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David Parker

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# ***Pelegos No More? Labour Historians Confront the 'New Unionism' in Brazil***

David Parker

Joel Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men: São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil's Industrial Working Class, 1900-1955* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

John D. French, *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

Margaret E. Keck, *The Workers' Party and Democratization in Brazil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

FROM THE MOMENT THE MILITARY took power in Brazil in 1964 — with negligible working-class opposition — the apparent weakness of Brazilian labour frustrated scholars and activists alike. Brazil was, after all, the most developed nation in Latin America, and São Paulo, its industrial epicentre, was a smokestack-ringed metropolis of international dimensions. If a real proletariat existed anywhere south of the Rio Grande, it was in São Paulo's booming automobile plants, metalworking factories, and working-class neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the *paulistano* labour movement appeared, as late as 1976, incapable of asserting its right to share in the fruits of Brazil's vaunted "economic miracle." Not surprisingly, the historiography of Brazilian labour reflected this pessimism, and sought to account for what was seen primarily as a story of failure.

In the last decade and a half, however, Brazilian labour has experienced an extraordinary resurgence, particularly in São Paulo. Starting in 1978, a series of major strikes paralyzed auto plants throughout the city's industrial suburbs — the so-called "ABC" region of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, and São Caetano do Sul. The President of the São Bernardo metalworkers' union, Luis Inacio da Silva ("Lula"), rose to national prominence as the expanding strike wave became a lightning rod of opposition to military rule. These strikes announced the emergence of a different kind of workers' movement, soon dubbed the "new unionism," that seemed to overturn years of tradition by taking a stronger stand against

David Parker, "*Pelegos No More? Labour Historians Confront the 'New Unionism' in Brazil*," *Labour/Le Travail*, 33 (Spring 1994), 263-78.

employers and giving greater voice to workers on the factory floor.<sup>1</sup> In the waning years of the dictatorship, as the generals gradually edged Brazil toward democracy, these unions joined forces with other rising social movements — including catholic radicals, neighborhood committees, feminists, environmentalists, and human rights activists — to form the Workers' Party (PT).

The resurrection of a militant, grassroots labour movement in Brazil, combined with the extraordinary success of the Workers' Party — in 1988 the PT won mayoral races in São Paulo and several other major cities, while Lula lost the Presidential election by only six percentage points — has in turn changed the tenor and focus of Brazilian labour historiography. We now see the emergence of a significant revisionist current, inspired not by labour's inability to prevent the 1964 coup, but by its heroic survival and resurgence under military rule. No longer compelled to explain labour's weakness, the new historiography is free to investigate how Brazilian workers made their own history within the ever-shifting constraints of intermittent authoritarianism. The result is a richer and more nuanced picture of Brazilian labour, increasingly influenced by new methodologies and new ways of thinking about workers' resistance. The three works under review are all contributions to this new revisionism.

### *Corporatism and peleguismo: the old wisdom*

THROUGHOUT THE 1960S AND 1970S, scholars desperately sought to account for the unions' apparent powerlessness, even acquiescence, in the face of repeated employer assaults on workers' rights and privileges. Most focussed their attention on two culprits: corporatist labour legislation, enacted by Getulio Vargas during the *Estado Novo* (1938–45); and corrupt union leaders, or *pelegos*, who amassed power and influence but at the cost of selling out their rank and file. In broad outline, the classic interpretation of Brazilian corporatism went something like this: over the course of the 1930s, Vargas gradually established a system by which the government granted official recognition to one union in each industry, and channeled pensions and other benefits through that union, whose finances were built up by a mandatory paycheck deduction, the *imposto sindical* or "union tax."<sup>2</sup> Officially recognized unions became the conduit through which government largesse flowed to the workers, and the union bureaucracies that tapped the flow saw unprecedented prosperity. The Faustian catch was that the labour ministry retained the legal right to retire official recognition, to intervene in union politics, and to remove leaders it deemed overly combative or independent. Furthermore, by

<sup>1</sup> John Humphrey, *Capitalist Control and Workers' Struggle in the Brazilian Auto Industry* (Princeton 1982), gives an excellent account of the emergence of the "new unionism."

<sup>2</sup> The *imposto sindical* was a mandatory payment of one day's pay per year, deducted from the paychecks of all workers, union members or not, and distributed among the official unions according to government priorities. Dues for union members were extra and voluntary.

failing to allow for recognition of union locals at the shopfloor level, the law actively promoted the estrangement of labour leaders from their rank and file. The result was an inherently top-down system, where unions became little more than organs of the government, destroying workers' autonomy and stifling any independent organization.<sup>3</sup>

With passage of the 1943 labour code (the *Consolidação das leis do trabalho*, or CLT), this corporatist framework became a permanent fixture of Brazilian labour relations, enabling it to survive the fall of Vargas and to prosper under both the democratic and military regimes that followed.<sup>4</sup> But in order to keep functioning so well for so long, the system required loyal union officials who were more concerned with delivering services [*assistencialismo*] than with defending workers against employers. Cynics went even further, arguing that the system required leaders more interested in feathering their nests than in criticizing the government or the capitalist system. These were the *pelegos* (named for a sheepskin saddle blanket), who cushioned workers from the weight of capitalist exploitation — or cushioned capitalists from the inconvenience of workers' resistance — but did nothing to alter the basic division of labour between oppressor and oppressed.

Left to be explained, however, was why corporatist control of labour proved so effective in Brazil, when similar legislation in Peronist Argentina never successfully debilitated the workers' movement. Much of the classic literature on Peronism also emphasized the rise of state-controlled unions and the corruption of union leaders, and yet Argentina's virtual ungovernability over the last half century — best illustrated by the insurrectionary Córdoba strikes of 1969 — contrasted sharply with the labour peace that characterized Brazil during the same period. To explain this point, a few scholars turned the classic interpretation of Brazilian corporatism on its head, reversing cause and effect to argue that Brazil's labour movement had always been fundamentally weak — hence the ease with which the State corrupted and controlled its leaders. Sheldon Maram, for one, argued that employers successfully divided and conquered their labour force long before Vargas ever appeared on the scene, primarily by exploiting the tension between European immigrants and native (Afro-Brazilian) workers.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the argument went, while Perón had to provide generous benefits in order to tame the already strong Argentine unions, Vargas was free to mold Brazilian labour as he wished, virtually from the ground up. In the final analysis, however, it did not really matter whether the conformism

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Paul Erickson, *The Brazilian Corporative State and Working Class Politics* (Berkeley 1977).

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth S. Mericle, "Corporatist Control of the Working Class: Authoritarian Brazil Since 1964," in James M. Malloy, ed., *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America* (Pittsburgh 1977), 303-38.

<sup>5</sup>Sheldon Maram, "Labor and the Left in Brazil, 1890-1920: A Movement Aborted," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 57 (1977), 271-2, specifically points to the contrast with the Argentine case.

of its leaders was a source or a symptom of labour's weakness: the overall picture of a passive, manipulated, ineffectual working class remained.

*Worker agency: the new wisdom*

IN DIFFERENT WAYS, the three books reviewed here challenge the idea that Brazil's corporatist institutions made independent working class action impossible. In his study of São Paulo's textile and metallurgical workers between World War I and the 1950s, Joel Wolfe has unearthed a strong yet largely hidden tradition of grassroots radicalism, dating from as early as 1917. This combative heritage, carried by women and men organized in ad hoc factory commissions, was frequently ignored and even opposed by the formal unions, both those led by *pelegos* and those led by the left. Yet the factory commissions, reflecting the collective consciousness of ordinary workers (many of them women), inspired and facilitated the rise of important strike movements in the 1940s, 1950s, and ultimately the late 1970s.

John French, in contrast, focusses his attention on the relationship between São Paulo's unions, politicians, and the State. Following recent work on populism by scholars such as Daniel James,<sup>6</sup> he argues that Brazilian unions were never simply controlled and manipulated by the government through their *pelegos*. Rather, Brazilian workers often used the corporatist system to their advantage, wresting significant concessions from populist politicians increasingly dependent upon their support at the polls. While some *pelegos* were unquestionably corrupt and unwilling to defend their rank and file, others subtly exploited what limited opportunities the authoritarian labour relations system afforded them. That the approaches and conclusions of Wolfe and French are so completely at odds testifies to the richness of the ongoing debate over Brazilian workers in the corporatist era, and demonstrates, as we will see, how current ideological struggles within the Brazilian left continue to shape and inform the historiography of labour.

Margaret Keck's contemporary study of the Workers' Party (PT) deals less directly with labour. Her concern is with the PT's difficult transition from a grassroots working-class movement of radical opposition to authoritarianism, to just one of several parties in a young democracy, devoted to broadening its appeal, winning elections, and running municipal governments. Even so, her book raises in a contemporary setting many of the same questions that so divide Wolfe and French: whether or not popular leaders can work within government structures without being co-opted, and whether workers should ideally fight their battles at the point of production or in the larger political arena. On the one hand, Keck argues that the PT has been uniquely successful in achieving power without falling into old Brazilian habits of patronage, paternalism and populism, and without losing

<sup>6</sup>Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge 1988).

touch with its strong working-class base. On the other hand, by identifying the inevitable dilemmas of success, her book strikes an important cautionary note.

*In search of the grassroots*

IN *WORKING WOMEN, WORKING MEN*, Joel Wolfe asserts that the major demands of São Paulo's New Unionism in the late 1970s — for the removal of *pelegos* from the union leadership, abolition of the *imposto sindical*, and an end to government intervention in labour relations — were by no means original. Indeed, those demands reflected a decades-old tradition of grassroots activism among São Paulo's industrial workers. (Wolfe, 2) The primary purpose of Wolfe's book is to uncover that tradition, chronicling the struggles of ordinary workers against employers, against the State, and often against the leaders of their own ostensibly "representative" organizations.

This third element, the conflict *between workers and unions*, is clearly Wolfe's main interest and his most important contribution. As he puts it:

Compared with some other Latin American countries (e.g., Argentina, Chile, and Mexico), Brazil has not sustained a large-scale, politically active *formal* labor movement. Brazilian labor leaders' and state makers' failures to speak to the rank and file's needs or to deliver real social gains hindered the development of a powerful labor movement in the first half of the the twentieth century. Brazilian workers have, however, created and maintained their own local, independent organizations that survive state intervention and violence because of their strong roots among the rank and file, and because their informal levels of organization have made them elusive targets for industrialist and state repression. These very features have also made this type of worker organization and mobilization difficult for historians to locate. (Wolfe, 3, italics in the original)

The "local, independent organizations" at the center of Wolfe's story are shopfloor level factory commissions: informal, ad hoc groupings of between five and fifty people in a single plant or sometimes a single division of a plant. At various times and under varying conditions, the commissions lodged workers' complaints against unfair rules and abusive foremen; negotiated such issues as workplace organization, machine speeds, and piece rates; and organized strikes. In Wolfe's view, these factory commissions were the grass roots — the authentic and militant voice of the average worker, a voice that otherwise had no place to be heard.

The relation between the factory commissions and formal labour unions was complex, ever-changing, and often antagonistic. Normally, the unions and the commissions simply ignored one another. Employers dealt with one or the other as it suited their interests, while the labour ministry acted as if the commissions did not exist. At other times, union leaders actively thwarted grassroots organizing, or more typically, intervened in local conflicts at the eleventh hour, presenting themselves as the workers' legitimate spokesmen and negotiating agreements that

satisfied their own agendas but ignored or de-emphasized the commissions' original demands. (Wolfe, 20, for example)

In the textile industry, this distance between rank-and-file commissions and the official unions was exacerbated by gender conflict. Wolfe asserts that a majority of textile operatives in So Paulo were women, yet they had no voice in the all-male textile unions. At its most benign, the exclusion of women led to serious sins of omission — failure to pursue charges of sexual harrassment by foremen, for example. But in times of high unemployment, male unionists proved actively hostile to working women, whom they blamed for taking men's jobs and forcing down wages. (Wolfe, 12) Even the discourse of formal unionism was heavily laden with gender stereotypes, depicting work as "manly" and unemployment as emasculating, while praising the domestic ideal of femininity and undervaluing women's contributions both as workers and as potential militants. Reality contrasted sharply with this image, Wolfe argues, as women played a leading role in the textile factory commissions.

On the surface, then, Wolfe's description of unrepresentative unions seems to echo the familiar critique of corporatism and *peleguismo*. Indeed, Wolfe casts the *pelegos* in an even worse light than the traditional image. For example, he notes that while payment of the *imposto sindical* was mandatory for all workers, only dues-paying members [*sindicalizados*] were entitled to receive the social benefits those unions distributed. Since the *imposto sindical*, not dues, provided the lion's share of union financing, leaders actually sought to keep union membership as small as possible, in order to maximize revenues and minimize expenditures. (Wolfe, 75-6)

Wolfe's argument is more sophisticated, however, than the old wisdom in several important ways. First, he argues that militant anarchist and communist unions were often just as guilty of ignoring their rank and file as were the corrupt, government-controlled *pelego* unions, and he notes that conflict existed between factory commissions and formal unions long before Getulio Vargas came to power. In other words, Wolfe agrees that Vargas' later success in reshaping labour relations on the corporatist model can be explained in part by the weakness of Brazil's unions prior to 1930. This does not prove, however, that Brazilian workers lacked militancy, only that they were badly represented by self-appointed leaders more interested in extraneous political issues — like Brazil's role in World War I — than with the bread-and-butter needs that so desperately concerned the rank and file.

Secondly, Wolfe rejects the old wisdom's central tenet that the *Estado Novo*'s corporatist labour legislation prevented grassroots worker militancy. Clearly *pelego* unions, dependent upon government recognition and the *imposto sindical*, rarely mounted significant opposition to employers or to the government. Wolfe, however, argues that because the official unions had so few members and because rank and file workers continued to prefer their factory commissions, the unions could not perform a social control function because they were so absolutely irrelevant. (Wolfe, 81, 85, 93) Indeed, under some circumstances even employers

found themselves preferring to negotiate with the commissions, because only the commissions enjoyed the moral authority to speak for workers and enforce agreements. How, then, was worker militancy controlled? Wolfe argues that direct repression, sometimes by industrialists, sometimes by the State, played a far more important role than corruption or co-optation. Shopfloor leaders were frequently fired or arrested, and strikes were broken up by police and the military. In addition, industrialists enacted a variety of internal measures designed to foster loyalty to the enterprise or — more often — to undermine worker solidarity. Factories held competitions to reward the most productive workers, opened cafeterias and stores providing scarce and otherwise expensive food at a discount, and in the 1950s rationalized production lines. (Wolfe, 85-6, 145-52) Workers resisted those changes that went against their interests, but employers, with the active support of State and Federal authorities, usually had the superior firepower.

Nevertheless — and this is Wolfe's most important point — there were significant moments in Brazilian history when the organization and militancy of the factory commissions spilled out into public life, pushing the formal unions to embrace their demands and pay attention to their needs. In each and every major episode of labour unrest in São Paulo, including the General Strike of 1917, the massive strike wave of 1945-1946, and the so-called "Strike of the 300,000" in 1953, Wolfe sees a single repeating pattern: worsening living standards, fueled by inflation, led grassroots workers and their factory commissions to strike. Formal unions and left-wing organizations (anarchist in 1917, communist in 1945 and 1953), operating in fleeting moments of comparative political liberty, adopted the commissions' demands as their own, and in so doing became — temporarily — more militant, more representative of the rank and file, and more attuned to the real needs of ordinary workers, including women.

Each episode of worker mobilization generated a backlash, as governments closed the political space as soon as they were able to do so. Because they were subject to intervention by the ministry of labour, formal unions fell victim to purges and crackdowns. But the factory commissions, with their informal, ad hoc organization, were better able to survive, persist, and reemerge when conditions again permitted. In this way, Wolfe argues, São Paulo's factory commissions became the vehicle by which industrial workers passed down a tradition and collective memory of militant resistance from one generation to the next.

Wolfe's book goes a long way toward explaining the paradox of weak labour unions in a city capable of mobilizing massive numbers of workers during ostensibly "spontaneous" strikes. By documenting the persistence of grassroots organization at the shopfloor level, he proves that those strikes were anything but spontaneous. He also shows that Brazil's corporatist legal superstructure was not the straitjacket that the old wisdom led us to believe. For those reasons, as well as for its attention to neglected gender issues, *Working Women, Working Men* is useful and valuable. Nonetheless, any study as ambitious as Wolfe's must expect some criticism. First and foremost, considering the centrality of factory commissions to



his argument, Wolfe devotes startlingly little attention to the concrete characteristics and day-to-day praxis of those organizations. How were commission leaders chosen? Were they chosen, or were they a self-appointed vanguard? When and how often did the commissions meet? Was there long-term continuity of leadership over time, or was there frequent turnover? Did commissions continue to organize in times of relative labour peace, or did they arise only during moments of conflict? If they did meet in times of labour peace, what functions did they perform, and what was their relationship with industrialists? Were all commissions equally militant, or were some commissions under management control?

These questions are not merely interesting or academic: rather, they cut to the heart of Wolfe's essential argument that the factory commissions faithfully spoke for a combative rank and file.<sup>7</sup> Clearly this is the perception of the workers Wolfe interviewed, but we have no way of knowing whether his oral histories represent a cross-section of the workforce or a self-selected group of militants. Indeed, at one point Wolfe mentions, almost in passing, that commissions sometimes played a coercive role — for example, pressuring workers not to participate in factory incentive programs or other schemes to increase production. (Wolfe, 150) Was this the action of a class-conscious majority enforcing its collective will against a few deviants, or a strong-arm tactic employed by a precarious vanguard? It may have been the former, but Wolfe offers only assertion, not proof.

### *Peleguismo and politics: a reassessment*

JUST AS IMPORTANTLY, Wolfe's otherwise laudable search for the grassroots worker diverts his attention from other — and potentially more significant — sources of historical change. When explaining the causes of the 1917 General Strike, the post-World War II strike wave, the strike of the 300,000, or other major episodes of unrest, Wolfe emphasizes developments either at the point of production or in household consumption levels — in his view, oppressive factory structures, poor working conditions, low wages, and the high cost of living were the decisive forces driving worker resistance. Wolfe provides original and important information on all of these issues, but in so doing he leaves the impression that national and local politics were only significant insofar as they opened or closed the space for popular mobilization from below.

John French takes a very different view. In *The Brazilian Workers' ABC*, a study of unions and politics in the industrial suburbs of São Paulo, he argues that labour's fate, and the consciousness of ordinary workers, cannot be divorced from the larger political picture. In 20th-century Brazil, that picture was dominated by

<sup>7</sup>Wolfe and French have elsewhere debated this point, focusing specifically on the 1917 São Paulo General Strike. Joel Wolfe, "Anarchist Ideology, Worker Practice: The 1917 General Strike and the Formation of São Paulo's Working Class"; John D. French, "Practice and Ideology: A Cautionary Note on the Historian's Craft"; Wolfe, "Response to John French," all in *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 71 (November 1991), 809-58.

a single overwhelming change: urbanization and the expansion of the electorate. As rural patronage-based machines lost their ability to dictate the outcomes of local and national elections, aspiring politicians — now called *populists* — realized that they could win public office by appealing to the working masses. This new political climate opened a world of opportunities for Brazilian labour, and just as importantly, legitimized new ideologies of citizenship and workers' participation. Nevertheless, the unions' strategy of alliance with elite and middle-class politicians also had its risks. French traces how the workers of the ABC region negotiated the dangerous waters of populism, seeking — sometimes successfully — to capitalize on their growing influence without sacrificing their autonomy.

As part of this larger picture, French re-evaluates both the impact of Vargas' corporatist legislation and the role of officially-recognized (*pelego*) unions, seeing nuance and ambiguity that others have ignored. His starting point, in keeping with the old wisdom but in sharp opposition to Wolfe, is that São Paulo's factory workers in 1930 simply lacked the power and unity to forge an independent labour movement over intense employer opposition. Thus, when Vargas established a mechanism for the legal recognition of unions, São Paulo's workers jumped at the opportunity — not because they believed Vargas' rhetoric of class conciliation, but because recognition legitimized their very right to exist, a right that neither employers nor the government had conceded previously. (French, 51)<sup>8</sup> Until the failed Communist uprising and subsequent authoritarian crackdown of 1935, French argues, legal recognition had fueled — not stalled — labour militancy.

During the *Estado Novo* and the ferociously anti-labour Dutra regime (especially 1947-50), the government did employ the corporatist labour code to justify union purges and the banning of strikes. Some unions were turned over to corrupt ministry officials, and *peleguismo* became a real phenomenon. Yet French doubts that the fate of Brazilian workers would have been any better had those laws not existed. Quite the contrary: even in the darkest hours of repression, a significant number of committed union leaders retained the ability to pursue what he calls "indirect action," working the government's advisory boards and labour courts to their members' minimum disadvantage. (French, 85-87) More importantly, during times of political liberalization, when the Brazilian authorities chose not to suppress the mobilization of workers, those unions aggressively turned to the official industrial relations apparatus — and the fine print of labour law — as a weapon in their struggle. For example, in the brief democratic interlude that followed World War II, as Getulio Vargas abandoned the authoritarianism of the *Estado Novo* and began to court labour as a base of support, many unions found that they could achieve major gains by pursuing collective grievance cases [*dissídios coletivos*] against employers in the labour courts. Not only did the courts increasingly rule in

<sup>8</sup>A very similar argument has recently been advanced for the Argentine case. Jeremy Adelman, "Reflections on Argentine Labour and the Rise of Perón," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 11 (1992), 250.

the workers' favour, but the very act of filing a *dissídio coletivo* cloaked workers' demands in a respectability that in turn legitimized strikes, demonstrations, and the entire range of other tactics employed to press their gains. (French, 96-7, 156-7) In short, working through formal channels did not rule out more militant strategies: rather, it complemented them and gave them force.

Central to French's vindication of Brazilian unions is his emphasis on their realism and responsivity to opportunity. That opportunity was created in part by political leaders — Vargas on the national level, Adhemar de Barros in the State of São Paulo — who for the first time in Brazilian history rode to power with the electoral support of the urban working class. By rhetorically embracing the workers' cause, these populist politicians brought about two important changes: first, they relaxed some of the controls on workers' organization, providing an opening for both unions and the Communist Party. Second, they validated and gave voice to workers' demands, contributing in no small way to the growth of a more radical class consciousness. This second point is controversial but important. For example, whereas Wolfe explains the strikes of 1945-46 as a reaction to concrete conditions — a decline in real wages after several years of massive wartime profits, line speedups, undercompensated overtime, and a string of broken promises — French argues that those strikes were equally inspired by "popular Getulismo," workers' inchoate faith that Vargas was finally on their side. As French puts it:

While he sought to blur the lines between social classes ... , the effect of Getulio's rhetoric was to foster a common group identity among ABC's discontented but expectant factory workers.... Rather than hindering the development of class consciousness among workers, these populist appeals actually served as a rallying point that helped to unify the working class and increase its confidence. (138)

Significantly, however, French emphasizes that popular and official *Getulismo* were two very different things. While Vargas merely sought to bring workers into his vision of a harmonious social order where class conflict ceased to exist, workers interpreted his message through the filter of their own experiences and struggles. Indeed, one of French's most original assertions is that in 1945, most of ABC's workers saw no conflict between their support for Vargas — forced out of power by the military and barred from running for re-election — and their voting for the Communist Party. (French, 139-40)<sup>9</sup> French interprets this independence as proof once again that Brazilian workers were empowered, not weakened, by the rise of populist politicians.

Still, French is by no means overly sanguine about what workers could expect to receive from the demagogues courting their support. Part 3 of the book, entitled

<sup>9</sup>Vargas formally endorsed General Dutra as the best alternative among the two conservative candidates. French, however, implies that the endorsement was halfhearted, and argues that large numbers of *Getulista* workers ignored the endorsement and voted Communist, seeing no contradiction in their actions.

"The Promise and Pitfalls of Democracy," describes the ease with which São Paulo governor Adhemar de Barros jettisoned the working class that elected him and joined forces with the anti-communist, anti-labour reaction unleashed by President Dutra in 1947. But French also shows that in the ABC region, this betrayal did not destroy workers' independent organizational capacity. Workers went on to elect a slate of Communist representatives to municipal government, only to see the results nullified by a central government determined to fight the Cold War. Soon afterwards, in 1950, workers brought Getulio Vargas back to power, with a more radical platform than ever. In evaluating all these political twists and turns, French basically argues that Brazilian workers, and the unions that represented them, knew exactly what they were doing. In the face of a strong and hostile opposition, they made the most of the tools they had, one of those tools being the vote. When supporting a populist politician appeared to offer them concrete benefits and more freedom to organize, that is what they did. When those politicians abandoned them, they turned to other forms of struggle. Throughout, we have a picture of rational — and increasingly powerful — workers making tactical alliances, not the classic picture of a deluded working class selling its soul for a few empty promises, or Wolfe's picture of self-interested unions selling out an otherwise militant rank and file.

*The Brazilian Workers' ABC* is not without its shortcomings as well. Far too often, French downplays the contradictions between workers and unions, so well chronicled by Wolfe. Far too often, he mechanically infers the ideas and attitudes of workers from the official statements of union leaders and Communist Party officials, as evidenced by his excessive reliance on the Communist paper *Hoje*. As this is, first and foremost, a book about Brazilian politics, we should perhaps not expect otherwise; yet it is important to keep in mind that the rank-and-file worker rarely appears on these pages. Additionally, French's decision to focus his attention on the most militant unions in one of the most militant regions of Brazil — a bastion of Communist support in the 1940s, and the cradle of the New Unionism — raises questions about the extent to which his conclusions can be generalized. French freely admits that many unions were led by classic *pelegos*, beholden only to the labour ministry. For example, his characterization of Artur Albino da Rocha, leader of São Paulo's ceramic workers' union (French, 174-5), looks much like something Wolfe might have written. But which, then, is more representative of Brazilian labour as a whole: the combative union with its subtle strategy of political action, or the corrupt union with its dependence on government subsidies and the *imposto sindical*? By demonstrating that militant, independent unionism could survive in spite of — indeed in part because of — corporatist legislation and populist demagoguery, French presents an original and highly significant thesis. But does he describe the rule, or just the exception?

Finally, if corporatism and populism neither debilitated nor undermined the autonomy of Brazilian unions, how do we explain labour's defeat and demobilization under military rule? Interestingly, while both French and Wolfe begin their

stories by alluding to the New Unionism, neither one says much about the 1964-1977 interregnum. Historians should not be criticized for limiting themselves to their sources, but future scholars need to test Wolfe's and French's conclusions against the later period: will they find corrupted, hamstrung unions serving the military regime while grassroots worker militancy bubbled below the surface, or will they find hard-nosed but realistic union leaders making the best of a terrible situation? Whichever way, the old corporatism-as-social-control thesis is likely to emerge worse for wear.<sup>10</sup> But we must be careful not to go too far in the other direction, seeing strength and resistance everywhere, to the point that the decade of labour demobilization under military rule becomes nothing more than a prologue to the São Bernardo strikes. Defeat, unfortunately, is also a part of working-class history.

*Grassroots activism, politics, and the contemporary debate*

THE CENTRAL ISSUE raised by Wolfe's emphasis on rank-and-file militancy versus French's focus on organized labour's alliance strategy can be summed up in two related questions: first, are workers best served by fighting their battles directly against employers, or are they better equipped to pursue change through legislation? Second, do political involvement and cooperation with government agencies complement the struggle at the point of production, or sabotage it? The first question involves a comparison of workers' bargaining strength and capacity to strike, versus their ability to affect political outcomes. The second hinges on the extent to which State intervention in labour relations promotes or undermines union power. Traditional students of Latin American labour, going back at least to Robert Alexander in the 1950s and 1960s, have generally argued that the region's workers enjoyed far more political power than economic clout *vis-à-vis* industrialists, but that the "overpoliticization" of unions, paradoxically, operated against workers' long-term interests by subordinating union goals to partisan politics and estranging union leaders from the rank and file.<sup>11</sup> As we have already seen, Wolfe rejects the first proposition but largely accepts the second, while French argues the opposite.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Wolfe's criticism of Youssef Cohen, *The Manipulation of Consent: The State and Working-Class Consciousness in Brazil* (Pittsburgh 1989). His comments appear in a recent review article: Joel Wolfe, "Social Movements and the State in Brazil," *Latin American Research Review*, 28 (1993), 248-57.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Robert J. Alexander, *Labor Relations in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile* (New York 1962) and Victor Alba, *Politics and the Labor Movement in Latin America* (Stanford 1968). Explanations of workers' weak bargaining power emphasized a poorly-skilled workforce and a large reserve army of unemployed, racial and ethnic division, ideological fragmentation of unions and their estrangement from the rank and file, and the tendency of unions to represent only a "labour aristocracy." Labour's political strength supposedly derived from the chronic instability of the political system, workers' capacity to threaten public order, and politicians' willingness to incite the masses for their own purposes.

Yet this problem is not just of interest to historians. As Margaret Keck points out, the debate over shopfloor unionism versus political involvement by organized labour has been and remains perhaps the single largest issue facing the modern Workers' Party. Born of a movement dedicated to building "authentic" unionism, unhindered by political ties or procedural constraints, the PT was forced to confront and test those basic principles as it became a contender for national power. For starters, Keck points out that the PT's situation in the 1980s epitomized Adam Przeworski's classic "electoral dilemma of labor-based parties":

... if they remain close to their working-class base of support, continuing to play a role in political class formation, they cannot win majorities in elections; if, on the other hand, they expand their electoral appeal to a multiclass one, they run the risk of ... losing the specificity of their relationship to the working class, and possibly its allegiance. (Keck, 125)<sup>12</sup>

For PT leaders, moreover, the electoral dilemma was but a small part of the problem. Their very success as trade-unionists owed to their rejection of a half-century of *peleguismo* and the subordination of workers' demands to populist politicians' electoral strategies. Whether or not corporatist legislation and government intervention in industrial relations had actually weakened workers' independent bargaining capacity *vis-à-vis* employers, the New Unionism was predicated on the belief that it had. Nowhere did the old critique of populism resonate more strongly than among the rising generation of labour activists that would form the backbone of the PT. It thus becomes easy to understand the intensity with which those young leaders defended shopfloor union autonomy from *any* outside political interference, even interference from the PT itself.

At the same time, there were others in the labour movement who saw in the relaxation of authoritarian rule a unique opportunity to win significant change on a national scale. They hoped to press labour's demands not one small factory at a time, but through unified political action, led by labour confederations and their political allies on the left. This second group, identified with union figures historically loyal to the Brazilian Communist Party, came to call itself *Unidade Sindical* — the Labour Unity group. Their opponents, bent on fostering local workers' autonomy, were known as *autenticos*. In the early 1980s, the two tendencies split into rival confederations — *Unidade Sindical's* CONCLAT versus the *autenticos'* CUT — and increasingly competed in local union elections. (Keck, 172-80)

Shopfloor action versus policy-making by labour bureaucracies, bread-and-butter unionism versus attempts to reshape the political arena: the terms of dispute within the Brazilian labour movement directly parallel — and obviously inspired — Wolfe and French's historiographical disagreements. Yet the contemporary PT, Keck argues, has proved uniquely successful at finding a healthy balance between both kinds of action. She attributes that success to three main factors: first, the PT

<sup>12</sup> Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge 1985), 23-9.

openly supported the *autenticos*, and unlike parties of the past, honoured an explicit pledge to respect and defend union autonomy. Even though unionists held most of the high posts within the party hierarchy and vice versa, party affairs and union affairs were scrupulously kept separate. Candidates for union leadership, for example, were not allowed to use the Party name. (Keck, 184) A tacit division of labour emerged, in which unions remained responsible for leading their own struggles, while the party sought only to improve the environment in which those struggles might be prosecuted. Legislative activity in and of itself "was not expected to be an important vehicle of change." (Keck, 185) Second, again paradoxically, the ever-present temptation to cross that dividing line was diminished by the PT's electoral defeat in 1982. The setback momentarily convinced many PT activists that grassroots activism, not electoral politics, offered the best opportunity for change. This "return to the base" strengthened the local organizations to the point that they temporarily eclipsed the party, ensuring their continued autonomy even as the PT later re-emerged as a viable force in 1985. (Keck, 187-8)

Finally, Keck argues that the PT may actually have succeeded — at least partially — in overcoming Przeworski's electoral dilemma, broadening its appeal over the course of the 1980s without compromising its commitment to the union movement. It did so by redefining the working class to include not just manual and industrial workers, but wage-earners of all kinds, including white-collar employees and salaried professionals. This ideological redefinition was inspired and promoted by the vertiginous rise of militant white-collar unionism in Brazil, particularly among teachers, bank workers, and public employees.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, noting the rise of white-collar strikes in the 1980s, and the growing presence of white-collar unionists among the PT's top leadership (the PT's second and third Presidents were both bank workers), Keck speculates that a sea change may be underway. As the PT inevitably moves toward a more inclusive discourse, white-collar unionists ease the tension between its multiclass political appeal and its union roots. As Keck puts it: "when middle-class candidates for elective office were middle-class unionists, they created a bridge between the two." (193)

Keck's optimism is well-tempered by caution. She understands the obstacles that lie between "movement and politics," and knows that if the PT has succeeded so far in overcoming or avoiding some of the dilemmas of success, it still has a long way to travel. The biggest question, of course, is what might happen when and if the PT becomes the party in power at the national level. Keck describes the enormous problems that confronted the PT municipal governments, as they had to deal with a broad range of competing interests in a climate of austerity. (Keck, 199-215) She has no illusion that those problems will not be far more intractable

<sup>13</sup>In São Paulo, Rio, and a few other major cities, bank workers have actually been unionized since the 1920s and 1930s. Only with the new Constitution of 1988 were public employees officially given the right to organize.

from Brasilia. There may be additional reasons for pessimism as well. Studies from other Latin American nations hint that the militant leaders of white-collar unions, typically former activists in university politics, seldom represent the views of their more conservative constituents.<sup>14</sup> Thus, they may not be such an effective bridge between the PT's working-class base and a more inclusive electoral message.

But above all, the PT has already begun to realize that electoral politics in Brazil are now, more than ever before in the nation's history, dominated by the mass media. On the one hand, this is an enormous opportunity, as television antennas increasingly adorn the tin or plywood roofs in even the poorest neighborhoods, both urban and rural. Illiterate and semi-literate inhabitants of Brazil's *favelas*, in some ways the PT's natural power base, are now voters, and may comprise a majority of the electorate. On the other hand, while the PT has made innovative use of the mass media in past elections (Keck, 154), picture-tube politics can only increase the distance between party leaders and their union base. And given the agenda of Brazil's corporate media giants — many credit *TV Globo* for the 1988 election of photogenic outsider Fernando Collor de Mello — the PT faces an enormous temptation to moderate its message in search of media "respectability," or face *de facto* censorship.

For all of these reasons, we may find — in spite of the New Unionism — that populism is far from dead in Brazil. Political parties have strong incentives to court the working-class vote, but equally strong incentives to avoid giving workers real power.<sup>15</sup> The temptation to see unions as instruments, not partners, is still quite high. For their part, union leaders will remain tempted to look for change from above rather than from below, as long as workers' electoral clout outstrips their bargaining power against employers. This is almost certainly the case in times of worldwide recession, economic restructuring, and high unemployment. To their credit, both the New Unionism and the Workers' Party have largely resisted those incentives and temptations. But notwithstanding the PT's long-term success or failure, these fine studies by Wolfe, French, and Keck all serve as reminders, each in its own way, that workers' resistance takes many forms, employs many strategies, but — above all else — endures.

<sup>14</sup>For example, Carmen Rosa Balbi and Jorge Parodi, "Radicalismo y clasismo en el movimiento sindical peruano," *Socialismo y Participación* (Lima, Peru), 26 (June 1984), 97-8.

<sup>15</sup>Illustrative are the recent experiences of Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru — candidates elected on populist platforms who nonetheless pursued deflationary neoliberal stabilization policies once in office.



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