

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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SCRIPT OF THE VIDEO LECTURE

On 12 May 1978, workers at the Saab-Scania truck factory in the city of São Bernardo do Campo surprised Brazil. They entered the factory but refused to start the machines, demanding wage increases and better working conditions. The strike quickly spread to other factories in the outskirts of the city of São Paulo and the neighbouring industrial region known as ABC Paulista, quickly involving more than 300,000 workers.

It was the beginning of a wave of massive worker protests and strikes and the emergence of new social movements that would accelerate the end of the military dictatorship instituted in 1964. The ABC Paulista and the automobile and metal workers were the epicentre of the protests, but the strikes spread to other sectors and regions of the country. Beyond sectors with an old union tradition like industry, transport and oil, strikes by rural workers, bank workers, civil service and education workers, among others, swept the country, with the participation of millions, despite the repression by the military government.

In 1964 a military coup backed by the urban and rural business elites and the United States government overthrew President João Goulart, a nationalist with strong links to the trade union movement. In the context of the Cold War and the impact of the Cuban Revolution, growing sectors of the middle and upper classes had become seriously



alarmed at the growing power and organisation of workers and popular movements in the cities, as well as the impressive mobilisation of peasants in rural areas.

The new regime was determined to destroy the "communist and labour hydra". Trade union offices across the country were invaded and ransacked. Many leaders were arrested, hunted and, in some cases, murdered. The military appointed conservative officials to head the most important and combative unions. Thousands of workers were fired and blacklisted. Business and the political police cemented a solid alliance; a climate of fear and persecution ruled the workplace. In the countryside, rural workers were expelled from their communities; many were killed by private militias in the service of landlords.

Repression 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 (highways, hydroelectric power plants and new agricultural frontiers, particularly in the Amazon region) and investments by multinational corporations in the automobile and consumer durables industries powered impressive economic growth.

The assault on trade unions greatly facilitated the overexploitation of labour, making Brazil the "world champion" in workplace accidents and deaths in this period. The "miracle", despite the economic growth, exacerbated processes of income concentration and social and regional inequalities in the country. Growing migration from the countryside swelled slums and working-class peripheries in the large cities. The formation of a "new working class" was completed; younger, with a greater presence of women and Afro-Brazilians, and a strong sociability anchored in the workplace and particularly in working-class neighbourhoods.

In the course of the 1970s, successive international oil crises, inflation, and the lack of state-supported social protection continually eroded the dictatorship's economic project and political support. An opposition front articulating various political and civil society sectors emerged. The military tried to control this growing pressure for democratization



by negotiating a "slow, gradual and secure" opening with the most conservative opposition sectors, a future "democracy" tutored by the military itself.

But it was in large measure the strength and mobilization of the workers that ultimately put an end to the dictatorship. The mass labour struggles catalysed and opened a new public space for a myriad of popular social movements rising from below. Housing associations in the peripheries and favelas of the large cities, an emerging indigenous movement, new feminist organisations and a renewed Black movement, movements for human rights and land struggles are some examples of the vitality of this working-class "civil society" at that juncture.

Besides the structural changes in the country and in the profile of the working class, this associative upsurge was also related to profound changes in political language, practice and organization. The so-called liberation theology of the Catholic Church and its emphasis on the popular organization of the "poor" played a central role in this process. The defeat of the armed guerrillas also reoriented the politics of many Marxists groups towards a less centralized and vanguardist approach.

The political grammar of these various sectors encouraged daily resistance in workplaces and communities. It emphasized the role of the "bases", self-organisation, the autonomy of social movements in relation to the State and political parties, as well as more inclusive, participative and democratic political practices, and the dignity of work and workers.

The mass strikes of the late 1970s were thus not only a demonstration of strength, but also a moment of fundamental political re-articulation in which the "new unionism" played a decisive role.

It was the force that led the majority of the strikes and announced a series of workers' demands concerning not only the workplace, but housing and community life in general. In the context of dictatorship, the movement quickly became politicized, putting the struggle for democracy and against the military regime at the centre of its discourse. Moreover, it emphasized that democracy was not only the return of the legal institutions



of the rule of law, but the deepening of a social democracy that would actually transform the structures of the country.

Arising in some cases within the existing structures and in others as union oppositions, the new unionism challenged the corporatist mechanisms of control established in the 1930s, demanding union autonomy and freedom. It combated the established union bureaucracy, generally made up of conservative officials who supported the military regime. It fought for internal union democracy and broad participation through assemblies, meetings and factory committees. Brazil's "new unionism" was in tune with many social struggles that impacted the worlds of labour in various parts of the world during the "Long 1970s" (1968-1984).

The "new unionism" and the social movements that emerged in the 1970s were fundamental to the re-democratisation of Brazil and the political and social life of the country in the last 40 years. The fruits of this social effervescence are the organisations created in the early 1980s which were central to these processes, such as the Workers' Party (PT), the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST).

The country, the working class, trade unionism itself and the social movements are very different today, posing innumerable new challenges for all of us. But the echoes of the "new unionism", its successes and failures, perhaps can once again help us to dream of transforming Brazil and the world.