La Garganta Poderosa

From the of Argentina to the world

| Argentina |

translated by Edmund Ruge

We are a revolutionary Latin American movement that grew out of the heart of the *villas*[1]of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Founded more than 15 years ago, we have grown to include 120 territorial assemblies in 12 Latin American countries.

Why *La Poderosa*? The word “power” carries immense importance for all members of the organization, and, while heavily loaded with negative connotations of appropriation for individual interests, and the authoritarian violence of those who engage in politics as a mere administration of interests in order to concentrate wealth and arrogance, the true “power” for those of us whose chief objective is to put food on the table is that of meeting, discussing, and collective doing; these three elements transform our lives and that of the entire community. This popular power that we reclaim sprouts from below, without large monetary transactions as a means and without financial quotes. We reconstruct it every day in every neighborhood where we organize, in every minute we share with our neighbors, every conversation, and in every assembly. True power does not depend on millions of dollars or primetime public TV coverage. That is why when we show our faces, they are scared of us, because they are unable to understand—much less to permit—an expression of liberty and dignity that is born of humanity’s immense creative potential.

But our name does not only draw its roots from that power that brings health to the people.

It also holds the name of the motorcycle with which Ernesto ("Che") Guevara and Alberto Granados rode through Latin America with the goal of learning about the unique realities of her people. It is through this internationalist learning process, and the migration that makes up our reality, that we decided to circulate through the veins of this continent in order to understand the needs that exist beyond the borders of our country.

Popular education

La Poderosa began in Villa Zavaleta, located in the City of Buenos Aires, between rounds of football played by youth that decided to unite to defend their rights, acting from their neighborhood and for their neighborhood—a kind of football with distinct rules, designed according to the needs of those that play it. Even at its beginning, Poderosa's identity was Latin American, because in these football games (before mixed football became common) there were youths from diverse backgrounds, youth born in other countries, the children of immigrants. In the *villas* of Argentina, these diverse cultures live together as neighbors that arrived in search of a better life. These family bonds, among those who left their native countries, those that stayed, and those that received the ones that left, are the key to La Poderosa's strength throughout Latin America. After years of work, today, those same kids that started everything with their football are the ones that train newcomers. It is in this dynamic that we base our logic of transformation and empowerment with which we seek to construct this bottom-up power, always keeping our roots in the *barrio*.

With this first kick, cooperatives began popping up immediately, for everything from textiles, carpentry, iron-works, and construction, to gastronomy and design, among others. The *Casa de las Mujeres y Disidencias* (The House of Women and Dissidence) was also born.

Our activities, directed by girls, boys, and youth, are designed so that participants lose their fear of talking, thinking, and participating, as well as in order to promote and sustain their schoolwork, accompanying them with school support and recreational, cultural, and sports workshops that function as safe spaces for them, their families, and others. Conducted on public, neighborhood turf, our Popular Football activities work in community development, building capacity with football, with art, with the kids, with the resistance. And that's how that group of friends playing football that committed themselves to a better world has

continued to grow throughout the continent.

Given the constant absence of the State, and in an effort to take on hunger, in every neighborhood we work in we have food kitchens where many feed their families. This was not born of any traditional political party banner, nor of any sponsor that depends on these neighborhoods to sell products. This was created by our women neighbors, invested in meeting the most essential needs and solving this insufferable injustice.

We are not glad that we have soup kitchens, given that this demonstrates how hard things are on a basic level, but we even so we must eat. That's why groups of women neighbors have taken this task upon themselves, which now benefits some 200 families in each neighborhood.

Popular control of security forces

One example of our fight against the daily abuses committed by security forces is the Kevin Plaza, located in the heart of Villa Zavaleta. During the day, it is a play space for children. At night it is an open war zone where, where security forces intentionally look the other way, allowing rival gangs to use the space to settle their differences. This willful neglect by security forces took the life of Kevin, a nine-year-old boy, a victim of one of those "stray bullets" that always seems to find one of our kids in its way. On that night, that bullet was one of 105 shots fired by registered weapons of war, in a shootout that lasted more than four hours, despite nine calls to 911 without any direct response other than "we have heard no shots, the area is under control."

Kevin should still be alive today. Frustrated with the abuse committed by those who should be caring for us, we decided to create the Popular Control of the Security Forces, a tool thought up, created, and brought into practice by the neighborhoods that made up the local assembly. The function of this tool is to assure that each and every police operation undertaken complies with the law, in order to guarantee, nothing more and nothing less, that the rights of those that live there are respected. With the passing of time and the realization that similar events take place across all territories, we decided that each

Poderosa assembly would obtain such a body in order to protect our kids and our neighbors. Beginning in 2018, our assemblies began a national assessment of cases such as Kevin's. In one month, more than one thousand cases that did not make it to commissaries or monitoring units, and thus were treated as though nothing had happened. The tool works within each neighborhood because it holds accountable those who should, in theory, take care of us, guaranteeing the reduction of violence committed by the State so that there will never again be a kid killed by a bullet purchased with our taxes, so that there will be no more illegal breaking and entering or illegal police operations, and so that what happens in our neighborhoods does not remain in our neighborhoods, permitting impunity for the threatening tactics, torture, verbal, and physical violence practiced daily by security forces.

On October 3, 2017—thanks to organized communities, coherent and constant protests from our assemblies in defense of the rights of children, adolescents, and youth—La Poderosa arrived at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, in order to attest to the scale of State violence and torture to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. As a result of this action, the UN required that the Argentine government respond to our testimony,

Gender

Violence committed within the health system dehumanizes us as poor women, even more so when we are migrants or part of the LGTBQ community. The deaf and blind justice system revictimizes women—who are already victims of gender violence—or does not attend to impoverished sectors. But within institutional and economic violence, there is also symbolic violence, the product of stigmatization in mass media outlets against women in humble neighborhoods, both for being women and for being poor, reinforced by cultural discrimination and driven by exclusion.

Upon opening our eyes to this new reality, we began to ask ourselves how to improve the quality of life of our women neighbors. The answer, after hours of cries, laughs, and courage, was the creation of the Gender Front, which takes on the role of finding answers, demanding that the State make itself present through effective public policies. In this way, the Gender Front triggered the construction of numerous *Casas de Mujeres e Disidencias*, a self-managed physical space used for all of the Front's activities since its origins. This space

by women for women contains six pillars: work, popular education, recreation, health, gender violence, and diversity.

La Garganta Poderosa

January 1, 2011, for the first time, La Poderosa's literary arm, the cooperative magazine known as *La Garganta Poderosa* (literally, the powerful throat) hit the streets. The magazine's birth is the consequence of more than seven years of organization, and more than 500 years of cries unheard.

Historically, poor neighborhoods around the world have not spoken in the first person. Rather, what we think or do not think has been transmitted by interlocutors, who, in the best cases stood on our front sidewalks and spoke without even consulting us. This formula, far from helping our neighborhoods change or enabling us to find solutions for our diverse problems, has forced us to live under a blanket of prejudice, thrown over us by the mainstream media.

These reports always omit the values we carry, such as solidarity and the culture of meeting, just as they omit that we have continued to survive despite so much neglect. Not only do they reproduce an incorrect image that a large portion of society believes about the reality that we live, but they also enable the perpetuation of public policies implemented by the State that, rather than meeting our needs, serve as temporary patches or even aggravate our situation.

It was in this context that our assemblies decided to also take communication into our own hands in order to demonstrate that our neighborhoods do not lack voices; they lack the media to make these voices heard. We thus decided to create communication media run by impoverished neighborhoods, with no official platform and no publicity, such that each word represents what we think and what we feel without any sort of condition of commitment to outside powers. This was not easy.

Four months prior to our "no-lie-launch"[2] for the magazine, each assembly elected two

communicators and began to pay for their education with funds raised by these same assemblies. It was in this way that the cooperative guaranteed groups of neighbors an educational process and high-quality technical tools to produce our first issue.

Our first yelling cover (each magazine cover features a photo of a mouth-wide-open yell) featured Juan Román Riquelme, former player for the Boca Juniors football team and the Argentine national team. On the back cover, Riquelme placed one finger to his lips, asking for silence,[3] making it clear that from that moment on, the people of the *villas* would begin to speak for themselves. A guy like him—quiet, unused to giving interviews—said yes to being featured in the inaugural edition of this *villa* magazine, and, with the magazine on newsstands all over the country, we sold more than 18,000 issues. Far from relaxing, we jumped into our next issue with an even bigger bet: from this moment on, we would open sales and distribution cooperatives for *La Garganta* all over the country. In this way, we would generate income at the same time that we would increase the number of issues sold. We would also guarantee the printing of our second edition, allowing assemblies to pay salaries to their communicators with these incomes, and continue raising funds with those that we printed. It is this new income which makes it possible, to this day, for us to advance the dreams of kids from all over: to see the ocean in the summer, to go on camping trips in different provinces. It also allows us to obtain materials and tools for our popular education spaces and to provide money to improve, combined with days of volunteer labor, public spaces in each neighborhood.

La Garganta Poderosa was born as a means to expose the paradigms of the logic imposed by dogmatic leaders and scholars, those classic theorists that illuminate socially determined conditions without socializing the theories that determine social conditions. It was born to question those solemn essayists that write on the *villa* ecosystems, researching us as though we were prehistory biological phenomena. It was born to grab their attention, as well as that of society in general, who knows so little about our neighborhoods. And why would they? Little is shown on television, in the news, or on the radio by those who dominate mainstream media. They always speak from afar, or, at most, in front of our neighborhoods, but never with their feet in our streets. They would never place a microphone, an earpiece, or a pen in the hands of any of our neighbors. They have spent more than five decades proving and verifying their theories in offices far away from our territories. And from these

same offices, they implement policies that have not worked and will not work because they omit the very people that should be protagonists in this process, the communities for which their policies are destined.

The latin american la poderosa

This was not some brilliant success story about a group of enlightened Argentines, nor was it a great exported idea, much less a formula easily replicated in other contexts. Dignity does not recognize borders, and meeting with one another is a necessary condition, as much for resolving urgent matters as for developing a societal project where neighborhoods, rural communities, and native peoples are the protagonists, so that once and for all, our fate may lie in our own hands. From Tierra del Fuego to the Rio Grande, we have had another better option: grassroots work and organization.

Aside from Argentina, where the organization is most developed, in Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, and Cuba, there are Poderosa assemblies, with territorial references that contemplate the development of each neighborhood and that progressively advance growth via: new assemblies in different neighborhoods, cities, provinces, and states; the production of content so that *La Garganta* in each country is rooted as a legitimate voice in each reality with the capacity to intervene in dominant discourse; and the construction of bonds of solidarity with other organizations.

As of 2017, we have held annual meetings that have allowed for experience exchanges between neighbors from the continent's most humble locations, people that we would have never met otherwise. Through collective work, we have allowed hundreds of our neighbors to travel and discover that there exist other neighborhoods that suffer from the same problems. Typically, poverty has meant that we only hear about one another through stigmatic journalism, where we are spoken of in the worst way—always as ugly, evil, lazy, and violent. The fenced-in media imposed upon our realities poses a real difficulty, but we envision a solution in which even without the ability to travel and see one another face to face, we might know that we exist, that we are not alone, and that both our dreams and the organizations we form to achieve them bring us closer together as brothers and sisters. Year after year, hundreds of neighbors from the *barrios*, from the periphery, occupations,

favelas, villas, rural populations, *colonias*, indigenous communities, have worked to consolidate a grassroots political platform that began as a motorcycle carrying two people through the open veins of our America, and that today is a collective full of hope and unity.

In July of last year, this encounter took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, given to the political crisis in that country since the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, and the imminent persecution of Lula da Silva, principal political leader for the people, and the only one capable of putting the breaks on the Brazilian right at the polls. *La Poderosa Latinoamericana* understood that all assemblies from all of these countries should do their maximum in order to lend support and international solidarity to the people of Brazil as well as to their social organizations. At 9 AM on July 27, a Latin American caravan of 30 micro delegations from 12 countries around the continent met in Porto Alegre, in the second Latin American forum of La Poderosa, named the “Grassroots Summit.”

La Poderosa Brasil

Neighbors from various cities are building this Poderosa in Foz de Iguazu, Porto Alegre, São Paulo, Ceara, and Salvador, Bahia, drumming up projects in popular education, cooperative and volunteer work. To contact us, write to us at **apoderosa.brasil@gmail.com**.

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