

Radicalization and confrontation: the militant appropriation of the corporative mode: the strikes in Minas Gerais at the post-1930 period

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Abstract

In this article, we deal specifically with the strike movements as manifestations of militant appropriation of the corporative political form, that is, manifestations of the radicalization and the discourse confrontation and the entities' actions attached to their struggle for a better efficacy of the politics. In this analysis, we cannot ignore the special circumstance where the manifestations of this appropriation took place. The points that interest us more directly are the intensive movement of the civil society in 1934 and 1935 and the higher aggressiveness of the Communist Party. We discuss two specific kinds of strikes: those that counted on the support of the official trade unions and the one that made itself in absentia of the Trade Union — the Oeste de Minas Railway strike. The third type, that has the Trade Union's support but not the accession of the bases, the Bank Clerk's strike, is not analyzed because of limitations on the article size.

Keywords: strike; official trade unions; corporatism.

Radicalização e confronto: a apropriação militante da forma corporativa — as greves em Minas Gerais no pós-1930

Resumo

Neste artigo, trataremos, especificamente, dos movimentos grevistas enquanto manifestações da apropriação militante da forma política corporativa, ou seja, manifestações da radicalização e do confronto do discurso e da ação das entidades atreladas na sua luta por maior eficácia política. Não podemos, nesta análise, desprezar a conjuntura especial em que se dão as manifestações dessa apropriação. O que nos interessa mais diretamente são a intensa movimentação da sociedade civil em 1934 e 1935 e a maior agressividade do Partido Comunista. Abordaremos dois tipos específicos de greves: aquelas que contaram com o apoio dos sindicatos oficiais e a que se fez à revelia do Sindicato — a dos Ferroviários da Estrada Oeste de Minas. O terceiro tipo, que tem o apoio do Sindicato, mas não tem a adesão das bases — a Greve dos Bancários — não será analisada por limitações do tamanho do artigo.

Palavras-chave: greves; sindicatos oficiais; corporativismo.

Radicalización y enfrentamiento: la apropiación militante de la forma corporativa — las huelgas en Minas Gerais después de 1930

Resumen

En el artículo, trataremos específicamente de los movimientos huelguistas como manifestaciones de la apropiación por los militantes de la forma política corporativa — o sea, manifestaciones de la radicalización y del enfrentamiento del discurso y de la acción de las entidades vinculadas a su lucha por una mayor eficacia política. No podemos, en ese análisis, dejar de lado la coyuntura especial en que se dan las manifestaciones de esa adaptación. Lo que nos interesa más directamente es el intenso movimiento de la sociedad civil en 1934 y 1935 y la mayor agresividad del Partido Comunista. Enfocaremos dos tipos específicos de huelgas: las que tuvieron el soporte de los sindicatos oficiales y la de los ferroviarios de la Estrada Oeste de Minas, que se hizo sin el apoyo del Sindicato. El tercer tipo, lo que tiene el respaldo del Sindicato, pero no la adhesión de las bases, a saber, la huelga de los trabajadores bancarios, no será analizado por limitaciones de tamaño del artículo.

Palabras clave: huelgas; sindicatos oficiales; corporativismo.

Radicalisation et affrontement: l'appropriation militante du corporatisme — les grèves à Minas Gerais dans l'après 1930

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous parlerons spécialement des rassemblements de grévistes comme manifestations de l'appropriation militante du corporatisme, c'est-à-dire, manifestations de la radicalisation et de la différence entre le discours et les actions d'entités qui luttèrent pour l'efficacité politique. On ne peut négliger, dans cette analyse, les situations particulières où les manifestations ont eu lieu. Les domaines qui nous concernent ici sont la mouvementation de la société civile en 1934 et 1935 et l'agressivité du parti communiste. Nous parlerons de deux types spécifiques de grèves: celles qui ont été soutenues par les syndicats officiels and celui qui a été fait par défaut du syndicat — des employés ferroviaires de la route Estrada Oeste de Minas. Le troisième type, soutenu par le syndicat mais sans l'adhésion des bases — les grèves bancaires — ne sera pas analysée en raison de la limitation imposée par la taille du article.

Mots clés: grèves; syndicats officiels; corporatisme.

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In March 1934, police in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, complying with special recommendations of the Ministry of Labor, transmitted through the Chief of the State Police, arrested several workers, accused of being communists and having spread seditious newsletters throughout the town. The proletarian organizations protested, releasing a note asserting that said workers were not communists, “but were only spreading propaganda newsletters of the proletarian aspirations within the one form of resistance allowed by universal law, the right to strike”¹

The police chief of Juiz de Fora told the reporter of the *Estado de Minas* that rumors of serious disturbances of the order, of communist character, announced for the beginning of March, came to the knowledge of the Government. Coinciding with these rumors, the police chief went on to say that there was leakage of newsletters, “openly subversive”, by individuals already identified by the police as “confessed Bolsheviks”. It was necessary to arrest them to preserve the public order and “ensure the great and sacred rights of the collectivity”²

Alberto Surek, a classist congressman and representative of the workers, said in an interview to the *Diário Mercantil* that these arrests were derived from a general order communicated to the state governments by the Ministry of Labor. According to Surek, the Social Order Service identified all individuals seen as communists and brought them under strict surveillance; they are not infrequently required to attend the police for clarification. Furthermore, no official meeting of union was realized without an agent of the Ministry to monitor and review the work. These preventive measures were justified by the abnormal situation that pervaded the country.³

This abnormal situation detected by the Ministry of Labor arose from the unexpected efficacy that official unions had acquired under the decree 19.770 of March 19, 1931. The attempt to contain the conflicts inherent to the production process, through the harnessing of workers to the state authorities and labor legislation, had failed. Not only the corporatism versions internalized by the actors were too different — labor and capital, which precluded their coexistence — but also the mobilization of official unions went out of the State control, exposing the instability of the corporate arrangement. This instability transpired in the radicalization of the discourse and militant practice of the official unions in Minas Gerais.

The slogans of the official trade union movement had expanded, surpassing the more immediate demands of the proletariat. The defense of the struggle against imperialism and fascism was included systematically in the militant discourse of “revolutionary and conscious” unionism.

In Minas Gerais, it was the Labor Federation that coordinated the resistance to integralism. According the manifest of March 1934, signed by the Labor Federation of Minas, Union of Civil Construction Workers, Union of

¹“Atividades Comunistas em Juiz de Fora”, *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 7 de março de 1934. p. 3.

²*Idem, Ibidem.*

³“A prisão de Comunistas de Juiz de Fora”, *Diário Mercantil*, apud *Correio Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, 8 de março de 1934, p. 1. Also see “A prisão de operários em Juiz de Fora”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 16 de março de 1934, p. 6.

Employees of Pharmacies and Drugstores, International Union of Employees at Hotels and Restaurants, Union of Book and Newspaper Workers, Union of Bakers Workers, Union of the barbershops employees, Union of the Footwear Workers and accompanying classes, Union of Clothing Workers and accompanying classes, and Union of Commerce Employees, to fight fascism represented, in that circumstance,

[...] protect the entire heritage of humanity, [...] work for the conservation of the collection of achievements legated by [...] the workers brothers fallen yesterday under the fire from rifles of the bourgeoisie, under the hoofs of the horses of the oppressors governments, killed in the foul islands and prisons.

Because to the systematic condemnation of integralism by different sectors of society, the Anti-Fascist United Front, led by Gentil Botelho Vieira, of the Union of Workers of the Book and Newspaper, was installed in Belo Horizonte in September 1934.⁴

In this article, we deal specifically with the striker's movement as manifestations of the militant appropriation of the corporatism political form. In other words, we discuss demonstrations of the radicalization and confrontation of discourse and actions by the entities linked by their fight for greater political effectiveness. We cannot, however, in this analysis, ignore the special conjuncture where those appropriation demonstrations were held. What most interest us, directly, are the intense drive of the civil society in 1934 and 1935 and the greater aggressiveness of the Brazilian Communist Party (Partido Comunista Brasileiro, PCB).

The National Liberation Alliance (Aliança Nacional Libertadora, ANL) was the main responsible for that drive of the society. Formed in March 1935, the ANL, considered as an "expression of embrionary social movements and of a masses society still incipient", had neutralized its own "participatory and reformist" ideal and was led by the PCB, a "closed organization that oriented itself to the centralism and to the Leninist tactic of power takeover".⁵

The ANL was the materialization of the policy, defined by the PCB, of united front defense. The Bureau of Agitation and Propaganda of the PCB stated that advocating for the united front did not meant to

[...] flatten the Marxist Leninist ideology with the petty-bourgeois ideologies, but show through the struggles, the superiority and efficiency of our ideology, our tactics, our strategies, the loyalty of our Party and our heads with the masses [...].⁶

In its action, the ANL should coordinate and direct the forces that were not in conditions to be incorporated into the ranks of the PCB, but however, could be considered revolutionary forces at that stage of the revolution. About these forces, the most critical to the PCB strategy were undoubtedly the official

⁴About the subject, see "As explorações integralistas no meio operário", *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 18 de janeiro de 1934, p. 1; 6; "Instalou-se ontem a Frente Única Anti-Fascista de Minas Gerais", *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 18 de setembro de 1934, p. 4.

⁵Aspásia Camargo *et al.*, *O golpe silencioso*, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Fundo Editora, 1989, p. 42.

⁶"Programa de curso para ativistas", Tribunal de Segurança Nacional, Processo nº 1, 1935.

trade unions. The Communists defended the importance of the role of these unions in the revolutionary struggle, based on determinations of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International, held in Moscow in October 1934. Notwithstanding the PCB repudiate, the corporate union structure, it was on this that it could most effectively concentrate its political base. Thus, the Dimitrov Report stated:

The Achilles' heel of fascism is its social basis. This is where we should attack. Therein lies the reason why the Communists must work within all fascist organizations and be the best defenders of the immediate interests of the masses. As they defend their interests, the masses will begin to come into conflict with the fascist dictatorship. We must use fascist mass organizations like the Trojan horse, within which we can penetrate the enemy's camp.⁷

Already in early 1935, the PCB believed it to be essential to

[...] conduct a vigorous work supportive of the labor union, fortifying and activating the union party cadres in all regions to do an effective job of fraction as a starting point for a real and serious union mass work in trade unions and businesses and workplaces.⁸

It was, therefore, not without reason that ANL's program, of general inception, now includes, in a second stage, the defense of the maximum workday of 8 hours, social insurance, increase in wages, equal wages to equal jobs, and guarantee to minimum wage. Every union should have a prominent number of Communists who, alongside the majority, would fight "for all economic claims pertaining to number of hours, working conditions, vacations, etc."⁹

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Despite all the speech of the PCB, it is important to highlight that the militant practice of the official trade unions — in which the Communists intended to develop "effective work" — preceded the PC more aggressive policy, begun in 1935. Despite the presence of Party members on their staff since 1932, these entities were, in most cases, disconnected from the orientation of the PCB.¹⁰ Actually, it was the PCB that intended to absorb and use the militant

⁷"Sétimo Congresso da Internacional Comunista", *A Classe Operária*, vol. 20, 1935, p. 4.

⁸"A ANL", *Revista Proletária*, n. 5, 1935, p. 3.

⁹*Idem, Ibidem.*

¹⁰The PCB Regional Committee, in Minas Gerais, was installed in 1932. Cf. "Episódios do Movimento Operário em Minas", *O Libertador*, Belo Horizonte, 23 de junho de 1945, p. 1.

workers of these organizations in their revolutionary struggle. To that extent, the presence of “conscious and revolutionary” unions became essential in the united front strategy.

In June 1935, when the Executive Committee of the ANL in Minas was elected, was given on the imperative need to form committees in unions of classes, a work that progressed throughout the entire month of July. The following were acclaimed as members of the Executive Committee: President, David Rabello, Federal University of Minas Gerais; Secretary, Ernani Prata, a law student and member of the Red Federation of Students; Octavio Xavier, a journalist and lawyer, and a classist representative of the employees in the State Assembly (that rejected the endowment); David Jardim Jr., a journalist and lawyer; Palladio Albino, an undergraduate student; Geraldo Coelho, a civil construction worker; Ivan Bambirra, a trader; Adolpho Quadros, a railroad worker; and Joseph Pezzi, an industrialist. On July 5, in commemoration of the day of creation of the Prestes Column, journalist Gentil Noronha, of the Union of Workers of the Book and Newspaper, urged everyone to join the hosts of the Aliança. Gentil Noronha stated:

Integralism wants to crystallize oppression in fascism, promising for the future while the National Liberation Alliance is the present revolution, fighting [...] on all fronts, clearly saying what it wants: to end the latifundia, win the bread, land and freedom.¹¹

The rise of Committees of the ANL in Minas Gerais — which presuppose the society support for the Alliance — had the Belo Horizonte Zone committee of the Brazilian Communist Youth to state:

We are thousands of young people belonging to the working and peasant classes, state and federal military forces, students, artists and poor intellectuals facing in combat, with conviction and boldness against the oppressive imperialism, however agonizing, once overwhelming and powerful, already today with the help of political polices that are at their disposal and with the help of fascist demagogues nicknamed ‘green chickens’ can no longer tighten the throat of the workers, is powerless to stop the fast march of the oppressed and is no longer able to shut up the conscious and revolutionary proletariat.¹²

Despite the miscalculation of the Communist Youth — the “fast march of the oppressed” preceded and became independent of the PCB — it is undisputed that, at this juncture, the action and the underlying discourse of the unions that had strategically appropriated the corporate policy radicalized. This radicalization was especially shown in strike movements and the struggle for trade union unity. We deal specifically with the strikes.

¹¹“O 5 de julho na Capital”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 6 de julho de 1935, p. 8.

¹²Secretaria do Interior do Estado de Minas Gerais, “Manifesto da Juventude Comunista do Brasil aos operários, camponeses, intelectuais pobres, estudantes, soldados e marinheiros”, Ocorrências Policiais, Relatório da Secretaria do Interior do Estado de Minas Gerais, 1935.

The strikes

Strikes have a dual function: they exert pressure and act as a medium of expression at the same time. They are considered a valuable resource for analysis because they show, like a mirror, employers, the state and public opinion.¹³

The way of the strikes held in the 1930s in Minas Gerais expressed the worker repudiation to the patronage attempt of privatization of the “factory world”, through pressure on the effectiveness of labor laws. The strike became the only way to for workers to make the “ousters of the rights of others” recognize their “social duties”.¹⁴ The workers would make “their rights prevail by the strikes”.¹⁵ The PCB, however, defended the radicalization of the strikes for the “arising of the revolutionary movement for the liberation of Brazil”¹⁶

The strikes would be the antidote to unworthy life of the proletariat and the intense and systematic exploitation by employers. Therefore, it became imperative to effectively channel the wave of outrage generated by this state of affairs. To the PCB and the revolutionary trade union movement would fit the task of organizing the strike movements.

The Ministry of Labor recognized the importance of the strikes in the economic freedom system as it was the only way the workers had to obtain better work conditions. As a result, the strikes caused, in these systems, the intervention of the State in the individual relations field and contributed to the making of a labor legislation.

According to the Ministry, with the adoption of the Modern State, deeply interventionist, the strike could be admitted, but never justified.¹⁷ The strikes were, in the State’s perspective, a true war of the employees against the employers. Strikes were considered abnormal, disturbing the free flow of natural laws, were detrimental to the economic interests of both classes involved in an undesirable antagonism.

The losses of social and moral orders that the strike entailed were always greater than those of the economic order. According to the Ministry of Labor, sometimes there could be a temporary conflict of interests between the bosses and the employees with respect to labor relations; however, the “intimate content” of the judicial relation should always be that of collaboration in the production process, in favor of the interests of the common worker. This “spiritual unit” was intangible in a struggle setting, “when a part feels victorious and the other obliged, by the defeat, to produce, in determined conditions that are only accepted by the needs of the moment”. In that way, passions that followed the strike end up being more harmful to the production

¹³See Michelle Perrot, *Le jeunesse de la grève*, Paris, Seuil, 1984; Jones Stedman, *Outcast London*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971.

¹⁴“A Greve”, *Correio Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, 10 de março de 1933, p. 7.

¹⁵“A União dos Operários em Construção Civil na palavra do seu presidente Joaquim Curvelano”, *Correio Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, 24 de junho de 1933, p. 7.

¹⁶“Greves”, *Revista Proletária*, n. 5, 1935, p. 2.

¹⁷“A Greve e o ‘Lock-out’ como recursos anti-sociais”, *Boletim do Ministério do Trabalho, Indústria e Comércio*, n. 43, 1938, p. 149-162.

than the very cessation of labor. The triumph of the employers in a strike left their authority without limit whereas that of the worker could destroy the work discipline, compromising the performance of the company where the standstill took place.¹⁸

*The strikes would be the antidote to unworthy life
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exploitation by employers*

Until 1937, the strikes were regulated by the decree 21.396 of 1932, which instituted the Joint Committees to reduce collective conflicts between the employees and the employers. According to article 16 of the decree, an employer that, in the event of discord with the employees, suspends the work without having tried a deal in the Conciliatory Joint Committee, or failed to attend the meeting, or even that, after concluded the agreement or delivery of the appraisal, refused to fully comply with it, would be fined, and bear the equity compensation payable by the non-enforcement of the appraisal. Article 17 established that the employees that left work without any previous understanding with the employers, by the Joint Committee, or that practiced any act of indiscipline, hampered the proposed solution of conflict or avoided the full observance of the agreement made or the decision given would be summarily suspended or dismissed. Both employers and employees unions that infringed the provisions of Decree 21.396, besides being fined, could have revoked his letter of unionization.

Nevertheless the Ministry of Labor acknowledged that the strikes were fruits of resistance and boycott of labor laws by employers; it condemned the way the claims were submitted. The Minister of Labor stated in 1934 that all claims pertaining to violation of social laws were being resolved and, by his instruction, the Ministry had intensified their services “directing employers in the practice of law and fining and threatening penalty on offenders”.¹⁹ The Minister especially condemned the presence of disturbing elements in the strike movements that

sought to interfere in workers’ centers, creating misunderstandings and disturbing the atmosphere of serenity in which the labor cases were been examined and resolved in the spirit of social justice and cooperation of laws.²⁰

In Minas Gerais, Governor Benedito Valadares, in a message presented to the Legislative Assembly in August 1935, denounced the “sowers of subversive

¹⁸A Greve e o ‘Lock-out’ como recursos anti-sociais”, *Boletim do Ministério do Trabalho, Indústria e Comércio*, n. 43, 1938, p. 149-162.

¹⁹“Movimento grevista”, *Boletim do Ministério do Trabalho, Indústria e Comércio*, vol. 1, 1934, p. 272-273. The news refers specifically to the strike movement in Belo Horizonte.

²⁰ *Idem, Ibidem*

ideas” that sought to shake the classes, “provoking strikes, making intelligent and seductive propaganda to impress less cautious spirits and thus raise fans.” The Governor continued, stating that despite the workers’ strikes in 1934, the subversive ideas were contained by the state due to severe surveillance and energetic action of the Police.²¹

However, they were not strange elements to the unions that disturbed the serenity desired by the Ministry of Labor. From 1934, the discourse and the practice of workers became markedly more radical. The Union Newspaper, of the graphic workers, appealed to the Mountain working class for their manifestations to be “decidedly integrated into the spirit of the class struggle character”. It continued stating that the antagonism between the working class and the exploiting class grew and worsened on a daily basis. It would be within that guideline that they could gain their rights in a faster way.²² The radicalization of discourse is explained by the fact that the hostility to the boss, which in normal times is contained, was exploding in gestures and words in times of strikes.²³ And 1934 was, par excellence, a time of strikes.

The language of the striker’s movements exteriorized potential violence embedded in their projects, determined by the condition of exploitation. As stated in an editorial of the *Correio Mineiro*, one should not “provoke the holy wrath of the people in the legitimate defense of their prerogatives”. The newspaper advised the employers to yield to the demands of the proletariat to “beat the looming wave of uncontrollable rebellion and triumph over the inevitable shocks that violence begets.”²⁴

The police periodical of Belo Horizonte *Argus* magazine, which was characterized by an exacerbated anticommunism, stated that the worker of Minas Gerais, in the 1930s, lived “in constant annoyance, in unexplained nervousness, a major factor of unfortunate striker’s chocks”. The Minas Gerais proletariat was, according to the same article, inoculated by the “venomous virus of the terrible red danger”, seduced by “communist agents masqueraded as saviors of the working class.”²⁵

The nervousness, however, had an explanation. The working class fought against exploitation imposed by employers: long working hours, intensive spoliation of the work capability, the violence of the upper, the intense exploitation of women and children, and the poor condition of the equipment. Thus, the discourse radicalized through a dichotomy that opposed the exploited to the exploiter, the slave to the master. These elements of militant discourse — the deploration of working conditions and exploration accusations — although they have integrated the lines of the strikes of 1934 and 1935, were not new. What specifies the radicalization of the behavior of

²¹“Mensagem apresentada à Assembleia Legislativa pelo Gov. Benedito Valadares”, *Estado de Minas*, 20 de agosto de 1935, p. 5.

²²“Para defender as aspirações do proletariado”, *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 2 de maio de 1934, p. 3.

²³See Michelle Perrot, *Os excluídos da História: operários, mulheres e prisioneiros*. Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1988.

²⁴“A greve da Oeste”, *Correio Mineiro*, Belo Horizonte, 20 de janeiro de 1934, p. 5.

²⁵“O Perigo Vermelho”, *Revista Argus*, Belo Horizonte, dezembro de 1935, p. 39.

unions is the exaltation of the workers' struggle, element that, along with the other two, features the militant discourse. The speech exalting the workers' struggle was transfigured in their practice when it absorbed the potential violence that embeds in the deploration of the conditions of the intensively exploited workers. What was sought was the effective implementation of labor policy made in the immediately after the revolution of 1930.

According to Offe and Wiesenthal,²⁶ class conflicts develop simultaneously on two levels: (1) within the political forms, manifesting within the rules given organizationally of the procedural game and (2) referred to the political forms when the forms themselves become objects of struggle.

In post-1930 Brazil, despite corporate policy had established the rules of the game, the bourgeoisie attempted to limit the covenant to the relations between state and workers to resist the corporate form. In this circumstance, the struggle of the working class developed to enforce the rules established by the corporate covenant. At that moment, the question posed to workers was to fight for the institutionalization of corporate political form. This kind of struggle is clearly identified as a conflict of classes and features the kind of clash established between employers and official unions in the immediate post-1930. In this struggle, the deploration of working conditions and the denunciation of exploitation by employers were recurring themes.

The workers of Minas Gerais appealed to the Ministry of Labor for the institutions to acknowledge the irregularities and take into account "the cry of revolt" of those who felt harmed. Requested on behalf of the "humble and needy people" who lived despoiled and "thrown away all the time out of service".²⁷ Henrique Quintão, vice president of the Association of Shoemakers, in a letter to the editor of *O Debate*, stated:

We have the law of labor accidents, the worker who cannot afford a lawyer does not receive the correct compensation; we have laws that order the strictest observation of hygiene in factories, and it is easy to verify — even here there are plants that have a capacity of forty workers and are working there a hundred or sometimes more. No ventilation, no artificial or natural light, without sanitary installation. We have laws governing child labor in industries. However, there are some factories in which the largest numbers of workers are minors.²⁸

In turn, a committee of workers of spinning and weaving commented to the editor of the *Estado de Minas* that in the industry,

workers of both sexes, many of them minors, are restrain on the so-called *serões* (TN: local expression for abusive overtimes) poorly fed and poorly slept [...] We have comrades who work

²⁶Claus Offe; Helmut Wiesenthal, "Two logics of collective action: theoretical notes on social class and organizational form", *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. 1, n. 1, 1980, p. 67-115.

²⁷Sérias Irregularidades...", *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 24 de março de 1934, p. 6.

²⁸Um 'mar de rosas", *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 31 de março de 1934, p. 6.

excessively. They subject themselves to lose health just to earn a little more money.²⁹

Criticizing the owners of bakeries, bakery workers said the bosses made anything to “not count one of the main factors in the calculation of manufactured objects: the hand labor”. This came out at a minimal price, because of the supply of arms and reduction of the workforce:

those who have the happiness of not been thrown into the gutter, to the grueling work, because they are required to expend their energies for long hours of night work, depleting and sacrificing their health.³⁰

It is virtually impossible, despite the homogeneity of discourses, to sort strikes occurred in 1934 and 1935 on *a priori* built model. What we can do is try to analyze them as a form of expression of the type of articulation that happened between the official trade unionism and its base. With this parameter, we detected three types of movements.

In the first, the process was led by the official union. In this case, the linked entity was necessarily recognized by its base as an effective tool of organization of the working class struggle. Most movements fit this kind, which reinforces our argument about the official unionism combativeness. We will analyze, as a sample in this category, strikes by bakers and weavers of Juiz de Fora, the workers of the Diva Shoes Factory, and employees of navigation of Minas Gerais. In the second type, the official union was not considered an effective channel of interest representation. The behavior of the Union of Railroad Workers of West Minas Gerais in the movement is elucidatory. And finally, the third type, which is characterized by abortive strike of bank employees, the official union — creator of the militant discourse — did not count on the accession of its basis, whether by its heterogeneity or because the specific demand that started the strike nationwide did not have enough mobilization power in Minas Gerais. We will address the first two types of movements.

Bakers and weavers, shoemakers, and employees of navigation

On August 8, 1934, the bakers of Juiz de Fora went on strike, demanding wage increases, complimentary coffee and bread without discount in salary, payment of overtime, employment guarantee for the strikers, among other things.³¹

Workers in tanneries threatened to join the movement if they were not given a 15% salary increase.³² Employees of factories Moraes Sarmento, Santa Cruz, Meuer, and Mascarenhas joined the strike, demanding a 30% increase in wages and 50% increase in overtime.³³ Workers also counted on the solidarity of employees of the Electricity Company of Minas Gerais.

²⁹“Os tecelões estão trabalhando demais”, *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 16 de novembro de 1935, p. 3.

³⁰“Agitam-se os operários panificadores da Capital”, *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 26 de setembro de 1935, p. 3.

³¹“Declaram-se em greve os operários de Juiz de Fora”, *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 8 de agosto de 1935, p. 8.

³²“Movimento grevista em Juiz de Fora”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 15 de agosto de 1934, p. 5.

³³*Idem, Ibidem.*

Although employers agreed with 80% of the points mentioned in the baker's claim memorandum, the strikers refused the deal and remained in session at the headquarters of the Union of Workers of Minas Gerais.³⁴ As the talks failed, the owners of bakeries decided to readmit, at their discretion, employees who presented themselves at the service according to deadline, and staffing the vacancies left. They also recognized the willingness of the population that was deprived of the distribution of bread at home.³⁵

The workers of Minas Gerais appealed to the Ministry of Labor for the institution to acknowledge the irregularities and take into account "the cry of revolt"

O Debate reported that Juiz de Fora was under "an atmosphere of vindicating warmth, since the just aspirations of the working classes had not been fulfilled in its fullness."³⁶ On August 11, the *Estado de Minas* stamped on their pages that the city had awakened "under the impression of a strike aimed to spread to all the workers' organizations."³⁷ In the morning, the authorities were forced to take action to avoid regrettable disturbances, which did not prevent serious conflict between strikers and police in front of the Bernardo Mascarenhas factory. The 3rd auxiliary police commissioner of Juiz de Fora placed the civil guard, the security body, and the police station on standby to control the pickets and the violence by the employers.

As the incidents spread, by the initiative of Alberto Surek, a classist representative, a meeting, with the support of the police chief and the mayor, was held on August 11 between bakers, who led the movement, and their bosses. The meeting also was attended by the president of the Conciliation Commission and the press.

Bakers got virtually all items claimed at the memorandum, as well as the readmission of the employees fired due to the strike. To the victory of the Bakers, the agreement on the demands of the weavers and employees of the Electricity Company of Minas Gerais was also reached.

In Belo Horizonte, in August 1935, the workers of the Diva Shoes Factory started a strike against the dismissal of four comrades and 10% reduction in their salaries.

³⁴According to Maria Herminia Tavares de Almeida, resistance to official guidelines could be perceived by the attempt of survival of the free trade unions, called Unions (TN: "Uniões" in Portuguese), and the creation, until 1935, of a reasonable number of unions that agglutinated free and/or official unions. However, the Unions and the inter-union entities had short duration. With respect to the free unions, they did not achieve a minimum of organizational stability, either by lack of resources and the small number of members, either because they did not bear the competition with official unionism. This is the case, in Minas Gerais, of the Unions in Juiz de Fora. Maria Herminia Almeida, *Estado e classe trabalhadora no Brasil (1930-1945)*, Tese de doutorado, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 1978. 2 v.

³⁵Prosegue a greve dos padeiros de Juiz de Fora", *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 10 de agosto de 1935, p. 1.

³⁶*Idem, Ibidem.*

³⁷"Terminada a greve dos padeiros de Juiz de Fora", *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 11 de agosto de 1934, p. 8.

According to the vice president of the Shoemakers Union, because the owner of the factory decided to reduce the wages of employees of the company, a committee was formed to claim the repeal of that decision. The owner, besides being uncompromised about the adopted measure, summarily dismissed the four committee members. Disgusted with the fact, the workers went on strike and the labor union referred the issue to the Regional Inspectorate of Labor. A striker committee settled in permanent session at the headquarters of the Shoemakers Union, saved by police investigators as well as the factory.

The autonomy of the State by the corporatism and the consequent incorporation of social actors in the public arena broke the political project that the Minas Gerais bourgeoisie elected as ideal. On the one hand, it prevented the path of the political representation of the class by party system, an essential question for the elite in Minas Gerais. The growing independence of the State thwarted her desire for increased participation in the state apparatus and an expansion of their sphere of influence in making policy decisions. On the other hand, to establish the intermediation of the state in capital/labor relation — intermediation that is externalized through the decree 19.770 and subsequent labor laws — prevented the consolidation of its project of control of the working class, designed in the 1920s. For the Minas Gerais bourgeoisie, labor legislation compromised the rate of accumulation of their companies, and the union law allowed workers an organization, under the aegis of the state, that would provide them a significant amount of power in confronting class conflicts.

Thus, if the condemnation of the decree 19.770 externalized in systematic attempts by employers to prevent the official unionization of workers was based on the possibility of pressures from union-organized working class, the rejection of labor laws was explained by the alleged impossibility of the Minas Gerais entrepreneurship to accept the publicization of his private world, the factory, fighting social legislation and keeping the perversity of a liberal market as of the First Republic in Brazil.

The condemnation of labor laws was not restricted to the discourse. Between 1933 and 1937, the Minas Gerais bourgeoisie consulted the Federal Government to delay implementation of each labor decrees. Unsuccessful, they boycotted them systematically. The owner of the Diva Shoes Factory claimed to decrease the salary of its employees not without reason, in view of the company's difficulties that prevented him from getting a reasonable profit.

Before the Joint Committee, the following agreement was accepted by both the parties: (1) the workers would return to work without getting effect of the 10% reduction in their salaries for a determined period; (2) after the deadline, the owner of the factory could fire, with notice, workers who had less than one year of service; and (3) the four dismissed employees had to be readmitted.³⁸ The Joint Committee had taken into account the financial difficulties of the factory as alleged by its owner. However, according

³⁸“Os operários da Fábrica Diva voltarão ao trabalho”, Folha de Minas, Belo Horizonte, 25 de agosto de 1935, p. 12.

to *Folha de Minas*, the condition of the company was more than satisfactory, the problems being generated by the workers not accepting the working conditions imposed by the establishment. After the meeting of the collective bargaining agreement, the members of the Striker Committee were “surprised by the voices of two cops” and taken to testify in the Social Order Precinct, being released later. Despite the “happy ending” of some of the movements, the repression of strikes was growing more intense, which in turn, radicalized the position of the strikers as can be seen by the movement of workers of the Minas Gerais Navigation.

In March 1935, in the city of Pirapora, upstate Minas Gerais, a strike began, which announced itself as of “great shape”, re-editing events that had occurred in 1934. Claims were the same as always — wage increase and improvement of equipment, which were reduced to “true rattraptraps that still float on the mercy of fate of those who surf in its bulge”.³⁹

Authorities in Belo Horizonte, convinced of the presence of “extremist elements inflating the strike and directing it to anarchist purposes”, sent to Pirapora an auxiliary police chief, leading a caravan of detectives specialized in movements of this kind with instructions to “ensure the property against any attacks of their bitter enemies” and guarantee public order. The Acting Secretary, Alvaro Baptista, told *Folha de Minas* that the situation in Pirapora was quiet and that the strike had failed to paralyze traffic completely, with the steamboats leaving and returning in the usual manner. The Secretary stated that the strike was almost totally extinct.⁴⁰

Almost two weeks later, *O Debate* reported that the Captain of the Port had intimidated strikers to appear in the Captainty at night, requiring them to sign a post-dated inquiry. The attitude of the Captain derived from its arbitrary act of having landed the crew of strikers before the competent investigation.

The Union of Masters, Pilots and Attached Classes of the River Navigation of the São Francisco sent a telegram to the Merchant Navy Admiralty, arguing if the Captain of the Port could “carry Captainty books overnight to onboard the ship at work *Wenceslau Braz* and summarily order the landing of the strikers’ seafarers”.⁴¹

O Debate accused the Captain of the Port of wanting to create — by violence and discretion — an absurd situation and produce serious consequences for the employees of the Navigation of the San Francisco. The newspaper claimed that there was a hidden agenda to oblige workers in a more intense protest, to allow the violent police intervention with the “demoralized justification that it comes to fighting extremism”. The strikers had their claims accepted by the Merchant Marine Admiralty.

³⁹“Projeta-se uma greve geral no Rio São Francisco”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 9 de março de 1935, p. 8.

⁴⁰“A greve na navegação mineira”, *Folha de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 12 de março de 1935, p. 12.

⁴¹“Descontentamento entre o pessoal da navegação do São Francisco”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 23 de março de 1935, p. 2.

In January 1936, the workers of the Minas Gerais Navigation of the São Francisco went on strike again. According to the *Estado de Minas*, the concessions were not enough, the workers insisted on having “rebellious attitude”.⁴² Two hundred workers who were considered extremists by the police were fired.

The company’s director, pressured by local politicians, was forced to resign and was replaced by the Mayor of Caratinga, a reasonable man and reliable to the government. Politicians of Pirapora and of cities situated on the shores of São Francisco lobbied the new director to reinstate the strikers, but the attempt was unsuccessful. Arguing that they were frankly extremist elements, Geraldo Albergaria, the new director, refused to readmit them. The strikers, supported by captains of various ports, tried unsuccessfully to return to their positions. The situation became increasingly tense.

Protesting against the intransigent attitude of the director, the strikers occupied the *Paracatu* and *Melo Viana* steamboats, paralyzing traffic on the river. Powerless to normalize traffic, Geraldo Albergaria resigned after meeting the Secretary of Transportation in Belo Horizonte. Immediately, a strong police contingent headed for Pirapora by the backcountry at night, taking copious ammunition that was seen piled in the corners of the wagons. The former director of the company told the reporter of the *Estado de Minas* that the Pirapora situation was very tense, the strikers being the absolute masters of the situation.

With the police violence, the strike was soon quelled. The Mayor of Pirapora stated that there was nothing to justify the police action. The strike was the result of the conflict of laws of the Captaincy or of the Ministry of Labor with the interests of navigation in Minas Gerais. According to the mayor, “communism arises as a weapon to strengthen the satisfaction of some wills”. The results of the strike were dismissals and arrests. The violent repression can be seen exemplified by the machinist who went mad in the confrontation with the police, having been brought to Belo Horizonte “completely distraught” and admitted at Raul Soares Institute (TN: Psychiatric institution at Belo Horizonte).⁴³

The strike of the railroad workers of the Oeste de Minas Railroad

In June 1934, about a thousand of railroad workers of the Oeste from the Divinópolis core, the strongest of the road, went on strike. The Union did not support the action. They accused senior officials of the road of having blown the movement to provoke discord between workers and managers, “so spreading disorder and misunderstanding within the working class”.⁴⁴ Januário Esteves, vice president of the Union of Railroad workers of the West Minas Gerais, considered inopportune any movement in that direction, especially at that time

⁴²“Greve na navegação mineira do São Francisco”, *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 9 de janeiro de 1936, p. 1.

⁴³“Ainda as ocorrências na navegação mineira do São Francisco”, *Estado de Minas*, Belo Horizonte, 10 de janeiro de 1936, p. 3.

⁴⁴“Rebenta um movimento grevista na Oeste de Minas”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 18 de junho de 1934, p. 6.

when the reform of road services was considered. He continued stating that the strike had been made at the discretion of the Union, which had not received any communication from strikers. Even so, the attitude of the Union would be to seek to reconcile the two parties and defend, to the extent possible, the rights of railroad workers involved in the movement.

Dismissals and arrests were the results of the strike. The violent repression can be seen exemplified by the machinist who went mad in the confrontation with the police

Cautiously, the union released an official statement that recognized the situation of true embarrassment upon railroad workers whose rights were being sacrificed. Despite not advising for the strike, the union recognized that there was much to be done for the benefit of the workers.

In response to the extremely cautious tone of the institution, 5.100 unionized workers disapproved the position of the board of the Union and called for their immediate deposition, as they did not meet “the aspirations of the workers, making use of their positions to political digging”⁴⁵

The strategic and consciously adoption of the corporate form of the formal unionization is explained by the possibility of the Minas Gerais working class being able to face the employers more effectively, through official bodies in the struggle for the institutionalization of labor rights edited in the immediate post-1930. What is called into question was the clash processed within the corporate policy form for its institutionalization, with the working class seeking to enforce the rules.

To understand this process of struggle as autonomous, conscious result of rational choice within corporate structures, it is necessary to consider the interactions that take place in the dynamics of political competition between the three actors — state, bourgeoisie, and working class. From this perspective, it is essential to pay attention to the triangular nature of corporate collusion, that is, besides the links of the bourgeoisie and the working class with the State, the links of these two actors together must be considered.

By electing the public arena locus of conflicts that take place in society, being this choice derived from the characteristic triangular relationship of corporate arrangements, the working class, in a way, appropriates the corporate structure. This allows their content to be processed in the political dynamic that takes place between actors in society. Thus, although the institutional form that defines corporatism remains, this being the form that allows the

⁴⁵Rebenta um movimento grevista na Oeste de Minas”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 18 de junho de 1934, p. 6.

working class to transform the public arena in the arena of interest, its nature and its contents are transformed. To that extent, the working class, incorporated heteronomously to the State, may develop a politically autonomous action in relation to their employer. Thus, in certain circumstances, it may be effective for the political action of the working class — because of the triangular articulation of actors in the corporate arrangement — to ensure institutionalized representation of their organizations and seek to keep the mediation of conflicts that persist in society in the hands of the state.

The strikers defended the movement, saying that they had only taken the decision to declare a strike after exhausting all the resources of negotiation. The Road refused to face the situation in a spirit of justice. The railroad workers denounced their untenable situation: “We live an existence of slaves, exposing our life day and night in risky services, given the poor conditions of the road and the poor state of the material.”⁴⁶

The strikers’ demands were fundamentally the wage parity with the Central do Brasil and the return of the road to the Federal Administration. They were always the same old complaints. The equalization of wages between the Oeste and the Central was justified by the paltry salaries of employees that were barely enough to cover the most urgent expenses on food. In addition, employees required residing in classes and stations distant of supply centers were subject to greater constriction due the delay of payments.

The defense of the return of the road to the Federal Administration was justified by the fact that the road under the state government was suffering huge deficits. The Oeste de Minas was without material, no cars, with the rail in deteriorating security conditions, urgently imposing it back to the care of the Union.

After the strike begun, the Superintendent of the rail, Pedro Magalhães, appealed to the Secretary of the Interior, Carlos Luz, and to the Police Chief, Alvaro Baptista, for taking appropriate actions. The information of the Superintendent was that the movement was restricted to Divinópolis, as the other cores of the Road were in peace, as the South Rail of Minas.

That same day, June 18, Benedito Valadares, Minas Gerais Interventor sent telegram to President Getúlio Vargas, stating the prompt steps taken with the beginning of the strike.⁴⁷ The Interventor had sent, at the request of the Road, a special train to carry a troop of the Public Force to Divinópolis.

The next day, on June 19, 5.000 employees had already joined the strike. The Strike Committee, which was named “X”, had received the support of the nuclei of Barra Mansa, Lavras, Ibiá, Araxá, Paraopeba, Sítio, Ribeirão Vermelho, and São João del-Rei. In retaliation to the growth of the movement, the Director of the Road, Benjamin de Oliveira, closed the areas circumscribed by the strike and the supplies posts of Barra Mansa, Lavras, and Ribeirão Vermelho, maintained by

⁴⁶“A greve da Oeste de Minas”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 20 de junho de 1934, p. 1.

⁴⁷“Last week I received warnings that railway general strike would burst. This morning, workers workshops Oeste de Minas in Divinópolis declared themselves on strike demanding match salaries Central. Immediately I ordered police contingent for that city [...]”, Telegram from Benedito Valadares to Getúlio Vargas, 18 de junho de 1934 (Arquivo Nacional).

the Office of Mutual Aid of Railway Oeste de Minas, were banned. Negotiations began with a meeting at the headquarters of the Regional Inspectorate of Labor, which was attended by the directors of the Union and the Regional Inspector, João Fleury.

The Union insisted on the condemnation of the strike. Relations between the workers and the Union had been aggravated by the fact that Januário Esteves sent Luiz Medeiros, of the Minas Gerais Labor Party, to Rio de Janeiro, in opposition to the 5.000 members of the entity, to mortgage support for the candidacy of Getúlio Vargas. This maneuver, according to the workers, intended to serve Antônio Carlos “with whom we were not nor will be due his government, harmful to the interests of the working class and the State”. The strikers, demanding the resignation of the board of the Union, did not agree that the entity could serve as an intermediary in negotiations, preferring to negotiate directly with the government. The union represented nothing.

The memorandum of the strikers presented the first steps toward the negotiation. The items displayed by the railroad workers were as follows:

- a) the Oeste back to the federal government, b) match the salaries of the railroad workers of the Minas Gerais Rede de Viação to those of the Noroeste do Brasil, c) no application of fines to the strikers, d) make up promotions that are not made by many years in the rail, (e) ensure rewarding remuneration for apprentices, (f) fill the vacancies at the Oeste de Minas with workers from Paracatu that are away from rail services after the merger of those.⁴⁸

At that time, the Board of the Road also reiterated that the strike was partial and that trains departed as usual from the capital, but, as a worker said to a reporter from *O Debate*: “the question is not to leave, since much of the rolling stock is here, what the Mr. should seek to know is if the trains return to the Capital [...]”.⁴⁹ Shortly thereafter, the railroad workers of Belo Horizonte also joined the strike.

With the generalization of the movement, the understandings sped up. On June 21, Benedito Valadares presented President Getúlio Vargas the solution for the Oeste railway strike, by way of an agreement between the committee of strikers and the Secretary of Agriculture, Israel Pinheiro. The strikers, in a bulletin distributed in Divinópolis, announced the victory of the movement, a “grand demonstration of idealism” that has “shaken the fibers of the workers of the Oeste” within the possibilities of the moment.⁵⁰

The strike by employees of the Oeste made it clear that outside the boundaries of official unionization, workers hardly obtained, or keep observed if they

⁴⁸Last week I received warnings that railway general strike would burst. This morning, workers workshops Oeste de Minas in Divinópolis declared themselves on strike demanding match salaries Central. Immediately I ordered police contingent for that city [...], Telegram from Benedito Valadares to Getúlio Vargas, 18 de junho de 1934 (Arquivo Nacional).

⁴⁹*Idem, Ibidem.*

⁵⁰“A greve da Oeste: primeiros passos para uma solução conciliatória”, *O Debate*, Belo Horizonte, 21 de junho de 1934, p. 1.

obtained, the claims contained in the memorandums. This is because the presence of the official union in the process was crucial, especially of a supervisory agent from the provisions of the Labor Court.

The Minas Gerais bourgeoisie understood the union law of 1931 and the labor laws as a virtual threat to the viability of the industrial enterprise during the 1930s, due to the weakness of the state against the claims of the working class. The bosses refused to believe in the effectiveness of corporate policy to control the working class. They intended to maintain the exploitation to which the working class was subjected, resisting the corporatism in the market. The resistance of employers to unionization of their employees was justified, therefore, by the certainty that it would instrument themselves in their fight against the violence of exploitation to which the latter were submitted.

The strikes led by the official unions are the biggest example of the experience of the Minas Gerais bourgeoisie.