

CHAPTER 2: WHY DOES LABOUR ORGANISE?: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

UNIT 8: BRAZIL: HOW A NEW WORKING CLASS BUILT A NEW LABOUR MOVEMENT

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KEY READING:

WORKERS IN MOTION: STRIKES, UNIONS AND REDEMOCRATISATION IN BRAZIL

Introduction

On 12 May 1978, workers at the Saab-Scania truck factory in the city of São Bernardo do Campo surprised all of Brazil. They entered the factory but refused to start the machines, demanding wage increases, better working conditions and an end to speedup.

Despite being prepared well in advance, the strike took even the union leadership by surprise; after years of repression, few believed that it would happen.

The factory's management was equally surprised, and called in the political police and a representative of the São Paulo State Labour Department in an unsuccessful attempt to intimidate the workers. The strike quickly spread to the large Ford car manufacturer and other companies in the industrial region known as ABC Paulista (Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, São Caetano do Sul and other municipalities) and reached the industrial peripheries of the city of São Paulo and other cities in the country. Within a few weeks, more than 300,000 workers had paralysed production.

1978 ushered in a cycle of strikes and social protests that would put workers at the centre of the redemocratisation process and profoundly impact Brazilian political life in the following decades.

Class metamorphosis

That moment was marked by a dual crisis for the military dictatorship. Repression had underpinned the ‘Brazilian economic miracle’ of the late 1960’s/early 1970s. Strikes were banned, wages squeezed and job security eliminated, facilitating layoffs and labour turnover. Large state infrastructure projects and investments by multinational corporations in the automobile and consumer durables industries had powered impressive economic growth. Now the model was being hammered by successive international crises and inflation. Popular dissatisfaction was rising and the dictatorship faced a crisis of political legitimacy with numerous social sectors mobilising to demand the end of the regime and the return of democracy.

It was also a period of great transformation in the world of work. A broader, more multifaceted and diverse working class had emerged in Brazil. The 1970s consolidated the structuring of a complex and diversified labour force. The regime’s development policies boosted the manufacturing, energy and construction sectors, alongside an expanding civil service, amplifying the prominence of employment in these sectors.

The economic and social transformations of the previous decades reconfigured the processes of class formation and identity. The strikes at the end of the decade and their politicisation in a context of struggle against the military dictatorship gave visibility and self-recognition to this “new” working class, crossing occupational and regional boundaries.

Above all, it was a working class marked by intense processes of urbanisation and migration. By 1980 68 percent of Brazilians were living in the urban world. Millions of working men and women now resided in the new urban peripheries, distant from the centres and dependent on public transport. Favelas (shantytowns), an older form of precarious, racialized urban self-construction, likewise underwent a process of expansion and ‘peripheralization’. The peripheries



and favelas were fundamental spaces for the formation of identities in which housing and work experiences constituted a common universe of struggles for rights and recognition.

The working class forged in those years was also marked by massive internal migration. The geographical mobility of workers, a long-standing phenomenon in Brazilian history, reached epic proportions in the second half of the 20th century. Between 1950 and 1980, almost 40 million Brazilians had some kind of migratory experience, particularly rural to urban, swelling the new industrial cities and zones.

In 1970, for example, 70 per cent of the population of the city of São Paulo had had some kind of migratory experience. In the metropolitan areas of capital cities such as Rio, Belo Horizonte and especially São Paulo, they were the "face" of this new working class, particularly in industrial employment and in the transport and construction sectors. They were present as well in the service sector, like, for example the Northeastern doormen and domestic workers in the homes of the elite and middle classes of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In those years, the experiences and stigmas of class, race and regional origin intersected in the construction of the identities of millions of people.

It was a young country with a young working class: the average age of Brazilians in 1980 was still around 20..

And it was a world of work with a greater female presence in formal employment. Women's labour force participation jumped from 21 percent to almost 28 percent from 1970 to 1980. These young women workers occupied poorly paid, insecure jobs with few prospects for advancement.

In 1973, the average salary for women was 60 per cent lower than for men.

Despite their subordinate status, women's greater presence in the labour market challenged traditional views of gender relations and women's place in society. Women's growing economic emancipation played a central role in transforming family models and the public arena. It is not possible to understand either the women's movements and the feminist wave of the late 1970s, or the emergence of social movements in general during redemocratisation, without understanding the role of these working women.

The dictatorship delivered a country in which the rich were even richer and the poor poorer. The policies of wage cuts and social control reduced labour's share in the national income, while the



benefits of growth flowed to businessmen, an upper middle management class, professionals and the upper strata of the state bureaucracy.. Rising inflation from the mid-1970s onwards increased the sense of loss and impoverishment. The country's deep social inequalities were perceived by millions of workers as the dominant mark of the military regime and became a denominator of common identities and demands in the late 1970s and early 80s.

Inequality was deeply racialized. The average income of a black man in 1960 was 60 per cent of that of a white man. In 1976, at the height of the dictatorship, it was only 38 per cent. Black workers remained concentrated in the lowest paid and least skilled occupations, often the most unhealthy and dangerous.

The dictatorship of the generals was perceived in factories, farms, construction sites and workplaces as a dictatorship of bosses and foremen. Workers lived in perpetual fear of managerial despotism. Attempts to organise met with constant repression, enhancing the employers' alliance with the political police and the military

Government policies facilitated recurrent layoffs, like the Severance Indemnity Fund which ended job security after 10 years. Unsurprisingly, turnover rates were high. In 1977, a worker remained employed in an establishment for an average of eight months.

Work was experienced as a space of precariousness, overexploitation and intense rhythms with long working hours full of overtime. In the 1970s, the country became the world leader in workplace accidents and injuries. The quest for dignity, respect and autonomy was in the air in thousands of workplaces across Brazil at the end of the 1970s. They united millions of workers who felt humiliated, oppressed and exploited. When the first factories and plants shut down, many realised that it was possible to fight, protest and organise to demand a different, better life.

The movements

In the second half of the 1970s, despite the constant repression, a wave of associations swept across working class neighbourhoods in Brazil. Mutual aid collectives, neighbourhood associations, mothers' clubs, groups demanding health, education and public transport, among

many other organisations, proliferated across the country. Fragmented and geographically dispersed, developing practices of local, everyday resistance, these associations created mechanisms of collective identity. As it grew, this self-styled "popular movement" began to act more broadly, occupying the public space with protests, demonstrations and marches, liaising with opposition leaders in the political world, and commanding the attention of the authorities, particularly at local level.

Progressive sectors of the Catholic Church played a fundamental role in this process. Present in Brazilian political life since before the 1964 coup, the Catholic left became hegemonic in various sectors of the Church between the late 1960s and early 1970s, and was a central actor both in the opposition to the military regime and in the reconfiguration of the working class role in the public sphere.

'Liberation theology' was an international movement that had a profound impact on Latin America. The 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia, was a turning point in the traditional positions of the Catholic hierarchy on the continent. The meeting affirmed the Church's commitment to solidarity with workers, the exploited and broad social transformation. It was a powerful inspiration for struggles for social transformation In a Latin America increasingly riddled with bloodthirsty dictatorships.

The social action of the progressive Catholic Church in those years was best exemplified in the base ecclesiastical communities (CEBs), along with the thematically organized pastoral organizations (workers', land, indigenous, etc.).

A space for meeting, exchanging experiences, popular education and community empowerment, the CEB's expanded into rural regions and urban peripheries. In 1970 there were an estimated 80,000 of them, bringing together around 2 million people across the country. They were a potent catalyst of movements and associations.

The Catholic left was obviously not the only active force in the popular movement during the period of redemocratisation. Minority groups of Protestants and other religions were also active in many of these associations. And the traditional left, although badly weakened and persecuted by political repression, always maintained some activity in working class neighbourhoods, with important pockets of influence, as in the case of the Communist Party of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro,

Santos and Recife. Many of the remnants of the armed left groups also began to work in the social movements,

The presence and activity of women in these movements was striking. Many represented themselves simultaneously as housewives, workers and residents of the favelas or peripheries. This working women's movement was linked, often in a tense and contradictory way, with an emerging feminism that had been spreading since the late 1960s, particularly among the intellectual middle class and sectors of the political left.

The question of racial equality also emerged at that time, with new characteristics and organisational forms. A new generation of black intellectuals and left-wing activists, as well as black trade unionists and activists in popular movements, began to publicly denounce racism and the "racial democracy" adopted as official policy by the dictatorial regime. In June 1978, various groups and organisations gathered in São Paulo to found the Unified Black Movement against Racial Discrimination (MNU), shortened the following year to the Unified Black Movement.

The organisational upsurge in Brazilian civil society in those years was also the incubator out of which emerged movements that would gain prominence in later decades, including demands for LGBT and indigenous peoples' rights

Trade unionism and strikes

While the influence of this associative effervescence should not be exaggerated, since it touched only a minority of the population, it signaled a qualitative leap in grassroots activity, in the politicization of the working class, and in the construction of a rights-based 'insurgent citizenship'

But at the end of the 1970s, trade unionism was the social movement that best embodied and expressed popular dissatisfaction and demands, while at the same time articulating a collective identity and a common language. And it was the massive and widespread strikes of the period

that gave the highest visibility to this new presence of workers in the public arena and in the political struggles of the country's redemocratisation.

If the 1978 strikes had come as a surprise, and the workers had won most of their demands, the following year they not only spread, but gained new forms of organisation and an even greater impact. Strike was the key word of 1979, and, once again, the metalworkers of the ABC in São Paulo were central protagonists. This time the union leadership was not taken by surprise. From the beginning of the year, the union held dozens of company meetings involving thousands of metalworkers. Faced with employer intransigence, a general strike began on 13 March. The union took charge of picketing at factory gates and on bus routes.

Despite employer pressure, defeats in the labour courts and police repression, the strike was massive and enthusiastic. In the midst of dictatorship, it was striking to see thousands and thousands of workers fighting for their rights and defying the military and powerful multinational companies.

The images of metalworkers 'writing' the word 'democracy' with their own bodies in São Bernardo's Municipal Palace, and of packed assemblies in the Vila Euclides Stadium, led by a charismatic bearded leader, were broadcast nationwide by newspapers and television channels that had just been freed from various government censorship restrictions. In the first half of 1979, São Bernardo do Campo became the capital of the democratic resistance and opposition politicians, students, intellectuals, artists and activists from various movements flocked there. Across Brazil there were outpourings of sympathy and solidarity.

But 1979 was far from being confined to the metalworkers of the ABC. The São Bernardo strike and the Vila Euclides images simultaneously catalysed and drove one of the most impressive strike waves in Brazilian history. Over the course of that year, more than 3 million workers paralysed production at some point in the course of 246 strikes that swept the country from north to south, in cities and in the countryside.

In September, the sugarcane workers of the Zona da Mata in Pernambuco stopped work, resuming a long tradition of collective action. The strike was meticulously organised by the region's rural union, with meetings and assemblies involving up to 70,000 workers. The

sugarcane workers' strike, which was victorious, opened up a new cycle of rural workers' mobilisations in the region.

Bank workers in São Paulo, Rio and Porto Alegre launched partial strikes, which were harshly repressed, but which stimulated national organisation in the sector in the following years. 1979 was also the year that public sector workers, particularly schoolteachers in states such as São Paulo, Rio, Rio Grande do Sul and Minas Gerais, organised massive mobilisations and strikes that challenged the state governors appointed by the military regime. In the years to come, education workers would consolidate their organization to become one of the most powerful trade union forces in the country.

The strikes also spread to workers with a weaker tradition of mobilization, like the construction workers in Belo Horizonte who struck in July, or the September strike in the footworker manufacturing city of Novo Hamburgo, in Rio Grande do Sul, when the workers at the Ciro shoe factory began a strike that spread to the entire city.

Beyond the ABC, metalworkers' strikes were breaking out in other parts of the country. In Minas Gerais, the strikes at Mannesman, FIAT and other companies in the industrial belt of Belo Horizonte, Betim and Contagem were a turning point. In Rio, the first general strike since the 1964 coup demanded an 80 per cent pay rise, job stability for pregnant women and crèches in the factories. Mass pickets and meetings helped the strikers win most of their demands.

In October, metalworkers struck in the cities of São Paulo, Osasco and Guarulhos. In the capital, the strike was mainly led by a new generation of militant workers who had taken part in the factory strikes of the previous year. The vast majority of them were linked to the metalworkers' opposition, which had been fighting the union leadership for years. Without the full support of the union, the strike was led in the streets by activists who organised the pickets and articulated the support of social movements in working class neighbourhoods. It was on one of these picket lines that the leader of the metalworkers' opposition and member of the Workers' Pastoral, Santo Dias da Silva, was killed by the military police. The murder shocked São Paulo's grassroots activists, who turned his funeral into a huge demonstration of indignation and repudiation of the regime and police violence.

The rise of mass worker protest had its longest and most emblematic moment in the 41-day strike of the ABC metalworkers in April and May 1980. The strike, which involved more than 200,000 workers who were demanding a 15% increase above the inflation rate and 12 months' job security, was fiercely opposed by the employers and the government, which took control of the São Bernardo and Santo André unions and arrested Lula and 10 other union leaders under the National Security Law.

But the strike continued after the arrests. Anchored in an impressive mobilisation, with support from the local Church and the strong solidarity networks of the ABC and São Paulo unions and neighborhoods, leadership passed to the Strike Fund, a network previously set up by the unions to raise financial resources and political support. The tense May Day celebration in São Bernardo, turned into an immense popular demonstration in which more than a hundred thousand people demanded rights, freedom and democracy.

But from the 30th day of the strike, with the possibility of the strikers being legally dismissed, the movement began to cool down. On 11 May, after 41 days, the metalworkers decided to suspend the strike. At the end of that month, the union leaders were released. The strike, although defeated in its demands, had tremendous political weight and represented an organisational leap that would reverberate for many years to come.

The economic recession and rising unemployment dampened strike action in the early 1980s, but strikes returned in July 1983, when oil refinery workers walked out in defiance of the military regime's National Security Law, and when different sectors of the trade union movement unified in an attempt at a general strike that had an impact on the metropolitan region of São Paulo and some other capitals and cities in the country.

A strong, active rural trade unionism emerged for the first time at national level during the military dictatorship. The regime had encouraged the creation of rural unions as part of the construction of a welfare network and the "pacification" and depoliticisation of the countryside. Throughout the 1970s, however, it was not uncommon for many trade unionists to use parts of this structure and resources for education and action to demand workers rights. Rural trade unionists, particularly from the Catholic left, transformed the practice of many unions,



federations and the increasingly influential National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (Contag).

In the rural world, violence and conflict were even more acute than in the city. Large landowners and local potentates responded with violence to the growth of rural workers' struggles and organization. In 1985 alone, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) counted 216 deaths and 1,363 injured in 768 conflict areas across Brazil.

Trade unions and social movements in the countryside denounced social inequality and the concentration of land ownership, exposing the contradictions of the authoritarian development model. The demand for agrarian reform was again brought into the public arena and was the basis for the formation of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST) in January 1984. Formed with the support of the Pastoral Land Commission, the MST brought together movements from various parts of the country and has since played a central role on the national political and social scene.

The strike wave of the late 1970s revived aspirations for a trade union centre that would bring together the local and sectoral organizations in the countryside and the city. Legally prohibited since 1943, confederations and other forms of inter-union organization were a longstanding objective that had repeatedly succumbed to repression and internal union divisions.

These divisions had deepened under the dictatorship, which spawned a legion of trade unionists who were loyal or at least accommodating to the regime. Although it had greatly weakened the Ministry of Labour, the military and its allies did not seek to eliminate the unions, but rather to eliminate any leftwing or independent influence and incorporate them in its authoritarian development project. Several of the leaders installed by the military coup managed to gain some legitimacy and form political groups that would control the unions for years to come. In trade union jargon, they were commonly referred to as "pelegos" (sheepskins, or scabs).

But the regime's anti-labour economic policy generated tensions in the union organizations, forging many leaders who were increasingly critical of the government. The strikes of the second half of the 1970s led to the emergence of a generation of young union leaders who quickly became politicised and rose to prominence. Lula was the most famous, but there were many others who made up the group that became known as "authentic unionists". Authenticity

signified a deep, legitimate relationship with the workers, distancing itself from both from the "pelegos" and from the traditional vanguardist left. Prioritizing autonomy from the state and employers and the defence of trade union freedom brought the 'authenticists' closer to the trade union oppositions spread across the country and were at the root of what has been called "new trade unionism".

Inside the trade unions, movements opposed to the military began to form immediately following the 1964 coup. The trade union oppositions, as they would come to be known, bravely resisted employer harassment in the workplace, dismissals and the dictatorship's continuous surveillance and repression, which led to frequent arrests and even deaths.

During redemocratisation, the trade union opposition grew and gained considerable visibility. In several cases, they won union elections in those years and throughout the 1980s. The most famous and symbolically important opposition, however, never won the fiercely disputed leadership of the São Paulo Metalworkers' Union, the largest in the country. Active since the second half of the 1960s, the Oposição Sindical Metalúrgica de São Paulo (OMSP) became an important part of the city's popular movement.

The OMSP developed a strong critique and rhetoric against the corporatist union structure inherited from the Vargas regime, which was seen as an instrument of social control. The opposition emphasized grassroots work, mistrust of the state, and workers' self-management traditions and practices. This put them in dialogue with a radical "workerist" discourse that was quite widespread in left-wing and Catholic circles globally in the 1970s.

The strikes at the end of that decade were the peak of the OMSP. Structured in the neighbourhoods and inside the companies, where factory committees sprang up, rekindling an old tradition of the Brazilian working class, the opposition succeeded in winning the 1978 union elections but was denied victory through widespread fraud, with the complicity of the Ministry of Labour. In the following years, internal divisions within the opposition and a political pivot by the incumbent leadership sealed the fate of the OMSP, which weakened from the second half of the 1980s onwards.

Traditional left-wing groups, who tended to mistrust trade unionists they did not control, strongly opposed the trade union opposition and organised a grouping called "Unidade Sindical"

(Trade Union Unity). Conflicts, sometimes violent, between these political forces in union assemblies and elections were fairly frequent in those years.

Opposing positions on the corporate legal structure which allowed only one union in a given jurisdiction, trade union oppositions, and tactical disagreements on how to confront the military dictatorship proved impossible to resolve, despite efforts at unity in 1981-82.

The impasse led leaders linked to the "new unionism" to found the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) in August 1983. In the following years, the CUT would become the largest and most active trade union confederation in the country, playing a leading role in the strikes and social struggles that would mark the 1980s. In November of the same year, the group linked to Trade Union Unity and more conservative trade unionists founded the National Confederation of the Working Classes (Conclat), which would be transformed into the General Workers' Centre (CGT) in 1986.

Conclusion

The dramatic emergence of mass social struggles at the end of the 1970s had mobilised millions of people and thousands of new militants had emerged. Opposition to the regime politicised many of those social movements in an unprecedented way and party reorganisation and the end of the dictatorship opened up space for new political arrangements and alliances, which varied greatly locally and regionally.

The dictatorship, in its twilight, was challenged by a wide and diverse range of social and political movements. Opposition to the regime was multi-class, but its fiercest and most combative sectors identified themselves as members of the working class and called not just for a formal rule of law, but for a "true democracy" that recognised the dignity of work and human rights and combated social inequalities.

Despite the economic recession and the decrease in strikes, the early 1980s were an intense time for trade unionism and social movements in general. It was a time of reorganisation and institutionalization, exemplified in the founding of the Workers' Party (PT) in February 1980.

The different opposition strategies and voices converged into a broad movement between the end of 1983 and 1984. Twenty years after being forcibly installed, the military regime was facing gigantic political demonstrations in which millions of Brazilians across the country were demanding the return of democracy. Trade unions and popular social movements played an active and fundamental role in mobilising the masses during the unsuccessful 1984 Diretas Já campaign for direct presidential elections. Like the campaign, they were defeated, and Tancredo Neves was elected president of Brazil in 1985 by an indirect electoral college.

The impact of organised workers and social movements in the public arena, however, was still far from exhausted. Although many analysts, political scientists and historians tend to neglect or downplay this role, reinforcing an elitist view that the political transition was fundamentally conducted inside barracks and offices, it is impossible to understand the New Republic and the Welfare State envisioned by the 1988 Constitution without understanding the place of the working class, its organisations and struggles in those years. And the red thread which links them to the striking workers of 1978.