

The most militant actions have been orchestrated by "piqueteros," a loose term for describing coalitions of unemployed or underpaid workers, who have been striking and protesting for months across the country. They frequently blockade the bridges and highways leading in and out of the city, a tactic which they began in 1996, and which was previously common only to rural areas. During the second week of February, they temporarily shut down the city's oil supply by blockading the entrance to the local refinery and Dock Sud, where oil could arrive by boat. These people are the poor of Argentina who have nothing to do with the current fiscal crises, but whose plights have come into sharp focus for the suddenly conscious middle class.

Though the police have mostly backed off within Buenos Aires, they continue to be violent and aggressive elsewhere. Towards the end of February, when piqueteros marched peacefully in the northern tourist town of Salta, police attacked with batons, bloodying many faces, mostly women and children, while detaining nine. Diego Rojas, a delegate of the *asamblea popular* of San Cristobal, interviewed at the workers' national assembly, says "In order to stay in power, the government is going to go against the people with blood and with repression, but we are organizing in this way also. We are going to start to think of auto-defense in how we self-defend against the police."

"We block the streets. We make that part of the streets ours. We use wood, tyres, and petrol to burn." adds Alesandro enthusiastically. He is a young piquetero who carries the three foot wooden club that has become one of the symbols of this movement. "We do it like this because it is the only way they acknowledge us. If we stood protesting on the sidewalk, they would trample all over us."

"When women no longer have the resources to feed their children," says piquetera Rosa, "the government is coming down, no matter what type of government it is."

These tactics have proved enormously successful. Whole families take part in the blockades, setting up collective kitchens and tents in the middle of the street. Many of the participants are young and over 60% are women. Over the years this loosely federated autonomous movement has managed to secure thousands of minimum wage temporary jobs, food allowances, and other concessions from the state. The police are often unable to clear the pickets, because of the popular support they receive. The highways often run beside the shantytowns, and there is always a threat that if repression occurs, thousands of people would stream out of these areas onto the road to support the piqueteros and mini civil wars could erupt.

What is extraordinary is that these radical actions, using extremely militant tactics and imagery - burning barricades, blocked roads, masked-up demonstrators wielding wooden and iron bars - practiced by some of the most excluded and impoverished people in Argentina, have not alienated other sections of society. Far from it, support has come from right across this movement.