

# **Teacher Unions and Education Policy in Argentina**

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The history of public schooling in Argentina presents a puzzle. Conceived as a central pillar of State consolidation, national identity and economic modernization, Argentine public schools maintained a reputation for being one of the best in Latin America throughout the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. But today, there is a generalized sense that the Argentine school system has lost its edge, and indeed, in international assessments of student achievement, Argentina lags behind other countries of similar economic development and cultural roots. Why the quality of education has declined over time is a contentious and unresolved question.

A common explanation for the low quality of public education in Argentina and other Latin American countries is that, although politicians want to introduce reforms to improve the quality of education, they are unable to do so because powerful teacher unions block these reforms. This chapter argues that, at least in the case of Argentina, teacher unions have much less influence on education policy than is commonly believed. For multiple reasons that I discuss throughout the chapter, the unions are not particularly capable of obtaining what they want, and whenever governments have attempted to introduce large-scale education reform, they have been able to do so despite union opposition. However, politicians have made few serious attempts to improve educational quality. Instead, in using the education system for political purposes, they have prioritized the expansion of educational access and used teaching jobs as a form of patronage.

To build the argument that Argentine teacher unions are less influential than commonly believed, I begin by discussing a set of historical, geographic, economic, ideological and political factors that have affected the organization, behavior, and effectiveness of Argentine teacher unions. Next, I outline the history of teacher unionism in Argentina, the difficult process of forming a national organization, and how the State helped teachers overcome those difficulties but at a cost for the autonomy of teacher unions and with long-term implications for the shape of union-government interactions. I then discuss the current landscape of teacher unions, how they interact with one another and with the government, what strategies they employ to advance their demands, and what those demands are. In the last section, I focus on unions' influence on education policy. I illustrate unions' limited capacity to block reform by analyzing their failed attempt to prevent education decentralization in the early 1990s; discuss how their interest in maintain a large membership has led them to support some desirable reforms and oppose others; and highlight the role of politicians' interest, regardless teacher unions' strength, in maintaining low standards for teachers, schools, and the education system at large. I conclude with a brief prognosis for the future of education in Argentina.

## Structural and historical obstacles to teacher organization

Argentina is a middle-income country with about 40 million inhabitants spread throughout a large territory that is divided into 23 provinces and the City of Buenos Aires. Since the passage of its first Constitution in the 1850s, the country has been marked by sharp economic differences across its provinces, with Southern provinces and the City of Buenos Aires lying on the wealthier end of the spectrum, Northern provinces on the poorer end, and the provinces of the Center—including the populous Province of Buenos Aires—lying in between. Because of its federal system, and despite the central government's compensatory role, the differences in economic development across provinces translate into big differences in the characteristics of public education: Northern provinces spend less than half as much per student as Southern provinces, and they also have more overcrowded classrooms, a higher proportion of unsafe school buildings, and lower levels of student achievement and school completion rates ([Censo de Infraestructura Escolar 1998](#); [Censo Nacional de Docentes 2004](#); [Censo Nacional de Población 2010](#); [Cippec 2013](#)).

Although a federal system on paper, the distribution of responsibilities between the central and provincial governments and the distribution of central revenues across provinces have been a source of conflict throughout history. Of direct impact for the organization of teachers and for their relationship with the State has been the change in the role of the central and provincial governments in the funding and administration of public education over time, with a gradual movement toward centralization from the emergence of public schooling in the 1880s up to the 1950s; a gradual movement toward decentralization from the 1960s through the 1990s; and a reemergence of the central government's role since 2003 ([Murillo 2001](#); [Puiggrós 1996](#); [Galiani, Gertler and Schargrodsky 2008](#)).<sup>1</sup> If the large disparities across provinces have made it difficult for teachers to find sufficient common ground to build a national organization, the coexistence of national and provincial schools has added another layer of difficulty, by creating contractual differences between teachers employed by different levels of government; and the shifts from centralization, to decentralization, to partial re-centralization have disrupted existing teacher organizations and forced them to find new strategies whenever governance changes have taken place ([Vázquez 2005](#); [Perazza and Legarralde 2008](#)).

A further complicating factor in the organization of teachers has been their internal division regarding the role of religious and political instruction in public schools. Indeed, the country's history is plagued with political conflicts over whether public schools should provide Catholic instruction or remain secular. When mass public schooling emerged in the 1880s, the oligarchic regime—which wanted to construct a culturally homogenous nation State that was independent from the Church—established that basic education ought to be characterized by universal public provision, compulsory enrollment, free access, and *secular* instruction. However, during the first half of the twentieth century, some provinces introduced religious instruction in the schools that

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<sup>1</sup> Even at the peak of decentralization to the provinces, the central government maintained important functions. In the 1990s, it established minimum curriculum contents; funded a large school construction program and other special and/or compensatory programs; supervised teacher training programs and provided technical assistance to providers of such programs; and administered standardized tests of student achievement.

were under their purview (Lionetti 2006). In the 1940s and 1950s, at the height of education centralization, the presidency of Juan Perón incorporated Catholic instruction throughout the public school system (Bernetti and Puiggrós 1993). Subsequent governments banned Peronism but maintained religious instruction (Gutiérrez 2010). Eventually, in the 1960s, a compromise was reached whereby public instruction would remain secular but the State would subsidize private religious schools. But until then, and like the rest of society, teachers remained divided over ideological issues, with those defending “secular” education on one side and those defending “free” (religious) education on the other (Vázquez 2005).

Two features of Argentine politics are also central to understand union-government interactions: the history of military dictatorships, and the existence, during democratic periods, of a presidential system characterized by extensive Executive power. Although most countries considered in this volume have had non-democratic regimes at one time or another, Argentina stands out for having experienced the largest number of transitions between democracy and non-democracy in the world (Przeworski et al. 2000). From unions’ perspective, this political instability has meant a constant change in the rules of the game that define whether and how unions can express their demands, and a difficulty to trust the agreements made during democratic periods—because these agreements would often be ignored in subsequent non-democratic regimes. Such distrust of the State was further fueled by military regimes’ brutal repression of teacher activism.

In turn, Argentina’s presidential system—where, like in much of Latin America, the Executive has extensive capacity to govern unilaterally—implies that, from a union’s perspective, the key factor that determines with whom the union interacts, how it exerts pressure, and how successful it is, depends heavily on what is the identity of the party in government. As I discuss in the next section, teacher union leaders have a stronger bond with the left-wing faction of the Peronist party than with other mainstream parties, and tend to be more conciliatory when this group is in government. While this creates an opportunity to introduce transformative reforms, the Peronist party, a populist labor-based party whose electoral strategy relies heavily on the distribution of patronage and clientelism among the poor (Collier and Collier 1991; Calvo and Murillo 2004; Stokes 2005; Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno, and Brusco 2012), has had few incentives to introduce reforms that improve the quality of education available to the poor (Tiramonti 2013).

In sum, the large geographic territory over which teachers are spread, the disparate economic conditions across provinces, and the ideological conflict over the role of religion in the education system, have all contributed to teachers’ difficulty to organize and exert pressure over the State. Whenever teachers thought they had overcome these obstacles, political regime transitions and changes in the structure of education governance disrupted the existing organizations, forced them to adapt their strategies to the new circumstances, and contributed to develop a sense of distrust toward the State. Further, in periods of greater trust—such as when left-wing Peronists have been in power—politicians have neglected the opportunity to introduce quality-oriented reforms, which tend to be inconsistent with the strategies of patronage and clientelism that plague Argentine politics.

## The slow and non-autonomous emergence of teacher unions

The rapid expansion of public schooling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries strained the State's capacity and generated tension between teachers and the State regarding the terms of the contract between them. Teachers complained about the frequent delays in the payment of salaries, the lack of basic school supplies, and the unsafe school buildings (Acri 2012, 18). The first teacher strike took place in 1881 in a school of the province of San Luis where teachers were owed 8 months' worth of salaries and refused to teach until their salary payments were updated. Similar protests—of a small local magnitude and for similar reasons—took place from the 1890s through the mid-twentieth century (Donaire 2009, 137).

From early on, the battle between teachers and the State became not just about material issues but also about ideas. It was common for the State to require that teachers adhere to, or reject, certain political views in order to keep their jobs,<sup>2</sup> but despite the many policies used to ensure ideological compliance—e.g., a system of school inspections, socialization into certain values during pre-service teacher training, “personality” tests for recruitment into teaching, centralized choice of textbooks, oaths of allegiance, etc.—there was always a group of teachers who contested the specific views prevailing at a given time. To prevent the intrusion of partisan politics into the classroom, teachers demanded legal protections against arbitrary changes in the rules for being appointed, promoted, or dismissed, as well as greater autonomy and consideration of their pedagogical knowledge when making policy decisions that affected their work (Vázquez 2005; Gutiérrez 2010; Acri 2012).

Despite their common interest in the timely payment of teacher salaries and the establishment of clear rules curtailing political discretion over curricular and human resource decisions, the contractual and ideological divisions amongst teachers hindered the emergence of encompassing unions. As mentioned earlier, the coexistence of national and provincial schools meant that some teachers had a contractual relationship with the national government and others with their respective province (Perazza and Legarralde 2008). The salary and working conditions of national teachers were usually better than those of provincial teachers, hindering the articulation of common demands between them. To complicate things further, teachers were also divided along partisan and religious lines (Gutiérrez 2010, 4). In this context, despite several (failed) attempts to organize at the provincial and national levels, a fragmented landscape of teacher organizations remained in place throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

The first national teacher union emerged in the 1940s under the sponsorship of Juan Perón's presidency. Labor unions had been central to Perón's rise to power, and once in power, Perón returned the favor by providing the working class with the legal right to form unions and bargain with their employer—but with a caveat that allowed the Peronist party to maintain control over unions: the State reserved the power to decide which unions had the legal right to represent workers' interests, engage in dialogue and negotiations with employers, and sign agreements on

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, teachers were required to pledge allegiance to the Peronist Doctrine during the 1940s and 1950s—and those who refused to do so were often purged (Bernetti and Puiggrós 1993)—and had to reject that doctrine after Perón was overthrown from power.

workers' behalf. Perón used this power to discriminate between unions, favoring those that supported his regime and excluding those that did not (Collier and Collier 1991; Murillo 2001). Having been unable to consolidate their power on their own, labor unions accepted this politicization of labor relations and provided Peronism with a loyal core constituency and political machines for electoral support and policy implementation (Murillo 2001, 30).

In the education sector, the administration sponsored the creation of Peronist-led provincial teacher unions and also appointed Peronist officials to lead the first national union of public school teachers, the UDA, founded in 1947<sup>3</sup> (Gutiérrez 2010; Vázquez 2005, 9). Two more Peronist-affiliated unions emerged in the late 1940s: SADOP, representing private school teachers; and AMET, representing teachers of technical-vocational schools. UDA, SADOP and AMET were each given a monopoly (in public, private, and technical-vocational education, respectively) to represent teachers in conversations with the government; any demands that were not channeled through these unions were ignored. In practice, this meant ignoring the demands of liberal-minded middle-class teachers who were generally opposed to the Peronist administration and constituted a majority of the teacher workforce. Expressions of discontent toward Peronist policies were further limited by the threat of being purged from the teacher workforce if one failed to express support for the regime (Bernetti and Puiggrós 1993).

The main accomplishment of teacher unions during these years was the sanctioning in 1954 of the first Teacher Statute covering teachers employed by the national government. The Statute set rules for teacher appointment, promotion, compensation, and dismissal; protected the job stability of permanent teachers (though not of substitute or contractual teachers); defined the salary schedule and the criteria for salary increases; established a generous pension; and, more generally, set teachers' working conditions. Equally important, the 1954 Teacher Statute introduced the system of Qualification Boards (*Juntas de Clasificación*) which, together with the Disciplinary Boards (*Juntas de Disciplina*) introduced by the 1958 Teacher Statute, are a key mechanism by which teacher unions influence the education sector. As I discuss later, membership in these boards enables teacher unions to exert considerable influence over who is appointed, promoted and dismissed—and anecdotal evidence suggests that unions use this power to benefit their own members (Rivas 2004, 182).

The political incorporation of teacher unions during the 1940s and 1950s constituted a “critical juncture,” to borrow the term used by Collier and Collier (1991), leaving at least three lasting imprints on the way teacher unions interact with the State. First, while it gave birth to a system whereby unions have considerable power over the hiring, promotion, and dismissal of teachers, unions were given only limited influence over education policy decisions. Such decisions have typically been made by national and provincial governments without a formal requirement to consult unions. This is unlike the case of other countries in Latin America, such as Chile, where unions have had formal representation in policymaking bodies at the national level since the 1950s (Núñez 1986, 121). Second, the Peronist years established a pattern of conditional recognition of unions by the State, in which partisan alignments often shape a government's decision to recognize

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<sup>3</sup> The ADE (*Agremiación de Docentes Argentinos*, or Guild of Argentine Teachers) was founded in 1947 and renamed UDA (*Unión de Docentes Argentinos*, or Union of Argentine Teachers) in 1952.

a particular union as a legitimate representative of teachers. [Murillo and Ronconi \(2004\)](#) argue that such Executive discretion in labor relations and the favoring of unions that are politically aligned with the government explains the pattern of lower frequency of strikes when the union leadership identifies with the party in government. Third, the 1940s and 1950s established an enduring bond between teacher union leaders and the left-wing faction of the Peronist party, especially at the national level. Indeed, throughout the 1960s, when the Peronist party was banned, many Peronist politicians stayed involved in politics by joining teacher unions and occupying seats in Qualification or Disciplinary Boards ([Gutiérrez 2010, 2011](#)).

### ***Change and continuity after the foundation of CTERA***

When Perón was forced to leave power in 1955, and the country entered a period of political instability characterized by an alternation between military and civilian presidents, teachers became atomized once again. After various failed attempts to build a national organization, in 1973, with Perón back in power, the Peronist UDA was reorganized. At the same time, 147 provincial unions came together under a national umbrella organization known as CTERA, today is the largest teacher union in the country. The foundation of CTERA and its coexistence with UDA inaugurated a new dynamic in teacher unionism, one marked by competition between unions for members and for a voice in the education sector.

CTERA differs from UDA in at least three ways. First, while UDA's membership is mostly concentrated in Buenos Aires, CTERA has presence throughout the entire territory and thus has become a more threatening force for national governments. Second, UDA and CTERA's relationship with Peronism differs. Since its inception in the 1940s, UDA has been affiliated with the Peronist party and belongs to the General Confederation of Workers (CGT), known as the "backbone" of Peronism. CTERA's relationship with Peronism is less clear-cut. On one hand, the organization claims to be politically autonomous and indeed has a rank-and-file with diverse partisan identities. On the other hand, over time the national leadership of CTERA has over time grown close to a faction of the Peronist party,<sup>4</sup> and since 1987 national leaders have come from a left-wing Peronist extraction. Third, the scope and prioritization of UDA and CTERA's interests differ, with UDA concentrating almost exclusively on teachers' material interests (job creation, salary increases, etc.) and CTERA concentrating on a broader range of issues within and beyond the education sector. In particular, CTERA permanently advocates for the institutionalization of participatory decision-making mechanisms in the education sector, which, it argues, are sufficient to ensure that teachers' material interests be attended to, but also, are necessary to ensure that the education system reflects democratic values.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the changes brought about by the creation of CTERA, a basic feature of teacher unionism remained intact: teacher unions' effective rights were never truly institutionalized and instead remained dependent on who occupied the Executive. At the national level, left-wing Peronist governments afforded unions greater participation and voice, which helped contain unions'

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<sup>4</sup> A number of circumstances contributed to this, including their shared experience of brutal repression during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, followed by the exclusion of teacher unions from education policy debates when the Radical party defeated the Peronist party upon the return to democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Personal interviews with leaders of CTERA and UDA.

political opposition in the streets. During Perón's brief presidency between 1973 and 1974, when a left-wing official led the Ministry of Education, UDA was given formal recognition to represent teachers, and CTERA, despite not receiving the same legal protection, accomplished its goal of being included in broad education policy decisions.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, following Perón's death in 1974 and his replacement by a right-wing Peronist faction with strong ties to conservative Catholic sectors, teacher unions were excluded from policy debates (Vázquez 2005). Their exclusion was exacerbated during the military regime that lasted from 1976 to 1983, a period of brutal State repression in which unions and political activism were banned, and militant teachers (and students) persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes murdered. The regime suspended the Teacher Statute, reduced drastically the amount of funding for public education vis-à-vis private (often Catholic) schools,<sup>7</sup> and transferred the administration of all primary schools and all corresponding teacher contracts to the provinces, leading once again to fragmentation among public school teachers.

Upon the transition to democracy in 1983 teachers demanded the recovery of salaries and expenditures; a Teacher Statute; the central government's commitment to fund public education; and a "democratization" of education, by which they meant greater participation of teachers, students, and parents in education governance. The Radical party in government, which had defeated the Peronist party in elections, maintained a confrontational relationship with the unions: when the government organized the National Congress of Pedagogy to debate education reform proposals, it invited teachers but not their unions. The unions invested considerable energy to reorganize teachers' capacity for collective action, which had suffered during the military regime. In 1986, CTERA joined the Peronist CGT and participated in the national strike against the Radical party administration led by the latter. In 1987, a Peronist leader took over the national administration of CTERA, and a year later, CTERA organized a massive national strike which lasted 42 days. The national leadership also made an effort to merge provincial unions so as to have a single union affiliate per province—a goal that was finally accomplished in 1991.

In 1989, the unions supported the presidential candidacy of Carlos Menem, a Peronist who campaigned on a populist platform. However, when Menem unexpectedly turned to neoliberal policies soon after being elected, teacher unions withdrew their support and a confrontational relationship followed, involving innovative forms of massive social protest that helped mobilize the public opinion in teachers' favor. In 1997, CTERA leaders joined left-wing Peronists who were also disappointed by Menem's turn to neoliberalism to found a new party, FREPASO—which would merge back with the Peronist party when the latter moved away from neoliberalism.

Since the election in 2003 of a populist Peronist government, which among other things introduced centralized collective bargaining and increased central government funding for education, the unions have maintained a relatively good relationship with the government, and in fact have

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<sup>6</sup> From teachers' perspective, this was a fragile situation: their interests could be expressed either through an organization that had legal jurisdiction to represent them but lacked political autonomy (UDA) or through one that had more political autonomy but lacked legal protection (CTERA).

<sup>7</sup> This was not motivated by a general interest in fiscal austerity; the external debt and the fiscal deficit increased dramatically during this period.

actively endorsed many of the Peronist candidates in legislative, gubernatorial, and presidential elections.

In sum, the emergence and consolidation of encompassing teacher unions came at a cost to unions' political autonomy. After a prolonged period of atomization, the first unions with capacity to articulate demands at the provincial and national levels emerged with the organizational and political support of the Peronist administration in the late 1940s. These formative years established a pattern of conditional recognition of unions by the State, which in a context of Executive discretion in the application of labor regulations has meant that unions are more likely to be included in policy debates and recognized as legitimate dialogue and bargaining counterparts when the union leadership is politically aligned with the party in government. The historical linkages between labor unions and Peronism, and the fact that the leaders of national teacher unions have generally come from the left-wing factions of the Peronist party—even in the case of CTERA, whose rank-and-file is politically diverse—can help explain why left-oriented Peronist governments have tended to be more inclusive of national teacher unions in education policy debates. In turn, whether unions are recognized and given a voice by the party in government has implications for the strategies they employ. When unions and the government are politically aligned, unions can obtain concessions without the need to resort to strikes, and are also more willing to have short-term tolerance of less-than-ideal working conditions because they trust that the government will eventually make things better for them; but strikes are more common when the unions and the government are not politically aligned.

## **Interests, strategies, and the struggle for power**

This section begins with a description of the current landscape of teacher unions in Argentina, and then discusses unions' main interests, the different strategies they have employed to pursue those interests, and the degree to which they have succeeded in realizing those interests, with emphasis on their record of accomplishments and defeats since the return of democracy in 1983. The section concludes with a discussion of the strategies that governments have employed to limit unions' power.

### ***Current landscape of teacher unions***

In Argentina today there are about 880,000 teachers, of which 640,000 are employed in the public sector and 240,000 in the private sector ([Censo Nacional de Docentes 2004](#)). Union membership is voluntary, and about 50 percent of teachers are affiliated to a national teacher union, with the rate of unionization being higher in public schools (67 percent) than in private ones (11 percent). Unionization increased during the 1990s, when the central government pursued a battery of neoliberal policies including the decentralization of education.

Five national teacher unions compete for members. The largest is the CTERA, an umbrella organization of 24 provincial unions—one in each province and the City of Buenos Aires—that has close to 290,000 members. The other national unions are UDA, whose membership includes about 50,000 public school teachers; CEA, with about 77,000 members; AMET, representing technical-



vocational teachers and with about 12,000 members; and SADOP, which represents private school teachers and has about 25,000 members (Donaire 2009).

Given that union affiliation is voluntary, and that not all teachers choose to join a union, it is worth asking what leads certain teachers but not others to join. On one hand, the belief that unions often use their position in Qualification Boards to differentially benefit their own members with promotions and transfers may provide incentives to join a union. In addition, teacher unions provide other material benefits to their members in the form of discounts for recreational activities, vacation packages, and so on. On the other hand, anecdotal evidence suggests that, for many teachers, the material benefits they can obtain from joining a union are insufficient to compensate for the ideological cost they bear for joining such a politicized organization. Indeed, a substantial fraction of Argentine teachers still identify with those early liberal-democratic, middle-class teachers who viewed themselves as professionals, looked down on union practices, and rejected any form of politicization in the education sector. Union members, then, are not a representative sample of the entire teacher workforce. My own analysis of nationally representative data reveals that, among public school teachers, unionization is more likely among teachers of more humble socioeconomic backgrounds, as indicated by their lower levels of educational attainment and higher poverty rates.<sup>8</sup>

Union density varies greatly across provinces, reaching as low as 20 percent of teachers in some provinces and as high as 80 percent in others,<sup>9</sup> and density rates tend to be higher in poorer provinces. There are close to 30 provincial teacher unions. Most provinces have a single union that is affiliated to CTERA, but in the Province of Buenos Aires, the City of Buenos Aires, and some Northern provinces, several unions compete for members. Further, even when a single provincial union exists and is affiliated with CTERA, the provincial leadership's interests and positions are not always aligned with those of the national leadership (Rivas 2004; Perazza and Legarralde 2008). Competition for members between unions and internal divisions within unions hinder teachers' capacity for collective action. As will be discussed later, in the early 1990s the government exploited that competition to advance education decentralization reforms. It was not until the late 1990s that CTERA was able to overcome its internal divisions and organize a national mobilization against decentralization and the other major reforms of that decade.

In addition to the funding they obtain from the payment of membership fees, unions have access to other economic resources. CTERA and AMET are in charge of administering the main health insurance provider for teachers, *Osplad*. UDA, AMET and SADOP participate in the administration of the dedicated pension fund for teachers, known as the *Caja Complementaria de Previsión para la Actividad Docente*. Finally, the national Ministry of Education provides substantial funding to unions for the provision of professional development courses (Rivas 2004, 131). Control over these sources of funding give union leaders some independence to pursue their own interests, even if not aligned with those of the membership.

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<sup>8</sup> Author's calculations based on data from the nationally representative *Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida* conducted in 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Based on data corresponding to the year 2000 provided by María Victoria Murillo and Lucas Ronconi.

## ***Interests***

The interests pursued by unions have evolved over time, depending on the status of labor rights, the macroeconomic conditions, and the education policies prevailing at a given point in time. In the early days of teacher organizations, which coincided with the rapid expansion of public education in a contentious political environment, the majority of claims focused on the timely payment of salaries and the establishment of clear rules of the game that impeded political interference with the curriculum and the appointment, promotion and dismissal of teachers. These interests, prioritizing greater voice and greater stability of working conditions over higher salaries, were reflected in the content of the 1954 Teacher Statute and in subsequent Statutes. The Statutes gave teachers greater voice through their participation in Qualification and Disciplinary Boards, and established rules for the appointment, promotion and dismissal of teachers, but the downside of greater voice and greater job stability was a sustained decline in teachers' real salaries until the end of the twentieth century ([Ministerio de Cultura y Educación 1976](#); [Rivas 2004](#)).

The military regime of 1976-1983 repealed the Teacher Statute, decentralized primary schools to the provinces, and reduced public education expenditures. Upon the return of democracy, the unions fought for a reversal of these policies, demanding the reinstatement of a national Teacher Statute, the establishment of a common salary schedule across provinces, a recovery of teacher salaries and public education expenditures, and a sustained commitment by the central government to fund public education. Their focus was on regaining what they had lost, but not more. Partly because the military regime had disrupted the organization of teachers, and partly because of competition between and within unions, their success was only partial. The 42-day national strike carried out in 1988 by the CTERA helped install the school finance debate in the public agenda ([Vázquez 2005](#)), but by 1990, per-pupil public expenditure in education was at the same level as in 1983, and teacher salaries were about 20 percent lower ([Rivas, Vera and Bezem 2010](#)).

Throughout the 1990s, confronted with a government that introduced orthodox fiscal policies, greater flexibility in labor regulations, and further decentralization, the unions focused on preventing losses—including material losses but also the loss of power within education governance structures. Again, although they obtained some concessions, in the grand scheme of things they were not very successful ([Murillo 1999, 2001](#)): secondary schools were decentralized despite the adamant opposition of CTERA, leading to a fragmentation in the organization of teachers which reduced the unions' power; and teacher salaries declined first and recovered later, remaining in 2000 at similar levels as in 1990. The main gains for the unions came from the establishment in 1999 of a dedicated fund for teacher salaries which helped insulate teachers from economic recessions ([Vázquez 2005](#); [Perazza and Legarralde 2008](#)); and from the expansion of per-pupil public expenditure in education, which increased by 85 percent throughout the decade to finance the construction of new schools and the expansion of compulsory education and, with that, the creation of new teaching jobs ([Rivas, Vera and Bezem 2010](#); [Rivas 2004](#); [Paglayan 2008](#)). Also, as part of a concession made by the Ministry of Education to end a 1003-day hunger strike, the national teacher unions were given control over the teachers' health insurance and pension funds—all benefits targeted to the union leadership more than to the teachers themselves ([Perazza and Legarralde 2008](#)).

Soon after it assumed power, the Peronist government that was elected in 2003—and that was reelected in 2007 and 2011—fulfilled many of the demands made by unions in the previous two decades. In 2005 it passed a new Law of Education Finance which guaranteed that by 2010 at least 6 percent of the GDP would be devoted to education and established a Compensatory Salary Fund to reduce the salary disparities between provinces. It also introduced centralized collective bargaining at the beginning of the school year, which established a floor for subsequent salary negotiations at the provincial level and, by serving as a focal point, helped reduce disparities between provinces even more. In 2006 it passed the Law of National Education, which established several forms of union participation in education policy decisions, including union representation in the newly created National Council for Educational Quality and the Education Policy Council. By the end of Néstor Kirchner's presidency in 2007, teacher salaries had increased by 58% in real terms compared to 2003, and per-pupil expenditures, which had fallen dramatically between 2001 and 2003, recovered fully and increased by an additional 13% with respect to 2001 (Rivas, Vera and Bezem 2010). In exchange for all this, the Peronist party was able to govern with relatively few national strikes compared to the previous two decades, and perhaps more importantly, it reestablished its credibility as a populist ally of the unions and benefitted from their active political campaigning and endorsement during national and provincial elections.

### ***Strategies***

Teacher unions have resorted to a creative portfolio of strategies to advance their interests, taking advantage of their position in Qualification Boards and Disciplinary Boards; organizing national and provincial strikes; using other peaceful but highly visible forms of social protest, such as a prolonged hunger strike; participating in collective bargaining negotiations; engaging in direct negotiations with provincial and national politicians; and endorsing political candidates and nominating candidates from within the union. Some strategies—such as taking advantage of their position in Qualification or Disciplinary Boards—have been exercised on a continual basis, while others vary with political and economic circumstances, and are often substitutes of one another—e.g., strikes and other forms protests vs. collective bargaining and direct negotiations with politicians.

*Qualification Boards and Disciplinary Boards.* Following a practice that began with the 1954 Teacher Statute for national teachers, and was further reinforced by the 1958 Statute, whenever an individual wants to enter the teaching profession in a given province, or when an already existing teacher wants to obtain a promotion or be transferred to a different school in the same province, he/she must send his/her application to the corresponding Qualification Board. These Boards consider all the applications they receive and provide a score to each applicant. The ranking of scores then determines who is hired, promoted, or transferred. The provincial Teacher Statutes determine what criteria must be used to assign scores to applicants. However, they also give members of Qualification Boards considerable discretion. For example, in the Province of Buenos Aires, up to 31 percent of the maximum score that an applicant can obtain may come from professional development courses, but the Statute and its accompanying regulations determine that it is up to the members of the Qualification Boards in that province to determine which professional development courses are worthy of credit and which ones are not. The same is true of the large

majority of provinces, where on average up to 38 percent of the total score that an applicant can obtain may come from professional development activities, but where the law leaves ample room for Qualification Board members to decide which activities deserve credit.

In practice, what this means is that members of Qualification Boards in general, and teacher unions in particular, have substantial discretion over which applicants are hired, promoted, or transferred. This is because, again continuing a tradition initiated by the 1954 and 1958 Statutes,<sup>10</sup> all the provincial Statutes establish that teacher representatives must be members of the Qualification Boards: in 16 of the 24 provinces, the number of seats reserved for teacher representatives constitutes a majority of the total seats in these Boards; in 5 provinces, there is a tie between the number of seats allocated to teacher representatives vis-à-vis individuals appointed by the provincial Executive; and in only 3 provinces do Executive-appointed members exceed the number of teacher representatives. Understandably, membership in these Boards is highly valued by teacher unions, as it gives them power to provide benefits to their own members (Rivas 2004, 182).

This is not to say that Executive-appointed members do not exercise discretion as well. Indeed, the inclusion of teacher representatives in Qualification Boards, and in the Disciplinary Boards that determine whether a teacher should be suspended or dismissed, was partly designed to counterweigh politicians' power to appoint, promote, transfer or dismiss teachers based on partisan, ideological or otherwise political criteria. But rather than solving this conflict by eliminating all discretion in the assignment of scores, the system that emerged is one where discretion remains high but the power to exercise discretion is shared by the unions and the Executive.

*Collective bargaining.* The Constitutional reform of 1949 advanced by Perón's administration introduced Article 14 bis, which among other things establishes the right of all workers to form and join unions and to engage in collective bargaining with their employer. As was discussed earlier, the system of labor relations introduced by Perón gave governments the power to decide which unions were recognized by the State as legitimate negotiators and which ones were not. In the private sector, governments often used that power to recognize only unions whose leadership was politically aligned with the governing party.

In the public sector, where governments are also the employers who are supposed to negotiate with unions, the passage of a statute regulating the exercise of public sector collective bargaining rights was delayed until 1991, and even then, it was not properly enforced (Cremonte 2009, 22-26). The introduction of public sector collective bargaining in the 1990s coincided with a time when teacher unions were significantly weakened, in large part because the decentralization of education of 1992 fragmented teacher-government relationships, leading in turn to a fragmentation of unions. In this context of weakened unions, the majority of provincial governments chose not to engage in collective bargaining with teachers (Rivas 2004), highlighting the frailty of unions' effective rights even in the presence of formal rights.

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<sup>10</sup> Whereas the 1954 Statute established that teacher representatives would be appointed by the Executive branch, the 1958 Statute gave teachers the right to choose their own representatives.

The Peronist government elected in 2003 sought to win back teacher unions' support, and among its strategies to accomplish this, it introduced in 2005 the legal right to participate in centralized collective bargaining negotiations over salary levels and working conditions. Since 2008, every year before the beginning of the school year, the national unions negotiate a minimum salary with the national Ministry of Education, and this serves as a floor for subsequent salary negotiations at the provincial level (Bezem 2013). For the first time in decades, there has been a sustained increase in teachers' real salaries, which increased by 76 percent between 2003 and 2012.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that the upward trend in real salaries began in 2003, *before* the introduction of centralized wage bargaining in 2008, and did not become steeper thereafter (Di Santi 2013). This pattern, which is in line with historical evidence from the United States (Paglayan 2014), suggests that the incentives that lead certain governments to grant collective bargaining rights to teachers also lead them to pay teachers higher salaries—even in the absence of such rights. In the Argentine case, the increase in salaries and the introduction of centralized collective bargaining appear to have been part of a strategy by the government to obtain the unions' political support, including their public endorsement of Peronist candidates in national and provincial elections.

*Strikes.* Teacher strikes are a common feature in the life of the Argentine public school student and, to a lesser degree, of the private school student too. The majority of strikes take place at the provincial level, with an average of 5 strikes per province per year since 1983 (Nueva Mayoría 2002; Rivas, Veras and Bezem 2010). However, strikes at the national level are not at all uncommon, with an average of about 1 national teacher strike per year in the three decades following the return of democracy.

There is considerable variation in the occurrence of teacher strikes across provinces and over time. Provincial strikes, for instance, are more common in provinces where the union leadership is not politically aligned with the governor's party (Murillo and Ronconi 2004). According to Murillo and Ronconi (2004), when the union leadership and the governor are politically aligned, there are informal channels of negotiation that enable the union to obtain concessions without the need to resort to strikes; and, in addition, the existence of a partisan link increases unions' trust of the government and makes unions more willing to tolerate short-term costs. Interestingly, the relationship between strikes and the level of resources is less clear: on one hand, strikes are more common in provinces that have experienced a greater movement of students toward private schools (Narodowski, Moschetti and Alegre 2013), but they seem to be little related to changes in teacher salaries or in the level of public education expenditure (Rivas, Vera and Bezem 2010).

National teacher strikes are also more common when the union leadership is not politically aligned with the party in government: they reached a total of 12 strikes between 1983 and 1989, during the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín, a member of the Radical party who unsuccessfully attempted to change labor laws to reduce the bond between labor unions and the Peronist party (Farinetti n.d.); declined to about 9 national strikes in the 1990s during the presidency of Carlos Menem (Clarín 1999), a Peronist who turned to neoliberal policies after having campaigned on a populist platform; and further declined to 4 national strikes throughout the period 2003-2013, when a populist Peronist government was in power (La Nación 2005; La Nación 2013; Polack 2012). The majority of national

strikes have sought to protect the inflation-adjusted value of teacher salaries and public education expenditures. In more recent years national strikes have sought to obtain not the maintenance but an increase in teachers' real salaries.

*Other forms of social mobilization.* Strikes are always disruptive, but they are not always successful, especially because oftentimes they are organized by a single union, putting the striking union in a weaker position to bargain, and making the demands look less legitimate in the public's eyes. Aware of the potential backlash of strikes, in the 1990s the national leadership of the CTERA devised a creative strategy to express its discontent toward the education reforms of that decade, demand the central government's commitment to public education, and build support among the general public. Specifically, CTERA mounted a hunger strike outside the national Congress, with teachers taking turns to participate in the strike, for a total of 1,003 days between 1997 and 1999. The mounting of a white tent outside Congress helped teachers sustain their protest even during cold and rainy days; the protest became known as the *Carpa Blanca*, or White Tent, and received ample coverage by the mass media and the support of the public opinion. Although the government did not reverse the battery of reforms it had introduced throughout the 1990s, it eventually agreed to create a dedicated funding stream for public school teachers' salaries, which served as a buffer against adverse economic shocks. The new fund, known as the *Fondo Nacional de Incentivo Docente* (National Fund for Teacher Incentives), or FONID, was passed into law in 1999; immediately after, the White Tent was lifted.

*Participation in elections.* Teacher unions often participate in elections, publicly endorsing the candidates and parties more ideologically aligned to them and from whom they think they will obtain more favorable treatment. The three teacher unions that were founded by the Peronist government in the 1940s have consistently endorsed Peronist candidates; these are UDA, SADOP and AMET, which together represent 10 percent of the teacher workforce and 20 percent of unionized teachers. In the case of CTERA, its foundation in the 1970s sought to bring together a plurality of teachers, and the union adopted a formal stance of political autonomy. Indeed, the rank-and-file come from diverse partisan affiliations, and the different groups that compete for the union leadership also represent different political views. Nevertheless, CTERA's national leadership since the mid-1980s has come from the left-wing factions of Peronism. Accordingly, the national leadership actively opposed the Radical party throughout the 1980s; openly supported the presidential candidacy of Carlos Menem, a Peronist who campaigned on a populist platform, but turned its back on Menem after he adopted a host of neoliberal reforms; joined other left-wing Peronists disappointed with Menem's neoliberal policies to found a new party, FREPASO; and since 2003, with a populist Peronist government back in power, has openly endorsed Peronist candidates in national and provincial elections. Minority factions within CTERA have claimed there is a double-discourse of formal political autonomy on one hand but informal loyalty to a sector of the Peronist party on the other.

In addition to publicly supporting certain candidates and opposing others, some former provincial and national leaders of CTERA have pursued public office themselves. Through these positions, they have continued to fight for greater resources for public education but have also advanced other

policies, such as the conviction of those involved in State repression during the military regime of 1976-1983, and the conservation of natural resources.

### ***Governmental counterstrategies***

A set of factors that are specific to teachers and their unions have constrained unions' ability to obtain what they want. These include competition between national unions for membership, and in the case of CTERA, the heterogeneity of the rank-and-file and the often divergent positions of provincial and national union leaders. To this we must add the strategies that governments have employed to limit unions' success. These include: excluding some unions from the negotiation<sup>11</sup>; splitting the conversation with unions, negotiating with some first and with others later so as to prevent their capacity to coordinate<sup>12</sup>; discounting from teachers' monthly salary any days of work lost because of strike; appealing to the public with messages that characterize unions as "subversive"<sup>13</sup> or "lazy"<sup>14</sup>; hiring *de facto* permanent teachers under temporary contracts, and using the formalization of those contracts as a bargaining chip; alluding to the constraints imposed by international organizations that provide funding for education programs; giving union leaders greater control over resources, without actually increasing the amount of resources; and using unpopular forms of taxation to fund increases in education spending in order to turn public opinion against teachers.<sup>15</sup>

### **Unions, parties, and policies**

So far I have described how teachers are organized, how they pursue their interests, and what has been their record of accomplishments and defeats, arguing that moderate levels of union density, competition between unions and within unions, a heterogeneous rank-and-file, and the absence throughout most of Argentine history of formal institutional mechanisms of union-government negotiation, explain the unions' combative strategies to exert pressure on the government as well as their limited success. In addition, the preceding discussion underscores the central role of the Executive branch in determining both the course of education policy and the voice given to unions in the policymaking process, a centrality attributable in part to Argentina's presidential system and in part to the structure of labor relations that emerged in the 1940s, which gave governments the capacity to choose whether and with whom they want to negotiate.

This chapter discusses unions' influence on education policy. Focusing on two major reforms introduced during the 1990s—the decentralization of education and the introduction of universal preschool—I argue that reform was introduced by the Executive regardless of whether unions opposed them (as in the case of decentralization) or supported them (as in the case of universal preschool). I also argue that, in both cases, the unions' position toward reform, although motivated by their own interests, was broadly consistent with what was in children's best interest. At the end

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<sup>11</sup> During the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín.

<sup>12</sup> During the presidency of Carlos Menem.

<sup>13</sup> During the presidency of Carlos Menem.

<sup>14</sup> During the presidency of Cristina Kirchner.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, the FONID was initially funded through a tax on vehicles, which led to the erosion of CTERA's support among the middle class (Gindin 2009).

of the section, I discuss unions' position regarding the low standards that exist for entry into the teaching profession, a case where unions' interests clash with what is in the best interest of children—but here too, I highlight that the main factor inhibiting reforms in this area is that politicians have an interest of their own in maintaining fairly low standards for teachers.

### ***Reform despite union opposition: The case of education decentralization<sup>16</sup>***

The distribution of responsibilities between the central and provincial governments and the distribution of central government revenues across provinces have always been contentious political issues. In the education sector, schools managed by the central and provincial governments have coexisted throughout most of Argentine history. The emergence of public schooling in the 1880s was accompanied by a gradual centralizing process, which reached its peak in the 1950s. By 1952, 43 percent of primary schools, 65 percent of secondary schools, and 83 percent of vocational schools were under the purview of the central government. A gradual process of decentralization emerged beginning in the 1960s. In 1968, a military government transferred some primary schools under central jurisdiction to the provinces, but the transfer was made on a voluntary basis. The military regime of 1976-1983 mandated the transfer of all centrally-managed primary schools to the provinces. By 1987, only 2 percent of primary schools remained under the purview of the central government, but a sizable portion of secondary and vocational schools (45 and 33 percent, respectively) remained under the central government's control ([Paglianitti 1991](#)).

Carlos Menem, the Peronist candidate which won the 1989 presidential elections, took power in the context of a hyperinflation that had led his predecessor to leave power before the end of his term. Although Menem had campaigned on a populist platform and with labor unions' support, he turned to neoliberal policies as soon as he assumed power. Seeking to end the hyperinflation, he adopted an orthodox recipe increasing the central government's revenue and decreasing its expenditures. Among other things, he privatized public utilities companies and other state-owned firms, reformed the social security system, and reduced the salaries of public employees. In this context, in 1991 he introduced a bill to transfer all secondary and vocational schools that remained under the central government's purview to the provinces. The bill was passed into law in December of that year, and the transfer of schools from the central to the provincial governments took place between 1992 and 1994 ([Murillo 1999](#)).

The decentralization reform transferred to the provincial governments the responsibility over the budget, resource allocation, and personnel decisions. Setting the wages of school staff, hiring and firing teachers and school principals, defining the length of the school year, supervising schools, establishing curriculum contents, and funding the provision of education, all fell under provincial governments. The central government maintained the responsibility to establish minimum curriculum contents, supervise teacher training programs, provide technical assistance to these programs, administer standardized tests of student achievement, and fund some compensatory programs. The reform did not affect schools' autonomy; schools remained in charge of the choice of textbooks, teaching and evaluation methods, and course content ([Galiani et.al. 2008](#)).

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<sup>16</sup> This section draws heavily on Murillo (1999), "Recovering Political Dynamics: Teachers' Unions and the Decentralization of Education in Argentina and Mexico."



As had been anticipated, national teacher unions opposed the decentralization reform. The national unions UDA and AMET rejected it because, by transferring teacher contracts to the provinces, they feared they would lose their ability to attract members vis-à-vis unions organized at the provincial level. The CTERA rejected decentralization because of its commitment to uniform wage and working conditions across provinces. Prior to the reform, the existence of a portion of teacher salaries determined at the central level had served as a focal point for the determination of salaries in provincially-managed schools (Perazza and Legarralde 2008); decentralization in the determination of salaries, the CTERA's national leadership feared, would impede this coordination, and increase the heterogeneity in salaries and working conditions across provinces. This, in turn, would make it more difficult to organize teachers at the national level, and the resulting fragmentation in the organization of teachers would weaken the unions' power and eventually lead to worse salaries and working conditions for all teachers (Hanson 1997; Balduzzi and Vázquez, *Neoliberalismo, resistencia y democracia*, mimeo 2001). Indeed, CTERA leaders interpreted the reform as a hidden attempt to weaken the unions (Murillo 1999). Teachers also feared that the reform would lead to a reduction in the number of teaching positions (Vázquez 2005) if the provinces decided to merge national and provincial schools.

The unions organized massive protests against the proposed reform, often joined by parents and, especially, secondary school students (Vázquez 2005). Foreseeing that the decentralization of education would worsen the quality of public schools in the poorer provinces, they argued that the reform represented a reduction in the State's commitment to ensure that all children had access to adequate education. Under the slogan "in defense of public education", they won the support of a sizable portion of the public opinion (Gindin 2009; Vázquez 2005; Perazza and Legarralde 2008).

Despite the unions' fierce opposition in the streets and the public's shared concern about the future of public education, the reform advanced with little difficulty and few concessions to the unions. As Murillo (1999) has noted, Menem's administration had no incentives to make concessions to the unions. First, the unions had removed their political support of his administration when he decided to pursue neoliberal reforms, and Menem did not want to appear as making concessions to opponents. Further, government officials knew that although all national teacher unions opposed decentralization, they could not form a unified coalition because they continued to compete for members. For instance, although all unions organized strikes, they did so at different times instead of joining forces. The unions' difficulty to coordinate their demands enabled the government to ignore those demands altogether. "CTERA's Secretary General, Marta Maffei, later noted that although the union opposed [decentralization] there was no bargaining over it" (Murillo 1999, 45). This was unlike the case of decentralization in Mexico, where a single teachers' union whose leadership was allied with the government was able to obtain significant concessions during the negotiation of the reform (Murillo 1999).

It is worth noting that decentralization did not improve the quality of education available to the poor. On the contrary, as the unions had predicted, the reform increased the disparities in educational resources across provinces (Rivas 2004) and led to a widening of the academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor (Galiani, Gertler and Schargrodsky 2008). In many

provinces, decentralization also led to an increase in the allocation of education resources based on political rather than efficiency or equity criteria (Rivas 2004).

### ***Aligned interests between governments, unions, and parents: The case of universal preschool***

When democracy returned under the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín in 1983, there was consensus from across all spectrums of society that the general legal framework structuring the education system, which dated back to 1884, needed to be revised and the education system reformed in order to better serve the economic and social needs of the new times. Seeking to open up the debate on how to reform the system, Alfonsín organized the National Congress of Pedagogy, which met between 1984 and 1988, and included parents, teachers (but not unions), religious groups, the business community, political parties, and community organizations. These actors agreed on the need to reform the contents of the curriculum, modernize the capacity of the state bureaucracy, increase the investment in education, introduce compensatory policies, and extend the number of years of compulsory schooling. These policies, it was believed, would help improve the skills of the future workforce and promote democratic values among future citizens. In 1993, during the presidency of Carlos Menem, these agreements were passed into law, through what became known as the Federal Law of Education, which also institutionalized the decentralization of education that had been introduced by Menem in 1991 as part of a wave of fiscal reforms (Tedesco and Tenti Fanfani 2001).

One of the policies that gathered the most comprehensive level of support was the expansion in the number of years of compulsory schooling and, within that, the mandatory attendance of 5-year olds to preschool. For those concerned with improving the efficiency of the education system, the belief was that preschool attendance would improve school readiness, reduce repetition rates—which were especially high among first graders—and, eventually, improve the skills of the new cohorts. For those concerned with improving educational equity, the belief was that mandatory attendance of 5-year olds and its corollary—the universal public provision of preschool for that age group—would expand educational opportunities for children from low-income backgrounds, among whom access to preschool registered the lowest levels. For parents, universal public preschool provision facilitated their participation in the labor force and reduced the costs of child care. For teachers, it meant the creation of new jobs. For unions, an increase in their membership, which helped expand their bargaining and political power (Murillo 1999, 35; Acemoglu and Robinson 2001). Indeed, unions have proposed that the State should provide universal services to all young children ages 0 to 5 years (CTERA 2007). For politicians, the new jobs created provided an opportunity to distribute patronage in exchange for union appeasement (Rivas 2004), and the expansion of compulsory schooling provided an opportunity to cultivate votes by participating in the ribbon-cutting ceremonies of the new schools built to accommodate the expansion.

Between 1994 and 2000, following the passage of the 1993 law which required mandatory enrollment in pre-primary education for 5-year olds and universal public provision for that age, the national government financed the construction of new classrooms with a capacity to host approximately 180,000 children; and the provinces also made some effort to expand public preschool (Berlinski, Galiani and Gertler 2009). More recently, the 2006 Law of National Education

expanded the mandate to provide public preschool for all 4-year olds as well, although enrollment at that age remains voluntary.

Existing research suggests that the expansion of preschool had positive effects on social welfare. [Berlinski and Galiani \(2007\)](#) have estimated that the construction of new preschool classrooms explains about half of the 15 percentage point increase in preschool enrollment throughout the 1990s; [Berlinski, Galiani and Gertler \(2009\)](#) find that each extra slot made available to preschool-age children led to an improvement in third-grade test scores and behavioral skills; and [Berlinski, Galiani and McEwan \(2008\)](#) find that preschool attendance led to an increase in maternal employment.

***Aligned interests between governments and unions, but at the expense of educational quality: The case of entry-into-teaching policies***

As the discussion above illustrates, teacher unions have supported reforms that are desirable, and opposed ones that are undesirable, from children's point of view. Their capacity to defend their own interests while articulating these interests with what is in the interest of students has often allowed them to gain ample support from the general public. The most persistent of their demands, that for better salaries, is another example of the frequent alignment that exists between teachers' and students' interests. Between the 1930s and the late 1990s, teacher salaries experienced a sustained decline in real terms and relative to GDP per capita ([Ministerio de Cultura y Educación 1976](#); [Rivas 2004](#)). This decline in the competitiveness of teacher salaries, coupled with the expansion of employment opportunities for women, and the fact that teacher training remained circumscribed to the tertiary non-university level, made the teaching profession less and less prestigious. Increasingly, those who decide to become a teacher have low levels of educational achievement, come from more humble sociocultural backgrounds, and choose teaching not because of a calling or passion to teach but because, for them, studying at a university is not possible and becoming a teacher represents a form of social mobility and job security ([Allinaud and Davini 1995](#); [Censo Nacional de Docentes 2004](#); [Tenti Fanfani 2007](#); [Donaire 2009](#); [Aguerrondo and Vezub 2011](#)). In this context of relatively low teacher salaries, the unions' demand for salary increases has the capacity not only to serve their members' interests but also to improve the prestige of the teaching profession, draw more qualified individuals into teaching, and raise the quality of future teachers.

However, as their position regarding initial teacher education programs suggests, unions' interests need not coincide with what is in the best interest of students. Indeed, better teacher salaries alone are insufficient to reverse the declining trend in the social prestige of teaching. A key problem in Argentina is that initial teacher education programs are of very low quality and very little prestigious. Teacher education programs remain within the purview of tertiary, non-university institutions (TNUIs). There are no barriers to entry into these programs other than having a high school degree; the curriculum is not demanding, and is more focused on philosophy of education and pedagogical theory than on subject matter knowledge or practical training; the evaluation of future teachers is not demanding either; there is a proliferation in the number of TNUIs providing teacher education programs (about 1,120, compared to about 90 universities), which hinders the capacity to monitor their quality; and the culture of these institutions resembles that of secondary

schools, with close personal ties playing an important role (Allinaud and Davini 1995; Aguerrondo and Vezub 2011; Cámpoli 2004; IPE 2001; Vaillant 2013). The 2006 Law of National Education reaffirmed the responsibility of TNUIs for the provision of teacher education, and mandated an increase in the duration of these programs from 3 to 4 years, a change that was perceived by teacher unions as a way of increasing the hierarchy of teaching.

One way in which some Latin American countries have sought to increase the social prestige of the teaching profession has been by transferring the training of teachers from tertiary non-university institutions to universities. The rationale behind this is twofold. First, in a context in which university education is becoming accessible to a larger fraction of the population, and where non-university degrees have less social prestige than university ones, training teachers in universities should help boost the social prestige of the profession and help attract qualified individuals that would otherwise not consider a teaching career. Second, if teachers are educated in universities, they will have access to better trained professors in a range of disciplines. This is obviously not the only way of raising the status of the profession and of pursuing a teacher education degree, but the unions' reaction to such a proposal—which I discuss below—is revealing.

When asked about their position toward a hypothetical proposal to move teacher education programs to the universities or, alternatively, a proposal to maintain teacher education programs under the purview of TNUIs but introduce admissions criteria based on applicants' academic performance in secondary school, the unions reject both proposals. Regardless of the merit (or lack thereof) of these proposals, the unions' reasons for rejecting these proposals illuminate how their interests can come into conflict with what is best for children. They argue that "TNUIs have a social function, as they tend to be very accessible," more so than the universities; that "anyone can learn how to teach;" and that introducing meritocratic admissions criteria would lead to a reduction in the size of the teacher workforce<sup>17</sup> (a prediction that does not take into account that raising the selectiveness of the teaching profession might deter some individuals but attract others who today do not even consider the possibility of entering the teaching profession because of its low status).

What these arguments highlight is unions' concern for the size of their membership, which would be threatened if more selective admission criteria led to a reduction in the size of the workforce, but also, and importantly, if teaching became a more attractive option for individuals from less humble backgrounds—as these individuals are less likely to join unions.

That Argentine unions have an interest in maintaining a large, non-meritocratic teacher workforce is not surprising, especially since, in the absence of stable and institutionalized forms of participation, strikes often become the only way in which teachers can exercise a collective voice. But what is more relevant—in a country where the Executive plays a central role in the determination of education policies—is that the Peronist party, which has been in government since 2003, shares this interest. The government has viewed tertiary non-university education in

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<sup>17</sup> Personal interviews with leaders of CTERA, UDA, and SADOP.

general, and TNUIs for teacher training in particular, as a means of ensuring widespread access to tertiary education across the population.<sup>18</sup>

Since the 1940s, when Juan Perón promoted the rapid expansion of tertiary non-university programs, these programs have served an important role in expanding the educational and labor opportunities of the working class, which is a core constituent of the Peronist party. The National Plan for Teacher Training, approved under the government elected in 2003, captures the view that becoming a teacher represents a form of social mobility for individuals who lack the means to access a university education, and that the State ought to protect these individuals' ability to advance in the social ladder by making teacher education programs accessible to everyone—even if that comes at a cost to the quality of teachers and the prospects of social mobility of those teachers' students. The Plan "acknowledges the underlying potential of tertiary non-university institutions . . . [which] are part of a model of lifelong education whose goal is to create equitable educational opportunities, social inclusion, and labor insertion . . . As part of this, we believe it is necessary to promote and maintain the institutions that train our teachers, as well as guarantee new teachers' access to these institutions." The Peronist party's interest in providing widespread access to tertiary education for the working class through TNUIs for teacher training helps explain why the unions' interest in maintaining a large and non-selective teacher workforce has remained unchallenged.

### ***What about accountability reforms?***

Over the past fifteen years or so, countries around the world have exhibited growing interest in education accountability reforms. The development of teacher evaluation systems with consequences for teachers' salaries and/or stability on the job; school evaluation systems with consequences for school autonomy and resources; standardized tests of student achievement used to inform the assessment of teachers and schools; standardized high school exit examinations to prevent students from leaving high school with inadequate levels of achievement, all point in the direction of increasing the degree to which the State hold students, teachers, and schools accountable for their performance.

In Argentina, the debate over these kinds of policies has been quite absent—certainly at the national level, but also in the large majority of provinces. Evaluation mechanisms exist, but the results of these evaluations do not translate into rewards or sanctions nor do they feed back into education decisions. For instance, the standardized student tests administered by the national government every 3 years show that about one third of students in the last year of high school have inadequate levels of knowledge and skills. The tests are primarily used by the Ministry of Education to monitor the system, but the results have no consequences whatsoever for students, schools, or teachers. Similarly, teachers are evaluated annually, but the results have no consequences and are not very reliable anyway. The system of school inspections, which has been around since the nineteenth century, is fraught with corruption, with inspectors often asking for bribes from school principals in order to "ignore" schools' lack of compliance with laws or regulations.

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<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Education (Argentina), *Plan Nacional para la Formación Docente 2004-2007*, [http://www.me.gov.ar/curriform/fordoc\\_acerca.html](http://www.me.gov.ar/curriform/fordoc_acerca.html). Translation by the author.

An exception to the absence of accountability-related reforms, or even debate, are the ongoing changes in the City of Buenos Aires, where after a pilot experience with voluntary teacher evaluations in 2011, a law passed in 2014—despite Peronist opposition in the Legislature—established the creation of a new institution responsible for evaluating the performance of all students, teachers, and school principals, as well as of education policies. In principle, high performance will be rewarded, and low performance will lead to mechanisms aimed at supporting improvement but will not be punished.

To attribute the general absence of education accountability reforms to teacher unions' power would be misguided. The unions do not oppose the idea of accountability, but they do oppose an unbalanced accountability system in which all responsibility for student achievement falls on teachers' shoulders without proper consideration for the State's responsibility to guarantee educational quality, for instance through appropriate funding and support mechanisms. Evaluation of education policies, however, is something that governments have often avoided or performed on the sidelines. Unlike the United States, or even other countries in the region such as Chile, where there is a huge community devoted to evaluating education policies, Argentina lacks a culture of evidence-based policymaking, and it also lacks the informational infrastructure necessary to conduct policy evaluations. Indeed, the existing infrastructure is so poor that policymakers do not even know precisely how many individuals work as teachers!

As already noted, and as the experience of the City of Buenos Aires demonstrates, strong political will among those in power, especially in the Executive, is a necessary condition to develop a culture of evidence-based policymaking and the infrastructure underlying such a culture. The historical tension between the central and provincial governments over who is responsible for funding and administering schools, and more broadly, who is responsible for ensuring the quality of education, coupled with a tradition of allocating education resources with a political rationale, are key factors underpinning the absence of widespread accountability efforts.

## **Moving forward**

Teacher unions in Argentina are often present in the news for the strikes and other forms of social protest that they organize. Their visibility, at a time when they are interrupting classes, fuels the general view that the quality of public education remains low and continues to deteriorate because the unions block quality-oriented reforms. What this chapter has argued is that unions strike *because* they do not have much influence otherwise; that throughout history, and in the three decades since the return to democracy, they have not been central players in the determination of education policy; and that if transformative reforms of the quality of education, and particularly of the quality of teaching, have not been introduced, it is because politicians in the powerful Executive branch have preferred, for reasons of their own, to opt for populist policies that focus on expanding access to education but clash with any notion whatsoever of restricting access to and permanence in the teacher workforce based on meritocratic criteria, and more broadly holding the State accountable for education quality.

There are two paths by which reform may be introduced in the future. One possibility is that non-populist parties will be elected into the Executive and will take advantage of their transitory

popularity and the power conferred by being in office to adopt reforms that seek to raise the quality of education and of teaching. This seems to be taking place, to some extent, in the City of Buenos Aires, where the PRO party has introduced reforms to evaluate teachers and increase the transparency of decisions made by the *Juntas de Clasificación*. It also resembles the way in which reform has been introduced in some Latin American countries, notably Colombia under Alvaro Uribe. The potential downside of these reforms is that, because they have been introduced in a context of a conflictive relationship with unions, they are less likely to persist over time or to be properly implemented.

Another possibility is that the Peronist party's incentives will change, and populism will no longer be an electorally fruitful strategy. The deep-rooted history of clientelism, patronage, populist policies, and strong ties with the working class make it unlikely that the Peronist party's incentives will change anytime soon. But if or when they do, Peronists will be in a better position than their opponents to advance quality-oriented reforms, because their stronger ties with teacher unions compared to other parties will enable them to build trust among unions, make credible concessions to the unions, and mitigate their potential opposition to reform.

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