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Interview with Jorge Ribot - Telefonicos
6 September 1986

Q: When did you begin as a union leader?

JR: I entered the Secretariado in 1964, having been a delegate before that. This was the era of Agustin Cuello. First I was on the Secretariat, then Press Secretary, then Adjunct Secretary. Between 1970 and 1972, I went back to work since the other leaders weren't too combative.

Q: But this was already the era of Guillán.

JR: Guillán became the Secretary-General in 1970. My understanding of Peronism was different from his. He espoused a Peronism always on the brink of the precipice. He was always flirting with the left. You have to talk to everyone, of course; ideas are enriched by dialog. But not like he did. But sometimes he thought he knew more than Perón.

Q: I'm now focusing on the Illia Period...

JR: Yes, that was the era Peronism attempted the return of Perón. I think that was the Argentine labor movement's richest moment. The leaders of the era, the "bureaucrats," launched a Battle Plan, but everything was first discussed with the workers in the workplaces, in neighborhood assemblies, in mobilizations.

Q: Was the Battle Plan connected to Perón's return?

JR: Yes.

Q: But at the time they were saying that it wasn't, since the CGT wasn't allowed to mix in partisan politics.

JR: At the time, the CGT was 80 or 90 percent Peronist. Since that time, it has lost ideological coherence. Even when the workers weren't Peronist, they assumed that their leaders would be; Peronism was seen at the time as an element of struggle, of opposition to the interests of the employers. It was a time of "exercises," the workers always would get together in demonstrations, mobilizations.

Q: I'm still not clear about the link between the Battle Plan and Operation Return. Vandor seems to have been the main architect of the Battle Plan, and at the time the newspapers were saying that he was trying to demonstrate that Perón couldn't return, so that he could gain full control of the movement. Is this correct?

JR: No. Prior to Operation Return, Vandor had not thought of challenging Perón for control of the movement. But when the government wouldn't let Perón return, he saw the opportunity.

Q: So during the operation itself, Vandor really was trying to facilitate Perón's return.

JR: Yes. If Perón would have returned, Vandor would have been second in line.

Q: I see. Perón was pretty old, too; I remember the Radicals were speculating that he didn't have many years left.

JR: No, at the time Perón was thinking clearly. Vandor wasn't speculating with that.

Q: Who were you closest to: Olmos, Framini, Vandor or Alonso?

JR: Olmos, Framini and I respected each other. Framini was honest and close to the workers. A lot of leaders, after 6 or so years, lose touch with the workers and become professionals.

Q: Some say Olmos was more to the left; in 62 he talked about a "workers' party."

JR: Olmos was more to the left. Not toward the communists, but to different left. One of his good friends was the mother of Camilo Torres, the Colombian guerrilla. But he was a Peronist. Peronism has a lot of left elements, that is, social elements; everyone calls the social side of things "left." When you're talking about cooperatives, about worker participation in running enterprises, that's communism.

Q: In Primera Plana in June 1966, they said that Alonso was completely in favor of the coup and Olmos completely against it. What about Framini?

JR: Framini's power was already declining then. Olmos was more important, by 1966 he was making contact with the university students who were working to support their studies. Olmos was not disposed to negotiate with the military; Alonso and Vandor were more prepared to negotiate with the so-called "nationalist" officers.

Q: I heard that Alonso was closer to the military than Vandor because at the time contacts were initiated Vandor was spending a lot of time at home with his wife; they had just lost a child. So Alonso was the only one for the military to talk to. Is this so?

JR: No, both of them had contacts with the military. Vandor wasn't a man to stay at home. He went to the races and spent huge fortunes.

Q: But Vandor claimed his only income was the 30,000 pesos a month he earned as Secretary-General of the metalworkers' union.

JR: Vandor had a Mercedes Benz. That's the most expensive car a diplomat or big businessman could buy. Vandor structured a group that accompanied him, with Cafiero and others who were thinkers and others who had created a political-union structure; that is, Vandor had his own structure. Hence he sometimes had no reason to negotiate directly with the military himself; his "right-hand men" went to do this.

Q: Like Geronimo Izetta?

JR: Yes, clearly.

Q: Who else?

JR: Gazzera, who is now with the CLAT, with Christian Democracy. He's a big leader of the wing of the CLAT who follows the thinking of Máspero (there's another wing that follows the Cuban, García).

Q: What about Juan José Taccone?

JR: Taccone had very good relations with the military. He was very clear-headed. He came to Peronism from the Communist Youth. His union was the most important state-sector union, a service-sector union, well-paid, with very strong social services. He was closer to Alonso than to Olmos, Framini, or Vandor. There are fine distinctions here, but so you can locate him I'd say he was closest to Alonso, closer to Alonso than to Vandor.

Q: What were the fine distinctions between Taccone and Alonso?

JR: Taccone maintained his union as an independent entity. It wasn't in the "62." He developed his own policy separate from the "62." He was a peronist but without compromising himself with the movement, the party; he stayed independent. He was more pragmatic, had more vision than Prado.

Q: In Peronist unionism, what makes a union more powerful: its number of members or its financial resources?

JR: The number of members, the number who can be mobilized. The metalworkers have real working people, they mobilize. Luz y Fuerza is more prone to negotiate. They get money not only from dues; they also get an ingerencia, a percentage of everyone's electric bills. Also, the state collects the dues and pays them directly to Luz y Fuerza, in the textile workers' union, for example, the employer collects the dues but doesn't always pay them back out to the union. The telephone workers don't have an

ingerencia. The tobacco workers, with Digón, also have a fantastic structure, with the clinic [for which Ribot now works] and CEDEL [the research institute]. They get money directly from the profits of two big tobacco companies even though they only have 6,000 members.

Q: How much? A million australs?

JR: They keep the figures very secret. Could be a million. They also get money from foundations connected to German Social Democracy. Earlier they had a much more ambitious project -FEPACO- in which Roberto García had a big part, 5 times as big as CEDEL, throughout the country with institutes, conferences. José Rodríguez played a big role in setting it up; Cafiero was also connected to it, and it went downhill after the 1985 elections.

Q: What other unions have important research institutes?

JR: ATE has one, connected to Christian Democracy, with which De Genaro has links though he's a Peronist. Ubaldini has links to the CLAT too. De Genaro and Abdala are close to ANUSATE, a social-christian tendency. Augusto Conte is along these lines too. Also, the pharmacy workers' have a research institute.

Q: It's interesting that all these unions are in the "25." What about unions in Ubaldinismo or the "62," do they have research institutes?

JR: No. They don't want to create an institution in which those from below can rise up and throw them out tomorrow. They're "professionals."

Q: What's happening with Hugo Curto? Is he rising up against Miguel in the UOM? Why is he on a Cafiero list as a candidate in the province of Buenos Aires?

JR: Curto is still Miguel's right hand man. The metalworkers always want to win; they have a finger in every pie. Also, the metalworkers have always made space for Cafiero.

Q: Seems like Perón always wanted to pull the rug out from under Peronist politicians who appeared to be carving out space of their own, like Matera...

JR: Matera did himself in. He was part of Vandor's apparatus, receiving a salary. Then Perón said no.

Q: Did Vandor seek an alliance with the MID prior to the March 1965 elections?

JR: Yes, there was something of this. The UP, created by Bramuglia, was Vandor's response to Perón. The proscription of

Peronism allowed Vandor to create the Union Popular, a political apparatus that responded to him, not to Perón.

Q: But wasn't the UP created by Bramuglia and Tecera del Franco much earlier, in the late 1950s, independent of Vandor?

JR: No, it was always a projection of Vandor.

Q: But you said earlier that Vandor didn't think of challenging Perón until December 1964.

JR: It's one thing to challenge Perón, another to bring him back and say "look, this part is mine." So Vandor could supply some ministers and government officials. The metalworkers always choose the Labor Ministers.

Q: Were you ever on the Executive Board of the "62"?

JR: No. I was in the 62 but my union was small, then about 35 thousand, though highly combative and politicized and with a good union school. A tough union in those years.

Q: What did the 62 look like as an organization? In the Illia years, did it have its own buildings, funds, press organs?

JR: No. All the member unions contributed to pay the expenses for the graffitti, the hotels, the meetings?

Q: How was the Executive Board put together in those years? Was everyone hand-picked by Vandor?

JR: Yes, there was something of this. Vandor carried a lot of weight, many of the leaders of other unions were his products. When they stood for election within their unions, he gave them all their logistical support: money, preparing the propaganda, supplying the cars, posters. And you won. Also, metalworkers had relatives who might work in other unions, and convince them to vote for Vandor's preferred candidate. Also, the press only publishes some of the propaganda given to them.

Q: Seems like Guillán is always in the papers these days. Who else?

JR: Yes, Guillán has very good press. Another is Ruckauf. Also Grosso, and among the union leaders Rodríguez. Also Miguel. Also Cafiero. And sometimes the government makes sure that certain leaders get written up, like Manzano. He's always taking more pot-shots at other Peronists than at the government. That way the Radicals can say that the Peronists are always fighting among themselves.

Q: Was Guillán always in the "25"?

JR: No, and they used to say all kinds of things about him. Guillán was re-elected as SG of the telephone workers with the support of a friend of his who is the cousin of José Ignacio López, the President's press secretary.

Q: Who holds real power in the "25"?

JR: They all have equal amounts of power, that's why they don't have a coherent policy.

Q: Are there alliances within the "25"?

JR: Yes. García and Digón, Rodríguez with his own project, sometimes moving toward Digón and other times toward De Genaro, Borda with De Genaro.

Q: What kind of differences are there between these alliances?

JR: Personal ones. Also on issues. De Genaro, like Manzano, want the "62" to disappear as the union arm of Peronism. Digón and García want to retain the "62," not to eliminate it, because their so closely "married" to the CLAT project. They want to be independent, like Taccone was before them. They're the Quixotes of Peronism. That's why Digón attacked the "62."

Q: What about José Rodríguez?

JR: No, Rodríguez is a negotiator. He negotiated with the military regime, no matter what he says. Not the same as Baldassini and Triaca, he negotiated in a different way. He's married to European Social Democracy.

Q: But European Social Democracy doesn't have much to do with the military regime.

JR: Rodríguez had to negotiate so as not to lose total control of his union. That's why we call them "professionals." Framini was a workers' leader. He was tremendously important in the fall of Frondizi. Some thought that Peronism was outmoded, and his victory in the Province of Buenos Aires was a victory for all of Peronism. It showed that Peronism was still alive.

Q: In the 1965 elections, what was the role of the "62" in drawing up the lists of National Deputy candidates?

JR: Total. Not only did they choose the union leaders who would stand as candidates, they also chose the politicians, the politicians who were their friends. But then they would give the lists to Perón for approval. Perón wanted concrete facts. Once a union leader said to him "why not let (Fulano?) run, he's got lots of money," and Perón said, (Fulano?) doesn't interest me, I'll nominate (Bengano?) because he's got lots of people, and to win I

need people, not money." Perón was educated by the military, he was the only one with a head on his shoulders.

Q: Vandor was also a military man.

JR: Yes, that's why he rose to the top. Now Lorenzo Miguel has distinguished himself, but it was Vandor who built the organization and then gave it to him. Vandor had his own cabinet, people who thought.

Q: In 1963 and 1964, there was a conflict between Vandor and Framini. What happened there?

JR: Vandor ^{in addition to his age} had a stronger personality. He was a tougher guy. I was at the great "62" plenary in (El Recero?), a UOM recreation center, in the last months of 1965, after the Avellaneda conference. This was when Perón had given instructions in a letter to question Vandor's leadership, he said "Vandor is the most loyal of those who have betrayed me." Alonso and Framini were there. Olmos was with us in a minority. The top leadership of the "62" met: Framini, Gallo of FOETRA, Alonso, Racchini, Izetta, Santillan of FOTIA, Coria... When they came out, they sat at the table. It was time to read the letter Perón had given to Framini. Framini and Vandor were there. Vandor said to Framini, "well, the plenary is starting, do you have something to say?" Framini was going to say something, but then remained silent. Next to me was the FOTIA leader Sánchez. He got up, and Vandor said "what do you want, my friend?" Sánchez sat back down without saying anything he had told us he was going to say. And on the other side Loholaberry, the Subsecretary of the AOT, said "I'd like the floor." Vandor got up and walked over to him, stopping right beside him. "What were you going to say?" "No, no, I don't want to talk." And that was the end of the Plenary. Later we went to eat, and Cuello and Gallo had arranged it very cleverly so I would sit right across from Vandor, because they knew I would challenge him. I had come from a new generation of leaders and I was challenging them within the [FOETRA] union. I challenged him, like he knew I would, and he said "no, it's not like that." I said it was, and I said Alonso was a sissy. I was very young. Olmos called me over and got me out of there. Later we had a political plenary in FOETRA, and deposed the old leaders like Cuello and Gallo. We came in with Mango. Guillán was with us but he was no more notable than any of us. Mango spoke, I spoke, I told them what had happened at (El Recero?) and they kicked out Cuello and Gallo, some even wanted to beat them up. Guillán was in the Federation, he came to the union [Federal Capital telephone workers' union] when Mango [?] and the military kicked him out. The Labor Ministry didn't allow either me or another guy named [Ezequiel?] to run for union office. We negotiated with San Sebastián and wrote a press release saying we weren't going to run, and they let Guillán run.

Q: So the Federal Capital section of FOETRA is more important than the Federation itself.

JR: Yes. The Capital section includes all of Greater Buenos Aires; it has almost 30,000 members. The rest of the country has less than 15,000. We have the most delegates to the congress, so we select the Secretary-General, the Adjunct, the rest.

Q: Are there other unions where this relationship prevails, like Luz y Fuerza?

JR: Yes, this is the case in Luz y Fuerza. Also SMATA and UOM. In all the unions. That's why the Federations always prevail over the interior unions. So when Correa of Córdoba or the guy from Mendoza exert pressure on the CGT to have the CGT regionals represented on the Directive Council, they refuse them. The leaders of the Federations, which are controlled by the Capital unions, say no, we're in charge here. The federations collect the money.

Q: But SMATA is a union, not a federation.

JR: Yes, but it acts like a federation. Same with SUETRA. 4,500 in the capital and 1,500 in the rest of the country.

Q: But there is a difference. In the UOM, a union, the dues are paid directly to the central organization, while in the federations the local union collects and then transfers a part to the federation. This would be the case in Luz y Fuerza, for example.

JR: No, the federation collects the money, and then sends part of it to the local. The federations can also intervene the locals.

[End of Interview]