

## Chapter 8

# Skilled Work and Labour Careers in the Argentine Printing Industry, 1880-1930

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### Introduction

From 1880 to 1930 both the Argentine economy and society experienced deep transformations. The agricultural export sector, which was based primarily in the Pampas, drove most economic change. The integration of the Argentine economy into an increasingly unified world market started in the middle of the nineteenth century with the exportation of wool. But it was only in the last part of that century that the dramatic growth of exports of grain and meat to Europe triggered significant changes that would shape some of the country's main characteristics thereafter.

These developments shaped the development of markets for land, capital and labour. The process of export-led growth did not affect all regions in the same way and to the same extent. The eastern plains (*Litoral Pampeano*) showed early and well-defined capitalist development, while other regions were less influenced by modern trends and remained behind.

Starting around the middle of the nineteenth century, a growing demand for unskilled labour was a key feature of the Argentine labour market.<sup>1</sup> The primary sector, construction of railroads, public works, and industry demanded an unskilled labour force with geographical and occupational mobility.

A massive wave of immigration met most of the growing demand for labour. The total number of immigrants from 1870 to 1914 was more than 7 million; however, 58 percent of them – more than a half – did not stay in the country (Recchini de Lattes and Lattes, 1975, p. 61).<sup>2</sup> Among those who returned home were many European seasonal harvest workers, the so-called *golondrinas* (swallows). *Golondrina* immigration reached a maximum between 1907 and 1913. These immigrants entered the country in October and December for the grain harvest and were an important source of seasonal workers for the primary sector.

Young adult immigrants of working age joined the ranks of unskilled workers. Day labourers and peons, who had no ties to any specific branch of the economy,

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<sup>1</sup> See Cortés Conde (1979, pp. 193-273), Pianetto (1984, pp. 297-307) and Sabato (1985, pp. 561-592).

<sup>2</sup> The total population was approximately 1.7 million in 1869, 4 million in 1895 and 7.9 million in 1914.

amounted to 30 percent of the active male population in the urban centres of the Pampas. They were required to travel to the places where there was a demand for workers and to accept a wide range of tasks. Workers shifted from rural to urban occupations according to the season and were continuously looking for jobs and for better salaries.

In the secondary sector of the main urban centres, unskilled and semi-skilled workers shared frequent changes in jobs and trades with the bulk of the labour force. A lack of continuity in occupation, frequent job rotation, weak ties to professions and short tenures characterized the labour market experience of a majority of the workers during this period. The dynamics of the labour market, instability of the economy, changes in the production processes and the potential for upward mobility (like many shop dependents or salary workers who became shop owners) are potential explanations for this pattern.

Studies differ in their conclusions on how the Argentine labour market affected workers' lives. For Cortés Conde (1979, p. 198) high mobility was a mechanism that allowed 'rapid adjustment between supply and demand of labour.' Pianetto (1984, p. 302) has a less optimistic point of view. Shifting back and forth between rural and urban occupations implied job instability and periods of unemployment. This pattern of employment was an obstacle to professional continuity and prevented workers from realizing acquiring a profession.

In the midst of a labour market characterized by so much churning, there were groups of skilled workers who enjoyed comparatively stable working lives. They worked in small shops or in certain branches of the industry that continued to demand 'artisans,' or at the minimum men with some amount of craft skills. They were generally organized in trade unions of local coverage.

In this paper we study a specific group of workers of the printing industry, typographers and linotypists (collectively known as compositors), who belonged to this group of 'successful' workers. These workers succeeded in maintaining continuity in both the trade they practiced and the jobs they worked in. This study addresses the question of how this group of workers managed to secure stability within the context of a labour market that revealed so much flux in occupations and during a period of challenges to traditional skilled work that arose from the expansion in the scale of the printing industry and from the introduction of machinery.

Three mutually related factors influenced the labour careers of compositors. Changes in the work process interacted with the demand for various kinds of skills. The relationship between capital and labour underwent successive periods of conflict and then negotiation. The changes culminated in the development of stable trade unions based on craft that excluded unskilled workers. The efforts of the unions led to the early development of institutional negotiation, which played a central role in the preservation of trades and the protection of jobs. We pay attention both to vertical movement between occupational categories and to the length of tenures within them.

A case study of the city of Buenos Aires permits the reconstruction of the labour careers of workers in the printing shops. Perhaps because they do not belong to the main sectors of the agricultural export economy, historians have largely neglected

the experience of these workers during the period of export-led growth. The careers presented here may or may not have been exceptional, but understanding them certainly helps to develop a more complex rendering of the labour experience.

In more general terms, the study relates the events in the workplace to the workers' own initiatives to shape it. The results of this interaction deepen the understanding of the careers of one important group of skilled workers beyond what can be deduced from the characteristics and dynamics of the Argentine labour market as a whole.

Within the context of a shift of scale from small production to the modern printing shop, this study poses the following questions: How did the division of labour and the technical innovations affect the workers' skills and job stability? How did the workers react to these changes? When did job stability begin to be appreciated by the workers and earn a place on the union's agenda? Finally, was this shift in perspective related to a shift in social expectations? Compositors may have eventually recognized that their careers no longer offered a chance for climbing the social ladder. May the idea of being a respectable salary worker for life have replaced the earlier expectation of becoming a prosperous shop owner?

The first part of the paper offers a review of the work process and the incorporation of new technology in typography—linotypes and monotypes—that occurred during the period in question. Technological change prompted conflict and then negotiations between employers and the trade union over how much control workers could exercise over the new machines. The results of these negotiations may have contributed substantially to job stability.

The second part of the study examines this thesis with an analysis of actual conditions at two large printing shops in Buenos Aires characterized by high professional and job stability where trade unions also exerted substantial influence: Ortega y Radaelli and Compañía General de Fósforos.<sup>3</sup> This study draws on sources from company personnel archives, which is rather unusual in Argentine historiography. Most of the archives of companies that have ceased production have been lost.<sup>4</sup>

The sources from the archival collections are of two types. Personnel Registries are available for both firms and cover the period from 1901 to 1930. The registries offer information on entering and leaving dates of the workers. Personnel Cards or individual files give us more detailed information on entering and leaving dates, the cause of leaving, causes for temporary interruptions of employment (lack of work, disciplinary sanctions, illness, strike, among others) and in some cases the worker's

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<sup>3</sup> The sources used in this study result from my own work of recovery and preservation of the company archive of the Compañía General de Fósforos y Fabril Financiera, which also provides sources belonging to Ortega y Radaelli. This archive is held by the Program for the Study of American Economic and Social History (PEHESA) of the Emilio Ravignani Institute of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Buenos Aires.

<sup>4</sup> Other studies of the economic and social history of industries and the labour force that employ records from company archives include Cortés Conde (1979), Gutiérrez and Korol (1988, pp. 401-424), Lobato (2001), Barbero and Felder (1992, pp. 189-203).

previous experience with other firms. These personnel cards also span a longer time interval, and they provide rich information on professional and job stability.

### **Industry and Labour**

In the period of time covered by this paper deep changes took place in the structure of the printing industry, both in terms of introduction of new technologies and of work organization. Lacking a pre-industrial past, the workers of the printing shops in Buenos Aires, in contrast to their French peers, for example, did not have a long history of guilds, corporative organization and strong craftsmanship traditions (Davies, 1993, pp. 17-32; Darnton, 1987, pp. 81-108). Their attitude toward the changes was not modelled by previous pre-industrial experience, as was the case in England in the face of industrialization. Nor can we find in Buenos Aires anything like the guild-free crafts system of the United States and Canada, which nourished a craftsmen's culture of resistance against proletarianization. Nonetheless, and in spite of these missing links, the graphic workers of Buenos Aires were not an exception. Their behaviour was comparable to what is shown by many historical studies of printing workers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first ones of the twentieth century in many different national contexts.<sup>5</sup> These studies reveal that during these periods of changes in technology and work organization, printing workers everywhere used very similar strategies for securing control of the work process and barring access of unskilled workers, children and women to the workshop.

In Buenos Aires the printing workers concentrated their union activity on the inner working of the labour process in order to control technological change, access to jobs, qualifications for jobs and mobility. Their attitude was one of establishing 'a stable social frame in which to work' (Smith, 1996, p. 260). They looked forward to guaranteeing the development of the trade and, as a consequence, a lasting labour career for them and for their sons, who were then starting as apprentices in the shops. Starting in 1907, the printing workers organized themselves in a permanent union, the *Federación Gráfica Bonaerense* (Buenos Aires Graphics Federation). There had previously been four unions, two of them grouped by nationalities (German and French), the *Federación de las Artes Gráficas* (Graphic Arts Federation – anarchist) and the *Unión Tipográfica* (Typographical Union – socialist). The last two were the most important in terms of number of affiliates and the influence they exerted on the workers at the time of raising demands. These four unions went on strike in 1906 with demands on salaries and working conditions. The strike lasted for 55 days and some 4,500 workers were involved, which represented about 85 percent of all workers in this branch of the industry in Buenos Aires. It concluded with an agreement between employers and the unions.

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<sup>5</sup> See Burr (1993, pp. 47-73), Duffy (2000), Kealey (1998, pp. 75-101), Rebérioux (1985), Smith (1996, pp. 437-445), Steinberg (1992), Zeitlin (1979, pp. 263-274), and Zerker (1986, pp. 122-130).

After the strike, the four unions joined to form the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense. From that date on, the Federation carried on most negotiations on working conditions. Even though not all the printing workers were affiliated, the agreements obtained by the Federation in the course of labour conflicts were highly influential. The union was firmly established. Owners of printing shops could not ignore or bypass it and they were forced to come to agreement with the workers in order to guarantee the development of their business. Between 1906 and 1919 working rules and standard wages were written down as regulations, and the printing industry thus became one of the first to have a formal regulation of labour.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a Joint Commission (Comisión Mixta) was established with representatives of the employers and of the different trades. It negotiated differences on the regulations and helped to settle labour conflicts. The regulations were revised every two and a half years. They set wages, rules for working in the shops and the rules for the Commission itself. The changes introduced and the agreements negotiated between employers and workers in the early 1900s lasted for seventy years until a new round of technological innovation that took place in the last decades of the century.

The printing industry started in Buenos Aires in the middle of the nineteenth century with newspapers and periodicals. The development of a market for these typically urban products can be considered a consequence of demographic growth and the increase in the social and cultural complexity of Buenos Aires. By 1914 its population exceeded 1.5 million, and it soon became a centre for the graphic arts. With the development of the educational system after 1880 literacy was extended to large sectors of the population. This resulted in the growth of the reading public, which demanded newspapers, scientific and literary publications, books and magazines.

By 1887 the total daily press run of newspapers exceeded 100,000, or about one copy for every 4 inhabitants of Buenos Aires (Sabato, 1999, p. 186). The circulation of newspapers such as *La Nación* and *La Prensa* increased further. The press run of *La Prensa* grew from 18,000 copies per day in 1887 to approximately 160,000 in 1913. By 1913, the total daily production of the morning and evening newspapers in Buenos Aires was around 520,000 copies.

The number of printing shops increased rapidly after 1880. The census of 1887 counted 14 binding shops, 19 lithographic shops (some typographic shops were also involved in lithography) and 89 printing presses, which employed 1,211 workers. In 1895 the number of shops had increased to 233 and the number of workers to 3,609. The industry expanded further and numbered 511 shops and 7,675 workers in 1914.<sup>7</sup> No further information on industrial development is available until 1935, when a new census counted 916 shops and 19,487 workers in the city of Buenos Aires. During this long period, the expansion of the printing industry was particularly remarkable during the 1920s (Villanueva, 1972, p. 457).

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<sup>6</sup> As a consequence of intense labour conflicts in the printing industry in 1919, the Regulations, which had been in force for 12 years, were suspended. This hiatus lasted for almost 10 years until negotiations between employers and workers resumed in 1928.

<sup>7</sup> *Censo* (1889). *Segundo Censo* (1895), 3, ch.11. *Tercer Censo* (1914), 7.

The census data show a large number of small shops that each employed only a few workers. In addition, the census results and other industry sources document the existence of a few major companies with a large concentration of capital and manpower. This heterogeneous composition of the industrial branches is typical of Argentina's agricultural export period.

In 1880 the newspaper and commercial/book sectors of the printing industry were fully installed and in many cases shared the same printing shops.<sup>8</sup> The range of products was quite diverse and included newspapers, periodicals, magazines, books, personal and commercial cards, advertising and gaming cards. To these traditional products were added different kinds of commercial publications, such as guides, seasonal catalogues for the department stores, cigarette packets, the traditional match box lithographs, customs labels for export goods, and white and lined accounting books.

Technological innovation followed a parallel path. Mechanization was introduced very early. By 1870, steam presses were gradually replacing manual presses. The newspaper companies were eager to introduce new technologies in order to increase printing speeds and the daily volume of production. They introduced the rotary press and the stereotyping equipment, which allowed page duplication without the need to re-compose type. The main job shops introduced the steam press and binding machinery.

Introduction of the linotype lagged. Patented by Otto Mergenthaler in 1885, it was first introduced in typography in Buenos Aires in 1901, when the newspaper *La Nación* bought 10 machines. Other newspaper companies and shops printing printed magazines with large press runs followed suit. Once it began, the progress of mechanic composition developed at great speed. By 1911, ten newspapers in Buenos Aires had installed 105 linotypes.<sup>9</sup> Even the workers' newspapers did not avoid mechanization. Both *La Vanguardia* and *La Protesta* bought linotypes for their shops (Suriano, 2001, p. 205).

A full understanding of the printing industry requires taking account of both the technologies used and the great diversity of the products involved. Each product (newspapers, business cards, catalogues, advertising and leaflets, magazines, or gaming cards) gave rise to different work processes and company organizations. Some of the shops performed all stages of the production (composition, printing and binding). Others focused on just one or two. Not just the nature of the products manufactured, but also their quality and the scale of production had a strong influence on the organization of the shops. Some shops such as Kraft, Peuser, Rosso and Ortega y Radaelli were complete multi-purpose shops and generally large. Others specialized in some specific products, such as advertising and leaflets. Scattered over the whole town were many small shops that would take on any kind of work with short production runs (Bilbao, 1990, pp. 3-4).

The production process in printing has three distinct phases: composition of the text, printing and binding. Composition evolved from manual typesetting to two

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<sup>8</sup> According to Kealy (1988, p. 82) in Canada, from 1870 on, there was an increasing separation of the two sectors, book/commercial and newspapers.

<sup>9</sup> *El Obrero Gráfico* (1911), year 3, No. 50 (September-October), p. 5.

variants of mechanization: the linotype and the monotype. The two systems co-existed during these years. In manual composition the starting point was a box full of type, which was handled by the typographer or typesetter. Manual typesetting was a complex and slow process requiring manual dexterity and mental agility. Typesetters worked with a wide range of different instruments related to the job: the composer, pliers, type, and galleys. Typesetting also demanded reading and writing skills beyond what was necessary for merely copying the original. The level of literacy far exceeded the skills provided to the general population by the few years of primary education available in Argentine schools. The task of reading the originals, which often contained annotations made by proof readers, and occasionally correcting syntax and spelling required substantial concentration and mental agility. Typesetters had to remember the position of more than one hundred characters in the different type boxes, with countless variations from country to country, between different shops and according to the language being used. They were also required to have some knowledge of page and title diagramming.

Manual composition was done as follows. The typesetter stood in front of the type box. In his left hand he held a composer, in which he placed, from left to right, the letters he took from the box. Once a whole line was set, the line was taken from the composer to the galley. This process was repeated until the necessary number of lines had been set. The galley was tightly packed and then tied with a piece of thread. It was then ready for the first proof print. After that the typesetter made the necessary corrections directly on the galley, according to the results of the proof. He repeated this process as many times as were necessary to obtain a page without errors that could then be used in the next stage of production, printing.<sup>10</sup> The new technologies—linotypes and monotypes—also required some level of skill.<sup>11</sup> The process of mechanical composition started when the operator pressed the 90 keys of the keyboard; pressing the keys made the type moulds descend from the pool and assemble in a line, ready to be cast with molten metal. Once casting was performed, the assembled line became a slug and the moulds automatically returned to their boxes in a continuous process.

Once the text was composed it went to press for the two final stages of production. The platens were first prepared and the pages were distributed for actual printing, which involved the work of the flat press mechanics.<sup>12</sup> After printing came

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<sup>10</sup> For work processes see Zimbalist (1979, pp. 103-126) and Zerker (1986, p. 122).

<sup>11</sup> Both linotypes and monotypes combine a composing machine and a type foundry. In the linotype, a single machine accomplishes both functions, where key presses make type moulds descend and assemble into lines. In the monotype, two separate machines, the keyboard and the foundry perform these functions. The keyboard, with 276 keys, is used to prepare a perforated paper roll. The perforated roll goes to the foundry where type moulds are selected according to the perforations. Type comes from the machine assembled in words and justified lines. The monotype was used for composing books, tables, scientific text and catalogues.

<sup>12</sup> 'Preparation' meant placing the plate in the press, locking it and adjusting it so that it made contact with the surface of the type evenly and with adequate pressure. This was a very complex process, especially in the flat press, since in order to level the plate it was often necessary to place supplements at various points. The second step was to prepare a mixture of water and ink, which also required adding the necessary dryers or solvents in the correct

binding, which included folding, gluing and sticking, stitching and securing the covers.<sup>13</sup>

How was this series of work processes organized? In some cases there was a well-defined division of labour within the firm, in which every task was assigned a job category with specific qualifications. This was the case in multi-purpose shops, where all of the processes and some auxiliary trades were contained in the same working place. In other cases, mostly in small shops, a single person could perform the whole process as a traditional craftsman.

Printing could also be de-centralized, in which case one shop was involved in all tasks belonging to a single process. For example, during the 1930s there was a growing number of shops dedicated exclusively to composition by linotypes, and others to printing and binding. In the period of time we are considering, binding showed an early tendency to de-centralization in the form of a putting-out system.

Did the new technologies bring about an increase in the intensity of work? Or, to put it differently, were there new ways of organizing work aimed at obtaining an increase in productivity? How did these changes affect workers' qualifications and job stability? Or, rather, was the persistence of manual processes enough to guarantee the immutability of the skills system and workers' control over the labour process? How were these matters negotiated between employers and workers? Two examples will perhaps help in trying to answer these questions. The first one concerns the ways of organizing the production process in composition by the piecework system. The second concerns the response of compositors to the introduction of the linotype.

The replacement of manual composition with technologies providing for a larger scale of production was motivated by increasing demand for printed matter and the separation of manual composition and mechanical printing, which required higher speed from the manual part of the process. Toward the end of the 1870s employers in the printing industry took some measures to satisfy this need. One of them was the hiring of typographers with lower skills and training. These were for the most part young men who had recently started as apprentices. Another one was the organization of the piecework system in typography in order to stimulate typographers to increase the pace of production. Once introduced, piecework

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proportions that varied according to the type of work. Once the ink was prepared, one had to make sure that it was evenly distributed over the surface of the inking rollers. The press itself had a set of keys that required the proper placement and adjustment before printing began. The keys were also adjusted at regular intervals once printing was started. The operator also had to check the margins of the printing area. When printing was done in colour, also the exact registration of the different colours had to be continuously checked and adjusted, which required very precise and careful handling.

<sup>13</sup> Binding started with folding, which in the case of newspapers, magazines and commercial work was usually done mechanically. Folders were then assembled and illustrations were added if they were printed separately. Folders were then tied together, either by hand stitching with a thread, or mechanically using wire staples. Hand stitching was more robust, but for magazines or commercial work of limited durability the mechanical solution was preferred. Once folders were tied together and after gluing and adding the covers, the edges were trimmed with paper guillotines.

continued to spread. In the big shops, those working by the piece were usually grouped in a different section from the rest. Piecework was accompanied by an increase in the number of semi-skilled typographers and by a division of the typographical trade into different skill levels according to the type of job performed. Typesetters working by the piece were called 'liners' (*linieros*) and were considered the lowest category of typographers.

The printing workers' union initially showed strong opposition to piecework. Given that the system found great acceptance among the liners, the union put forward alternative perspectives on the best way to attack the problem, which ranged from the regulation of piecework to outright elimination. Two different reasons prompted the willingness of liners to accept piecework. The system allowed them to increase their income at the cost of extending working hours. A prevailing ideology of personal freedom among skilled workers also played a role. A comment in *El Gráfico*, the official journal of the union, sums up the impact of this perspective on the policy towards piecework. The typographer is a man 'who works and comes to the workshop when he pleases, who does not want to work for others, who earns a lot if he chooses to work very hard, etc., etc.; that is what moves us to seek for regulation'.<sup>14</sup>

The employers, who supported piecework because it eliminated the 'laziness' of the traditional skilled worker earning a fixed salary, were open to negotiating the working conditions and wages of the liners, but would not agree to eliminate it altogether. When collective regulations were negotiated after the great strike of 1906, a wage tariff for piecework was discussed and approved. The resulting tariff was complex. It specified such details as the way of counting words to be composed according to the size and kind of font used, and whether the job involved an original or a re-print. It also established whether compensation for a particular type of work would be according to the piece or based upon a payment of salary. Statistic tables and graphs, calendars, mathematical and algebraic formulae, works on navigation, works in foreign language and, generally speaking, complex and time-consuming works were reserved for salaried workers. This was a decisive point in the negotiations, because it blocked the employer's main objective, which was to have complex work carried out by workers receiving less pay than the skilled workers. The union's strategy succeeded in defending the interests of both groups of workers. The lower-skilled liners were protected from having to compose time-consuming material under piece rates that were designed for simpler tasks. Salaried workers, who were more skilled, maintained their privileged position by monopolizing part of the production and barring competition by less skilled and inexpensive labour.

The other example, the response of compositors to the introduction of the linotype, also highlights the conflicts that took place in the first decade of the twentieth century. As seen in the previous example, these conflicts were both between workers and employers and also among different groups of workers.

The linotype threatened compositors with de-skilling and technological unemployment. A linotype is best described as a kind of special typewriter that

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<sup>14</sup> *El Gráfico*: Órgano de la Federación de las Artes Gráficas (1905), September, year II, Nr. 15, p. 1.

could be operated by workers without any particular skills in composition, including women or children. In addition, a good linotypist could supposedly match the productivity of five good typesetters. According to one of the Federation's main leaders, the effects of this innovation started to be felt around the middle of the first decade of the century. By 1905, the union estimated that the introduction of the linotype in the newspaper companies had resulted in the dismissal of about 30 percent of the typesetters. In the job and book companies, the linotype displaced about 10 percent of the typesetters. When the newspaper *La Nación* bought linotypes, its composition section had 60 workers. According to statements made by the company four-fifths of them could have been dismissed, but instead they were reassigned to manually composing the volumes of the Biblioteca Popular (Popular Library) collection appearing weekly.

However, the net effects of the new technology on employment were more limited than one might imagine. Many of the typesetters with traditional skills were not forced to change their trade, because large numbers of shops continued using the manual process or combined it with the mechanical one. The introduction of machinery also cut costs, which in turn stimulated expansion of the industry—and employment—as more consumers demanded printed matter.

In addition, typesetters employed by shops printing books or producing for the commercial market closed ranks against the recruitment of new workers. They obtained control of the process of training and hiring of the workforce for the new machines through an article included in the first Regulation signed between employers and workers in 1906. This article established that 'typographers are the only persons to be admitted for operating linotypes, and shops that begin to use these machines shall recruit the necessary operators from within their typography staff.'<sup>15</sup> Only shops that did not have enough skilled personnel could hire a skilled man from outside in order to train the new operators.

Initially, this extended control over the machines was a source of conflict between typesetters and linotypists and it prevented them from establishing a common union during. By 1908, the two sides had overcome their differences and agreed to join their two trades in a single union, which was a part of the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense.

The very small number of female linotypists, only 26 according to the 1914 census, suggests that typographers' control of jobs was effective enough to avoid recruitment of women almost completely. Government regulations that came into effect in 1908 also helped restrict entry. By classifying topography an unhealthy occupation, they effectively prohibited women and children from working in it.

The regulations of 1906 also set very detailed rules governing the use of the linotype machines. One rule restricted shops to hiring only one apprentice for every three journeymen. Another stated that typesetters were to have priority for becoming linotypists. Rules also attempted to control the training process at a level of minute detail. They set acceptable schedules for training. They also ensured that trainees were not to be compensated. Nor were companies allowed to sell the output

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<sup>15</sup> *El Obrero Gráfico: Órgano de la Federación Gráfica Bonaerense* (1908), May, year I, number 14, p. 12.

produced by trainees. Once they could compose three thousand letters per hour (after about one or two months of training), the new linotypists began to earn a salary according to the established tariff.<sup>16</sup>

The regulations on tariffs and wages were also very detailed. They specified both the minimum salary and the maximum productivity, the duration of the working day, week and month, the tariffs and the maximum duration of overtime work. After 1915, they also stipulated that only affiliated workers could be hired.

In brief, in their negotiations with employers workers in the printing industry were able to secure control of the new machines – linotype and monotype – and of the supply of jobs. The success of their efforts is not so surprising. The main employers were willing to negotiate from the first decade of the twentieth century onwards because of the brief ‘shelf-life’ of the main products of Buenos Aires’ printing shops. A strike could have devastating effects on business, since products like newspapers and magazines, which combined daily news with articles and advertising, could lose readers and advertisers and get into deep financial trouble very quickly.

The early regulation of the relationship between capital and labour was particularly effective in the largest printing shops where the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense had more influence. In these shops, one would expect to find relatively long and stable labour careers. The study of careers described in the next section confirms this view.

### **The Careers**

Information on the career patterns of workers in the printing industry is available from the records of two related firms: the Radaelli firm, which was one of Buenos Aires’ most important printing shops, and the graphic arts shop of Compañía General de Fósforos, a company that purchased the Radaelli firm in the early 1920s. Together, the records available from these firms offer information on careers that span the first half of the twentieth century.

Radaelli was one of the most important printing shops in Buenos Aires.<sup>17</sup> It was called ‘Ortega y Radaelli’ from 1901 to 1911 and then ‘Ricardo Radaelli’ until 1921. In late 1907 the firm constructed a large new plant covering 4,235 square meters outfitted with new production processes. One of the most important was photoengraving, which was then a leading technology and for which the company held exclusive rights for several years. Radaelli developed into a multi-purpose printing shop and it became the printer for most of the major magazines published during the period. Printing magazines did not allow much time between releases and required large production runs. The magazines included lots of illustrations and

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<sup>16</sup> See the Regulations published in the *Boletín de la Unión Industrial Argentina* (1906), October/November, pp. 38-50.

<sup>17</sup> Part of what is said here about the evolution of the Radaelli shop and the composition of the work force is taken from (Badoza, 2001, pp. 46-81)

other high-quality typographic material.<sup>18</sup> In short, Radaelli required modern production techniques, a large and disciplined labour force prepared for the high standards of speed and quality set by the weekly periodicals and a complex and precise organization of the workshop.

In 1921 the *Compañía General de Fósforos*, a limited liability company, purchased the Radaelli Company. The *Compañía General* was already involved in the commercial printing business. As part of its vertical integration of the manufacturing of matches, it had established a shop in the Barracas district on California Street that printed the traditional lithography of matchboxes and also produced game cards. Both of these were high-volume products until the 1920s.

The purchase of Radaelli significantly increased the company's printing business. The Radaelli workshop continued using its original premises in Paseo Colón Street from 1921 to 1926. In 1926, the personnel and machinery were merged with the company's Barracas operation. The merger of the two shops required re-modelling and enlargement of the California Street building. From 1925 to 1929 the firm installed new machinery, especially linotypes. In the printing process, typography and lithography were modified by the introduction of the two-colour press, which increased the productivity. They bought the exclusive rights to using the offset system from the German company Offset-Beka, and they introduced flat-bed colour rotogravure presses which were used to print the new supplement 'Art and Literature' of the newspaper *La Nación*, which had a minimum press run of 200,000. The firm also installed new machines for the different phases of the binding process, which were intended to save time and manpower in performing tasks that were originally performed manually or with slow machines that were unsuited to large volume production.

The *Compañía General* also implemented organizational reforms to economize on time and manpower in the printing process. It followed the general patterns of printing workshop organization found in the United States, which was then considered the Mecca of labour organization. It established a new hierarchical structure on the shop floor and introduced a modern industrial accounting system, by means of which it could measure the rate of return on every publication and for every section of the company. In 1929 the printing shop became part of *Compañía Fabril Financiera*.<sup>19</sup>

These two shops – Radaelli and the graphic arts shop of *Compañía General de Fósforos* – had different origins: the first one started as a small shop, the second one was from the beginning part of a big company. The two of them were important shops during different periods in the twentieth century, and in both cases the owners increasingly concentrated on the commercial side of the enterprise and distanced

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<sup>18</sup> In 1914 some of the main magazines were printed in the following quantities: *Caras y Caretas* 115,000, *El Hogar* 45,000, *Mundo Argentino* 124,000. According to: *Censo* (1914, 9, p. 276).

<sup>19</sup> In 1929, the *Compañía General de Fósforos* was split in two limited liability companies: the *Compañía General de Fósforos Sudamericana* and the *Compañía General Fabril Financiera*. The latter kept the vegetable oil, cotton, textile, paper and printing businesses. See *Compañía General Fabril Financiera, Memoria* (1930) and *Estatutos* (1936).

themselves from the production processes. Instead, they delegated the technical supervision of the production process to a large structure of regents and foremen. For the workers, this meant closer surveillance and greater labour discipline.<sup>20</sup>

Also the scale of hiring changed, the labour force grew. By 1908, the payroll included some 350 employees according to comments that appeared in a trade union newspaper on a 15-day labour conflict in Ortega y Radaelli during the month of July.<sup>21</sup> Other large shops employed similar numbers of workers. For example, in 1907 the labour force of the *Compañía Sudamericana de Billetes de Banco* (South-American Bank Note Company) numbered 400. By the time of the strike of 1930, the graphic arts shop of *Compañía Fabril Financiera* had grown to 2,000 workers.

For the skilled worker, conditions on the shop floor at the Radaelli and at the *Compañía General de Fósforos* differed greatly from the traditional craftsman's shop, where a single man was capable of performing the whole labour process. These typographers and mechanical compositors were hired by the most dynamic and competitive sector of the printing industry. How did their labour careers evolve?

In order to be able to answer this question, I reconstructed the labour careers of workers in the composition section of the Radaelli Company and then of the *Compañía General de Fósforos*. The Personnel Registry (or Personnel Book) of Ricardo Radaelli's Heliographic Shop provided the starting point. This two-volume registry was certified in 1919 by the Departamento Nacional del Trabajo (National Labour Department).<sup>22</sup> Of the 1,000 pages in these volumes, 641 were filled with data pertaining to the workers hired by the different sections of the shop. Each sheet had information on several items: last name, given names, birthplace, nationality, profession or job, hiring and leaving dates, hiring mechanism (recommendation, etc.), and promotions or changes between sections. With some difficulty, we could reconstruct the data of 631 of these 641 workers. Of the ten remaining sheets, seven were unusable because of their bad condition and three had been invalidated by the company.

The reconstruction showed that in Ortega y Radaelli, the great variety of production processes, the introduction of machinery and the extensive division of labour prompted hiring a workforce with both diverse skills and trained in a wide range of trades. The records also document the hiring of skilled workers whose trades were not directly related to the graphic arts and incipient demand for a more homogeneous and unskilled workforce without any particular qualifications, which could easily shift between different positions and sections within the company.<sup>23</sup> A partial reconstruction of the quantitative data also revealed the existence of a layer of

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<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the owners of small shops were personally involved in many tasks like dealing with customers, carrying the shop's accounting, buying consumables and raw materials. They also organized and supervised the work of their few dependants, and worked with them.

<sup>21</sup> *El Obrero Gráfico* (1908), year I, No. 20, p. 8. Other workers' newspapers like *La Vanguardia* and *La Protesta* gave similar figures.

<sup>22</sup> We know this registry was initialized in 1919, but we do not know precisely at which date it started to be used for the registration of personnel.

<sup>23</sup> See Sabato and Romero (1992, pp. 194-217) and Falcón (1986, pp. 102-118).

supervisory staff. The changeover to this complex organization of the labour process did not eliminate employment of workers trained in the traditional crafts. In this particular branch of industry, these workers exhibited great resilience.

The majority of workers hired by Ortega y Radaelli were native-born, although the proportion of foreign-born was higher than in the rest of the industry. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the industry hired almost exclusively Argentine workers.<sup>24</sup>

Family, friendship and nationality networks were among the most common means used to get the necessary recommendation or 'presentation' to gain access to jobs. Data in the personnel book show that 208 workers were recommended. Including the 52 workers that were recommended not by individuals, but by the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense, the total of workers receiving a recommendation increases to 300. In the hands of these skilled workers, recommendation or 'presentation' was a key tool for controlling who could enter the trade and guaranteeing that newcomers were capable of defending their same interests.

In the composition section, the total workforce registered from 1901 to 1921 amounted to 100 workers, distributed in categories and crafts according to the Table 8.1. The categories used in the personnel records were those of the traditional hierarchy system: apprentice, half-journeyman, and journeyman. Each category expressed both the skills a worker acquired throughout his labour career, until he reached the top of the hierarchical pyramid, and the kind of work he could perform.

**Table 8.1 Composition of the workforce by level of skill and craft (in percent)**

Craft	Level of Skill			
	Journeyman	Half-Journeyman	Apprentice	Machine Assistant
Typographer	44	4	11	
Linotypist	27		4	
Monotypist	4		1	
Linotype Mechanic	2		1	2
Total	77	4	17	2

*Source:* Based on data from the Personnel Registry of Establecimiento Heliográfico Ricardo Radaelli.

*Note:* The table includes data for 101 employees in the composition section.

There were few half-journeymen, and the percentage of apprentices was higher among the typographers than in mechanical composition. The study of skilled labour must always consider the degree of control each group of workers has over recruitment, since this control determines to a great extent the structure of the

<sup>24</sup> Our reconstruction confirmed what had already been stated in 1909 in a report published by the *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo* (Bulletin of the National Labour Department) on labour conditions in printing and lithographic shops. The report stated that there was a sustained flow of printing workers from neighbouring countries (Uruguay and Brazil) and also from Europe, mainly Italy and Spain. See *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo*, (1909, 30<sup>th</sup> September, p. 327).

workforce. In the case of linotypists, for example, the low percentage of apprentices was due to restrictive hiring mechanisms that the skilled workers managed to establish.

The large share of journeymen in the total can be explained by the abundance of high-quality work for which skilled men were necessary. The large number of typographers speaks of the relative importance of the manual composition process, which was not relegated to a marginal role by the introduction of new technology.

A look at the distribution by craft shows the division of the composition trade into two groups: (manual) typographers and mechanical compositors. The mechanical compositors also included the mechanics, who were in charge of maintaining and repairing the linotypes. The percentage of linotypists in mechanical composition is greater than that of monotypists; this is explained by the fact that the linotype was the machine of choice for periodical publications, which was a major part of Radaelli's production palette.

If we consider the date at which they were first hired, most of these workers belong to age categories ranging from young to adult, 14 to 49 years, with a majority of cases in the range from 18 to 37 years. Regarding nationality, the workers of the composition section could be classified in decreasing order of frequency as Argentines (47 percent), Italians (24 percent), Spaniards (19 percent) and Uruguayans (6 percent). The nature of the trade required literate workers who were fluent in the Spanish language, and that is why three-quarters of the total workforce came from Spanish-speaking countries.<sup>25</sup>

The sources from Radaelli are not so well suited to establishing mobility between categories (from apprentice through journeyman). The case of Arturo Rozzi, who joined the company as a typography apprentice on 31 October 1911 does offer one example. Born in Buenos Aires, he climbed the ladder from apprentice to half-journeyman to journeyman, although the dates of each promotion are not known. This example offers a contrast with the experience of workers in the binding section, where most of the young apprentices and advanced apprentices had temporary jobs. The simple and tedious nature of their work degraded the content of skills in their category. For them the connection between job and labour career had been disrupted, and the restructuring of the work actually precluded a progression from apprentice through to a skilled binder.

The records also show that some journeymen were promoted to supervisory positions as second-foremen in typography (see Table 8.2). Upward mobility could mean either climbing the ladder of skills within the craft or jumping to the first level of the supervisory staff. The effort to summarize the labour careers from the point of view of tenure and job stability encountered a serious obstacle. The personnel book showed no date of departure for 49 percent of the workers. A reasonable assumption here is that, by the date of the last entries in the book, many of these people were still working.

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<sup>25</sup> Sean Wilentz points out that already in 1855 most composition workers in the city of New York had to be literate in English. This requirement kept Germans and poor Irishmen out of the composition rooms. About half the workers were native, and one third of the immigrants came from England, Scotland and Wales. See Wilentz (1984, pp. 129-132).

**Table 8.2 Promotions to supervisory categories**

Name	Starting date	Starting section	Promoted to
Dablanc, Camilo	16/01/1914	Typography	Second foreman, composition
Amoretti, Antonio	20/01/1903	Typography	Second foreman, composition

*Source:* Personnel registry, Establecimiento Heliográfico Ricardo Radaelli.

*Note:* Dates given as dd/mm/yyyy.

However, there still are doubts about the completeness of the records, since the years from 1917 to 1920 showed a great turnover of personnel. If we consider the cases of the 33 workers whose tenures were less than one year in the whole period from 1901 to 1921 we see that, with only one exception, all of them had joined and left the company within those years. In 1917 nine joined seven left the company. In 1918, six joined and eight left. In 1919, 12 joined and five left. Finally, in 1920 five joined and 13 left the company.

The short tenures of these workers would apparently suggest labour careers more similar to those found in industries that employed unskilled manpower.<sup>26</sup> However, this is not the case. The turnover in 1919 could be explained by a high level of conflict between labour and employers in the printing industry that occurred in that year.<sup>27</sup> The conflicts originated in the demands of printing workers and expressions of solidarity with other workers. As it turns out, many of the dates for departure dates were in a semester in which many strikes occurred, and others came soon after. However, not all dates of departure are noted. For example, the typographer Ruggiero Rúgilo was also a union leader who joined Radaelli in February 1919. He was fired immediately after the strikes of the first half of the year.

Any one of the events between 1906 and 1921, including changes in size and mechanization of the company, two general strikes of the union in 1906 and 1919, and one strike limited to this shop in 1908, could have had a profound effect on the workers at Radaelli. Indeed, some lost a secure job and were forced to look for a new

<sup>26</sup> Lobato (2001, pp. 136-137).

<sup>27</sup> During the first half of 1919 printing workers fought for their own demands, and also supported a boycott movement against a large department store, Gath y Chaves, which was the target of a strike by its workers. As noted by Marotta, this boycott was launched by the Federación Obrera de la República Argentina (Argentine Workers Federation), and it was mainly supported by two trade unions: the Federación Obrera Marítima (Shipping Workers Federation), who refused to unload from the ships goods destined to Gath y Chaves, and the Federación Gráfica Bonaerense (Buenos Aires Graphics Federation), who refused to print advertising material for the store. Of all commercial printers, Radaelli was paralyzed because this shop printed all of Gath y Chaves' catalogues and the workers strictly enforced the boycott. This conflict, which occurred in the first half of 1919, affected the employers themselves. In fact, it led to a division between the big printing shops. Those affiliated with the printers' section of the UIA (Unión Industrial Argentina or Argentine Industry Union) favoured enforcement of the 12-year old regulations on wage tariffs and work in the shops, and were thus inclined to reach an agreement with the Federation. Others, however, preferred a breach in the relationship with the trade union. See Marotta (1961, 2, pp. 249-256).

one. In the long run, however, and with the exception of some periods of conflict, most managed to continue practicing the craft they had learned at an early age and retain their jobs.

How does this story proceed after 1921? It was very important to follow up the careers of workers that had started in Ortega y Radaelli for whom no date of departure was noted in the personnel records. The Personnel Registry of *Compañía General de Fósforos - Talleres Gráficos* (General Matches Company – Printing Shops), filled in much of the information missing in the earlier volume. The registry is a big volume where all skilled and unskilled workers joining and leaving the company in the 1920s are registered through approximately July 1930. Adding this registry to data from the predecessor company provided an answer to a first question: whether there had been continuity in jobs after the shop changed ownership and the two shops were merged. By looking up the workers in the registry we were able to complete the labour careers of 25 out of the 47 cases for which the information in the Radaelli records was incomplete.

**Table 8.3 The distribution of job tenures from 1901 to 1930**

Tenure	Number	Percentage
Up to 1 year	33	41.77
More than 1, up to 5 years	9	11.39
More than 5, up to 10 years	7	8.86
More than 10, up to 15 years	6	7.59
More than 15 years	24	30.38
TOTAL	79	100.00

*Source:* Personnel registries of *Establecimiento Heliográfico Ortega y Radaelli* and *Compañía General de Fósforos – Talleres Gráficos*.

*Note:* Total cases are 101. Cases with unknown leaving date number 22. Table percentages are relative to 79 cases with known leaving date or date of career end.

Table 8.3 gives us a better perspective of job stability and a more accurate measure of continuity within the craft for the workers hired by Radaelli between 1901 and 1921. The large incidence of very long tenures (more than 15 years) is specially remarkable and similar to what we can find in other groups of skilled workers like the train drivers organized in *La Fraternidad* (Suriano, 1991, p. 95).

The discussion thus far has focused on summarizing the data on the labour force collected from the personnel registries, which offer a global view of lasting careers in the long run. Another source, the Personnel Cards of *Compañía Fabril Financiera*, offer a perspective on individual careers of the oldest workers, which allow us to study some of the careers in the composition room. These data are fragmentary, since many workers' cards are missing due to company cleanup procedures. In some of these stories, the details of the dates of hiring and departure show the effects of two strikes: the 1919 strike at Radaelli and a strike for the recognition of health hazards in typography from July to September 1930 when the shop was under the

ownership of *Fabril Financiera*.<sup>28</sup> Even though strikes could frequently interrupt labour careers, as can be seen from this table, the most skilled workers usually recovered their jobs a few months after being dismissed, like Bettati, Rodríguez and Hermida in 1930, and Toncedo in 1919 and 1930. In other cases strikes were an occasion for changes of employer, as can be seen in the cases of Loréfice, who joined Radaelli after the 1908 strike, and Hermida, who joined in 1919.

**Table 8.4 Some cases of job tenures from 1901 to 1949**

Last name	Position	Periods of Employment					
		From	To	From	To	From	To
Bértola	Typographer	2/01/11	31/12/49				
Rodríguez	Typographer	12/01/13	22/07/30	14/01/31	03/04/36		
Sampaoli	Typographer	5/11/17	23/09/23	08/08/27	5/04/40		
Toncedo	Monotypist	20/12/11	31/03/19	05/03/20	16/07/30	02/02/31	08/04/44
Loréfice	Monotypist	1/11/08	20/06/23	12/08/32	30/09/49		
Bettati	Linotypist	15/08/16	15/07/30	18/09/30	30/04/46		
Hermida	Linot. Mech.	12/03/19	15/07/30	9/01/31	11/02/32		

Source: Personnel Cards, *Compañía General Fabril Financiera – Talleres Gráficos*

Note: Dates are given as dd/mm/[19]yy.

Two other cases show longer dismissal periods during the 1920s, for unknown reasons. However, in all cases when they re-joined the company the workers returned to the same section, job and category they had held when dismissed. This provides evidence for the statement that it was not frequent for composition workers to change their trade or to circulate through various sections and machines before

<sup>28</sup> The great printing workers' strike of 1930 was intended to win enforcement, in certain branches of the industry, of the laws on health conditions that had been passed in 1928. The *Compañía Fabril Financiera*, with more than 2,000 workers, was the main shop involved in the strike that came to an end with the military coup of 6<sup>th</sup> September 1930. 'It was a dramatic strike, a strike where the personnel of *Fabril* were able to show their resources of combativeness and solidarity, since more than 2,000 fought to defend 300 typographers. Meetings of striking workers were held in the *Centro Socialista de la Tercera* (Third Socialist Center), which by the time had a big place in *Montes de Oca* street near the corner of *California* street, 300 meters away from the large printing shop.' Interview with René Stordeur by Luis Alberto Romero, for the Oral History Project (Romero, 1971, pp. 53-54). Stordeur was one of the main printing workers' trade union leaders, as well as a prominent socialist leader. A few days before the shop was completely paralyzed, the following comment was registered in the minutes of the Board of Management: 'As it is of public knowledge, given that almost all our personnel is affiliated with the *Federación Gráfica Bonaerense*, it is likely that in a few days all our workers will be on strike, and it is nothing but logical to assume that within a few hours the strike will be extended to the whole graphic trade' (Minute Nro. 28, 7/16/1930, Folio 398, *Minutes of the Board of Management Nro.5*, *Compañía General de Fósforos*).

finding a job in which to remain for some time, as was usually the case with unskilled workers.<sup>29</sup>

One of these leading cases is typographer Enrique Bértola, born on 2 April 1889, in Sale, Alessandria, Italy, who immigrated to Argentina in 1906.<sup>30</sup> When he came he already possessed the skills of the trade, since from that year on we find him working as a typographer. He always worked in renowned printings shops, although much smaller than Radaelli and with frequent labour conflicts, as we can see in the newspapers of that time. We do not know if his job changes during his first years were stimulated by these conflicts or by the desire to obtain higher earnings. Once he joined Radaelli he stayed with the company and remained through the two successive changes in ownership. As the card shows, he was promoted to the second man in charge. He kept this position until he retired.

**Table 8.5 Labour career of Enrique Bértola**

Period of Employment		Company	Position
From	To		
23/12/1906	28/02/1907	Tipografía Roma	Typographer
01/03/1907	30/11/1909	Martlok	Typographer
03/12/1909	19/01/1911	Tragant	Typographer
20/01/1911	19/09/1921	Radaelli	Typographer
20/09/1921	31/12/1928	C. Gral. de Fósforos	Typographer
01/01/1929	31/12/1949	C. Fabril Financiera	Second in charge of Typography

*Source:* Personnel Card, Compañía General Fabril Financiera – Talleres Gráficos

*Note:* Dates gives as dd/mm/yyyy.

The career of the monotypist-founder Juan Loréface offers another good example. He joined the company in November 1908 and retired in September 1949. He was born on 5 September 1887, in Modica, Ragusa, Italy. He had only a primary school education. He arrived in Argentina in 1908. Although there is no information on his previous work experience, it can be assumed that his skills in composition had already been acquired in his home country before he emigrated at age 21. His personnel card in Compañía Fabril Financiera, his last employer and where he remained until 1949, allows us to define his labour career. The registry shows that he worked as a monotypist over a period of 37 years and seven months. He spent 14 years and 7 months at Radaelli and then he moved to Peuser, where he worked for about 7 years as a monotypist. In 1932 he re-joined Fabril Financiera, where he worked as a monotypist for 16 years up to his retirement.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Tables presented by Mirta Lobato for the period 1931-1945 show the persistence of certain traits, among them, the large share of workers who remained less than one year in their jobs. In the case of the Swift meat packing plant, this percentage reached 83 percent for men and 77.3 percent for women. Lobato also points out that during the 1930s turnover continued, albeit with some differences from the previous period. '[T]he number of times that the same person could join and leave the company increased' (Lobato, 2001, pp. 210-213).

<sup>30</sup> Personnel Registry, Folio No. 36 and Personal Data File No. 105 of C.G.F.F.

<sup>31</sup> Personnel Registry, Folio No. 65 and Personal Data File No. 934 of C.G.F.F.

Arturo Bettati, who was born in Italy, joined Radaelli on 15 August, 1916, and retired from *Compañía Fabril Financiera* on 30 April, 1946. He always worked as a linotypist, with the exception of a period of seven months in 1939, when he performed as a monotypist journeyman.<sup>32</sup>

Eugenio Ressonaglio, a native Argentine, was born in the city of La Plata, capital of the province of Buenos Aires. He joined Radaelli as a typographer on 8 December 1919, but his card does not show a date of departure. He next appears in the personnel records on 2 May, 1928, when he began work for the *Compañía General de Fósforos - Talleres Gráficos* (Printing Workshops) in the composition section, as a typographer. He stayed with the company until the 1930 strike, when he was fired. He was re-hired several months later, in January 1931. In 1935 he was promoted to second chief of typography, a position that he kept until he died in 1939.<sup>33</sup>

The description of these stories does not pretend to be taken as representative of all the cases embraced by this study. Its purpose is just to examine some individual examples of labour careers. They show a clear tendency toward professional and job stability.

They also suggest that the companies under examination offered comparatively good salaries and working conditions that would favour longer tenures. In fact, as early as 1902 the *Compañía General de Fósforos* established a retirement system funded by the company. Its coverage was increased in 1920, when it was called 'Régimen Provisorio de Jubilaciones y Subsidios' (Provisional Retirement and Benefits System). This system provided both retirement and a one-time life insurance allowance that was granted to the worker's main heirs: wife, parents or children. The *Compañía General* also promoted a mutual aid society with which workers could voluntarily affiliate. In 1926, the company also started to loan funds to workers to finance the construction of homes. These initiatives were aimed at social welfare, which was not provided by the state. In some cases they were resisted by trade unions, which viewed them as labour retention mechanisms that could discourage workers from going on strike for fear of losing their benefits.<sup>34</sup>

The fact that men with long tenures were frequently fired during the strikes show that these skilled workers' loyalties were closely tied to the interests of their crafts, which they apparently considered more important than their individual job stability and careers.

## **Conclusions**

This study focuses on a particular company in a specific industrial branch. It pays close attention to the complex changes that took place in production, labour and union strategies. The focus on the details of changes at the work place allowed an

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<sup>32</sup> Personnel Registry, Folio No. 40 and Personal Data File No. 170 of C.G.F.F.

<sup>33</sup> Personnel Registry, Folio No. 534 and Personal Data File No. 137 of C.G.F.F.

<sup>34</sup> Source: *Compañía General de Fósforos*, Libro de Actas de Directorio (Minutes of the Board of Management) Nro.5.

exploration of many different aspects of the development of labour careers for a group of skilled workers.

Census data for 1887 and 1935, two years that include most of the period covered by this study, document a dramatic expansion of the industry. The number of printing shops grew by 7.5 times and employment in printing grew 16 times. Rising demand for printed matter fuelled the expansion of the industry. The structure and production of the large shops became increasingly complex, which stimulated the multiplication of processes, the introduction of machinery and the division of labour. The consequence of these changes was a more heterogeneous structure of the labour force, both in terms of trades and skills. In this context skilled compositors were subject to the pressures of employers. Employer decisions to hire young and less skilled men (and even women) and establish more rigid shop discipline with the help of foremen were only two of the strategies used to erode the privileged position skilled workers enjoyed in the composition process.

In response to this threat, the union's activity was aimed at reasserting authority and control of the work process. The union sought to avoid the threat of de-skilling and worked to guarantee good working conditions and trade and job stability. After the long 1906 strike and subsequent negotiations with the employers, compositors managed to control the new machines—linotypes and monotypes—and the supply of jobs.

This case study underscores the importance of literacy, high skill levels, the short shelf life of many printed products and the early organization of crafts-based unions in the development and shaping of career profiles in the printing industry. As can be seen from the descriptions of negotiations, the union was very clever at unifying the interests of different groups of workers, while employers tended to favour negotiation over conflict, due to the prohibitive cost of strikes and the highly competitive nature of their market.

Even recognizing the differences between printing workers in Buenos Aires and their peers in the French corporation, we may reproduce here Ségrestin's comments on French typographers: 'from the beginning, there has been a double ambition: on one hand, to strictly organize access to the jobs and the development of careers, on the other, to regulate in technical terms the incumbency of each professional function and the tariff for each job.'<sup>35</sup>

In contrast with the high occupational turnover shown by labour market studies for the last years of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century in Argentina, the manual and mechanical compositors studied here, in spite of some temporary discontinuities, had long and stable labour careers in the long run. The printing companies, on the other hand, had come a long way from the first small-scale artisan shops.

The study reveals little vertical mobility. This was due mainly to the effectiveness of the negotiated restrictions on the recruitment and work of

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<sup>35</sup> '...', depuis l'origine, la double ambition d'organiser strictement l'accès au métier et le déroulement des carrières, et de tenter de codifier en termes techniques les charges inhérentes à chaque fonction professionnelle et les rémunérations relatives à ces charges' (Ségrestin, 1985, p. 34)

apprentices. The union exerted considerable influence on the development of careers.

The fact that workers with long job tenures were involved in the union's general and shop strikes indicates strong ties between individual careers and the fate of the workers as a group. This is probably explained by the fact that by the middle of the twentieth century, most workers in the printing industry had already abandoned any expectations of social promotion. The careers of pioneers of the Buenos Aires industry such as Peuser, Kraft and Coni, who had become prominent shop owners based on their knowledge of the trade, were no longer relevant for their own lives. The condition of wageworker gradually came to be considered permanent rather than temporary. As a consequence, the union's activity focused on securing stable jobs and good living and working conditions.

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