


## Life and Work in Times of Distress: A Qualitative Exploration (2022-2023)

### Vida y trabajo en tiempos de malestar: Una exploración cualitativa (2022-2023)

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**Abstract:** This article examines expressions of social distress in contemporary Argentina and their relationship with political transformations, particularly the rise of radical right-wing leadership. Through a qualitative study based on three focus groups conducted between 2022 and 2023, it analyzes the experiences of workers in precarious conditions: low-skilled wage earners, independent professionals, and digital platform workers. The findings reveal a structural tension between the abstract valuation of work as a source of dignity and self-worth, and the concrete conditions of labor precarity, which intensified after the pandemic. Participants express distress regarding income insufficiency, inaccessibility to homeownership, absence of care infrastructure, and perceived arbitrariness in social policies. These dissatisfactions are articulated in individualized terms, disconnected from collective transformation horizons. The study demonstrates how eroding social protections and inability to project stable futures generate affective configurations that contribute to the delegitimization of democratic mechanisms for resolving social problems. The conclusions highlight the urgency of reformulating labor and social protection policies, while recognizing current difficulties in constructing collective alternatives amid growing social fragmentation and political disaffection.

**Keywords:** Argentina, everyday life, work, social protection, subjective distress, labor precarity.

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina las expresiones de malestar social en la Argentina contemporánea y su relación con transformaciones políticas, particularmente el ascenso de liderazgos de derecha radicalizada. A través de un estudio cualitativo basado en tres grupos focales realizados entre 2022 y 2023, analiza las experiencias de trabajadores/as en condiciones de precariedad: asalariados de baja calificación, profesionales independientes y trabajadores de plataformas digitales. Los hallazgos revelan una tensión estructural entre la valoración abstracta del trabajo como fuente de dignidad



y “autovalía”, y las condiciones concretas de precarización laboral intensificadas tras la pandemia. Los participantes expresan malestar ante la insuficiencia de ingresos, la inaccesibilidad a la vivienda propia, la ausencia de infraestructura de cuidados y la percepción de arbitrariedad en políticas sociales. Estas insatisfacciones se articulan de manera individualizada, desconectadas de horizontes colectivos de transformación. El estudio demuestra cómo la erosión de protecciones sociales y la incapacidad de proyectar futuros estables generan configuraciones afectivas que nutren la deslegitimación de mecanismos democráticos de resolución de problemas sociales. Las conclusiones señalan la urgencia de reformular políticas laborales y de protección social, reconociendo las dificultades actuales para construir alternativas colectivas en un contexto de creciente fragmentación social y desafección política.

**Palabras clave:** Argentina, vida cotidiana, trabajo, protección social, malestar subjetivo, precariedad laboral.

## Introduction

In Argentina, the emergence of radical right-wing political leaderships, characterized by neoliberal economic agendas and culturally conservative government programs, has prompted the formulation of various hypotheses aimed at explaining both the popular support they generate and their effectiveness in reconfiguring public debate around social problems (Semán, 2023; Ipar & Wegelin, 2023; Murillo, 2021). Recent research suggests that a growing sense of social malaise —expressed in terms such as “negative affects”, “discontent”, “weariness”, or “sad passions”— constitutes a core component of the complex ideological assemblages that have sustained these processes of social transformation (Dubet, 2020; Alles, 2021; Kessler & Vommaro, 2024; Macon, 2025).

From these perspectives, social malaise is understood as a key factor in explaining two interrelated phenomena. First, it has contributed to the conditions of polarization that enabled the electoral ascent of authoritarian political options (Kessler & Vommaro, 2024). Second, it has fostered a degree of public tolerance of, and even support for, structural adjustment measures that intensify inequality and erode basic rights (Bartolotta & Gago, 2023; Stefanoni, 2024). Within this context, tracing the different ways in which such discontent is articulated helps to elucidate the legitimacy of government initiatives that adversely affect large segments of the population and that, under other circumstances, would have been difficult to justify in public terms (Villarreal & Ipar, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this article aims to contribute to the analysis of experiences of malaise as they emerge and intersect in the everyday lives of workers employed in precarious segments of the labor market. We proceed from the assumption that the meanings arising from these experiences play a constitutive role in shaping the definition of social problems in the public sphere and in configuring the legitimacy of different forms of state intervention designed to address them (Grassi, 2003, 2019). This leads us to ask: How is social malaise articulated at the intersection of work, living conditions, and social policy? What does it reveal about the relationship between material conditions, political subjectivity, and institutional legitimacy?

To address these questions, the study adopted a qualitative research strategy based on focus groups conducted between 2022 and 2023, a period that coincided with the resumption of in-person academic activities following the socio-health-related lockdown. This moment proved particularly conducive to analysis, given the intensity of public debate surrounding the reorganization of everyday life under the rubric of a “new normality”, as well as the social consequences of school closures, restrictions on movement in public spaces, and the intensification of inequalities in living and working conditions among those who performed essential tasks (Benza & Kessler, 2022; Peirano *et al.*, 2023).

The article synthesizes the experiences of three specific groups: low-skilled manual and service workers; self-employed professionals registered under the *monotributo*<sup>1</sup> tax regime; and workers employed by digital platforms. Although heterogeneous in their socio-occupational composition, these populations are analytically grouped on the basis of their shared condition of labor precarity and constitute a strategic sample for examining the affective configurations and interpretive frameworks that characterize broader segments of the contemporary labor market.

Following this introduction, the article presents the conceptual framework that defines the key notions of social malaise, structural labor precarity, and self-worth, situating them within the relevant theoretical debates. The methodological design is then outlined, including the composition of the focus groups and the strategies used for data analysis. The subsequent section presents the main findings of the study, organized

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1 In Argentina, the term *monotributo* refers to a simplified tax regime available to small-scale taxpayers. Under this system, contributors pay a fixed monthly fee that encompasses both tax obligations and contributions to the pension and health care systems.

around six thematic axes that range from abstract evaluations of work to perceptions of social policies. These results are discussed in dialogue with the specialized literature, making explicit the study's specific contribution. Finally, the conclusions synthesize the central arguments and outline their theoretical and practical implications.

### **Conceptual Framework: Malaise, Precarity, and Self-Worth**

To make sense of the experiences examined in this article, we draw on three interrelated conceptual lenses: social malaise, labor precarity, and self-worth. Together, these concepts make it possible to connect the material, subjective, and political dimensions of the phenomenon under study, linking what workers feel, the conditions under which they labor, and the meanings they construct regarding their social position.

For the purposes of this analysis, malaise—which may manifest as discontent—is understood not merely as an individual psychological state or a singular experience of suffering or dissatisfaction, but rather as a broader affective configuration embedded in the tensions between the world of work and everyday life in its contemporary neoliberal form. In turn, such configurations may give rise to specific political orientations (Ipar, 2017). At the same time, it is important to note that,

emotions, affects, or feelings do not possess an ideological content in and of themselves. What is analytically salient is instead the ways in which they circulate, are transformed, named, and mobilized in the social world. Of particular relevance is how different emotions or affects generate affective configurations that are neither homogeneous nor static, and that cannot be reduced to ideological terms alone (Macon, 2025, p. 284).

In contemporary neoliberal societies, malaise emerges as a shared experience when institutional promises—work as a pathway to social integration, effort as a guarantee of progress, and the state as a provider of protection—are systematically left unfulfilled. As Dubet (2020) argues in his analysis of contemporary “sad passions”, we live in a period in which frustration and resentment appear to function as dominant political affects. In the Argentine context, a growing body of scholarship has documented how discontent—articulated as unease, indignation, anger, and related expressions—can be mobilized within discourses that challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions and redistributive policies, thereby redirecting malaise toward authoritarian political alternatives (Ipar, 2017; Villarreal & Ipar, 2023; Cuesta, 2023).

We assume here that this malaise is grounded in what the sociological literature has conceptualized as labor precarity of a historical or structural nature: a multidimensional process that extends beyond mere informality or unemployment (Paugam, 2015; Neffa, 2016; Pérez Sainz, 2016). This condition is marked by the absence of protections, chronic instability, and the inability to project viable futures (Julián Vejar, 2022). In Argentina, such precarity has expanded even among formally registered workers and forms part of a long-standing process through which protected wage labor has lost its centrality as the organizing core of social life and collective identities.

Recent studies on the socio-occupational structure confirm this trend. They point to the growth of forms of employment once considered “atypical”, the expansion of what has been described as “forced” self-employment —*monotributo* workers who did not choose this status— and the emergence of platform-based work as a refuge from unemployment or as an entry point into the labor market for young people (Maceira, 2021; Chávez Molina & Rodríguez de la Fuente, 2023; Salvia *et al.*, 2024; Haidar, 2020, 2023). Together, these processes give rise to what Costa and Rottenschweiler (2023) have termed the paradox of the “working poor”: individuals who are overemployed yet remain unable to rise above the poverty line. Research attentive to gender inequalities further indicates that processes of precarization are particularly acute among young people and women in general, and among female heads of household in particular (Barón, 2022; Cavallero & Gago, 2022; Partenio, 2022).

To analyze how the precarization of living and working conditions is translated into experiences of malaise, the concept of self-worth, drawn from Grassi and Hintze (2018), is central to this study. The concept refers to “the capacity to live off one’s own labor, free from dependencies and tutelage”, and operates as a culturally embedded value that serves as a benchmark for dignity and social recognition. Self-worth not only shapes an individual ethic of effort but also functions as a principle that hierarchically structures access to rights: “the establishment of the conditions of self-worth simultaneously institutes the non-right to be supported by the labor of others” (Grassi & Hintze, 2018, p. 17). It is important to emphasize that this principle entails a political-institutional and historical scaffolding that, while enabling the reproduction of collective life, also underpins and reproduces its inequalities.

Thus, the possibility of self-worth as a personal ethic comes into sharp tension with labor conditions that materially preclude its realization. As Estela Grassi (2019) notes, one of the effects of neoliberalism has been the consolidation of a form of “common sense” that assigns individual responsibility for failure to achieve self-worth, thereby obscuring its structural determinants. This contradiction —between the imperative mandate to be “self-reliant” and a reality that frustrates the satisfaction of even the most basic needs— constitutes, we argue, a core generative source of the malaise examined in this article.

However, the relationship between labor precarity, social malaise, and authoritarian turns is neither mechanical nor automatic. As a growing body of research has shown, the same experiences of insecurity and mistrust may give rise either to solidarity and collective organization (Pérez Sainz, 2019) or, conversely, to fragmentation and the pursuit of individualistic or authoritarian solutions (Viotti, 2020). The key question, then, is which mediations enable malaise to be channeled in one direction or the other. In this regard, Alles (2021) has examined the role of the “sense of injustice” and resentment in contemporary democracies, showing how perceptions of arbitrary inequalities undermine institutional legitimacy. In the Argentine case, Kessler and Vommaro (2024) identify three factors that link discontent to disruptive political options: perceptions of corruption or arbitrary management of public funds; the view that social policies are clientelistic and reward those who “do not work”; and demands for “order” and/or “iron-fisted” responses in the face of a perceived sense of chaos. From this perspective, the recurrent presence of expressions of malaise in the discourse of these workers can be understood as part of a broader potential for generalized discontent which, under conditions of political polarization, may fuel a growing delegitimization of mechanisms of public deliberation and democratic problem-solving (Cuesta, 2023; Ramírez Gallegos, 2024).

## Materials and Methods

This article is based on a research project conducted by the Group for the Study of Social Policy and Working Conditions (GEPsYCT) at the Gino Germani Research Institute, University of Buenos Aires.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Funding for the fieldwork reported in this article was provided by two complementary research projects: PICT 780/2017, “*Social Policy and Political-Cultural Disputes*:

project's overall objective was to identify and analyze the principles through which the political contestation over the meaning and legitimacy of state social interventions —both in general and in the specific domain of social policy— is constituted. To this end, we examined issues that emerge and are discursively articulated in the problematization of the relationships between work, living conditions, and social policy within social groups defined primarily by their socio-occupational positioning.

### *Research Design*

The study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at achieving an in-depth understanding of the meanings and social representations associated with work and everyday life. Focus groups were employed as the primary research technique (Hamui Sutton & Varela Ruiz, 2013; Cyr, 2019), given their capacity to generate data through interaction among participants. This method is particularly well suited to capturing the arguments, justifications, and shared common-sense frameworks that emerge from collective discussion among peers who occupy similar positions within the labor market, thereby allowing for an examination of how meanings related to work, living conditions, and social policies are collectively produced.

### *Participants and Selection Criteria*

The overall fieldwork involved six focus groups comprising a total of 34 participants. For the purposes of this article, three specific groups were selected based on two main criteria: (a) weak or intermittent access to traditional forms of labor protection, and (b) the absence of active participation in social or labor organizations.<sup>3</sup> The final sample analyzed

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*Continuities and Ruptures in the Ways of Problematizing the Relationships between Work, Living Conditions, and Social Policy in Argentina (2015–2020)*”; and UBACYT 2020–2022.20020190200083BA, “*On the Social Production of Living Conditions: Social Policy and Security in Argentina*” (2016–2021).

<sup>3</sup> The three groups not included in the present analysis —comprising formally employed workers in both the public and private sectors, workers engaged in organized Popular Economy initiatives, and workers in the Social and Solidarity Economy— were part of the project's overall research design in order to ensure comparability with the research team's previous studies (Grassi & Hintze, 2018) and were the focus of complementary

in this article consisted of 17 participants (6 women and 11 men), aged between 24 and 60, all residents of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. The composition of the selected groups is presented in Table 1.<sup>4</sup>

### *Recruitment and Data Collection Procedures*

Participants were recruited using purposive snowball sampling, with the aim of ensuring intragroup homogeneity in terms of socio-occupational position in order to facilitate discussion. Although age and gender quotas were established to achieve a balanced distribution, the recruitment process encountered difficulties in coordinating schedules compatible with unpaid caregiving responsibilities. As will be discussed below, such responsibilities fall disproportionately on women. As a result, the final sample underrepresents women with dependent children or adults in their care. This limitation should be taken into account when interpreting the findings, particularly in the case of the group of platform workers.

Fieldwork was conducted between June 2022 and May 2023 at the facilities of the Gino Germani Research Institute (University of Buenos Aires). Each focus group consisted of five to six participants and had an average duration of approximately 120 minutes. Sessions were moderated by two members of the research team, who ensured equitable participation among all attendees.

### *Instruments and Analytical Protocol*

A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore three core dimensions: (1) meanings and experiences of work in everyday life; (2) working conditions and strategies of social reproduction; and (3) perceptions of social policies and labor protection.

All sessions were audio-recorded with prior informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data processing followed the principles of thematic content analysis through an inductive coding process conducted by the research team using Atlas.ti software. This approach made it possible to identify emerging categories and recurring thematic cores, from which the most representative excerpts were selected to illustrate the analytical categories presented in the Results section.

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articles. A comprehensive analysis of these groups falls beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>4</sup> The table is included in the Appendix at the end of this article (Editor's note).

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study was conducted in accordance with strict ethical protocols. All participants signed an informed consent form outlining the objectives of the research and the intended use of the data. Confidentiality was ensured and participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms in the presentation of testimonial excerpts.

### **Results**

The exchanges generated in the three selected focus groups revealed a complex web of meanings surrounding work and everyday life. The conversations, grounded in the premise of work as a central organizer of life for those who depend on it as their primary means of subsistence (Danani, 2009), went beyond the mere description of objective conditions. Starting from the initial question, “What place does work occupy in your lives?”, participants articulated both individual and collective reflections on the meanings of work, their relationship to their tasks, time management, income, and the possibilities of organizing everyday life and care responsibilities. The analysis presented below organizes these findings around the central axes that emerged recurrently across the three selected groups, giving shape to the lived experience of precarious work.

#### *The Fundamental Tension: The Unfulfilled Promise of Work*

In the group of low-skilled manual and service workers, an initial set of meanings associated with the notion of work —understood in the abstract— was described as a “priority”: the unavoidable way of earning a living honestly, one that “in some way confers dignity” on those who perform it and entails an inevitable personal sacrifice in order to sustain their self-worth. In other words, work is affirmed as a fundamental value. Following Grassi and Hintze (2018), we understand self-worth as “the capacity to live from one’s own work, free from dependencies and tutelage”, and, within the framework of the discussion on working conditions, it is important to recall that “the establishment of the conditions of self-worth simultaneously institutes the non-right to be supported by the work of others” (Grassi & Hintze, 2018, p. 17).

In this way, work was framed as the legitimate means of meeting one's own reproductive needs and those of the family unit. Within this group, references to personal effort —closely associated with deservingness— were particularly salient. This perspective was condensed in the expression “I earn it myself”, articulated as an ethical position grounded in self-worth; that is, as an achievement attained through work, without resorting to handouts or assistance, which sets them apart from those who do receive such support. Definitions of work as a “dignified” and “priority” activity over other possible means of subsistence (where available) became increasingly nuanced as the conversation turned to the difficult conditions under which these workers carry out their tasks and the meager compensation they receive in return. Thus, a persistent tension emerged between the proclaimed virtue of work and its concrete conditions, with marked negative effects on subjective well-being.

Among those who carried out their professional activity on a self-employed or independent basis, different elements emerged when reflecting on the place of work in their lives. Rather than focusing on the moral value of work, participants foregrounded narratives of their successive labor market insertions —each increasingly precarious— emphasizing the contrast with their current conditions. At this point, they converged in highlighting the overwhelming amount of time devoted to work and the constant personal availability required to sustain their income, in the absence of guarantees of stability and with a high degree of personal commitment. Taken together, they described a form of total dedication to occupations that entailed serious difficulties in accessing the labor protections enjoyed by formal wage earners in dependent employment.

Finally, among workers engaged in platform-mediated delivery and transportation services, the meanings associated with work also revealed a contrast between past and present experiences. Age differences within the group proved significant when weighing perceived advantages and disadvantages. Current platform-mediated occupations were generally described as a viable response to recent unemployment or as a means of supplementing income, particularly for those who already had access to a vehicle:

This came up for me as a quick option; I had the car... it worked for me, it helped me get by financially, and it gave me the possibility of having time (...) what the app gives me is precisely that: the possibility of having time...” (Victor, 52, driver, platform worker; emphasis in the original).

The “freedom” to manage one’s own schedule emerged as a highly valued feature. However, this availability did not always offset the lack of protections and regulatory frameworks governing the activity, nor the long working hours that participants had to sustain in order to secure sufficient daily income. One of the older workers, formerly a small business owner, likened this experience to a borderline situation of “self-exploitation”, stemming from the pace and conditions imposed by platform companies:

And it is strange... you say to yourself: But I’m exploiting myself. How can it be that I end up doing this?” (Victor, 52, driver, platform workers group).

These tensions constitute the underlying substrate that articulates, in everyday work experiences —between self-worth and abandonment, between autonomy and self-exploitation— concerns about income and housing, as well as perceptions of and demands toward public policies. While the tension between self-worth and precarity provides the general framework of discomfort, concrete labor trajectories reveal how this tension materializes in individual biographies. In their accounts, participants show that precarity is not a static condition but rather a process consolidated through multiple labor insertions that are increasingly stripped of protections.

### *Labor Trajectories Under Precarity*

My job is really tough (...) before, I used to work from four in the morning until ten at night, because I worked for a cleaning company. And they treated you like... “Do you want money?”—then you had to work and work and work, going from one place to another, they sent you everywhere (María, 47, cleaning staff; emphasis in the original).

When examining each participant’s relationship to their work, the specific tasks they perform emerged as a key element. As María’s account illustrates, there are forms of work described as “tough” that are subject to extremely high demands from employers and from the recipients of the goods or services provided, while simultaneously lacking social recognition and valuation. Remaining in these conditions was associated with the need to “work at any cost” in a context of economic crisis (Grassi, 2003) or with expectations of future improvements in the agreed-upon working conditions.

Among manual and low-skilled service workers, accounts of the devaluation of their tasks and of everyday lack of empathy —linked by participants to class hierarchies— were recurrent: “They’re people with money, and they don’t value others, the person next to them” (María, 47, cleaning staff). Within this group, a contrast emerged between accepting an activity perceived as “chosen” —within a very limited range of options— and work understood as a vocation or desired path. This tension was expressed through the distinction between working at “what you like” and working at “what you end up doing”. Silvina (42, bakery assistant), with the agreement of the rest of the group, stated that an “ideal” job would be one that “creates quality of life and that you can enjoy, where you can choose the kind of work you want —then it would truly be a priority. But if you do more or less what you ended up with... I don’t know if it’s that good”. She also acknowledged, however, that “there are many people who work at whatever they can, whatever came along”.

This latter definition proves particularly appropriate for describing the trajectories of the platform workers, who reported multiple and varied occupations prior to their current activity. In the words of one participant, this accumulation made them “jugglers of life”. Within this framework, they defined their current occupation as an opportunity in a context of crisis. Initially regarded as a temporary “stopgap” or situational “palliative”, the activity progressively became their main occupation. As Martín (55, motorcycle courier) put it: “You tell yourself, ‘I’ll get by with this and rebuild’, and here I am, ‘rebuilding for eleven years’”. Similarly, Víctor (52, driver) recounted: “After twenty-five years, I closed my business from one day to the next; when I thought my life was settled, I found out it wasn’t”.

The conditions imposed by platform-mediated work emerge in these accounts as a significant source of discomfort. In particular, participants pointed to constantly changing company rules, the physical toll of working outdoors, and the imposition of work rhythms dictated by applications —through fines and account blocks that prevent workers from taking on new jobs— arrangements that generate “injustices” and inequalities among workers themselves. As recent research has shown (Haidar, 2020, 2023), this system operates as a virtual form of labor discipline in the absence of a direct, embodied authority.

Even under these conditions, members of the group valued the possibility of managing their own working time. In theoretical terms, this flexibility would allow them to engage in leisure activities, pursue

training, or devote time to loved ones. Control over one's own time thus translated into expectations of being able to pursue projects that might lead to forms of employment more closely aligned with their interests. While younger participants viewed this activity as a temporary means to study or acquire training, older workers—who had experienced layoffs, unemployment, or business closures—defined it as a kind of “refuge” from which it is difficult to exit, even as they continue to hold out hope of doing so.

Ambivalent assessments of the activity and its advantages became evident when participants were posed a hypothetical question about choosing between a salaried job in an employment relationship and platform-mediated work. For the option of “committing to salaried employment” to be considered viable, income emerged as a crucial variable: “If I earn more money, I’ll take it”. However, participants were unwilling to “take the first thing that comes along” or, in their own terms, to go back to “lowering their heads”. At comparable wage levels, the availability of discretionary time would make the decisive difference, and this was contrasted in the discussion with the rigidity characteristic of salaried employment that some had experienced in the past.

Other references to freedom were also articulated not in relation to the scheduling flexibility of platform work, but rather to employment that guarantees labor rights and social security protections. Access to health care was framed as a critical issue among the precarious workers considered here. When asked what they would choose if they could, responses were unequivocal among older participants with prior experience of protection:

The freedom to allow yourself to get sick at a job—you’re in a salaried position, you know that if you get sick (...) you can stay at home and rest. (Victor, 52, driver).

Flexibility in the organization of working and living time, in turn, requires full availability, extending the working day without guarantees. In this sense, the “free” time ostensibly available to workers is constrained by the productivity and commitment demands imposed by mobile applications in order to secure adequate income. This possibility encounters concrete physical limits in workers’ health.

Among workers who practice their profession independently, their current activity acquired meaning as part of a specific educational and training trajectory that enabled them to access this position. Personal

decisions associated with professional autonomy or the launch of their own commercial projects —being an “entrepreneur”— were also narrated, as well as the choice to carry out the activity without hierarchical controls, even at the cost of lower wages. Their accounts combined both the possibilities and limitations of the *monotributista* status, which encompasses highly heterogeneous labor situations: from those who found in it a pathway to economic autonomy to those who contrast it with salaried employment, not without a certain nostalgia for its protections.

At first, you think... *monotributista*, you manage your own schedule. But that’s not really the case. My schedule isn’t mine; the job manages me. It’s the other way around. (...) Later on, I realized that working in an employment relationship has major benefits, and I really understood that during the pandemic. (...) But the truth is that being a *monotributista* didn’t benefit me, and I’m not a *monotributista* because I chose to be one, but because that’s what the system required: you’re a professional, you’re a *monotributista*... there’s no other option (Cristina, 60 years old, occupational health and safety technician, emphasis in the original).

I don’t like it when people say things like *Monotributiste*, for example, because I feel that I’ve actually made good use of the *monotributo*. For me, it became a pathway to upward social mobility; had I remained in salaried employment, I probably wouldn’t have what I have today, nor the autonomy to decide what I do and don’t do, or even the flexibility to engage in social activities (Silvia, 36, graphic designer).

Even among this group, with comparatively greater educational credentials and social capital, the condition of being “independent” under registration as *monotributistas* entailed a lack of labor rights, which became particularly evident during periods of personal vulnerability in which the inability to work prevailed. At this point, references to the extreme experience of the pandemic emerged forcefully:

During the pandemic... I couldn’t do anything. I was in bad shape, I didn’t earn anything—if I don’t go out, I don’t generate income... I don’t get paid. (...) Honestly, I had a really hard time, because if I don’t go out, I can’t generate any income (Cristina, 60 years old, occupational health and safety technician, emphasis in the original).

The account of these hardships contrasted with the experience of those who faced the pandemic while employed in standard dependent employment relationships and were able to maintain job continuity and income. This disparity was perceived as reflecting discretion on the part of public authorities and arbitrariness in the design of public policies, as the status of independent workers effectively drew the line that excluded them from essential protections.

Overall, the analysis of the expressions used across the three focus groups to describe working life reveals a condition of ongoing provisionality, marked by a lack of guarantees and pervasive uncertainty. Participants associated their employment situations with “abandonment”, —ironically— with the “freedom to fall ill,” and with “self-exploitation”, as well as, more resignedly, with the need to sustain a “tough job” as a “stopgap”, a way to “get by”, or to “hold out for what is to come”. Other recurrent expressions included “wild card”, “it’s what I ended up with”, “it gets you down”, “the job controls me”, and descriptions of “going to work angry” or “resentful”.

These characterizations, grounded in personal trajectories, reveal the tension between valuing certain aspects —such as flexible working hours or autonomy— and, particularly among older participants, invoking memories of previous jobs that offered greater rights and opportunities. Within this expressive framework, the texture of subjective malaise in relation to current work takes shape. While trajectories outline the map of precariousness, it is in everyday life that its effects become palpable. As will be shown in the following section, this precariousness does not affect everyone equally: the organization of care introduces an additional layer of inequality that shapes trajectories and deepens malaise.

### *Care Work and Gender Inequalities*

The everyday organization of care work —historically unequally distributed between men and women— emerged as a central element in the relationship between work and daily life. These responsibilities included not only childcare but also the care of dependent adults, constituting a key condition for participation in paid employment and disproportionately affecting the economic autonomy of women with dependent children.

Among independent workers, references to care responsibilities emerged as decisive turning points in the labor trajectories of women participants, who reported difficulties in reconciling time devoted to caregiving with their position in paid work. Comparisons with those who benefited from more extensive leave and labor protections associated with standard dependent employment highlighted the vulnerability of their registered status as independent workers:

When I became pregnant, I had no access to any form of coverage; I did not fall within any recognized category (...) I felt deeply unprotected, and I still feel that

way. I think there is a gap in the legal framework in this regard (Clara, 40 years old, entrepreneur; emphasis in the original)

This circumstance was compounded by the “familialist” conception of the social security system within the local tradition, which links employment registration status, marital status, and family composition when determining entitlements. As a result, benefits were limited or altogether absent for those covered under the *monotributo* scheme, a category that does not provide paid maternity leave. The absence of an adequate care infrastructure led Claudia, a lawyer, to interrupt a promising career in the banking sector:

Why do I have to be the one who stays home to take care of the children? (...) It took me a long time to get back on my feet, to be able to work and earn my own income. But I wish the state had different policies for mothers... so that we could go out and work (Claudia, 45 years old, lawyer).

The availability of institutional or family-based care networks emerged as a fundamental condition for participation in paid work, shaping the economic autonomy of women with dependent children. This situation was further exacerbated among those who interrupted their employment trajectories during the reproductive life course.

Among those working in delivery or transport through digital platforms, the previously described schedule flexibility represented an advantage for sharing caregiving responsibilities, particularly in cases of shared custody:

For example, I take the kids to school in the morning, and their mother picks them up. It gives me that option (...) If I were in a standard employment relationship, I probably wouldn't be able to do those things (Alex, 28 years old, courier).

This relative advantage must be situated within the unequal distribution of care work, in which women disproportionately assume caregiving responsibilities and are consequently compelled to accept more flexible forms of labor insertion, typically informal and more poorly remunerated, a situation that is further exacerbated in single-mother households (Government of the Province of Buenos Aires, 2024).

Among manual and low-skilled service workers, the absence of institutional infrastructure and specific social protections was particularly salient. The impossibility of “stopping work” acquired a dramatic dimension in cases such as María's, who has a child with a disability in her care:

The good thing is that I work... I was going to stop working, but I had to keep going, carry the weight for my son—basically, endure whatever comes at work for my son, because he has to keep going (María, 47 years old, cleaning staff).

In their case, the presence of dependent persons extended not only working hours but also active working life beyond retirement age, shaping labor trajectories with no horizon of rest. It is clear that the lack of care infrastructure not only places a disproportionate burden on women, but also directly affects their economic autonomy and the inadequacy of available income to sustain family life.

That formally protected, wage-earning employment relationship—considered the benchmark of what was “normal” not so long ago, and the figure against which the “atypical” could be identified by contrast (Danani & Grassi, 2009)—now appears as the material and symbolic mirror through which the workers who participated in the focus groups view their current situation. This mirror offers an ambivalent, fragmented reflection: one that restricts certain freedoms while enabling others. Rights placed in jeopardy are increasingly experienced as privileges when seen through the lens of precarious conditions—oscillating between the “utopia”, or the memory of past protections, and the demands of everyday labor.

### *Economic Insufficiency and Living “Day to Day”*

Here, if you miss work, you lose—your daily pay. Your hours depend on you: making it to the end of the month, getting by day to day, or saving, putting money aside, paying off debts. If you miss a day or two, you know that... the following week you have to push yourself harder (Alex, 28 years old, courier, emphasis in the original).

Unlike classical studies on the social question, which identified the figure of the “unemployed” as their central problem, this research found an expansion of labor situations in which workers who were (over) employed nonetheless failed to earn sufficient income to cover the basic consumption basket (Costa & Rottenschweiler, 2023). Recent scholarship has documented the emergence of the “working poor” as a representative figure of local trends in recent years, particularly following the sharp post-pandemic loss of income (Messina, 2024). In this context of heightened economic instability, concern over low wages cut across all three groups examined and intensified in response to the rapid erosion of purchasing power.<sup>5</sup>

Among manual and low-skilled service workers, dissatisfaction with wage levels was particularly salient. The sense of urgency generated by

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the focus groups were conducted during a period of accelerating inflation, which would reach annual rates of over 200% by late 2023.

the persistent and unpredictable rise in prices during the fieldwork period was expressed with marked concern. As one participant noted, had wages kept pace with inflation, they might have achieved a situation of basic comfort: “not well off, but comfortable”. However, this expectation did not materialize, and their accounts of everyday working life were especially bleak:

Maybe you work all day and it’s still not enough to eat, not enough to do anything, and that really gets you down. You work all day and you don’t even have money to go play soccer or have a beer. So sometimes you feel the need, but you say to yourself: I get up, I work, I get home, I sleep, and that’s it. Why do I work so much if I can’t afford anything at the end of the month? Everything feels like a luxury, maybe (Julio, 24 years old, meter reader, emphasis in the original).

This made evident the erosion of work motivation when wages are insufficient and basic goods become unattainable “luxuries”. The inability to access essential goods and services, even while devoting full working days to paid labor, generated growing feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction among participants.

For the three groups analyzed, having a job —far from guaranteeing adequate income— depended on the availability of personal resources and remained subject to the conditions of vulnerability specific to each type of activity. Among platform-mediated delivery and transportation workers, ownership of a roadworthy vehicle and the ability to operate it marked the boundary between employment and unemployment. The immediacy of “living day to day”, together with the meagerness of earnings, extended working hours without ensuring the achievement of this basic goal:

That boundary between having a job and not having one is extremely thin. I mean, this work is very fragile. I work through the apps, but I don’t have the capacity to save enough to replace my car. If something serious happens to it and it breaks down, I can’t afford to fix it. I’d have to go out and look for another job, but in the meantime, I’d be out of work. I don’t know—the line between being employed and unemployed is very narrow (Victor, 52 years old, driver, emphasis in the original).

In addition to low wages and the lack of guarantees, the group of independent workers raised criticisms of the tax system. At several points during the focus group discussions, participants called for a review of the tax burden faced by those engaged in self-employed work, who encounter state-level bureaucratic obstacles in pursuing their commercial initiatives.

Discontent with the tax burden, understood as a tangible representation of state intervention, was also expressed among platform

workers, who perceived the regulatory requirements attached to their employment status as abusive measures. They considered it contradictory that a State which neither regulates companies nor protects their working conditions should nonetheless require multiple vehicle registrations and the payment of specific fees, when, as they put it, “nothing comes back to the worker”.

This expression captures a significant dimension of the role played by the absence of protections in the collective construction of malaise. In these cases, a State that failed to fulfill its role as guarantor or regulator of labor conditions was perceived, when it did intervene, as an obstacle, one that did not ensure redistributive processes in either the short or medium term. The lack of collective spaces of belonging or representative organizations among these workers further deepened this absence of institutional supports capable of socializing the management of needs. The phrase “nothing comes back to the worker” thus encapsulated this perception, while also revealing the difficulty of envisioning the construction of networks of protection and care among peers that might enable the collective resolution of basic needs or the articulation of demands before the relevant authorities.

Chronic economic insufficiency not only jeopardizes daily subsistence but also undermines the ability to plan for the future. In this context, the housing crisis emerges as the clearest expression of a foreclosed future.

### *Housing Crisis and an Impossible Future*

Beyond concerns about income, the critical housing situation emerged as a central problem across all three groups analyzed. This crisis took on multiple dimensions: on the one hand, anxiety among renters regarding tenure security and the requirements for lease renewal; on the other, the difficulties of accessing housing in areas close to workplaces, educational institutions, and health services, particularly for those with dependent family members.

The persistent fear of being unable to secure alternative housing, together with the volatility of costs in an increasingly deregulated real estate market, intensified uncertainty and led participants to accept conditions that undermined basic rights. María's testimony illustrates this extreme form of precariousness:

(...) I live in a *conventillo* in La Boca, and from paying 20, I think it's now going up to 40, and it's just a single room with a shared bathroom. It's fine —I'm five blocks from the Argerich (Hospital), which is why I stay there— but finding another place is impossible because I don't have the means to save any money (María, 47 years old, cleaning staff, emphasis in the original).

In other cases, housing strategies involved relocating to peripheral areas, perceived as “unsafe” or marked by high levels of violence. This added to already difficult working conditions the additional strain of long commutes on unreliable public transportation. Such circumstances extended the effective working day and increased the physical and emotional cost of everyday activities. For those with dependents, geographic proximity to health and educational institutions proved decisive in shaping mobility strategies, given both the time and financial costs involved.

Across the groups, recurrent comparative references emerged to the opportunities previous generations had to access housing through work, establishing a sharp contrast with the current situation, in which immediacy and the urgency of meeting basic needs prevail. The possibility of long-term planning —traditionally associated with saving— was thus contrasted with the priority of making it to the end of the month as the dominant horizon. This generational contrast became evident in the following exchange:

José (32 years old, construction worker): One of the things is that, for example, I rent—and like me, a lot of people do, and we don't really have a way to own something of our own.

María (47 años years old, cleaning staff): It's impossible.

José (32 years old, construction worker): And how do you do it? Working, it's impossible.

Ernesto (24 years old, factory worker): (...) I mean, my grandparents—and even my dad, who's 55—bought the house where I live now. They bought it by working, just like all of us are working now, and now...

María (47 years old, cleaning staff): Now the priority is just making it to the end of the month.

Culturally, the notion of homeownership —the “dream of owning one's own home”— has historically functioned in Argentina as a key orienting ideal, whether as the primary destination of savings among middle sectors or as an achievement pursued through self-construction or collective organization among popular sectors (González Rouco,

2024). The lack of access to credit and the absence of broad public policies have given rise to a severe housing crisis<sup>6</sup>, particularly in the city of Buenos Aires, which has been replicated —with specific local variations— in the country’s main urban centers. Aspirations to access housing thus emerged as a cross-cutting demand:

We all want to have the possibility of having a home, not only people in crisis. (...) So, I think housing should be the same for everyone (Ernesto, 24 years old, factory worker).

The perception of the collapse of traditional mechanisms for accessing housing was captured in Adrián’s testimony:

Mortgage credit hasn’t existed for many years, there are no developments either, and there are no major housing programs, so... cities become gentrified and you end up living wherever and however you can, and the only way to buy a house is by waiting for someone to die (Adrián, 35 years old, lawyer).

Faced with the difficulties of obtaining housing through personal savings or self-construction, manual and service workers linked their lack of access to the absence of public policies that recognized them as potential beneficiaries. Independent professionals, by contrast, associated this problem with the demand for mortgage credit —virtually nonexistent— or with its resolution through family inheritance. Both groups agreed in conceiving housing as a right that should be guaranteed for the entire population.

Against this backdrop of multiple deprivations, social policies emerged as a key arena of dispute. The testimonies revealed that the State was simultaneously demanded and questioned: its intervention was called for in areas where it had been absent, while the legitimacy of its actions was challenged where it had intervened. The relationship with the State and its mechanisms of protection thus became the final link in this chain of discontent, revealing a crisis in the available avenues for resolution.

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6 Reports from surveys conducted by the organization *Inquilinos Agrupados* in June and September 2024 confirmed a deterioration in tenants’ living conditions, further aggravated by the repeal of the rental law that was in force at the time the focus groups were conducted, through Emergency Decree (Decreto de Necesidad y Urgencia, DNU) 70/2023 on economic deregulation. As of September 2024, 44.5% of the income of surveyed tenant households was allocated to rent and condominium fees, excluding taxes and public utility charges. In the case of leases initiated after the entry into force of DNU 70/2023, this share rose to 49% (Inquilinos Agrupados, 2024a; 2024b).

### *Social Policies: Criteria Under Scrutiny*

In discussing social policies and their relationship to work, an explicit tension emerged between the assumption of “non-work” attributed to those who receive state assistance and the condition of those who sustain a verifiable labor activity. This distinction was strongly challenged by participants, particularly by those engaged in manual and service work involving long hours and meager wages. This group perceived its position as much closer to that of the actual beneficiaries of welfare policies, despite not receiving such assistance. The accounts and experiences that surfaced during the conversations confirmed these assumptions and expressed anger at the unequal distribution of aid from limited resources, allocated according to criteria perceived as unclear and at odds with the previously mentioned ethic of effort:

They pay me to come in at six in the morning to turn on the heating, open the door, sweep the sidewalk, you know. And I earn it, and I go in with more motivation all winter, and I even bought myself a motorcycle. I received all three IFE payments, saved the money, and bought a motorcycle, and that’s when I started working in a cleaning cooperative where I ended up with a permanent position in a building (...). But I earn it. (...) I get home at twelve, I arrive at six in the morning, Saturday, Sunday, I take out the trash. Just like households: we rent, and some people were given a house, paid for one month five years ago, paid one month and that was it, you know what I mean? And here you are, killing yourself to work (Héctor, 39 years old, building superintendent, emphasis in the original).

So, it made me really angry that I have to work in order to have things, and these people have to give [a portion of what they receive] to the political broker (María, 47 years old, cleaning staff, emphasis in the original).

The analysis of this relationship made it possible to identify, across all three groups, a shared dissatisfaction with what was perceived as the arbitrary management of resources, along with a demand for the establishment of clear criteria for state assistance. Among manual workers, this demand was expressed as a “need for oversight” in order to identify situations of abuse that they claimed to know firsthand, but which they felt were ignored by regulatory authorities. Similar arguments regarding the need for oversight also emerged among those working in platform-mediated delivery and transportation. General claims about deservingness associated with work were contrasted with testimonies of abuse whose justification was grounded in direct experience:

I'm in favor of policies, of economic assistance, but they always have to be monitored. I think that's where the failure is —that there's no oversight (Alex, 28 years old, courier, emphasis in the original).

When social policy entailed the possibility of accessing homeownership —the satisfaction of a need perceived as unattainable through work— and, at the same time, cases of noncompliance with allocation requirements became known, references to discontent intensified. Over the course of the conversations, legitimate orders of priority for “receiving assistance” from the State were gradually delineated.

However, the precarious position they shared with those considered legitimate potential recipients of state assistance blurred the boundaries between their self-worth derived from meeting family needs through their own labor and legitimate dependence on assistance:

Because the reality is also that if you have to live off a welfare benefit, you can't really live either, no one lives off a benefit. You receive a benefit, but then you do other things. In my neighborhood there are people who receive benefits and sell tortillas, and they get by in any other way they can, doing odd jobs; no one lives off a benefit because the money isn't enough to live on (José, 32 years old, construction worker, emphasis in the original).

I think they're always poorly targeted. For example, the emergency benefit during the pandemic didn't reach most of us (*monotributistas*) because we were excluded by certain requirements, being registered as self-employed, if you bought this or did that. And now there was another bonus that was only for those in formal employment, and once again the self-employed were left out. I think they always give priority [to others] (Alex, 28 years old, courier).

It should be noted that, in the case of self-employed workers registered under the simplified tax regime, the contrast was constructed in relation to salaried employees, whereas for manual and service workers the comparison was drawn with those receiving social assistance. This distinction became particularly evident through their experiences during the pandemic. Emergency Family Income (IFE) emerged in the conversations as a symptom of the tension between deservingness and self-worth among individuals who were not habitual recipients of income transfers. Those who managed to access the benefit emphasized its virtuous use (“I bought a motorcycle to be able to work”), while those who did not obtain it described the eligibility criteria as arbitrary or exclusionary.<sup>7</sup>

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7 For an overview of the assistential intervention instruments implemented during the pandemic, see Lijterman and Minteguiaga (2023).

These critical stances toward potential arbitrariness did not entail an abstract rejection of the need to assist those who required it —provided that such need could be verified— nor did they encompass all forms of rights-based claims. Indeed, a certain historical memory emerged within the groups regarding how collective struggles had made it possible to secure rights that remain in force today:

I think that anything we, as a society, want collectively, we have to go out and fight for it... because if you wait for them to give it to you, they won't. You have to go and take it. Sometimes it's the only way to push back—there's no other option. That's how rights were won, because otherwise we'd still be working 12 hours, 16 hours a day, even worse than that (José, 32 years old, construction worker, emphasis in the original).

Across all groups, there was consensus on the need to clarify eligibility criteria and on the view that assistential social policies should constitute an “emergency” measure —temporary in nature— whose legitimate resolution ought to be the creation of employment. When asked about street-based social mobilization, participants from all three groups acknowledged the value and legitimacy of demands for better living conditions, while also pointing to the difficulties that public demonstrations pose when they disrupt an already complex everyday life:

We're all dissatisfied with the situation we're living in in this country, but there are ways and ways of blocking things, that is, helping the people who are protesting, but also helping the people who have to go to work (Ernesto, 24 years old, factory worker, emphasis in the original).

The thing is, we also live in a city where there are demonstrations every single day, and having to get through that is really exhausting. But I think it's absolutely valid for everyone to be able to protest and to demand their rights (Silvia, 36 years old, graphic designer, emphasis in the original).

The one who fights is always going to bother people, and so is the one who's stuck in traffic, and the one who needs to get home and can't commute—but it's the only way things have moved forward over time. Otherwise, I think everything would stay the same, because little by little, that's how something ends up being achieved (Federico, 27 years old, security worker, emphasis in the original).

These positions revealed a significant ambivalence: the legitimacy of protest as a democratic mechanism was acknowledged, yet it was questioned when its forms interfered with the everyday lives of other workers. This tension between abstract solidarity and concrete discomfort in the face of social protest emerged, in itself, as a symptom of malaise:

fragmentation had become such that even forms of collective resistance were experienced as an additional problem rather than as a shared solution.

## Discussion

The findings derived from the work with these three specific focus groups make it possible to understand how labor precariousness is embodied in everyday experiences of malaise. Far from constituting merely scattered complaints, the expressions documented reveal a systematic pattern in which the disconnect between the symbolic value of work and its material reality gives shape to a scenario of potential institutional delegitimization.

Malaise, understood here as a political–affective configuration, emerges as a collectively constructed phenomenon forged through dialogical interactions in which participants contest meanings related to work, living conditions, and social protections. The fundamental tension identified—between the ethic of self-reliance (Grassi & Hintze, 2018) and the conditions that make its realization impossible—operates as a core generator of this affective configuration, expressed through forms of anger, indignation, and uncertainty, albeit not without ambivalences and reservations regarding the guarantee of shared rights.

The documentation of fragmented labor trajectories and the paradox of the “working poor” (Costa & Rottenschweiler, 2023) demonstrates how precariousness has become a structural condition (Pérez Sainz, 2016) rather than a transitory situation. It is particularly significant to observe that this process of precarization does not affect only traditionally informal workers but also extends to independent professionals and platform workers. The pandemic acted as both a revealer and an accelerator of these preexisting trends, rendering visible the depth of the social fracture.

This study contributes to elucidating the debates that outline shared meanings surrounding work and the role of the state in defining the scope and limits of social protections—or, in other words, their legitimacy—. Drawing on the specialized literature, the malaise that emerges in the focus groups can be associated with interpretations that suggest that, when frustration fails to find collective channels of resolution (such as protest, collective organization, or other forms of action), it turns inward—manifesting as exhaustion and self-exploitation (Bartolotta & Gago, 2023)—and sideways, in the form of animosity toward those perceived as “assisted”. This process helps to explain, at least in part, the

fragmentation observed in disputes over what is considered just or unjust, as well as the difficulty of constructing collective horizons of transformation.

The gender dimension emerges as a structuring axis of these experiences. The unequal organization of care not only deepens women's precariousness but also exposes the limits of a social protection system designed around the assumption of a male breadwinner. The absence of adequate care infrastructures thus constitutes a structural barrier to women's economic autonomy and a factor that intensifies malaise and economic hardship in female-headed households (Barón, 2022). In this regard, recent research has also warned of high levels of household indebtedness (both formal and informal), particularly among those responsible for care work (Cavallero & Gago, 2022).

The documented housing crisis acquires particular analytical relevance insofar as it represents the clearest materialization of the "impossible future". The generational contrast in access to housing through work reveals the collapse of traditional mechanisms of social mobility, consolidating what several participants described as an "extended presentism", in which the horizon is reduced to mere day-to-day survival, or simply "making it to the end of the month".

Finally, the perception of arbitrariness in social policies—summarized in the expression "nothing ever comes back to the working person"—reveals a weakened relationship between citizenship and institutions. This distrust is not directed solely at specific policies, but rather at the very logic of state intervention, perceived as discretionary and detached from criteria of redistributive justice. The call for "oversight" that emerged in the focus groups—reasonable in itself—ultimately expresses a demand for a minimum threshold of predictability and equity that the political-institutional system has failed to guarantee.

These findings, derived from fieldwork conducted on the "eve" of a change in government, shed light on some of the mechanisms through which the malaise generated by precariousness came to nourish disruptive political options (Kessler & Vommaro, 2024). The everyday experience of abandonment, combined with the perception of a state that demands but does not protect, creates fertile ground for authoritarian solutions—promising order and a break with the *status quo*—to gain legitimacy, even among those who are likely to suffer their consequences.

## Conclusions: The Future Has Already Arrived (Long Ago)

Not just any job, nor employment under any conditions, makes it possible to escape the pressure of working merely to survive. Making a living from one's own work can in fact mean living in very different and highly unequal ways, depending on the type of work involved. At this point, social and labor policies are what enable one or another of these possibilities (Grassi & Hintze, 2018).

The quotation above encapsulates the core problem explored in this article. Throughout these pages, we have argued that a pervasive sense of malaise or discontent emerges from the unresolved tension between an ethic of self-worth —one that emphasizes individual effort— and labor conditions that systematically frustrate the possibility of what these workers consider a dignified life. The pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis merely acted as revealers and accelerators of this preexisting condition (Benza & Kessler, 2022).

The analysis of three specific groups of precarious workers —low-skilled wage earners, self-employed professionals registered under the *monotributo* regime, and platform workers— shows that, despite their socio-occupational differences, they share a common experience of malaise that is constructed in everyday life: “self-exploitation”, “abandonment”, and the perception that “nothing ever comes back to the working person”.

The findings show that the promise —or expectation— that formal employment constitutes a pathway to social integration, upward mobility, and access to rights is in crisis. The testimonies of these precarized workers reveal a reality in which work no longer protects against poverty (“working poor”), does not guarantee access to housing (“the dream of homeownership” as a utopia), and does not allow for future-oriented planning (“extended presentism”). These conditions constitute a fundamental basis for discontent.

A crucial finding is the persistence of the assertion of individual autonomy —“I earn it myself”— as a bastion of dignity and deservingness, even when its counterpart is “self-exploitation”, insufficient income, and lack of protection. This tension generates frustration that, in the absence of collective channels for resolution, turns inward (as exhaustion) and sideways (as resentment toward those perceived as “assisted”). This dynamic of individualized frustration, among other identified factors, contributes to the fragmentation of potential solidarities among workers

and undermines the construction of collective horizons for a shared future.

Beyond documenting discontent, our study shows how the fragmentation of experiences —where even collective protest is experienced as a problem— hampers the construction of political alternatives. There is a certain consensus that this discontent has been channeled, as reflected in recent electoral outcomes in Argentina, into a condemnation of traditional politics. Suspicion of corruption and perceptions of arbitrariness in social policies were directed at state institutions; however, social and trade union organizations were also perceived as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The demand for “control” and “order” that emerges in the focus groups is, at its core, a call for a baseline of predictability and justice that the political–institutional system has failed to provide. In response, citizenship appears to have found an outlet for its discontent in political options that proposed a radical break with that system, even when their policies deepen the very structural causes of this discontent. The future arrived long ago, marked by uncertainty and lack of protection.

In this context, the political and intellectual challenge no longer lies solely in denouncing precariousness, but in rebuilding bonds of solidarity and creating institutions capable of restoring a horizon of democratic trust. This entails rethinking social protections beyond traditional formal employment, acknowledging the diversity of labor situations; designing policies that recognize and redistribute care work, which sustains life under conditions of precariousness; and, above all, reconstructing a language of the common that can contest the meaning of discontent against authoritarian solutions.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**  
**Composition of the Focus Groups Analyzed**

Focus group	Number of participants	Age (range)	Socio-occupational characteristics
Manual and service workers	6 (2W, 4M)	24-47 years	Low-skilled formal wage earners (construction worker, cleaning staff, factory worker, building superintendent, pastry assistant)
Independent workers	5 (4W, 1M)	35-60 years	Professionals and technicians registered as <i>monotributistas</i> (graphic designer, lawyers, occupational safety technician, entrepreneur).
Platform workers	6 (6M)	28-55 años	Drivers and delivery couriers working through digital platforms (Uber, Rappi, Cabify, etc).

M: Men W: Women N= 17 participants

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

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