



## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ARGENTINEAN COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT AND THE ICA SINCE THE FIRST ICA CONGRESS

*Daniel Plotinsky, Professor and M.Sc. in History. Director of Idelcoop Fundación de Educación Cooperativa [Foundation of Cooperative Education] and of the Archivo Histórico del Cooperativismo de Crédito [Historical Archive of Credit Cooperatives]. Editor of the Idelcoop Magazine.*

Argentina participated in the foundation of the International Cooperative Alliance, which is one of the reasons to be proud of the Argentine cooperative movement. However, this detail does not appear in contemporary texts, which obscures its veracity and makes it very difficult to verify. These times of pandemic seclusion, where archives and libraries remain closed, are not ideal for seeking the truth. Therefore, and with the invitation to reflect, I modify the suggested slogan as follows: For what reason would it not be strange to have Argentina present at the Congress in London?

The first cooperative experiences in our country took place during the last decades of the 19th century, and they were linked to the massive influx of European immigrants – required under the economic model imposed on the country, stemming from the organisation of the nation State – who contributed not only to work techniques and procedures, but also traditions and organisations based on solidarity and cooperation.

The leading cooperative organisations were faced with the same discussions that took place in Europe, and consequently two different types of experiences unfolded: a group of cooperatives was created by working class people with the aim of freeing themselves from capitalistic exploitation or at least to mitigate its effects; while others were promoted by members of the middle classes and the petite bourgeoisie with the aim of seeking solutions to their economic and social needs. According to scarce and somewhat questionable sources, there were approximately 60 cooperatives in the late 19th century.

Those that spread the cooperative values in the early days included the Frenchman Alejo Peyret, the Catalan Victory y Suarez and the German L'Allemant, who came to our land seeking better

opportunities for development or fleeing from the repression that was being unleashed in their countries against the attempts of social transformation. All of them maintained active engagement with European organisations and political and social militants. Shortly afterwards, the task was continued by a generation of Argentinian young people, amongst whom Juan B. Justo was most prominent in his contribution to shaping socialism and developing the cooperative movement.

Was it he who participated in the ICA founding Congress? It is possible, since he was in Europe in 1895, but officially only in Madrid, Paris and Brussels. He was so impressed on his return from Brussels, that during the discussions around establishing the Argentine Socialist Party (1896) he went on to defend the Belgian model for the development of unions and cooperatives, against the majority trend prone to imposing the German experience as a model for a revolutionary struggle of social classes. It is also possible that, as a result of the active exchange he had with the Belgian cooperatives, it may have been one of them who represented Argentina at the Congress.

What is certain is that El Hogar Obrero (EHO), a credit and building cooperative founded in 1905 with efforts inspired by Justo, was the first non-European organisation to be accepted as a member of the ICA in 1910, two years before incorporating consumer interests to its originating activities. This coincides with the trend – predominant at the Congresses of the Alliance from 1904 onward – to promote the cooperative movement for consumer interests. It was also its regular participation at the ICA that allowed the EHO to establish relationships with wholesale cooperatives in England, Spain and Italy from 1920 onward.

On the other hand, it was with the sponsorship of El Hogar Obrero that in 1919, a Conference of Cooperatives took place in Buenos Aires, where the first steps were taken to establish a national Congress in which all branches of the cooperative movement were represented. A few months later, the first Argentine Congress of Cooperatives was held, with the central aim of developing a project to create the General Law of Cooperative Societies. The discussion revolved around whether or not to include the concept of political, religious and racial neutrality, as well as matters of remuneration to leaders and tax exemption. In addition, the Congress proposed to the ICA that 21 December – which is when the operations of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers began – should be marked to annually celebrate the International Day of Cooperatives. The Alliance made this initiative their own, although they changed the date to September 6th, and then to the first Saturday of July.

In the following decades, there was active involvement of some Argentinian entities and leaders in doctrinal discussions that would take place at the ICA headquarters. As an example, during the 1960s, the matter of neutrality became a particular focus of heated debates.

In the categorical and exclusive defence of the (then) fifth principle (1937) by powerful federations of consumer and credit cooperatives, a small sector of credit cooperatives put forth in a text of 1965 and signed by one of its prominent leaders, that cooperatives were not neutral and nor should they be, explaining to what extent and why cooperatives necessarily engaged in a deeply political activity in the pursuit of their objectives. This text may be said to have advanced the revisions made by the ICA at the Congresses of Vienna (1966) and Manchester (1995), which ended up replacing that principle with the one on the autonomy and independence of cooperatives.

In summary, the ongoing and increasing participation of the Argentine cooperative movement in the International Cooperative Alliance has allowed it to keep the founding values and principles alive, and at the same time has prompted it to reflect on them, and thereby enriching them further.