article to show the importance of doing research on the conditions of worker's housing and the experiences of workers' struggle for housing, as an integral and decisive segment of the history of labor as a whole. Moreover, I wanted to argue that this research can be significantly enriched if it is done with a comparative perspective and with a transnational scope, in order to trace common traits and thus enrich our understanding of local peculiarities.

I examined the repertoire of actions and organizational forms adopted by the striking tenants: from those concentrated at the level of the building, such as picket lines, propaganda actions and various sociability measures; to those that brought the conflict into public space, such as mobilizations and confrontations with the police. With regards to organizational structures, the cases of both cities show an articulation, not always simple, between grassroots organizations and others of greater scope. Likewise, it is worth noting the difference between the dominant role played by the Socialist Party of America in New York—but not the Socialist Labor Party—and the much more blurred role played by Argentine Socialism, which was even quite critical of the movement.

The role played by women in these conflicts, in turn, opens very important questions and lines of research around issues such as the separation between the public and private spheres under capitalism and the role played by women in the domestic sphere. These are issues that have been extensively studied and discussed in historiography, thanks to the contributions of feminist historians. The examination of conflicts such as tenant strikes, in particular, sheds light on episodes of conflict that show a bridge between these usually invisible domestic spaces, on the one hand, and the public space in which they were inserted within the framework of conflicts, on the other.

This, in turn, highlights the decisive role of women in working-class families, and shows that focusing only on experiences in the workplace (more male-dominated) can give us the wrong picture. If 'men were the cornerstone of workplace organization', as Jeremy Adelman properly stressed, 'women would play a much more decisive role in terms of organization at home, building or neighborhood level' (1992, p. 15). As Wood & Baer aptly summarized:

Because housing and other consumer concerns often struck women first, many gathered in their courtyards, on neighborhood streets, and in local markets to discuss their situation. Along with their male colleagues, thousands banded together to mobilize other tenement residents, circulate petitions, and organize demonstrations. (2006, p. 869).

The prominent role played by women has very important consequences for our understanding of the relation between working-class conflicts in the workplace and in the home. Bellucci & Camusso brilliantly summarized the potential consequences of an

approach that integrates both spaces in the making of a truly broad labor history: ‘In practical terms, the working class was distributed in two territories: the factory, where most of the men worked, and the home, where most of the women worked—at the time, the strike was a form of struggle which articulated both territories’ (1987, p. IV).

It is a topic that has been examined in previous work, although not yet on a comparative and transnational scale. Scholars of the New York case have pointed out the importance of women's organization at the grassroots level, and the greater male presence at the highest levels of formal organizations. In the case of Buenos Aires, it is significant that the studies have recognized the unwillingness of the unions to take decisive intervention in such a massive and radicalized movement. I consider that no minor part of the explanation lies in the female dominance of the movement's leadership, something that was difficult for male-dominated unions to assimilate. I expect that future research will allow to develop these comparative questions a bit further, and in so doing enrich the history of tenant organization on a global scale.

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