

# The proletariat, hope and the dream of a good life

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*Just living life is not enough,  
We must also dream of it.*  
(Mário Quintana, 2005)

## What do workers dream of?

**C**APITALIST SOCIETIES promise a good life to those who work. And that promise, lived in the form of hope, legitimates both a vital need for survival and all kinds of daily jobs, which are most often tedious, underpaid, strenuous and involve long working journeys.

Despite this promise and its legitimacy, the working class knows that the only way to build a society where work can provide a good life for all is by fighting and developing societal projects of its own.

It also knows that knowledge is necessary in this building process - both socially produced knowledge and its own knowledge, from its own viewpoint.

This issue is the *raison d'être* of the existence and work of the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (*Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos* - Dieese), perhaps the only entity of its kind in the world for its specificity and way of being. It was created by 18 unions in São Paulo with different political orientations and has been run by the Brazilian trade union movement since 1955, the year of its creation. Dieese was born out of a dream of trade unionists: having the first department of a *Worker's University built by this class of workers*.

For this reason and to this end, Dieese, which is politically directed by the Brazilian trade union movement, has been since an inter-union organization with a voluntary- and solidarity-based membership approach, as each trade union and federation contributes to its maintenance and growth within their possibilities. It is solidarity-based also because a lot of Dieese's work is targeted not only at social organizations, but at the entire working class. The quality and scientific rigor of its productions and activities make it a reference in work-related issues for both the academia and Brazilian society at large. It is also recognized in many international forums.

Dieese produces knowledge from the viewpoint of the working class' interests. Making *world-class science* is a pun that makes sense.

Dieese's technical and scientific staff currently includes 170 professional

sociologists, economists, political scientists, anthropologists, historians, educators, pedagogues, psychologists, philosophers, production engineers, geographers, mathematicians, policy makers, and administrators, all graduates from top Brazilian universities and many of them masters and doctors with scientific research in their areas of expertise.

Finally, Dieese has worked since 2006 to make another piece of the dream that created it come true: the establishment of a higher education school, accredited in October 2011 by the National Education Council of the Ministry of Education. Through an undergraduate degree (Experimental and Interdisciplinary Bachelor's Degree in Labor Sciences), the *School of Labor Sciences* opened its doors to society in August 2012, with a political and pedagogical approach that distinguishes it from other higher-education institutions due to the knowledge it produces *based on work, not about work*, and to the training process it proposes.

Knowledge is crucial to fulfilling a worker's dream. Not only knowledge about work acquired in practice and in educational institutions, but especially the production and appropriation of knowledge from the standpoint of the working class and with the aim of transforming reality.

The National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (*Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores na Agricultura* - CONTAG) also trains staff at its National Training School, which, apart from delivering national, state and regional courses, also created the Groups for Trade Union Studies (GESs) for rural communities. For CONTAG, rural communities refer to workers from a particular place, groups of settlers, campers and family farmers. The main purpose of the GESs is to discuss the problems, issues, proposals and dreams of these communities by carrying out studies.

With a base of 25 million rural workers, CONTAG still has a long way to go. Yet, eighty GESs were in place in the state of Piauí alone in late 2011.

Producing and acquiring knowledge through educational activities is also a priority for the Movement of Landless Workers (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores sem Terra* - MST), which has created its own content and developed a teaching methodology specifically designed for rural workers and their families as part of land-occupation processes.

It is worth remembering that knowledge is a matter in dispute in today's world, i.e., the political and social hegemony is disputed through societal projects that are distinguished, among other dimensions, by the knowledge underlying them.

Nevertheless, producing knowledge as a tool for transformation – as do Dieese, its School of Labor Sciences, CONTAG and its GESs, MST, and several other unions – is part of the everyday lives of only a small proportion of workers.

On the other hand, different types of work, working time, working conditions, and gains from work are part of the day-to-day lives of the entire working

class. Work, which is a human activity par excellence, builds the world and at the same time humanizes and brutalizes its subject in this creation process.

Until recently, alternating between a tiring, boring, repetitive and often poorly paid work and a scarce free time nurtured only the dream of a *good life* for workers. Workers lived and accepted the world that way because that was how things worked and because they did not seem to be up to the challenge of changing it. Today, however, technological changes in work processes and an almost unprecedented possibility of actually developing a democratic environment in Brazil have allowed the union movement to collectively build an agenda to intervene and improve the quality and direction of this process.

The recognition that a good job, an essential condition for a good life, is more than what the vast majority of people can obtain for themselves was the motto for six *Working Class Marches* held in the first decade of the twenty-first century, all aimed at recovering and creating a policy for increasing the minimum wage, reducing the workload to 40 hours per week, and supporting the ratification of Conventions 151 and 158 of the International Labour Organization (ILO), among several other claims. Another demonstration in this line was the “Journey for promoting development with income distribution and appreciation for work, which was held in 2007 and made the Workers’ Agenda for Promoting Development with Income Distribution publicly available. This agenda was also built collectively by the trade union movement and presented proposals for public policies supported by the working class that have been forwarded to the Brazilian government and to business leaders with the aim of initiating a major national debate” (Dieese et al. 2010, p.5).

The Agenda for Building a National Development Project with Sovereignty, Democracy and Appreciation for Work is the latest result of this joint construction process of Brazilian central unions in the 2000s. It was approved on June 1, 2010 by more than 20,000 union leaders gathered at the Pacaembu stadium in São Paulo on the occasion of the National Working Class Assembly. Its six strategic pillars include: a) promoting growth with income distribution and strengthening the domestic market; b) increased appreciation for Decent Work (ILO) with social equality and inclusion; c) the State as a promoter of social, economic and environmental development; d) democracy with effective popular participation; e) sovereignty and international integration; f) union rights and collective bargaining indicate the purpose of a dialogue between organized workers and the State and society.

Also as part of this joint union effort, the Training Program for Union Officers and Advisors (PCDA in the Brazilian acronym), as it is known by the trade union movement, was resumed in 2011 under the coordination of central unions and Dieese. It is a 3,000-hour training activity divided into three classroom modules of two weeks each, as well as two research works in the inter-modules. The subject of this training program was “Work and Develop-

ment,” based on the notion that, as part of a development process, work should not be a consequence, but rather an organic part of its project and implementation.

In other words, the labor movement should organize itself, study and hold the State and society accountable for changes in the types of work that the current technological level allows for. And, as a result, it can achieve some notable progress in our country, which has a troubled history in the context of labor relations.

When sociology asks what is the workers’ hope and dreams, it actually wants to know what these workers desire, what is the meaning of *being* human for contemporary men and women. In this regard, it is interesting to listen to Lefebvre (1958, P.15), who says:

Another dimension that shapes and is shaped by workers’ dreams today is the amazing presence of technological developments in everyday life combined with a no less astonishing degradation of the day-to-day life of a large part of the population.

And, in this case, it is not just about impoverishment. While they may coexist, degradation and impoverishment are two different phenomena in the sense given by Lefebvre. The latter refers to the gradual lack of resources for everyday needs, while the former focus on the form and content of the time spent off work. This time, whose regularity and schedule are as stringent as those of daily jobs, implies that people should have fun without any obligations, just by releasing their tensions and fulfilling their needs. Any other possibility, such as what used to be called hobby or family visits, is not part of the current definition of what leisure is. Hobby, for its resemblance to work, and family time, for being seen as mandatory, are rejected as improper activities during off-work time. One might think then that off-work time is just about taking a rest, *not from work, but for work*.

My doctorate research conducted in 1998, as well as others that are now part of my daily work as an educator at Dieese, show different leisure dimensions in our increasingly scarce free time that contribute toward the notion of degradation, such as off-work time filled with activities in which we, as consumers, are more and more passive and less and less active. For example, soccer is increasingly watched (either live or on TV) and less and less played for fun or as a sport. The resounding success of reality shows also suggests that life’s emotions are being replaced with those experienced through an *armchair voyeurism*.

The dreams and activities really encouraged by our society are those related to consumption and that end up classifying people according to their performance as buyers, often without any relation to actual needs. The very act of consuming has become a necessity and the ethos “*I buy, therefore I am*” makes the degradation clear.

One can see then that significant improvements in working conditions and wages are apparently offset by a life where active subjects are replaced with passive spectators whose sole purpose is to buy.

Henri Lefebvre (1958, P.241) also notes that “constantly staring us in the face, mundane and therefore generally unnoticed – whereas in the future it will be seen as a characteristic and scandalous trait of our era – is this fact: that life is lagging behind what is possible, that it is retarded.” This is to say that, today, the trajectory of humanity could allow a very different life from that focused solely on working, resting for work, watching other people’s activities, and then working again.

So are the gains from work unrelated to one’s way of life? And what is a good life all about after all?

There is a clear mismatch between the difficult, but concrete, advances in working processes and relationships and the degradation of everyday life, especially with respect to the replacement of activity with passivity.

Do the things offered as good for workers today express the possibilities of our time? Better yet, is this voyeur role considered good? Or have we lost the content of hope that used to encourage the fights, riots, and proletarian revolutions that marked much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

In a rather pessimistic analysis in the introduction of *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, Hobsbawm (1995) provides an explanation for these facts by showing three important changes between the beginning of what he called the short century in 1918 and its completion in the early years of the 1990s.

The first one was when Europe lost world hegemony as the center of power, wealth, *intelligenza* and civilization. As a result, the European work world, which builds on the history of workers’ struggles and peasant revolts and on the reaction against totalitarian governments – and against the backdrop of two world wars – is seen as outdated. And the discussion of what is good and possible, of values and ways of life that were based on and, at the same, used work ethic as a reference point, are considered a *thing of the past* and seen as an impediment to the proper functioning of the market – and are therefore endangered. This takes away the historical reference of what is good and what is bad – whether at work or in the life that this work provides – from ordinary people, workers and the working class.

In the second part of his analysis, Hobsbawm shows an adversarial process that has two contrasting dimensions: a globalized world and the growing inability of public institutions and collective behavior bodies to adapt to this unitary way of life. However, Hobsbawm (1995, p.24) says that “the private human behavior found it less difficult to adapt to the world of satellite television, to electronic mail, to the vacation on the Seychelles islands and to overseas jobs.”

Ordinary people who follow the ‘every man for himself’ logic feel more

comfortable using and incorporating changes in their day-to-day lives than the public or private entities that represent them. In other words, changes come to each person in a direct manner and without any mediators, be they parties, trade unions, churches or other organizations. The opportunity to hold discussion forums is thus lost. And this direct and individualized relationship is paradoxically more homogeneous than it would be if it were mediated by collective bodies, as people ultimately take facts that are presented to them for granted. It's the famous "*if it's on the Internet, then it must be true.*" But what is reported by the media and over the internet are not just facts. These are embedded with values and different views about the world and human beings in general, presented as ready-made meals and therefore unquestionable.

Finally, today we are living what Hobsbawm (1995, P.24) calls "the breakdown of old patterns of human relationships," perhaps the most disturbing of the changes, especially with regard to the proletariat's dreams. According to Hobsbawm, there are signs everywhere of a break between the past and the present in terms of human relationships, and he gives as an example the loss of values (e.g. solidarity) that make no sense in a society where everyone looks for their own interest. Going a bit further in Hobsbawm's reasoning, there is a concern that the break between past and present may also disrupt the relationship between the present and the future in terms of how today's actions will build tomorrow's world.

If that is so, then where is the dream going, and what is the purpose of dreaming?

This last change, intensified by the two previous ones, gives the present a sense of finality, of an accepted fact expressed in daily complaints about life always followed by a '*but what can I do?*'

Many of today's union leaders experienced the hardships of a long dictatorship in their young adult lives. Some faced imprisonment, torture and exile, and all of them are familiar with wages eroded by inflation, recessions, unemployment, dismantled organizations, press censorship, censorship of cinema and theater, lack of freedom in schools and student unions.

The 1988 Constituent Assembly, which established the current Constitution and initiated a democratic construction process by publicly and openly discussing the dreams of a generation that had been battered and silent for a long time, resulted in a Charter that is undoubtedly an expression of human rights in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, although there is still a long distance between what is provided for in the Constitution and what is already part of the daily lives of the proletariat more than twenty years after its enactment.

However, this generation of workers who fought against dictatorship, who actively participated in the Constituent Assembly's discussion and who are responsible today for victories in collective bargaining has not finished their task, if the question is what do young Brazilian workers dream of.

Contardo Calligaris (2007), a psychoanalyst and author of a weekly newspaper column in the *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper, asked its readers a few years ago why teenagers of our time “dream of an apathetic and reasonable future just like our lives” and said that, compared to teenagers of twenty years ago, those of today “dream small dreams.” In his reflection on the reasons for these small dreams, Calligaris said that teenagers dream “of a daily routine that, for us adults, is not a dream at all, but the result (more or less unquestionable) of commitments and frustrations” (ibid.).

“If life requires us to make an adjustment between utopia and necessity, perhaps it’s possible not to give up on utopia. But if the dream is already adjusted, then the utopia and a life-changing experience are lost” (Sochaczewski, 2007, p.137).

If the main thing is to live a good life and if this is to be the content of young workers’ dreams, then what is the role of adult workers in building and showing this dream to their successors?

While there are signs of changes within the realm of work, the uninteresting, repetitive and passive daily lives of adults who live around them is not enriching and not even give younger people a reason to hope or fight. The current generation of workers must reestablish the link between present and future for young people to be able to dream. The hope of an entire society depends on it.

The process that young people go through to learn and work toward maturity determines their ability to dream and also shape their dreams. *Changing one’s life or changing life to suit one’s desires* is a choice that depends on the hope that lives in proletarian dreams.

If the things that adults can teach young people based on their way of life at and off work “don’t show the breadth of the world nor reveal the possibilities of its transformation, and if work is only a means for survival, then young people have small dreams” (Sochaczewski, 2007, p.138).

And utopias cannot be created without dreaming big; and without utopia, there is no transformation.

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*Abstract*– This paper discusses the content of hope of the working class in Brazil in our time, considering the struggles of the union movement for better working conditions and wages, and the role of knowledge production specific to this process. The main point of reference for this discussion is the proletarian dream of a good life and the responsibility of the present generation of union leaders in teaching young workers for the purpose of building a utopia for transforming society.

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