

Another World is Possible: The Ceramics of Zanon

By Raúl Zibechi | January 20, 2006

On some occasions, rare though they are, the slogan “Another world is possible,” becomes reality. The workers of a ceramics factory who took control of the company and have been functioning as a cooperative for four years now, demonstrate that even working for a large, high-tech business, it is possible to create another life.

“The poetry of life can be larger than the poetry of paper,” said the Argentine poet Juan Gelman, upon contemplating “a square meter of poetry” impressed into ceramic tile that the workers of Zanon take wherever they go as a gift. When he learned his poetry decorated the 25 squares of ceramics, he wrote emotionally: “Never in my life did I imagine that I would see my poems published on ceramics. Never in my life did I imagine that the workers of a reclaimed factory would interrupt their work in order to make it happen. It appears my imagination fell short.”

The more-than-five-year struggle of the workers of Zanon Ceramics has much of the makings of a lyric poem. They had to confront a successful Italian businessman, labor unions from the Neuquén Province (in southern Argentina, two kilometers away from Buenos Aires), and governmental authorities and the police before they became the country’s largest reclaimed factory, and the most successful from a “business” standpoint.

Zanon is Argentina’s most important ceramics factory, covering almost 20 acres (80,000 square meters) or 9 hectares, and utilizing the latest technology: mobile production lines for transporting the tiles, mechanical Caterpillars and robotic cars that slide along rails, robots that impress different patterns into the clay, gigantic funnels for mixing, and automatic kilns. The large machines are run, nevertheless, through cooperative rather than hierarchical structures.

The Look from the Outside

At first glance, the experience of Zanon Ceramics is hardly different from other businesses taken over by their workers—a total of 200 in Argentina. Perhaps the most important feature is tied to the recuperation of the labor union by the workers. In Argentina, labor unions do not

defend the laborers, but rather, the businessmen, and the Labor Union of Workers and Ceramics Employees of Neuquén (which unites four factories in the province) was not the exception. The company paid an extra salary to the union leaders and made donations to the union to ensure that there would be no conflict.

Within the factory, fears ran high, recall workers Mario Balcazza and Jose Luis Urbina: “If the boss told a worker he had to stay 16 hours to work, he had to, because if not, the next day they would suspend him.” When they began to put together a list of alternative candidates to run in the union elections in 1998, internal repression spiked drastically: “If you spoke with someone from the union, the company marked you and then fired you, and no one would defend you because that kind of behavior would also get you fired,” says Balcazza.¹ But finally, more than 60% of the 300 workers opted to renovate the union and distance the bureaucrats.

And so began another chapter of history. The new union would not allow itself to be bought or intimidated by the company. It made the appropriate denunciations when illegal actions were taken, and it gained the confidence of the workers. In order to overcome difficult operational and commercial situations, the company intensified the rhythm of work, which caused numerous work-related accidents. Starting in 2000, the chain of events came to a head: an employee died in the factory without medical attention because the business, which runs 24 hours a day, did not even have an ambulance or doctor on hand. When Daniel Ferras, age 22, passed away, the workers stopped production for eight days demanding, and finally receiving, an ambulance and nurse. Afterwards, Zanon began to get behind on its wage payments (up to three months without pay) until September of 2001 when it decided to turn off the kilns.



The proposal of Zanon Ceramics was to downsize to just 60 employees, but the workers interpreted this as a way of “cleaning out” the labor union. By that time, Zanon had incurred substantial debts with the provincial government, which had lent money to the company so it could pay back wages. The workers rejected the layoffs, burnt the telegrams in front of the Presidential Palace, erected a tent in front of the company for five months, and, thanks to a judicial seizure of 40% of the ceramic stock, they began to sell it off to compensate for their lost salaries. Nevertheless, in spite of having gone months without their salaries, a section of the ceramicists donated their pay to restore the provincial hospital, while the unemployed workers from the Movement of Unemployed Workers (MTD, for its initials in Spanish) of Neuguen provided the labor.

In March of 2002, 220 of the 330 workers decided to occupy the factory and began production “under worker control.” Through an assembly, they all agreed to receive the same salary, and formed commissions on sales, administration, security, expenditures, production, planning, safety and hygiene, and public relations. The indigenous Mapuches, who, up to that moment had been degraded and exploited by the ceramics company, gave the workers at large access to their clay quarries. On April 5, 2002, the first production of 20,000 square meters of tiles left the factory. Three months later they produced 120,000 square meters, half of what the company had produced under the previous owners.

The Role of the Community

From the point of view of the production of growth, the development of Zanon under the ownership of its workers has been a success: at the moment they are producing 300,000 square meters of tile, exceeding previous production levels, and they expect to reach 400,000 square meters in the near future. With help from the Universities of Comahue (Neuguén) and Buenos Aires, they have reclaimed and updated the production process, and in two years they invested 300,000 dollars into the maintenance and improvement of machinery. From the 300 accidents per year that occurred under previous ownership, they have brought the number down to 33, and there has not been a single death, whereas before, approximately one worker died every month.

Under the management of the workers, various new tile designs have been introduced. In the former era, European and Italian medieval designs prevailed.

However, when the workers took control of the designs, they began making changes, implementing Mapuche designs—created in conjunction with Mapuche communities themselves—with the objective of restoring the culture of a marginalized culture and paying homage to those who had offered their reserves of clay to the ceramicists.

One notable difference between Zanon and other businesses recovered by their employees is its relationship with the community. The factory has legally changed its name to Fasinpat (Fábrica Sin Patrón, or Factory Without Owner), become a cooperative, and started making a countless number of donations: to hospitals, schools, nursing homes, soup kitchens for the general public and for children, to indigenous groups and groups with disabilities, firefighters, and the Red Cross of Neuguén. The Zanon workers awarded thousands of square feet of ceramics as a sign of recognition for help they had received and because they believe the profits of a business should be returned to the community. The most important and emblematic donation was the construction of a health center for the neighborhood of Nueva España (New Spain). Under the guidance of the community members—400 families who had for 40 years run a first aid center—the Fasinpat employees donated the materials and constructed a health center for the members of the neighborhood. Moreover, when they need to hire more employees, they call on the organizations for the unemployed and the members of the neighborhoods to hear their proposals. In this way, the 100 new positions created so far have been filled by young people who have had a difficult time inserting themselves into the job market.

But the community also supports Fasinpat. The factory is open to all who wish to visit it. Each week students and people from all over Argentina (and a good number of foreigners) arrive at the Zanon plant to see and experience one of the few modern factories—totally automated and with some robotic processes—in the hands of the workers. In turn, when the police attempted to remove the workers on April 8, 2003, thousands of neighbors surrounded the factory to stop them. Soon after, 9,000 people gathered for a rock festival inside the factory to show the solidarity of community with the workers.

Currently, they maintain a website, host a radio show, and distribute a monthly newspaper with national circulation.² They have also produced several videos relating various aspects of their experiences. They maintain a

good relationship with other worker-recovered businesses and they frequently take trips to tell the story of their experience and to meet other workers in similar situations. They recently participated in the First Latin American Gathering of Worker-Recovered Factories, which took place on October 27-29 in Caracas, Venezuela.

Journey to the Center of the Manufacturing Monster

In the pamphlet “Zanon under worker control,” Zanon workers explain their work methodology: “We are interested in letting you know that behind each ceramic tile there is a history and a reality that has made it possible for the wheel to keep on turning. All processes and decisions are in the hands of the workers. We are the ones who decide what to buy, how to sell, what and how to produce.” Perhaps the major difference between Zanon-Fasinpat and other companies is the organization of the production process: “This factory is an intricate machine where each one contributes his part, where there are no hierarchies and where the commitment to and responsibilities of work determine the quality of the product and the future of our management.”

The differences between the current and previous managements are striking. A former employee recalls, “We were not allowed to leave or go to the bathroom. The pathways were marked out with different colors. Red indicated places where there were automatic machines and you had to move with caution, and blue was for places you could go. Back then, the kiln operators had to wear red clothes, electricians green, and so forth. That way, they could tell if someone from another sector was somewhere they weren’t supposed to be. It was like a jail.”³ The managers were on the upper floor, in offices with glass windows so they could keep watch, and close by were the union organizers, who followed on the heels of all the workers.

When the workers took over production, the assemblies of each sector began naming coordinators to take charge of the production process and dialogue with their peers when problems arise. Every few months, the coordinators rotate out so that after a certain amount of time, each person has had a shift as coordinator. According to those interviewed, the coordinator earns the same salary as the rest but has more responsibilities.

Carlos Saavedra, who was general coordinator of the whole factory, recognizes that the duties require more time than normal, and adds, “I do not control anyone and no one controls me. We simply all report the work that we do so it can be accounted for. The numbers are clear. Anyone can see them. Whether I am coordinator or not is a decision made by the assembly, and if I am not, then that is their decision. Everyone does what he or she is asked.”⁴ Now, instead of control, the workers of Zanon have created mutual confidence and responsibility.

The factory is divided into 36 sectors that work during three 8-hour shifts. Each sector has its own coordinator. “Each Monday there is a coordinating meeting and there they decide what each shift needs; problems of individual sectors are resolved and if they cannot be resolved, they are brought before an assembly of all the shifts. But the final product that goes to market is the responsibility of everyone, not just the person who makes it, because we all work on the same level, in conjunction with each other from the raw clay until the final ceramic piece is finished and put up for sale.”⁵

Once a month, the factory calls a day-long meeting in which every member participates. It is the most important meeting, and it covers all topics—from the type of footwear necessary for each section, to the purchases they will make, and external actions of solidarity in which they will participate. “The social, political, and production aspects are all discussed. For each point, we have a specific order that we go in, and we will not adjourn the meeting until every last issue is agreed upon,” recount the workers. Nevertheless, they recognize that this way of functioning—democratic, participatory, and horizontal—requires a lot of energy: “It is exhausting, but it is productive because you find solutions to all of the problems debating them with everyone. It is worse to let time go by because everyone ends up with doubts. There are many things that probably are not understood immediately; there are sectors that manage money, expenditures, sales, administration. To do this, we assigned two individuals, whom we call auditors, to manage the expenses. Each month, they produce a report of how much is being spent and bought. This report is given to demonstrate transparency to everyone. If there is money left over, we can use it to fix machinery or buy raw materials. And everything is resolved at the section assembly or general assembly.”

The assembly established some rules for coexistence. Everyone must arrive at the factory 15 minutes before

their shift begins and cannot leave until 15 minutes after it technically ends, so that they can find out or relay the news of the day to members of a different shift. Two examples demonstrate the achievements and difficulties of this system: on one occasion they were forced to make a painful decision and fire an employee who had been stealing, but on another “they paid for a worker with addiction problems to go into treatment and the employee was able to continue working.”⁶

As strange as it may seem, the time dedicated to equal debate improves the level of production per hour, something that goes against the current of the hegemonic business model. Perhaps because, as Saavedra notes, “hours no longer mean what they used to. Back then, I worked 12 hours and returned home feeling exploited and destroyed. Now, if I return home tired, it is a different kind of tiredness. Because inside you is passing a caravan of satisfactions that is sometimes difficult to explain.”⁷ Before, when the horn sounded indicating the end of a shift, the workers left running to their houses so they could forget about work. “Now I stay longer even when I don’t have to,” says Saavedra, implying that work can exceed being just an obligation and become a satisfaction. For his part, the assembly-line worker Juan sums up many of the feelings of the workers: “Back then, I would pass a ceramicist on the line, and he was just a ceramicist. Period. Now, each ceramicist that I pass on the line is like something of ours in its rightful place, something that belongs to you.”⁸

Today, the ex-Zanon workers hope that the Argentine government will decide to recognize their status and let them to continue to operate under their own control. They hope that someday the State, which to this day has yet to make a purchase from them, can become a client that will contribute to the growth of a project that is demonstrating that “another world really is possible.”

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END NOTES

- ¹ Entrevista personal a Mario Balcazza y José Luis Urbina.
- ² El periódico se llama Nuestra Lucha y la página web es www.obrerosdezanon.org.
- ³ Hernán López Echagüe, ob. cit. p. 178.
- ⁴ Carlos Magnani, ob. cit. pp. 143-44.
- ⁵ Entrevista personal a Mario Balcazza y José Luis Urbina.
- ⁶ Lavaca, Sin Patrón, ob. cit. p. 40.
- ⁷ Carlos Magnani, p. 144.
- ⁸ Analía Cafardo y Paula Domínguez, Autogestión obrera en el siglo XXI, ob. cit. p. 36.

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