

Undoing Social Policy: The Far Right and the Poor in Argentina

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Abstract

Behind President Javier Milei’s 2023 electoral success lay deep failures by previous governments to lessen the damaging consequences of the country’s neoliberal transformation, especially its legacy of persistent labour informality and precarity at the core of declining incomes and increasing poverty throughout the country. Yet his broad appeal also revealed an expanding consensus that the crisis confronting the country was not the result of various flaws of neoliberalism but rather of the path followed to patch them up. It is within this confounding context that we decode the harsh libertarian approach to poverty and the poor and the policies and institutions through which the current administration has, thus far, attempted to govern them. We argue that social policy reforms undertaken by the far-right Argentinean government seek to undermine extensive organisational networks that unemployed and informal workers have created over more than 30 years of struggles, with individualising social programmes becoming consolidated as a counterweight. These transformations stand as the backdrop of an approach to poverty that has emphasised the stigmatisation of recipients, the criminalisation of their organisations, and high levels of repression against them all.

Keywords

employment programmes; informal workers’ movements; poverty; social assistance

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, a fundamental aspect of the configuration and reconfiguration of the programmes through which Argentina’s governments addressed the deleterious consequences of the transformation of labour markets was the role that organised informal workers themselves played in demanding state protection. With increasing, if oftentimes uneven, effectiveness, informal workers achieved growing abilities to exercise

pressure on policy formulation and implement key social programmes aimed at compensating for the lack of a wage and also, importantly, to draw upon essential fiscal resources to consolidate the capabilities of the organisations bringing them together. A key pivot in this power was their organisations' role in supporting, through collective work, various forms of productive projects and community initiatives aimed at sustaining basic social and urban infrastructures devastated by austerity, such as day cares, basic healthcare services, soup kitchens, housing, road construction, and waste management. As explored in this article, while their practices were not without tensions, there is no question that organisations representing informal workers became powerful political actors in transforming, while at the same time becoming transformed by, the implementation of social assistance programmes.

These social programmes, usually involving a work component and often housed within the Ministry of Social Development, and their destruction under Milei's administration lie at the core of our exploration. Indeed, a key objective of the restructuring of social assistance under the current libertarian government has been to curtail programmes providing support to informal workers and their organisations (Fernández Álvarez, 2024; Piva, 2024). This has been the central thrust of reforms to social programmes because, notwithstanding shortcomings and deep contradictions, and in a manner quite unique within Latin America, organised unwaged workers in Argentina had transformed the resources available through social programmes into means for mobilising and increasing their political capabilities. Tellingly, present "anti-collectivist" trends in assistance programmes have been balanced by parallel increases in individualised benefits mostly aimed at women with children under the age of 18. We argue that the relationship between the two transformations in the delivery of social assistance programmes reveals the need to secure at least some degree of social control. Assistance is offered in forms that ensure the individualisation and isolation of "deserving" recipients while stigmatising and criminalising self-organised informal and unemployed workers and their organisations. We further suggest that dismantling what was an extensive architecture of social programmes and undermining social services compound an already fragile and incomplete social protection system. We develop this argument by considering three fundamental components within Milei's social strategy and his attack against informal workers and their organisations.

First, neutralising informal workers' organisations as political contenders has entailed a shift away from workfare programmes as they had developed since the 1990s in response to international financial institutions' prescriptions. Workfare had become another tool in the normalisation of precarity and the new discipline that neoliberalism imposed on workers (Cooper, 2012; Peck, 2002). Yet in an interesting twist, Argentinean workfare programmes also provided means for organisations of the unemployed to bolster collective experiences at the grassroots level, often even under clientelist pressures (Araujo, 2018; Bascuas et al., 2021). While the role of organisations of informal workers in allocating social programmes had long been sources of political friction, most governments of the period opted to avoid open confrontations. Milei's commitment to dispense with the assistance programmes expressly designed to address the demands of social movements representing informal workers marks, then, a major transformation in social assistance policy. Second, the timing of eliminating work programmes is also significant in that it unfolded while the government austerity programme inflicted new levels of hardship, dismantling the broader infrastructure of social protection. Moreover, the government's overall economic policy has given no indication of current or future potential for employment generation. Third, the government has sought to criminalise poverty and social policy in unprecedented ways, with the main objective of stigmatising the poor and the organisations representing them.

In appraising the depth of the transition now underway in Argentina, in the second section below we consider the evolution of social policy and programmes from the 1990s until 2023. Against this backdrop, in the third section, we explore each of the three dimensions mentioned above. We conclude with a reflection on the libertarian neoliberal transformation of social policy as an attack upon democracy and the poor.

To prepare this article we have relied on a mixed methodological approach. Between March and August 2025, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 members and leaders of various organisations of the unemployed within the city of Buenos Aires and its suburbs: Front of Organisations in Struggle (FOL [all acronyms in this article correspond to their Spanish names]), Darío Santillán Popular Front (FPDS), and Movement of Excluded Workers (MTE). The last two organisations are members of the Union of Popular Economy Workers (UTEP). The organisations in our sample reflect divergent political views and trajectories with respect to their relationship with the state. The experiences and views of unorganised informal workers are not part of this study. We have also used findings from previous research for which we interviewed leaders of organisations of the unemployed closely connected to the popular economy and its key organisation, UTEP, and who held at that time official positions within the government. In both cases, interviewees were identified through personal contacts and snowball techniques. Primary bibliographic sources include documents produced by social organisations along with government websites and publications. Statistical data were obtained from official statistics and other specialised sources.

2. Unemployment and the New Argentina

2.1. *Neoliberalism and Beyond: The First Decade of Social Assistance Programmes (1990s–2008)*

High levels of labour formality and a powerful labour movement, outcomes of robust bodies of collective and individual labour rights consolidated since the first Peronist government in the 1940s, had granted workers in Argentina access to an extensive social security system. Widespread social protection provided universal access to education and, with greater limitations, health care. Social assistance programmes were confined to supporting the relatively small segment of the population excluded from the benefits of formal employment. These social and labour protections started to crumble first under the weight of state terror through which the 1976–1983 military regime enacted the first neoliberal reforms in the country and, after the return to democracy, due to the discipline imposed by economic crises. However, ironically, it was under a Peronist government in the 1990s that the country's thorough neoliberal restructuring was finally accomplished. Thus, as in many other countries in Latin America, the 1990s was a decade of profound transformation in Argentina, and nowhere was this more evident than in changes to labour markets, where deregulation and growing economic instability resulted in an unprecedented growth of unemployment, informality, precarity, and along with them, poverty. Critically, such transformations also implied heavy losses for workers regarding access to health services, pensions, family allowances, and myriad other social benefits connected to formal employment and central in configuring working class identities in Argentina.

Nevertheless, it is unsurprising that in a country with high levels of labour organising, unemployment was no impediment to activism. Unemployed workers and their growing and politically diverse organisations—“*piqueteros*” as they came to be known then, or social movements as they are usually referred to now—became central actors in waves of social mobilisation throughout the country. This was particularly so in the second half of the decade through demands for the extension of social assistance programmes and

job creation (Svampa & Pereyra, 2003). Local governments along with community and church-based NGOs were the original conduits for the workfare and anti-poverty programmes created at this time. Later, some organisations of the unemployed also took on roles in allocating social assistance. In this capacity, earned not without struggle, they participated in selecting the beneficiaries of state-funded workfare, expecting these beneficiaries in turn to sustain some political engagement with the organisation, mostly through attendance at meetings and mobilisations. Furthermore, responsibility for coordinating the collective projects through which beneficiaries satisfied the programmes' work requirement gave social organisations the ability to develop new connections with communities they strived to represent and with territories that were now key sites of struggles (Freytes Frey & Cross, 2005). As mentioned above, these projects mostly involved basic infrastructure and soup kitchens, but in time, other basic economic initiatives like textile workshops, food processing, and garbage recycling were fostered as well. State engagement with organisations of the unemployed in the allocation of social assistance, by now targeted mostly at workfare programmes, was to become a key feature in the expansion of country-wide social programmes and in the political transformation of some social movements themselves. The relationship, though, was not free from tensions, particularly as the power of these organisations continued to grow and with it, their ability to negotiate the number of programmes accruing to their rank-and-file.

Two points deserve attention in appraising the implications of social movements' expanding political capabilities. First, for organisations of the unemployed, their role in dispensing public resources through workfare programmes involved new forms of doing politics and connecting to their membership that elicited concerns about clientelism. In our view, an issue with the concept of clientelism is that, as Vommaro (2017) suggests, it can simplify and thus mischaracterise the multifaceted political connections between recipients of assistance and their intermediaries. But the term is also problematic because it has been used to deride poor people's politics and the nature of their struggles. In sum, as a form of analysing political action it detracts from the study of how, against several odds, the poor attempt to organise. Second, through pivotal roles as intermediaries of social assistance, organisations of informal and unemployed workers themselves gained growing capacities to influence politics and policy-making. In the case of organisations politically closer to the Peronist party, their involvement included appointments of some leaders to government positions. Nonetheless, even at the highest point of engagement during the last Peronist administration between 2019 and 2023, participation in government did not automatically translate into access to policy-making spheres except in a limited number of offices within the Ministry of Social Development, mostly in designing programmes rather than policy-making.

It is also worth mentioning that the early focus on clientelistic practices within organisations of unemployed workers generated a level of political controversy and academic interest somewhat out of pace with their actual influence on the implementation of these programmes (Longa, 2019). World Bank-funded workfare programmes like the 1996 Trabajar programme, which only reached about 130,000 beneficiaries, a tiny percentage of the 14.5% of the affected population in 1998, was mostly delivered through local government and not social organisations. Nevertheless, the implementation of the programme signalled the beginning of what has been defined as the "assistencialisation" of social policy (Grassi et al., 1994), a term depicting the relative growth of social assistance spending, which was the other side of the downturn in labour markets and social protection described above.

By late 2001 Argentina confronted what was then an unprecedented economic, political, and social crisis that forced the elected government's resignation. As the country sank into the deepest point of this crisis, in mid-2002, unemployment affected 21.5% of the labour force, and involuntary underemployment, 24.3%. Equally troubling was that 44% of those with jobs were unregistered workers (Felder & Patroni, 2018). Under these circumstances, and given the extremely low capacity of social assistance programmes to provide viable subsistence options, it is unsurprising that by 2003 an astonishing 51.7% of the population lived under the poverty line and almost half of them (25.2%) in conditions of extreme poverty (Delfini & Picchetti, 2005, p. 200). Emerging as the response to this crisis, the most extensive workfare programme in the country thus far was the Unemployed Heads of Households Plan (PJJHD). Through it, two million unemployed workers received a small stipend in exchange for performing some community work and ensuring school attendance and mandatory vaccinations for their children.

Argentina's improved economic prospects after 2003 coincided with the election of the new government of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) that, like other governments in the region at this time, demonstrated considerably more determination to address various socio-economic deficits engendered by neoliberalism. This political transformation was expressed most vividly in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America with the substantial expansion of social spending (Arza et al., 2024). Kirchner's election set the country in a new economic and political direction, with historic consequences for social policy in general and assistance programmes in particular. With an economy growing at a fast pace, along with government support for wage and social security improvements and a commitment to reduce informal employment, labour market and poverty indicators experienced significant improvements: by 2007 unemployment had fallen to 7.5% and poverty to 23.4%. Furthermore, renewed economic growth afforded practicability to the government's commitment to foster "genuine employment." Yet the number of salaried workers who continued to lack any kind of legal protection or coverage through social security remained at 35% in 2010 (Álvarez et al., 2012). If non-professional self-employed, social assistance recipients, and domestic workers are included, then informality affected 44% of the labour force in the same year (Groisman et al., 2011, p. 5).

Notwithstanding improvements in key social indicators, high levels of informality even after five years of sustained economic growth were evidence of persistent rifts between aspirations to produce "genuine work" and the reality of a deeply segmented labour market. A pattern of development relying on extractive industries with very low capacity for labour absorption and the tendency toward labour-saving technology both complicated and constrained the possibilities of bridging that rift. Not only had the number of unregistered workers remained inordinately high, but in 2010 their wages were only half of those of the formally employed (Álvarez et al., 2012). Even worse were the conditions of workers whose insertion into labour markets remained unattainable, thus continuing to make a living through informal activities was a necessary way to secure their survival or, if they received any, to supplement social assistance.

After 2009, economic growth in Argentina began to decelerate, and after 2012 the country confronted both growing inflation and high levels of economic volatility. Increasingly uncertain economic performance aggravated conditions in labour markets and renewed demands on social assistance, to which the new government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) needed to respond. We will see that there were some novel initiatives, but her government and those that followed—the right-wing administration of Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) and the Peronist government of Alberto Fernández (2019–2023)—confronted limitations that had become evident after a decade of experimentation in social programmes.

First, understandings about who the unemployed were in Argentina would remain central to the tensions that developed as part of the formulation of social policy. Were the large mass of unwaged workers and the very precariously employed part of a reserve army of labour? Or were many of them a marginal mass, chronically surplus to capitalist accumulation? (Nun, 2001). This was a critical distinction, as it elicited divergent government proposals regarding social programmes and tensions between state and social movements and among social movements themselves. Second, social movements representing many of the workers demanding social assistance gained a strong political voice early on in ensuring access to programmes and, increasingly, a role in their implementation. It was as intermediaries of workfare programmes that organisations of the unemployed and informal workers secured new opportunities to increase their organisational capabilities, although often at the cost of moderating their demands and creating divisions among organisations representing informal workers. Third, even after their rapid expansion between the 2010s and 2023, social assistance programmes in Argentina engendered a system that remained inadequate for offsetting the precariousness affecting most workers and addressing the structural bases of their poverty. It was also insufficient to overcome the fragmented nature of social protection (Arza et al., 2024).

2.2. From Job Creation to the Popular Economy (2009–2023)

Policy responses to poverty and informality underwent a substantial reconfiguration after 2009 with the introduction of two social assistance programmes designed to deal with persistent unemployment and its impact on poverty levels. One was the Universal Child Allowance (AUH), a programme covering all low-income unemployed and informal workers that both deepened assistencialisation and provided more stability, as there were no quotas or other qualifications required to access the benefit—in particular, no work conditionality. Parents were only required to commit to school attendance and to basic health-care attention. AUH became the most extensive assistance programme in the country, reaching 4.1 million beneficiaries by April 2025 (Administración Nacional de la Seguridad Social, 2025). While the allowance reflected a growing regional pattern toward conditional monetary transfers and away from workfare (Cecchini & Madariaga, 2011), its institutional features set it apart from other comparable regional programmes, like Progresá in Mexico or Bolsa Família in Brazil, which more closely followed the approach that multilateral institutions promoted in the region.

The other programme was the Argentina Works Programme (PRIST-AR), which promoted the creation of worker cooperatives as the means for allocating social assistance. Two aspects of the programme are notable for our discussion. First, not only was the stipend substantially higher than in previous workfare programmes, but participants also successfully pushed for their formal recognition as cooperative workers with the right to at least rudimentary health insurance and social security benefits. Second, while municipalities were originally the main implementing body for the programme, social organisations mobilised effectively to gain their inclusion as partners in the management of cooperatives. By 2015 there were 300,000 participants in the programme organised in almost 8,000 cooperatives (Hopp, 2018, p. 116).

Importantly, during this period many organisations representing the unemployed underwent a gradual but momentous transformation that moved them further away from previous demands for job creation and toward new ways of thinking about the activities unemployed workers undertook to ensure their survival. This thinking, along with the need to find a conduit for the demands emerging from workers within

PRIST-AR cooperatives, resulted in the creation in 2011 of the Central of Workers of the Popular Economy (CTEP; Bascuas et al., 2021), which in 2019 gained recognition as a union (UTEF).

CTEP/UTEF's impact in organising informal workers and in challenging the mainstream conceptions of productive and reproductive labour and the very contours of social policy has been the subject of a substantial body of literature (Fernández Álvarez, 2019; Ruggeri, 2024). Here we highlight three facets in the development of CTEP and its demands crucial for grasping the essence of the dispute around social policy in general and assistance programmes in particular. First, a foundational principle in the organisation was the conviction that economic growth could not provide the means to address the lack of employment affecting a sizeable portion of the labour force. Nonetheless, while unemployed workers lacked a wage, they were far from being jobless, as their very survival demonstrated. CTEP defined "popular economy" precisely as the sphere of economic activities and productive work—as well as political and social interactions—where mostly unwaged workers ensured their survival, often with resources procured through social programmes. This popular economy encompassed street vendors, garbage recyclers, care providers in community day-cares, workers in soup kitchens, neighbourhood dispensaries, small farmers, members of cooperatives—those who must try to secure a living beyond a wage even if they exchange their labour power for cash sporadically in precarious labour markets. With the idea of popular economy, CTEP captured a reality that, while sharing some features with non-capitalist alternative economies (Gibson-Graham, 2020), or workers' self-organised and solidary economic initiatives (Coraggio, 2020), was not reducible to them (Bascuas et al., 2021; Ruggeri, 2024).

Second, CTEP demanded recognition for workers' economic contributions, as these were clearly essential for the reproduction of large segments of the population within and outside the popular economy. It is through its demand for their recognition as essential workers that CTEP demanded a transformation of the foundations of social assistance programmes: Workers in the popular economy did not require social assistance but a social salary. Moreover, as workers, they should have the right to organise, as other workers do, through a union. Both were attempts, as Bascuas et al. (2021) argue, to overcome the limitations that being the subjects of social assistance imposed both on their capacity to exercise autonomy and to be recognised as legitimate actors in the planning and management of their own community initiatives. Other organisations, like FOL in our study, remained critical of this approach, as they saw legitimising the popular economy's existence as accepting the downgrading of what before had been protected public jobs, now fulfilled through social assistance programmes.

Finally, and crucially, the demand to be recognised as workers implied that, like for other wage earners, their logical interlocutor within the state should be the Ministry of Labour and not the Ministry of Social Development, where most assistance programmes were located. Taken as a whole, CTEP's proposal amounted to the resignification of assistance policy, pushing for the recognition that changes to labour markets and employment transcended the spheres of action of assistance programmes.

Paradoxically, it would be under the incoming conservative presidency of Mauricio Macri that CTEP achieved some significant victories that were just as important for social movements outside of its umbrella. While Macri's election was a sign of the deep political transformation the country was undergoing—not the least of which was a growing dissatisfaction with rising spending on social assistance—it was also a moment of reaffirmation regarding the capabilities in the hands of social movements. While the economy continued

to give signs of steady deterioration and mounting inflation undermined the purchasing power of salaries and social assistance benefits, social conflict reached new heights. Notwithstanding the government's original plan to reduce social spending, not only was CTEP successful in protecting benefits but it managed to force the government to increase the number of PRIST-AR cooperatives and participants in the programme. Furthermore, the organisation and other social movements were given an expanded role in the programme's delivery and administration, a change that quickly broadened their political presence in poorer areas of cities. By the end of 2019, CTEP and other organisations of the unemployed managed the lion's share of the 551,000 employment subsidies created under Macri's administration, double the number in 2015 (Hudson, 2025). As some of our interviewees explained, though, this growth, while positive for expanding political opportunities, also created new challenges whose full implications were not immediately clear. One was that the rapidly expanding membership overwhelmed the administrative capacity of organisations; the other was that the expansion prompted new divisions both among participants with various degrees of political commitment to the organisation and between them and their leadership.

The apex of CTEP's active campaign was the approval of a Social Emergency Law in December 2016. It instituted a Supplementary Social Salary (SSC) to be set at 50% of the legal minimum wage as compensation for the activities that workers in the popular economy were already undertaking. Equally germane for our discussion, the law established a process for collective negotiations and recognised the rights of workers CTEP represented to be protected under some of the country's labour laws. A Registry of Popular Economy Workers (RENATEP) was also created with the purpose of formally identifying workers in the sector and collecting the information required to eventually integrate all cash transfer programmes into the SSC.

All this represented major gains for organisations of the unemployed that the government soon tried to undermine. After having agreed to changes that could potentially transform the nature of social policy in the country, the Macri administration took a step back, deciding instead to transform PRIST-AR and other existing programmes into the We Make the Future (HF) programme (Hudson, 2020). Crucially, the new programme eliminated work conditionality, asking instead for participation in training activities, a decision aimed at severing the bonds connecting social movements and their grassroots. On balance, though, the government was unable to limit the power of organisations of the popular economy, and its policies ended up consolidating them as key political actors in the country (Basucas et al., 2023).

The Peronist administration that replaced Macri's in 2019 brought about a new wave of changes to social policy that expressed two simultaneous and conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, the Fernández administration opted for a return to more traditional forms of social assistance programmes that in many ways undid some of the milestones reached with the approval of the SSC. On the other hand, the government offered new spaces of formal participation to organisations of the popular economy, from including their representatives on electoral lists to appointing them to government offices in various ministries and departments, especially the Ministry of Social Development.

Despite the government's political proximity to social movements, the entrenchment of an economic cycle marked by fluctuating growth rates, external crises, growing inflation, and fiscal deficit set the context for mounting political resistance to the expansion of subsidised work programmes even within the government. Yet this critical moment cannot be fully understood without factoring in the fateful impact of the Covid-19

pandemic on social policy, as it fundamentally exposed the multiple tensions engulfing it: If for a large, and *growing*, segment of the population the expansion of state social spending was unsustainable and unjustified, such spending still remained profoundly inadequate for mending the consequences of the social dislocations that development had continued to generate. Thus, when the government created the Emergency Income Programme for Families (IFE) during the pandemic in 2020, 13 million people registered for it, half of the economically active population of the country, and 8.9 million qualified for the benefit.

The worst of the pandemic behind, after 2022 the economy showed signs of recovery, but fiscal tension and inflation continued to mount. In this context, the government redesigned social assistance to absorb the previous SSC and HF programmes under the new Boost Work Programme (PPT). Significantly, the new PPT was now under the exclusive control of the Ministry of Social Development. This was a setback in key ways, as the “salary” was transformed once again into a social plan, the stigmatising practice that social movements had strived to leave behind. It was also a blow for organisations like UTEP because it happened under the watch of its own leaders, many now in positions of power in the government. Nonetheless, their participation in government secured several innovative initiatives aimed at expanding support for key productive activities within the popular economy, especially recycling, small-scale textile production, and farming, along with their technological improvement and the commercialisation of their production.

Although the pandemic placed challenges on the drive to reach workers in the popular economy, registrations in RENATEP reached 4 million in 2023 (Bascuas et al., 2023). This initiative reveals beliefs within some sectors of the government that there were ways to reduce some of the most damaging consequences of extreme precarity by introducing alternative ways to formalise work experiences within the popular economy. The expansion of self-employed contributions to health care and pensions confirmed the intention while also demonstrating how far government interventions were from embarking on social assistance programmes and policies that could provide recipients effective means to overcome their poverty. Not only were the resources offered insufficient for those who received them, but a significant portion of the population was left behind: Of the 4 million registered, only about 1.3 million received assistance through a work programme (Hudson, 2025).

The Fernández government’s rather contradictory set of policy initiatives attests to the ongoing tensions along the axes through which social assistance policy had developed in the country. But, at this juncture, there was a new dimension to such tensions, with political opposition to the government and its allies in the social movements reaching new levels. Diminishing political support for the government might account for a new emphasis on recovering economic growth as the basis for the creation of genuine jobs and for the concerns voiced by some factions of the governing party about needing to curtail the intermediation of social movements in the implementation of key social programmes. Both policy ideas also expressed the somewhat conflicting relationship with social movements representing the unemployed, including the CTEP/UTEP, the closest politically to the government and the largest organisation in the sector. The logic of its political strategies, particularly disruptions of the public space, created wide discontent and thus raised uncertainty within the government. The options at the disposal of the government, however, were also limited by tangible changes in people’s interpretations of social reality; most obvious was probably the middle classes’ opposition to the use of fiscal resources for what they considered to be excessive social assistance benefits. But there was also another, less visible antagonism looming among the poorest sector of the population, connected to their changing expectations about paths out of poverty. The very

entrepreneurialism fostered through social assistance had mutated from experiences of collective undertakings to the extolling of individual initiatives, a kind of “neoliberalism from below” (Gago, 2017). If this was true for small fractions of informal workers who benefitted from state assistance, it was even more unavoidable for those who had to fend for themselves. The desolation of so many is a result of the synthesis of both developments: fragmented social protection systems incapable of providing an escape from poverty and entrenchments of patterns of economic growth that left a substantial portion of the population behind.

3. The Reign of the Chainsaw: Undoing Social Protection

3.1. *Informal Workers and Their Organisations Under Attack*

By 2023, the conditions discussed above had come to shape perceptions that the crises would find no solutions within the democratic consensus that, with all its imperfections, had regulated political life in the country for four decades. Javier Milei’s electoral victory was unambiguous proof of the rising appeal of authoritarian discourses that tied expanding rights entitlements to unsustainable fiscal spending, unabated deficits, and inflation. Accordingly, once in power, the libertarian government moved swiftly to implement a draconian austerity programme whose implementation has been purposefully based on repression and the criminalisation of adversaries, particularly among social movements. Within a year, Milei’s administration had decreased state spending by around 25% in real terms. While several areas have been affected, cuts in social policy were central pillars of Milei’s stabilisation and adjustment strategy and of a major overhaul in the way social protection had evolved in Argentina (Schipiani et al., 2025). Utilising executive presidential powers, Milei managed to undermine public institutions that previously had been sites for the extension of the social, cultural, and gender rights so deeply abhorred by the far-right government and many of its followers.

The scope of the social policy restructuring sought by the libertarian government was evident from its early decision to create a new Ministry of Human Capital encompassing policy areas previously covered by three key ministries: Social Development, Education, and Labour. Amalgamation implied the downgrading of ministries with a long political history in the country to the status of Secretariats. In the case of the Ministry of Social Development, its transformation into the Secretariat of Children, Youth, and Families also involved the narrowing of the scope of its social policy in line with the government’s decision to place children and families as the primary subjects of social assistance, a move that resonates with practices of far-right governments elsewhere. It also included the elimination of the Secretariat for Social Economy, which had implemented programmes closely connected to organisations representing unemployed and informal workers.

This restructuring was the backdrop to the changes the government pursued in social assistance programmes, its openly stated objective being to close the channels that had enabled unemployed and informal workers and their organisations to extend their political reach. Consequently, upon assuming power, the administration froze the amount that the 1.27 million recipients of the PPT received. In a context of high inflation, this quickly translated into a substantial loss of purchasing power, its monetary contribution becoming marginal within households (Schipiani et al., 2025). Critically, the government eliminated the work requirement from the programme, placing it under direct control of the executive power, thus displacing social movements from their previous role as implementing units. Thereafter, the PPT was replaced by two new programmes, also under the control of the government: Back to Work (VT) and Social Support (AS). The former was designed to support recipients the state considered fit to work, approximately 75% of the

total, with their reinsertion into the job market; the latter, to assist those with several children or over 50 years old, who were therefore deemed unemployable.

The savings emerging from the restructuring were a significant incentive for the government: Year-on-year budget execution for the VT programme decreased 61.1% in real terms in 2024 (Oficina de Presupuesto del Congreso [OPC], 2025a, p. 6). But just as important was the government's commitment to discipline informal workers and, especially, to "put an end to the business of intermediaries" in social assistance—that is, the social organisations whose leaders in the government's view had become "managers of poverty" ("Javier Milei a los empresarios," 2024). Displacing social movements as agents in the implementation of social assistance programmes was furthered by excluding them all, without distinction, as legitimate political interlocutors while vilifying them as corrupt criminal organisations. Milei's confrontational approach to social movements signified the end of over 20 years of practice through which governments had endeavoured not only to maintain open channels of communication with social movements but also to avoid repression as the main instrument of control.

Another decision similarly motivated by the desire to undermine the political clout of social movements was to withhold food distribution shipments to networks of community kitchens, run mostly by women, upon which impoverished Argentineans rely for their survival. While social organisations of unemployed and informal workers were the main target of the policy, other long-standing community, neighbourhood, and church-based organisations were equally affected. In the context of the growing deregulation of food markets and sharp increases in food prices—128% in just the first six months of the Milei administration (Anello et al., 2024, p. 4)—the reduction in resources channelled through community kitchens further deepened food insecurity (Vera et al., 2025).

Contrasting starkly with what happened to workfare and other programmes supporting community initiatives, existing conditional cash transfers to households with children were revitalised, and the amount of the transfers increased. Such was the case most importantly with the AUH, which increased by 47.8% in real terms in 2024 (Schipiani et al., 2025, p. 5). Public spending on the programme rose by 40% between 2023 and 2024 (OPC, 2025a, p. 6) and by a further 29.8% in the first half of 2025 (OPC, 2025b, p. 5). The government also increased amounts allocated through the 2020 Food Card programme, but here the most noteworthy change was the decision to expand the realm of beneficiaries by increasing recipient families' maximum age of qualifying children from 14 to 18. Changes in these conditional cash transfer programmes have significantly altered their relative weight vis-à-vis workfare programmes. By the end of the previous government in November 2023, a subsidy through the PPT programme was four times the amount of AUH; a year later, the AUH allowance was 16% higher (Schipiani et al., 2025, p. 11).

The government itself made explicit the connection between the increases in conditional cash transfers—focusing exclusively on families with children—and the dismantlement of programmes previously connected to social organisations, reducing support for the population unable to enter the labour market and for adults without children ("Estamos terminando con la extorsión," 2024). It has also indicated what it perceives to be the crucial role of conditional transfers in managing social conflict. While based on questionable data, Milei's statement is revealing: "They also predicted that we were going to have a social catastrophe, a catastrophe that we did not have because...if you take the Universal Child Allowance plus the Food Card, they cover today 99% of the basic food basket" ("Javier Milei, a la ex presidente," 2024). In budgetary terms, the programmes do not

represent a significant investment (Arza et al., 2024), but they do reflect the configuration of a libertarian social policy aimed almost exclusively at controlling social conflict. In our view, these shifts distinguish Argentina's far-right approach to social policy from that of other right-wing governments like Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023), where spending on conditional cash transfers was more drastically cut (Zimmermann, 2022).

Organisations of informal workers have responded to changes with new waves of mobilisation, often coordinated with broader social movements and labour unions. Thus far, the government has managed to neutralise the potential political impacts of social mobilisation, but, whenever necessary, it has not feared to use repression in ways not experienced since Argentina's return to democracy. It has attacked the very core of what the organisations of the unemployed needed to reassert their presence as political actors—that is, their capacity to disrupt the public space (Merklen, 2005), a central strategy of their struggles, even under governments with which they shared substantial political affinities. A wide range of additional tools have been used to increase the cost of mobilisation, including new regulations that allow the government to remove participants in demonstrations from the roster of social programme beneficiaries (Poder Ejecutivo Nacional, 2024). Social organisations, in turn, have deployed new strategies to confront the government, including legal action for failure to distribute food and for suspending socio-urban integration policies in working-class neighbourhoods (Fernández Álvarez, 2024). However, while the courts have ruled in favour of the organisations, the government has repeatedly failed to comply with the orders.

The changes outlined above represent a radical transformation in the relationship between the state and organisations of informal workers. While governments since the 1990s had sought to contain social conflict by accommodating some of the demands emerging from the organisations of the unemployed, Milei has made the de-collectivisation of social assistance and disciplining of the popular sectors the cornerstone of his approach. The aggressiveness with which he has attacked movements representing the most vulnerable sectors of the population is a reminder of the far right's profound distrust of democracy and what is collective (Brown, 2019). This explains the abandonment of some key features of earlier neoliberal social assistance paradigms, such as requiring participants to work in return for benefits, promoting "NGOism," and, finally, the subsequent territorialisation that became a part of social assistance mechanisms (Arias & Scaglia, 2025). In this sense, increases in individual conditional transfers might have been a pragmatic and effective option for controlling social conflict while also achieving the goals of a retrenched, regressive social policy (Fischer, 2020).

Finally, we should not lose sight of the hollowing out of institutions that previously played a central role in supporting the viability of community-based economic initiatives. Dismissing public employees is a case in point: The National Council for Social Policy, which planned and coordinated social policy, saw its staff reduced by 64%, and the National Institute for the Social Economy, created to regulate and support cooperatives, lost 41% of its staff (Centro de Economía Política Argentina, 2025, p. 9). Milei's restructuring has also affected areas of the state developed since the 1990s charged with producing statistical information along with monitoring social programmes. Such is the case with the Programme for Strengthening Strategic Social Information, which received no funding in 2024.

3.2. The Broader Transformation of Social Policy

Milei's chainsaw did not stop at the social programmes for unemployed workers and their organisations. Deep cuts reached a significant number of programmes designed to buttress the economic viability of

precarious productive and social initiatives at the community level. A telling example is the elimination of the National Waste Recovery, Recycling and Environmental Services Programme. This initiative had been instrumental in improving working conditions for informal urban garbage recyclers and public urban sanitation workers. The discontinuation of public procurement from workers' cooperatives along with permitting imports such as textiles and cardboard deepened problems of competitiveness for surviving small, community-based undertakings. Programmes designed to address deep-rooted challenges in the social reproduction of poor communities, principally housing, care services, and basic urban infrastructure, were also dismantled (Fernández Álvarez, 2024). The impact of these cuts has been devastating for the poorest communities in Argentina, which must now often rely on credit to meet basic needs, sometimes obtained through the growing presence of drug trafficking networks in these communities (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, 2025a).

But the reach of Milei's attack on the social assistance infrastructure went much further. Congruent with his depiction of an aberrant social justice (Micheletto, 2023), his libertarian government questioned other social assistance programmes that had expanded considerably under previous Peronist governments. Such was the case with disability pensions, a non-contributory benefit that reached 1.2 million, and student grants (Plan PROGRESAR), a conditional cash transfer that, at its zenith in 2023, benefitted almost 1.9 million youth. Both programmes, which aided numerous poor households, underwent deep cutbacks affecting both the amount of the benefit families received and their access. Changes in disability benefits deserve special note as they have been the source of considerable political attention in connection to charges of institutional corruption. The modifications, proposing more stringent qualifying criteria, were successfully challenged in court and declared unconstitutional, yet the government seems to have found an effective administrative route to withdraw the pension from 500,000 beneficiaries (Centro de Economía Política Argentina, 2025).

Cutbacks aimed at broader social policies further compounded the stark realities faced by poor households. Because of the significance of pensions in total government spending, cuts there have taken centre stage as part of Milei's commitment to balance the fiscal budget. Rapid pension expansion in Argentina between 2005 and 2010 had incorporated 2.5 million pensioners (Beccaria & Danani, 2014, p. 73). A considerable achievement of the previous Peronist administrations, the policy made it possible to extend pension coverage to previously excluded populations, and while the benefits remained small for many pensioners, they made a proportionally significant contribution to poorer households' income (Álvarez et al., 2012). Moreover, the expansion of pensions had a particularly positive impact on women, who had traditionally encountered greater obstacles entering protected wage relations and accessing retirement (Arza, 2022). However, pensions have declined between 15 and 18.7% in real terms in 2024 alone (OPC, 2025a, p. 10), and vulnerabilities for older adults living in poverty have been further amplified through a 16.8% reduction in public funding for retirees' health insurance funds (OPC, 2025a, p. 10), a cutback affecting key programmes like the provision of free medication (Vera et al., 2025).

Public health has been another area of profound transformations when compared to some of the patterns established since early in the new century. These changes further jeopardise access, particularly at a moment when demand for public health services has increased owing to the rising cost of private health insurance (Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales, 2025b). Significantly, programmes with direct gender impacts, most centrally reproductive health, have been openly targeted for cuts, aggravating the consequences of the institutional retraction of gender policies (ONU Mujeres, 2024), the first expression

of which was eliminating the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity created during the previous Peronist administration.

Public education has fared no better under the Milei administration. Several critical cuts point to the government's intention to extend the marketisation of education. Key examples include the suspension of federal programmes aimed at improving teacher salaries in provincial education systems and expanding technological upgrading for teachers and students along with the lack of funding for school infrastructure. Instead, the government created a voucher programme to subsidise private school fees, an unprecedented measure in Argentina where there has long been a strong tradition in support of public education. Indeed, Argentina's national tuition-free university system has been considered the key vehicle for upward social mobility for the middle classes. Cutbacks to universities have brought their budget to its lowest level since 2006 ("El presupuesto universitario," 2025).

Finally, declining levels of economic activity have resulted in increasing unemployment, underemployment, and informality (Vera et al., 2025). Deteriorating labour market conditions have only elicited further cutbacks to job training programmes and other initiatives previously supporting youth employment, the registration of domestic workers, and job protection in companies undergoing productive restructuring. As in the 1990s, the government has sought a way out of the conundrum through increased labour flexibilisation, but now the emphasis has been on limiting the utilisation of legal instruments previously used to penalise informality. In comparing the two periods under discussion, we suggest that there was a tendency until 2023 to find ways to formalise what was informal without really altering its very precarious nature. Under Milei, that tendency has now reverted to fostering the growing informalisation of previously formal employment. As our discussion has emphasised, to achieve this goal the government appears intent in converting precarity into the only reality most Argentines know.

3.3. From Anti-Poverty to Anti-Poor: Weaponising Poverty

It has been argued that politicising both poverty and the instruments through which policy attempts to address it is required to "empower" the poor and protect them from the stigmatisation they are often subjected to in their condition as beneficiaries of social assistance (Mkandawire, 2005). As our discussion suggests, this politicisation lies at the heart of key struggles waged by recipients of social assistance in Argentina, a counterpoint to the de/re-politicising emphasis on personal responsibility for the conditions of one's existence, critical to capitalism's cosmology, but even more central to neoliberalism (Giroux, 2024). The politicisation of the conditions leading to poverty should also be contrasted with technocratic approaches that distort what are political choices behind a veil of scientific objectivity in policy-making (Fischer, 2018; Midaglia, 2012). In particular, the language of austerity has proved essential to the depoliticisation of policy decisions, obscuring the power relations that infuse the transformations the state seeks to ensure the reproduction of existing hierarchies (Loperfido, 2024).

While the emphasis tends to be placed on the emancipatory promise of politicisation, in our view Milei's policy decisions can be taken as demonstrating that politicisation can also become an instrument of oppression—key to stigmatising and criminalising the poor through the weaponisation of poverty. Neither the ruthlessness nor the chaotic nature of his approach to social policy are miscalculations; rather, they are integral components of the intent to address the poor as the enemy and to ensure their defeat as political actors. There is no

desire to depoliticise poverty or the instruments to mitigate it; on the contrary, the drive has been to frame them as components of a logic of statism that needs to be destroyed. There have been no articulations of anything resembling policy routes to address the problem of poverty in Argentina nor hints as to how to really make use of the so-called “entrepreneurial” initiatives of the poor. Furthermore, the very elimination of work requirements in remaining social assistance programmes demonstrates a disinterest in assuming any role that could be construed as custodial in the management of labour.

Milei’s policy reorientation is instead part of a larger and more troubling effort to stigmatise and criminalise the poor. One would be justified in arguing that this is unfortunately far from new. Yet the intensity and scope that open attacks against the poor have reached under Milei’s rule set the current context apart. Part of his approach is expressed through repression, and as with other far-right governments, in hateful speech. In a well-rehearsed conservative libertarian trope, stigmatising the poor is not only connected to their supposed failure to find their place in a system of endless opportunity but also to the right of “good” citizens to no longer accept any responsibility for the poor (Balsa, 2024; Brown, 2019). As Milei insinuated to his audience at the Hoover Institute in 2024 without a hint of sarcasm, when denied all means of survival, the poor will figure out by themselves a way not to starve to death (“Milei: ‘La gente va a decidir,’” 2024). And that seems to be the only promise, because other than flexibilization, there has so far been nothing in public discourse to suggest any perspectives on employment policy or the importance of labour in the economic transformation of Argentina.

Not leaving it to chance, the Milei government has been creating and implementing an administrative and legislative machinery that criminalises protest and social movements for their purported irregular use of public funding. Soon after taking power, the government implemented an anti-demonstration protocol that also criminalised street protests and has given free rein to the repression of protest. The protocol has been instrumental, with the enabling authority of the judiciary, to bringing criminal charges against demonstration participants and their leaders and organisations. These practices have generated fear among members of social organisations of unemployed and informal workers, many of whom are migrants, doubly exposed to both repression and the risk of deportation. Particularly vulnerable groups—such as retirees, who gather weekly to demand improvements in their benefits, and recipients of disability pensions—have also been targets of the state’s repressive apparatus. This has all contributed to a climate of fear that has undoubtedly been one more factor behind the diminution in social mobilisation during this turbulent time.

Utilising repression and fear as a form of control has also involved the legal prosecution of social movement leaders on charges of corruption. Mainstream media have relished the spectacle, as it provides further ammunition for social prejudices against state apparatuses that allegedly fostered social assistance as another form of illicit enrichment and clientelism (Salinas, 2024). The reaction stands as a reminder of the high levels of antipathy in Argentina, even before Milei’s victory, towards social assistance (Balsa, 2024). Charges against leaders of social movements have further complicated what are already extremely trying political circumstances. Nevertheless, many of our interviewees noted a link between the attack on social movements and their capacity to organise the poorest sectors of society. As one of them put it vividly:

That the government has come after 140 of our leaders is a sure sign no organisation has been spared. It is also a sign of our unity as a sector in the past, notwithstanding our political differences, and our capacity for unity in the future as we consolidate a common front against this government.

4. Conclusion

Contrary to what one might expect as consequences of the changes outlined above, Milei's administration insists his anti-inflationary programme has succeeded in raising 12 million Argentines out of poverty (Tarricone, 2025). While there is considerable debate about how poverty is measured in Argentina, the consensus among most commentators is that the number has no connection to the conditions experienced by those subject to the policy changes we have identified. There is also no denying that adjustment in Argentina has inflicted new distress on the most vulnerable. Following practices of the 1990s neoliberal period, the re-marketisation of social services and protection has been a key component of the libertarian government's austerity plan. Unlike the 1990s, though, when the government sought to respond to growing poverty and social protest through establishing targeted social assistance interventions to appease those most affected by structural reforms, Milei has undertaken a major overhaul of programmes aimed at informal and unemployed workers and their organisations. However, neoliberalism in its conservative libertarian version reveals itself, like neoliberalism in general, to be highly pragmatic in being willing to deploy some welfare interventions for as long as it deems it necessary to manage social conflict. This might account for the decision to not only retain but also *expand* key conditional cash transfer programmes that gained prominence under Peronist administrations. The pragmatic approach might be strong enough to further extend new forms of social protection as what appears to be an unavoidable economic downturn sets in and, equally important, as surviving informal support networks are put under further strain. The Argentinean case may once again, either due to Milei's change of course or his political defeat, prove a neoliberal paradox: the desired expansion of the market leads unavoidably to the expansion of the state (Fischer, 2020; Kiely, 2020).

We interpret the libertarian version of the new right, including its illiberal features, not as a departure from neoliberalism but rather as a deepening of its authoritarian and segregationist traits. Reforms so far have shown the intent to impose new levels of punitiveness (Davies, 2016); these reforms involve not only increasingly restrict access to social assistance but, more crucially, facilitate the stigmatisation, persecution, and repression of those who do access it. Punitiveness has also been critical in demonstrating the state's capacity to exploit prejudices that segregate the poor as "lazy" and "undeserving" or as untrustworthy political actors, as it is because of their very vulnerability as poor that they are subject to easy manipulation. Still, there is probably no clearer indication of the anti-poor bent of the government than its very failure to address in any meaningful way the problem of poverty in the country. Two illustrative cases in point are the lack of concern for growing informality in labour markets and the absence of an employment plan. Yet through these omissions, what the far-right government seeks to challenge is not so much state intervention in general but rather redistributive state policies in particular (Fernández Álvarez, 2024).

In closing, we think it important to revisit and re-emphasise the idea of politics and the political in the context of the far-right government in Argentina. Central in Milei's discourse has been a profound distrust of the political as the sphere where democracy is contested, sometimes in a disorderly fashion, but also strengthened. His is an anti-democratic attack on people and institutions—an attack that has been extended with particularly callous intensity against the dense territorial networks of unemployed and informally employed workers' organisations constructed over 30 years of struggles. Their demands were about social policy and benefits, but they were always also about politics and their recognition as a political force. In all their limitations and missteps, these struggles were the manifestation of a collective process of learning from below that will not be easily undone.

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