Crisis and Agrarian Protest in Argentina: The Movimiento Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha¹

by Norma Giarracca² and Miguel Teubal³

Translated by Carlos Pérez⁴

The Movimiento Mujeres Agropecuarias en Lucha (Agricultural Women in Struggle Movement—MML) is an agrarian movement led by women that emerged in Argentina in the mid-1990s (Giarracca and Teubal, 1997). Developing in a region noted for grain and cattle exports that borders the rich pampas, the movement emerged from the spontaneous actions of a group of farmers against the banks' auctioning of their land and agricultural machinery to collect their debts. Lucy de Cornelis, the wife of an indebted farmer, convinced that her family's debt was unjust, sent out a radio message calling for a meeting with other farmers who were in a similar situation, and those who responded to her message were women. These women stopped the auctioning of her property and that of many others with prayers and song and by persuading the potential buyers of its injustice. Since their first action in September 1995, the women have organized themselves on a national level and introduced the issue of debt and the potential disappearance of Argentina's small and medium-sized agricultural producers into the national political discourse.

Bursting onto the scene with novel tactics such as obstructing legal action, the movement adopted a discourse that has tended to become radical and demonstrated its discontinuity with traditional agrarian social protest actions and established new alliances between the women's movement and the movements of the "new agrarian protest" (Giarracca and Gras, 2001). That it went beyond confrontation to sustained collective action indicates that it is capable of becoming a social movement or part of one by uniting the protests of the rural world with those of the women's movement. Charles Tilly (1986) characterizes "confrontation" as discontinuous collective action in one's own interest. The MML has attempted to create a new social subject by identifying new meanings that transcend the mere struggle for a particular demand, putting an end to the rural auctions, and call attention to a national cultural problem—whether it is possible to continue to live in the countryside as one's parents and grandparents did. In other words, the issue is the survival or extinction of the capitalized family farm, with all of the cultural consequences this question implies. These characteristics would have allowed us to analyze the MML as a "new social movement," but instead we have tried to understand it in terms of collective action. As Melucci (1984) points out, we need to guard against the tendency to see unity in the very places that should be examined to determine whether unity exists.

The empowerment of the MML was made possible by the creation of social networks. The critical socioeconomic circumstances that the agricultural sector suffers (loss of land, absence of the resources to move) frame the movement's actions and impose concrete limits on them. It has halted more than 500 court-ordered auctions either directly or indirectly, by legally petitioning for the nullification of the court-

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² Norma Giarracca, a sociologist, is a professor and researcher in the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires and coordinator of the Rural Development Group of the Latin American Social Science Council. She is the author of *Tucumanos y Tucumanos: Zafra, trabajo, migraciones e identidad* (2000) and the editor of *¿Una nueva ruralidad en América Latina?* (2001). She is at work on a book about Argentina's rural social protest movement in the 1990s.

³ Miguel Teubal is an economist and a researcher for the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research and a professor at the University of Buenos Aires. He is currently working on a book about the impact of globalization on Argentine society, with special reference to the rural food system.

⁴ Carlos Pérez teaches Chicano and Latin American studies at California State University, Fresno, and is conducting research on the nineteenth-century Bolivian caudillo Manuel Isidoro Belzu.

ordered action. Since its initial actions, its visibility has increased considerably through demonstrations and the use of the mass media. After the highly visible initial emergency period there was a latency period (Melucci, 1984) of reinforcing solidarity and creating new rules for shared practice. During this period, the women organized networks that would reinforce their message. The MML today has legal status that empowers it as a farmer's union, an increased presence on the national level, and a method that is identified with it throughout the country. Furthermore, it is recognized as an important actor in the national agrarian movement, traditionally composed of men.

The organization's empowerment emerged from the social practices introduced by its leaders, among them consolidating its territorial expansion through communication with women farmers all over the country and working within national and international networks of farmers struggling for similar causes. Territorial expansion did not necessarily empower the MML as an actor, but it created a process of identification—a symbolic integration of these women whose voices had not been heard by other farm-union actors— that was an important first step. What happened to this group, until very recently considered powerless, when it took control of decisions affecting its members' lives and work?

In the first place, there was collective action, the ability to mobilize and make demands, but there were also processes that involved members as rural women acquiring consciousness, knowledge, and skills. Tarrow (1997), examining the circumstances that give rise to a movement's political power, focuses on the political opportunities that organize new movements and give form to their grievances. Questions of political traditions, elite tolerance, and the opening and closing of political possibilities are of fundamental importance. The reestablishment of democracy in 1983 and the creation of public policies favoring the strengthening of the institutional life of women in general were positive conditions for the MML's emergence and empowerment. Other aspects of the process of empowerment were the actions of the MML itself as a social actor and the skills that they reinforced.

Pettersen and Solbakken (1998: 321), citing McWhirter, define "empowerment" as a process in which persons, organizations, or groups "become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context; develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives; exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others; support the empowerment of others in the community." Accordingly, power and empowerment are strongly related to knowledge, in its broadest sense, including not only practical and technical knowledge but also self-knowledge and knowledge that allows one to choose and make decisions which, according to Giddens (1991), support life options (the politics of life).

THE SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The agricultural sector occupies an important place in Argentina's political, social, and economic history. Traditionally, a distinction is made between the pampas, the fertile plain made up of the provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Cordoba, Entre Ríos and La Pampa, and the rest of the country (Cuyo, the Northwest, the Northeast, Patagonia, etc.). The pampas provides the bulk of agricultural production (70 percent) and almost all of the country's grain, edible oils, and beef exports. The regional economies produce industrial crops such as sugarcane, tobacco, yerba maté, cotton, wool, wine, fruits, and some grains and engage in minor livestock production. The two are differentiated not only by the type of production they engage in but also by the type of land use, which in the pampas (except for fruit, vegetable, and some dairy production) is much more extensive.

In recent decades the agricultural sector has decreased in relative importance both in its overall contribution to the gross national product (GNP) and as a source of employment. Today it contributes only 7 percent of the GNP and employs only 10 percent of the national labor force. In spite of this, about 60 percent of exports continue to be agricultural. The last national agricultural census, taken in 1988, registered 378,000 farms occupying an area of 177,000,000 hectares. In the previous census, in 1969, there had been 538,000 farms, and it was estimated that in 2000 there would be 25 percent fewer farms than in 1988. Women supervise 11 percent of these farms. Women engaged in agricultural work make up 17.34 percent of the economically active rural population, and women are almost a third of the category "family workers

related to the farmer” (Biaggi, 1998).

In recent decades a large number of small and medium-sized farms have disappeared, while large farms have maintained their importance. Between the 1969 and the 1988 census the number of farms of 200 hectares or less declined from 428,000 to 282,000. In the 1988 census, although farms of more than 1,000 hectares represented only 7.2 percent of all farms, they held more than 75 percent of the nation’s cultivable land, while farms of less than 200 hectares occupied barely 7.7 percent of the cultivable land. This class of farmers, the *chacareros*, does not have the same importance as it does in other “lands of recent settlement” (Australia, Canada) or in highly industrialized ones, but it is relatively more important in Argentina than in other Latin American or Third World countries (Archetti and Stölen, 1975). In comparison with other Latin American countries, the peasant sector is much smaller and primarily located in some of the regional economies—in sugarcane production in Tucumán, cotton production in the Chaco, Santiago de Estero.

The present agricultural crisis is the result of both the economic policies of the Menem administration (1989-1999) and the state’s lack of interest in or capacity for finding a solution. On a macro level, the convertibility plan of 1991 and the so-called structural reforms—privatization, deregulation (especially regarding labor), and the opening of markets to foreign trade and investment—constituted the central axis of the governmental plan promoted by Finance Minister Domingo Cavallo. The convertibility plan fixed by law the exchange rate of one Argentine peso to one U.S. dollar and decreed its full convertibility. It not only caused an immediate lowering of expectations and an inflationary spiral but also excluded the possibility of devaluation as an element of economic policy and established strong limitations on national monetary policy. The achievement of price stability permitted the implementation of an extremist structural adjustment program, applied, according to Menem, “without anesthesia or a parachute” (see Teubal, 2000-2001). The convertibility plan and the structural adjustment measures significantly affected the agricultural sector in ways that were mostly prejudicial to small and medium-sized producers.

The November 1991 economic deregulation decree (no. 2284) put in place a number of measures concerning the internal economy, foreign trade, and the deregulation of markets, among them many that would affect the agricultural sector and especially the regional economies. Citing the necessity to reduce public expenditures, the government dissolved a large number of agencies, many of them created in the 1930s, that had traditionally defended the interests of agricultural producers: the National Meat Board, the National Grain Board, the National Sugar Board, the Yerba Maté Board, and others. The suspension or reduction of regulatory mechanisms such as production quotas, withholding tax on exports, and price supports followed. Budget allocations were reduced for a series of public institutions, in particular the National Institute of Agricultural Technology. These measures transformed the Argentine agricultural sector into one of the world’s most deregulated and open, thus exposing it to an unusual degree to the boom-and-bust cycles of the world economy. After the dismantling of its control agencies and the standards that had allowed it to regulate production and revenues, the state’s functions were reduced to extension and assistance programs and a few animal health and commercial consultation programs.

Thus, the state opened to market forces many of the decisions in which it had formerly intervened, creating much uncertainty. The measures adopted significantly affected prices and costs in the agricultural sector, subjecting it to violent changes in profitability. While the various strata of producers in each region and branch of production were affected differentially, in general the small and medium-sized producers suffered the most. The liquidation of the National Grain Board eliminated price supports and alternative channels for the marketing of cereals, leaving producers at the mercy of the large cereal merchants and exporters.

During the first few years of the convertibility plan, the international price of wheat remained very low. According to some estimates, agricultural prices in 1993 had fallen to half the 1980-1993 average value (Asociación AgroGanadera de La Pampa, 1996: 17). In 1994 the price of wheat had risen to US\$136 a ton, and only in 1996 did it exceed US\$230 (rising to US\$290), although during the harvest season and at the point of sale it fell to US\$120 a ton. Producers were not always the immediate beneficiaries of the price increases that took place in the middle of the decade. At the end of the 1990s the decline of prices intensified, and this and the growing overvaluation of the peso affected profitability in this sector.

At the same time, the cost of production increased, especially for small and medium-sized producers,

largely as a result of the increase in the rates for public services (privatized during the decade) and in the costs of inputs. Both factors negatively affected the profitability of agricultural production and the rural family's quality of life. Maintaining one's standard of living required more and more land, and the owners of smaller farms experienced an everincreasing struggle for survival.

Added to this was a fiscal policy that was particularly harsh toward producers with limited resources. Although duties on exports and special contributions for the maintenance of public agencies were eliminated, the increase in other duties, applied retroactively, particularly affected this group of producers. The value-added tax, introduced in 1990, increased steadily to its current 21 percent. Combined with a system of withholding taxes on bills of payment, it had a negative effect on producers' financial circumstances. Eliminating the minimum tax exemptions on the profits tax also seriously affected small producers. Obligatory contributions to the social security regime that had been bankrupted by government actions also became an additional burden for rural producers. An increase in municipal taxes completed the regressive model applied to this sector.

Relatively low prices, increasing internal costs, and the growing pressure of taxation significantly limited the profitability of the agricultural sector. The worsened financial situation of producers, especially small and medium-sized ones, after the mid-1990s completed the picture. The relative stability in the general price level achieved by the convertibility plan favored the granting of bank credit to the agricultural sector. During the 1990s an increase in credit directed toward the agricultural sector reflected the situation with regard to credit for all productive sectors. The stability achieved by the convertibility plan freed a series of funds that had previously been deposited in the banking and financial systems to guard against inflation. This policy contributed to a consumer boom during the first years of the decade.

As agricultural credit increased, the total debt of the sector significantly increased. The siren song of modernization bewitched many producers into debt to purchase a tractor or replace agricultural machinery. The sector's debt was 1.9 billion pesos (equivalent to the same amount in dollars) in 1990 and 7.1 billion pesos in 1994. According to estimates by CONINAGRO, the national federation of agricultural cooperatives, in April 1996, even taking into account debt payments in the period 1991/1992-1994/1995, the accumulated debt was 5.3 billion pesos (dollars) in 1995. In 1996 the total debt for the agricultural sector, including the emergency and commercial tax component, amounted to 10 billion pesos. Although the average payment period increased from one and a half to three years, the real rates and financial costs for the post-hyperinflationary period (post-1989-1991) exceeded 20 percent annually on the average in real terms (24 percent for 1991 and 20 percent for the succeeding years)—higher interest rates than those available internationally. In addition, there were the costs included in bank credit, such as commissions and service charges, the onerous collateral requirements for securing credit, and the multiplying punitive interest that led to repossession.

The price stability achieved in the 1990s was not accompanied by a corresponding decline in nominal rates of interest; instead, real rates increased. As a result, financing became more profitable for the banks, but this situation was disastrous for those receiving credit. Likewise, in comparison with those for large producers, the rates of interest for medium-sized and small producers were extremely inequitable. The profitability of this sector, particularly for medium-sized and small producers, did not grow on a par with the debt. Increasingly, small and medium-sized producers found themselves in a precarious situation due to the overall macroeconomic conditions and falling agricultural prices.

At the same time, legal guidelines regarding credit were routinely ignored. For example, overdrawn accounts became one of the most important mechanisms for dispensing credit. It was reported that often "the overdrawn individual is obligated to investigate the financial transactions on his account since he does not know what they are crediting or debiting." In effect, the banks unilaterally determined the interest rates on such accounts, which might range from reasonable to usurious. Similarly, the application of charges for services, "many of which are not even asked for by the account holder, who does not even have prior knowledge of them," was impossible to determine. Many financial institutions had "a credit policy that consists of enticing their clients to operate with overdrawn accounts, often restricting access to other forms of credit. Thus, the client is obliged to go into debt by utilizing the most costly form of credit" (Asociación Agro-Ganadera de La Pampa, 1996: 11).

The prospects were not good. In fact, CONINAGRO estimated that in 1998-1999 the economic surplus of the agricultural sector, that is, the amount available to this sector for consumption, investment, and debt payments, did not exceed 5.5 billion pesos (dollars). After deducting consumption costs (4.5 billion), estimated investments (950 million), and debt payments (3 billion), a deficit of 2.95 billion remained and was expected to require major financing by the banking system or, better, some type of refinancing (CONINAGRO, January 11, 1999).

It is estimated that only 30 percent of the total debt of producers from La Pampa (the province where the MML began) is principal, the rest being interest, administrative costs, penalties, and so forth. To this debt must be added the mortgages held by national and provincial banks. The provincial bank refinanced many debts and reduced the annual interest rate from 18-19 percent to 9-9.5 percent, with a two-year grace period. It is estimated that of the 25,710,000 hectares planted in 1997-1998 some 12,000,000 were mortgaged, the majority with the National Bank.¹

THE BANKS AND THE MML

The MML leaders recognize that the new circumstances affect both those who are indebted and those who are not. One of them summarized their demands as follows:

An immediate suspension of the auctions currently being carried out, recalculating the debt on the grounds of usury, and refinancing in order to pay.... [The recalculation] would be capital... we have adopted the slogan of the Mexican Barzón movement: "We do not deny the debt, we will pay what's fair." We want a traditional debt with an international interest rate, a Libor rate, and, finally, we make a further demand by saying "interest corresponding to profitability" because [the international interest rate], the Libor, also drains away the possibility of making payments. Associated with these demands, we also want price supports, because if we do not have them... we can't pay. These four measures go together. We need recalculation, refinancing, an immediate end to the auctions so that we can continue to have land and tools so that we can work to pay, and price supports because without them [we still cannot pay].

A snowball effect hampered producers' ability to pay their debts. MML President Lucy de Cornelis's situation is similar to that of many others: a principal of 20,000 pesos in 1993 became 80,000 pesos during its first refinancing and finally reached 170,000 pesos in 1999. The generalization of the debt problem is reflected by the way that the banks approached the problem. As one banking officer put it, "The Bank of La Pampa not only continued to lend credit but also kept the rates intact, except for some minor changes, during the 'tequila crisis' and the present crisis in Brazil. What happened during those critical moments? The banks sat on their funds, not lending even a peso to anyone in certain specific areas."

The MML achieved an important goal in 1999: the National Bank and other official banks not only suspended the auctions of agricultural producers' goods but also agreed to refinance their debts. With the emergence of the MML, all of the agricultural organizations took up the issue of the auctions and the debt. The Federación Agraria Argentina (Argentine Agricultural Federation) sent a letter to the National Bank saying that farmers indebted to the bank "had had their land expropriated or their goods attached, losing their livelihood and finding it impossible to pay their debts," and that the debt for shipping charged by the agricultural industries was "asphyxiating the rural population." Even CONINAGRO declared the debt "the most serious of the decade" (*La Nación*, December 14, 1999).

The MML's Lucy de Cornelis responded that the refinancing with its installment plan was a step forward but had major limitations. Clarifying that from the beginning the women had demanded a 20-year bond, she emphasized that interest rates were too high, the tax on the interest was not viable, and the debt had to be recalculated in every case: "We demand the recalculation of all the debts since their origin and that the punitive ones be removed, something which has already been done.... This is the only way that we producers, especially small and medium-sized ones, can pay our debts." She pointed out that if her original 1993 debt of some 20,000 pesos were recalculated she would owe no more than 30,000 pesos. She emphasized that the high interest rates—13-14 percent, including costs— had to be reduced to a maximum of 5 percent if

producers were to escape their present situation. And despite this important decision regarding refinancing, the auctions continued.

As new problems emerged and as they interacted with other organizations, the MML organizers tackled other issues besides the demand for refinancing. The two most important of these had to do with gender and the environment. In effect, their actions in the public sphere, engaging in difficult negotiations with male union leaders, allowed them to reflect on their role as women in that sphere. They also began to discuss the environmental issue, which some had already considered when they questioned the technological model offered by neoliberalism.

ORGANIZATION

Led by Lucy de Cornelis, the women of La Pampa Province were the first to organize. Another pioneer, Joaquina Moreno, although not indebted, decided to participate because she believed that conditions for small and medium-sized farmers were worsening daily and existing organizations were finding it difficult to recognize and confront the problem. Subsequently, other women from Santa Fe Province, the southern provinces, and finally the poorest northern provinces met with the organizers. Cornelis recalls those first moments as follows:

In the first meeting I was in front of a round table that we had put in the room . . . the embarrassment . . . made me blush. . . . "Well, now," the other women said, "we are going to create a provisional committee," and they elected me president. On September 21, 1995, when the other provincial women arrived, we told them, "Now, let's talk." There were women who were more capable [than I], but in that meeting they elected me the national president of the movement.

She considers "ability" (by which she means mainly having some formal education) to have been a fundamental element in her election. The reason she was chosen, however, is that members considered her someone who could secure, recognize, and mobilize resources and initiate direct action: "We were all desperate, but no one took the initiative to unite the people.... This is why we value Lucy so much and did not want to abandon her. She started the movement and continues to maintain the same energy as she did at that time." Other MML members said, "She got us to do things together," "She fights for our land," "She stands up to the banks," "We must fight all together." Cornelis's capacity for direct action does not derive from any previous experience in union organizations or from formal education (she never completed high school). Instead, it seems to come from passionate response to the unjust and insulting circumstances that she experienced. Although the initial moment of locating resources and calling together other farmers was important, it was her ability to maintain the momentum that made her a leader.

David Slater (1991), writing on the new social movements in Latin America, points to the importance of a leadership that can guarantee a rudimentary organizational form—a leadership that is in a position to articulate a project, a vision, a series of concepts and values, within a discourse that can effectively address the circumstances of the social subjects immersed in the situation. Cornelis's project not only conferred relevance on her actions but also thrust her into a leadership position. Her leadership role was also based on her ability to relate to others, her skill in calling others together and acquiring their authorization to act in their name. Her rejection of the institutional discourse politicized her actions by transforming them into collective action, an implied struggle between two social actors confronting each other not only over the appropriation and reorientation of social values but also over symbolic and material resources (Melucci, 1984). Her actions not only revealed a widespread economic situation shared by other farmers but also presented an opportunity for innovating, creating, imagining, and transforming that situation. There was a space where objectives were constructed by all of the pioneers (those who called the meeting and those who attended it). Melucci (1992) reminds us that this process is active and relational, creating a "collective identity" that involves a system of understandings, intense interaction, subjective and intersubjective investment, and emotional and affective exchange.

Our interviews with ten of the principal MML organizers permit some preliminary conclusions with regard to the movement. The women range in age from 40 to 65 and are descendants of European families, French, Italian, and Spanish. Although most have three or four children, two have none. Only two had any prior political experience, one while a student fighting for human rights and the other in an agricultural union. Some had participated in cooperatives. These characteristics allow us to place them in the social world of the small cities or towns of the country's interior that are the administrative centers for the surrounding countryside. During the twentieth century the inhabitants of these towns, descendants of immigrants, achieved, with great difficulty, some degree of social mobility by trusting in hard work, family effort, and education. Cornelis and other organizers have sons or daughters attending high school or the university. Many of them spoke of difficult family circumstances in the past—struggles over or loss of an inheritance, bankruptcy, loss of land. The danger of losing what they have fought so hard for appears repeatedly in their accounts, and consciously or unconsciously this seems to have been one of the main motivations for their collective action.

Having a farm not only allows them to participate in the market economy, giving them sufficient income to permit their children go to school, but also constitutes a legacy for future generations. Again, as in much of their family history, all this was in danger of being lost. Land and other property are part of the conjugal relation. Nevertheless, if the land is the husband's inheritance, the wife and children are heirs to it but not proprietors. A 1959 law affecting profit-generating property establishes that if the husband dies, the wife can benefit from joint ownership of the land for ten years. There is, however, a tradition of some juridical equality with regard to family inheritance. Problems emerge in those areas of the rural economy (in northern Argentina) where two factors militate against a woman's right to property: the lack of land titles proving ownership to farms and the fact that common-law marriages are not recognized in inheritance cases. In the regions where the MML is strongest, we did not detect stark imbalances by gender within the family group. The danger for these women of losing their inheritance generally came from the state, the banks, and their creditors.

In conclusion, the subjects' social background—their families' progress, their own development as rural women, their cultural traditions as daughters and granddaughters of immigrants, and the image they carry of their immigrant grandparents—is important for an understanding of the sources of their strength. Personal experiences of success and loss help to explain their surprising decision in the 1990s to throw off their aprons and enter the public sphere.

From its inception, the MML has utilized the mass media to spread its message. At first, local radio and newspapers provided it a forum and contributed to its growth. In the weeks following the actions against the auction of the Cornelis property, the provincial newspapers asked, "Will the example of Winfreda [the town in which Cornelis lived] spread?" They also announced that women from the western part of the province of La Pampa had met independently and made contact with Cornelis. After the June 3, 1995, auction in Winfreda, representatives from the different zones of La Pampa and the provinces of Santa Fe, Buenos Aires, Río Negro, and Formosa met on September 21 and set up a national committee.

During the second stage, the pioneers sent representatives from auction to auction, having contacted the media in advance. Often, they said, the mere idea that they would be intervening contributed to public officials' halting the auctions themselves, and on other occasions they created circumstances that prevented an auction from proceeding. Even when they did not succeed and the lands were sold, their presence and solidarity were supportive for those who lost their land.

One of the organizers told us how a group that subsequently joined the MML was created in the province of Tucumán:

It was beautiful. First, we knew about the auction, so we went to organize the resistance. We organized the movement, and two weeks later the auction took place. In actuality, the auction became not only a public act but also a political one. A large number of organizations were there—the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, HIJOS [an organization of the children of the disappeared]. It was the first time that anything like this had ever happened in Tucumán. When the auctioneer began, we all stood up and started singing the national anthem. This was a completely new situation. The auction took place nevertheless, but we annulled it. Ten days later they held another one, which we also annulled.

The MML has a number of legal consultants who support its actions. Actions take place on two levels: protesting to stop auctioneers in the act and appropriate legal action. The legal consultants and organizers estimate that more than 500 auctions have been halted in the past five years. If direct action by the MML is impossible (Cornelis was jailed and the other organizers were prosecuted), the lawyers file an appeal to declare the act null and void by reason of "legal error." They have won the majority of these cases, but the bank continually tries to organize new auctions.

Small groups of women identifying with the MML continue to emerge in many provinces and regions of the country, and some of them attend the meetings of the national committee. At the national level, the organization is extremely precarious and spontaneous, lacking financial resources for trips, telephone bills, a regular meeting place, or a newsletter. Nevertheless, it empowers itself not only through its every action but also with the emergence of every new group of indebted women.

EXPANSION: THE CREATION OF NETWORKS

One of the first initiatives of the pioneers was to join with other national or international organizations that had experience with these types of actions. Since their husbands or fathers were members of small or medium-sized farmers' unions, they had contacts with these organizations. They had the most contact with Chacareros Federados (Federated Farmers), located in the grain-producing region, and the Federación Agraria (Agrarian Federation) of which it was a part. Chacareros Federados takes a much more combative line than the official position. The organizers have been able to identify and criticize asymmetrical gender relations and to establish contact with men who are open to the new democratic currents. They have pursued empowerment for their movement through links with other organizations that share their fighting spirit and show respect for their gender.

The MML has associated itself with provincial organizations composed of indebted small farmers and merchants such as the Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero (The Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero—MOCASE) and the Centro de Empresarios de Famaillá (Tucumán) (The Entrepreneurial Center of Famaillá). Furthermore, they have consolidated their relationship with various women's organizations by holding an annual meeting on March 8, International Women's Day. They are also in contact with human rights organizations and with the Confederación de Trabajadores Argentinos (Confederation of Argentine Workers—CTA) and the Movimiento de Trabajadores Argentinos (Movement of Argentine Workers—MTA), combative trade-union organizations that provide an alternative to the "official" Confederación General del Trabajo (General Confederation of Labor—CGT). Although they have a strong relationship with some legislators from the center-left political parties that are part of the Alianza (Alliance), they declare themselves politically neutral. They also have links with university groups, progressive church sectors (many of the organizers are very religious), and Indian communities. Their national meetings attract the media, both local and national.

Their relationships on the national level are oriented toward establishing networks: organizing collective projects, participating in joint actions, seeking to introduce new directions that would include them. These networks become important strategic resources for their actions by creating sympathy and solidarity in different social worlds (i.e., women's, religious, university, etc., organizations). In Latin America they have contacts with the Barzón, the Mexican debtors' organization, and the Brazilian Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement—MST). Lucy de Cornelis speaks of establishing a "Latin American debtors' movement."

What unifies the MST and the MML is the land issue: the Brazilians want to acquire it, while the Argentines want to keep from losing it. "They're fighters just like us," said one of the MML organizers. However, the MST also represents the "feared other," the landless peasant. Cornelis attended the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre and came into contact with the international organization Vía Campesina. Meetings like this represent a very important advance, since they are oriented toward placing the struggle in a broader global context.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

The MML emerged in the mid-1990s, when the political and economic circumstances of Argentina presaged the cycle of protests that was to emerge some years later. The debt burden of small and medium-sized farmers resulted from concrete policies such as convertibility and the increase or decrease in interest rates. At the end of the decade there was a great deal of instability in world financial markets and fluctuation in agricultural prices, and the state chose not to implement effective policies for small and medium-sized producers.

Although the MML emerged during the debt crisis of the agricultural sector, it eventually became a strong voice against the entire neoliberal model. This was possible because it broke with the commonsense notion that debts are the responsibility of the individual who incurred them. This break allowed them to analyze and deconstruct their own debts, to raise the question of their irrationality, and to initiate a new discourse that called into question the legitimacy of the debt and of the economic model in general.²

The MML is a clear representative of the new agrarian social protest because in addition to its economic demands it makes others that respond to the problems of contemporary society. In fact, the protests of the 1990s can be characterized as novel in that they involve new social actors and call attention to a new type of social question. In this case, the type of social actor—an organization of women farmers and peasants—conditions the demands expressed.

Pettersen and Solbakken's (1998) conceptualization of farm women's strategies for change can be applied to the MML case. These writers maintain that "empowerment" implies a movement from self-understanding to collective action that has three dimensions: the personal, that of intimate relationships, and the collective. Our objective was to see the organization as a developing social actor with the capacity to participate in the agricultural transformations under way. The fact that it is a women's organization gives it the ability to affect the new agrarian protest on various levels. To this end it has had major confrontations with the leaders of traditional agrarian unions because the men do not want to relinquish their decision-making positions. The MML calls for more participation by women in all public and decision-making spaces, but in spite of this it cannot be considered a feminist movement.

NOTES

1. In 1998-1999 the debt crisis extended to all sectors of the economy. In 1999 "bank loans in an abnormal situation [being behind in payments] grew by 30 percent in the nation's ten most important banks" (*Clarín*, July 10, 1999).
2. The issue of responsibility for the debt is frequently discussed in a country where the state, during the last dictatorship, assumed the burden of much of the private international debt and where the state assists and subsidizes the large banks and the automobile industry and declares itself powerless when confronted with huge fiscal irregularities.

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