

Lula's Hegemony and Brazilian Labor Relations: The Case of Call Centers and Their Unions

Ruy Braga
University of São Paulo (USP)

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(SLIDE #1)

The uncommonly high approval ratings of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government, which guaranteed Dilma Rousseff's victory in the 2010 presidential elections, clearly stimulated the Brazilian sociological imagination: what are the bases of the current Lulist hegemony? Undoubtedly, one of the most important contributions to the debate over the so-called "Lulism" has been by André Singer in a famous 2009 article. According to Singer's well-known argument, beginning in May, 2005, during the scandalous "Mensalão" (the monthly backhander) period, where members of parliament bought votes, Lula's government would have lost to the PSDB (Tucano opposition) an important number of supporters won over in 2002 from the urban middle-class. Attracted by government-promoted public policies, however, low-income Brazilian voters, traditionally not in favor of Lula, would have warmed to the PT program during the 2006 campaign and, in a movement known in political science as electoral realignment, decided to solidly side with the governing candidate, thereby guaranteeing his victory.

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Comparing electoral research for 2002 and 2006, Singer offered vast proof regarding this realignment, and demonstrated that a vote for Lula in 2006 was widely a "popular" vote, whereas the opposing candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, would have been preferred by the middle and upper classes. This approximation between Lula and the PT in relation to those disqualified, underpaid workers deprived of prestige, otherwise known as the *sub-proletarian* class, led Singer to identify in Brazil the revival of a phenomenon genealogically associated with the rich history of *Latin-American populism*. To give you an idea, Singer understands sub-proletarians as those who receive up to one minimum wage and half of those who had a salary of up to two minimum wages. According to this criterion, 63% of the Brazilian proletariat consisted of sub-proletarians. Here is the hypothesis: *Lulism would be the ideological expression of a class fraction supposedly incapable of constructing autonomous forms of organization that would instead look to the State for the path par excellence to reducing social inequality*. Our aim here will be to test this hypothesis in the light of the analysis of one of the sub-proletarian groups which grew the most in the last decade: telemarketing operators, or teleoperators.

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In Brazil, this sector (SLIDE #4) was formed only very recently. In fact, 96% of the Brazilian tele-activity centers (CTAs) were created after 1990, and 76% after 1998, the year Telebrás was privatized and at the height of neoliberalism in the country. Secondly, between 1998 and 2002, the number of jobs in the sector grew at an annual rate of 15% and figures from the Ministry of Labor indicate that during

Lula's government this rate grew 20% per year, or a total of 182% between 2003 and 2009 (see Table 1).

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(1) Classificação Brasileira de Ocupações: 4223 – Telemarketing Operators
Fonte: MTE/Rais

And, taking into consideration that the Ministry of Labor figures consist of only outsourced tele-operators, the numbers are even more noteworthy. Adding the number of outsourced and in-house tele-activity centers, the Brazilian Association of Teleservices, which represents call center businesses, estimates that, in 2010, more than 1.2 million workers were employed in the sector. This increase transformed the call center sector into the main gateway for young people in the formal labor market in the country, in addition to creating the second and third greatest private employers in the country, Contax (78,200 employees) and Atento (76,400 employees), respectively. Furthermore, this increase, despite still being concentrated in the Southeast region (259,108), is relocating to the Northeast region. During Lula's government, this region showed the greatest growth in the number of teleoperators in the Brazilian call center industry (277.12%) (see Table 2). (See Table 3).

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Tabela 2: Evolução Anual dos Operadores de Telemarketing ⁽¹⁾ , segundo Região								
Brasil, 2003 a 2009								
Região	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Varição no período
Norte	-	1.20%	13.04%	36.46%	-7.37%	-1.66%	10.42%	57.02%
Nordeste	-	101.68%	21.98%	4.02%	13.85%	19.73%	8.11%	277.12%
Sudeste	-	62.22%	22.79%	11.86%	16.61%	15.48%	-0.02%	199.96%
Sul	-	20.16%	29.33%	11.89%	7.91%	4.93%	-0.92%	95.08%
Centro-oeste	-	40.12%	21.42%	-2.21%	6.61%	22.01%	-0.73%	114.83%
Brasil	-	56.82%	23.20%	10.16%	14.50%	15.09%	0.65%	182.30%
⁽¹⁾ Classificação Brasileira de Ocupações: 4223 - Operadores de Telemarketing								
Fonte: MTE/Rais								

Table 2: Annual Evolution of Telemarketing Operators, by Region Growth in the period

It is worth remembering that nearly all these positions consist of formal employment, that is, governed by labor legislation and subject to collective bargaining. The known trend toward informal employment in the Northeast region has transformed telemarketing into an appealing activity for the young worker with no previous work experience.

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Tabela 3: Operadores de Telemarketing ⁽¹⁾ , segundo Região							
Brasil, 2003 a 2009							
Região	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Norte	1,417	1,434	1,621	2,212	2,049	2,015	2,225
Nordeste	9,253	18,661	22,763	23,678	26,958	32,278	34,895
Sudeste	86,381	140,125	172,063	192,470	224,431	259,162	259,108
Sul	16,692	20,057	25,940	29,024	31,319	32,863	32,562
Centro-oeste	11,411	15,989	19,414	18,985	20,239	24,694	24,514
Brasil	125,154	196,266	241,801	266,369	304,996	351,012	353,304
⁽¹⁾ Classificação Brasileira de Ocupações: 4223 - Operadores de Telemarketing							
Fonte: MTE/Rais							

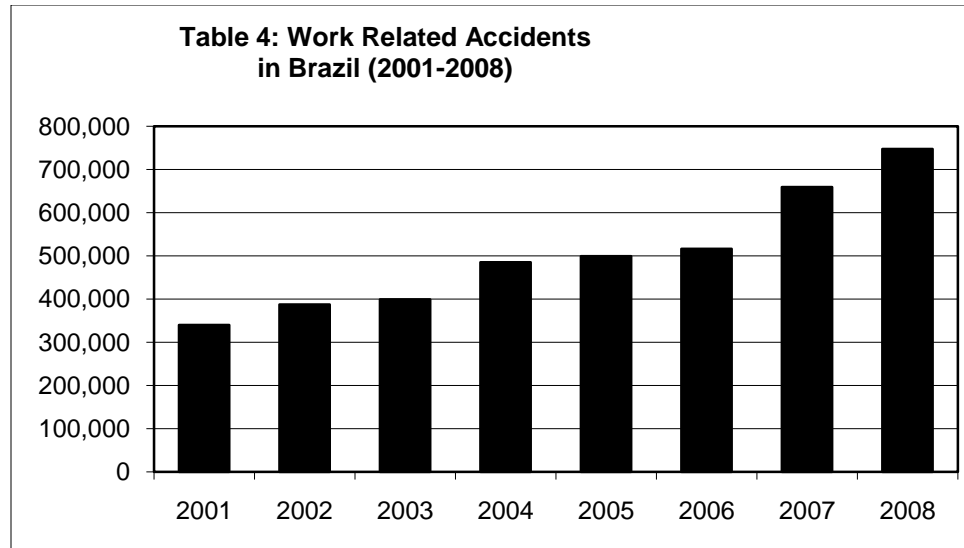
Table 3: Telemarketing Operators, by Region

As a result of the development of a new regime of post-Fordist accumulation, supported by entrepreneurial outsourcing, neoliberal privatization and labor financialization, Brazilian call centers spread to the Northeast under Lula's government, nurtured by a vast share of young workers, especially women and blacks, in search of their first opportunity in the formal labor market. To sum up part of the recent evolution of work relations in the country, the call center industry has proved to be a privileged place to observe current modifications in the Brazilian post-Fordist sub-proletarian class. Hence our interest in following the trajectory of teleoperators, emphasizing four key variables: *model of labor organization; level of skills; salary ratio; and forms of collective mobilization.*

From the point of view of general characteristics of teleoperators' work process, our field research in two of the largest Brazilian call center businesses, one of domestic capital and the other international, found that with the automatization of teleoperator work, the productivity gains come at the expense of a sharp increase in physical fatigue, automated posture, part-time work contracts, dizziness from the multiplicity of calls, and getting sick on the job. In fact, throughout our field research, either because of the way the questionnaire was administered to the selected sample in both businesses, or because of the contact with teleoperators through the in depth interviews, we came across a reality marked by Repetitive Strain Injuries, tendonitis, Ménière disease (bouts of severe dizziness with ringing in the ears and progressive hearing loss), acute depression, urinary tract infections – because of the limited bathroom breaks – , obesity, uncontrolled hypertension and vocal chord nodules. The answers to our questionnaire revealed a clear link between the working hours and the operator's process of getting sick:

To a great extent, it seems reasonable to us to assume that getting sick in the workplace, as recorded both by academic researchers as well as investigations conducted by the Department of Labor Relations, derive from a combination of factors, among which are inadequate training, stress arising from having to meet goals, negligence with respect to ergonomics and the ambient temperature of the workplace, few breaks during the day, lack of days off, strict monitoring of the teleoperator and the increased hours of work which accompanies the process of technological renovation. In a way, let us remember, this tendency is attached to the rise in the number of work place accidents reported during Lula's government, especially starting in 2006 (see Table 4).

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Fonte: Anuário Estatístico de Acidentes do Trabalho - Ministério da Previdência Social (2005-2008)

Another salient characteristic of the Brazilian call center industry is its oligopolistic behavior. The total number of workers of the two largest companies (153,200) corresponds to 46% of the total number of workers of the 18 next largest companies (180,479). This is a feature that clearly differentiates the Brazilian call center industry from such countries as the United States and France. This oligopolistic characteristic in addition to the low-skilled work force and the relative weakness of the unions acting in this sector help us understand why – even though the large majority of Brazilian teleoperators (70%) are covered by collective bargaining – Brazilian salaries (US\$3,415.00 annually – covered by collective bargaining – and US\$4,484.00 annually – not covered by collective bargaining) are among the lowest in the world in this sector, surpassing only the salaries of Indian workers. For the sake of comparison, a US teleoperator earns a yearly salary of US\$35,000 and a teleoperator in South Africa earns US\$11,200.00, 10 and 3 times, respectively, the salary of a Brazilian teleoperator. The low wages correspond to the low-skilled work force: among the 17 countries sampled by David Holman, Rosemary Batt and Ursula Holtgrewe, Brazilian teleoperators were those who had the lowest level of education.

With the rate of female participation in the work force nearing close to 70%, in addition to the high occurrence of AfroBrazilians, it is possible to say that the Brazilian group of teleoperators is largely comprised of black women. In other words, it is precisely that sub-proletarian group that has historically occupied the worst positions in the labor market, in addition to heading 80% of the single-parent families in the country. In addition, as we will see, our field research, both in the businesses as in the unions, showed that, besides being women and black, it is very common to find among the Brazilian teleoperators countless workers with special needs, in addition to a significant share of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals and transgendered (LGBTs). Again, we find ourselves among the most discriminated groups in the Brazilian labor market.

It was no surprise, therefore, for us to identify in our field research the presence of a minority group, however significant, of teleoperators inclined to adapt to the work hours and who felt, to some extent, satisfied with this type of work. As shown in the interviews, they were a group formed mainly of black women around 20 years old and dealing with urgent family responsibilities. We noted that, often, when the female workers stated that their husbands were unemployed, the feeling of adapting to the work flow and associating work to positive values increased. On the basis of the interviews, we realized, as was to be expected, that being the breadwinner produced a very strong disciplinary effect, particularly in cases where – a well-known and frequent business recruitment strategy – the worker declared herself to be a single mother. This same tendency toward adaptation can be found in interviews with gay teleoperators. During the research, we realized that the call center industry turned into a type of “refuge” for those highly discriminated sub-proletarian groups in the Brazilian labor market.

The contact with infotaylorism added to the permanent dispatching scheme of the labor force, however, leads these workers to develop critical behaviors in relation to the working conditions and the businesses. Often, we come up against an accentuated dissatisfaction with respect to salaries and the ever-increasing pressure from the business to reach the established goals. On the one hand, the operations coordinators and the HR managers, according to our interviews, are constantly making an effort to explain to the teleoperators that they are involved in a terrible economic competition, attempting to dissuade them from any collective action of a trade union or political-organizational nature. On the other hand, the selection of workers demands behavioral qualities such as availability, flexibility, readiness to accept new rules, all of which are structured so as to have a certain inclination to subordinate oneself to the system. Let us not forget, either, that teleoperators are recruited for temporary, short-term missions, which are renewed based on one’s behavior on the job, when they must demonstrate availability and loyalty toward the business.

Obviously, these characteristics, associated with the high rate of manpower turnover, impose structural difficulties for collective organization. And, in fact, when we began our field research during the second semester of 2003, reports of collective mobilizations or strikes were extremely rare among the teleoperators spoken to. The only exception was the mention of a defensive strike that took place in the Quatro A company, on February 4, 2000, regarding the quality of the food. The interviews with the trade union directors and the trade unionists inevitably began highlighting the huge obstacles that unionism confronted in this industry: as soon as a teleoperator approached a union and began to develop some sort of organizational activity, he or she was soon harassed by the companies or simply dismissed due to the end of the fixed-term contract, forcing the union to restart the entire work all over again, without further accumulation.

Another frequent observation linked to the trade-union diagnosis with respect to the organizational challenges imposed by the telemarketing sector

referred to the lack of political experience within the group of teleoperators. Because it is a category comprised of mainly young people new to the labor market, we often heard opinions from trade-unionists such as, “They’re very depoliticized,” “They don’t understand the importance of unions,” “It’s difficult to communicate with them”... In the case of one union, Professionals in Telecommunication Union in the State of São Paulo (Sintetel-SP), for example, which until 1998, was confused with the state-run Fordist company in the São Paulo telecommunications sector, Telesp, the age-gap between trade-unionists and teleoperators seemed to impede collective action. And, as we will see, the high diversification of businesses and activities stemming from the privatization of Telesp brought on intense disputes between trade-unionists with regards to defining the representation of their rank and file.

Immediately following the privatization cycle, which was marked by the outsourcing and firing of workers, the sector’s unions ended up focusing primarily on maintaining and creating jobs. In the case of the former Telesp, for example, the Sintetel union substituted long-term demands for short-term, and adopted a defensive stance in its demands. This happened during a period in which a large part of the benefits won through previous collective bargaining agreements (such as extra pay for extra hours, bonus payment for previous notice, as well as aid in cases of illness or injury) were steadily reduced by the companies to the minimum levels allowed by law. In addition, the right to represent the teleoperators was challenged by another union, launched in 1992, Sinratel (Professionals in Telecommunication Union of São Paulo). This union challenged the right to represent telemarketing workers in the city and metropolitan region of São Paulo. For this reason it is in an ongoing legal dispute with Sintetel, which represents workers in the telecommunications sector for the entire state of São Paulo.

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In the period prior to the privatization of Telesp, the main union demands consisted of wage adjustments and length-of-service bonuses. After the privatization, however, because of the rise in unemployment and job insecurity, the demand for wage adjustment was largely replaced by the demand for safeguarding jobs, and the demand for length-of-service bonuses replaced by negotiating wage subsidies that tried to include, with little success, profit-sharing and some social benefits, such as health plans and accords with private universities. Furthermore, in the period prior to privatization, the very low manpower turnover and the relative homogeneity within the Fordist business environment allowed relatively stable ties of solidarity to form among workers, which facilitated trade-union action. In other words, a certain symbolic structure that focused on validating the identity of the “Telesp worker” promoted collective mobilization.

Maintaining this symbolic structure for a long period allowed for workers and trade-union leaders to share a reference system, even though the latter, as part of union management, maintained a distance from the daily practices of the workers

they represented. Due, in large part, to the rise in unemployment that followed the privatization, Sintetel's defensive performance led to reinforcing a model of trade-union action characterized by pragmatism and by updating the strategies for making demands: bargaining with companies completely replaced any open confrontation whatsoever.

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As a response to Sintetel's model, Sintratel charted a new course: through greater integration in the non-union social movements, the black and LGBT movements in particular, Sintratel leadership sought to strengthen alternative forms of class solidarity by encouraging collectives geared toward the discussion of questions of race, gender and sexual orientation, and thus getting teleoperators closer to the everyday life of the union. In addition, the union has been acting with the LGBT Pride Parade Association of São Paulo, establishing itself as one of the few trade-unions or professional associations of São Paulo to organize, year after year, a separate float during the parade. This link between Sintratel and LGBT pride has encouraged transvestites and transsexuals to participate in the trade-union movement as delegates of the rank and file, which is not very common in the history of the Brazilian labor movement.

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Nonetheless, despite these differences, it is also possible to observe some important convergences between the Sintetel and Sintratel's standards of action. Both, for example, have been investing in the organization of professional courses through partnerships with businesses in the sector, in addition to taking part in the "Brazilian Program of Self-Regulation of the Customer Relations Sector", created by employers in the sector. Similarly, both Sintetel as well as Sintratel have been following a model known as "citizen-unionism," by which the union offers to its associates diverse services formerly offered by the State, such as health care plans and vocational training, in addition to supporting employment agencies whose funding comes from the Workers Relief Fund.

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Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's election, in 2002, represented a veritable watershed in the relationship between Brazilian trade-unionism and the State apparatus. In the first place, Lula's government filled nearly half of the key steering and advising positions – about 1,305 in all – with trade unionists who began controlling an annual budget over R\$200 billion. Furthermore, strategic positions relating to the pension funds of state-run businesses were also occupied by trade-union leaders. Many of them took on very prestigious positions in state-run businesses – such as Petrobrás and Furnas Centrais Elétricas – , in addition to joining the administrative board of BNDES (the Brazilian Development Bank). Lula's government also promoted union reform that legalized Brazilian trade-union

federations, by raising the union dues and transferring nearly R\$100 million annually to these federations. All in all, Brazilian trade-unionism rose to the role of a strategic actor with regard to capitalist investment in the country.

This new reality, as was to be expected, modified the relationship between the call center industry's trade-union and the State apparatus in the country. Throughout our interviews with trade-union leaders and rank and file activists of both unions, a favorable opinion of Lula's government clearly predominated. In order to justify their adherence to the PT program, trade-unionists made repeated comparisons to the FHC (Fernando Henrique Cardoso) Era. Moreover, professional development projects – not to mention agreements with private colleges – implemented by trade-unions, depend on Workers Relief Fund resources and count on the support of federal programs such as University for All Program that distributes full or partial study grants to low-income students to finance private university education. It is not surprising, therefore, that the main initiative in Lula's government with relation to the telemarketing sector, the "Telemarketing Law," did not provoke, apart from the routine bellyaching, a single protest on the part of trade-unionists. The law, which was passed on December 1, 2008, is limited exclusively to the rights of consumers and did nothing to improve the working conditions of the teleoperators.

If there is no *pressure on government*, with regards to strikes, Sintratel has shown itself to be more active than Sintetel. Here it is worth noting that, despite the structural blockade facing collective mobilization in the sector, there have been a fair amount of strikes in call center industry in São Paulo. As previously stated, when we began our research, we did not log any references to strikes in telemarketing. This scenario, however, was altered after the famed strike of the Atento company unit located in São Bernardo, which occurred in August 2005. This was a crucial episode in Sintratel's history because the strike broke out in the same city that, thirty years prior, had watched the eruption of the great cycle of strikes, which under the leadership of Lula, gave rise to the "new unionism."

The workers' dissatisfactions stemmed from not receiving wage adjustments for the two previous years, shortfalls in their meal tickets, the implementation of bank of hours, the precarious working conditions, in addition to psychological harassment. When faced with lower transportation-allowances, various demonstrations were organized, with the backing of Sintratel (and the opposition of Sintetel, culminating in a day-long work stoppage of approximately 150 teleoperators – reason enough for the police to imprison trade-unionists and for various teleoperators who went on strike to be fired. Then, about half of the 900 teleoperators in the unit decided to join the movement, which went on for nine days and demanded, in addition to a 17.74% pay raise, a meal ticket readjustment from R\$2,74 to R\$6, wage equality, as well as profit-sharing. The strike, despite the dismissals not being reversed, was considered a victory by both the union as well as the teleoperators who had almost all of their demands met. Shorter strikes, but with

the same list of demands, began happening every year: profit-sharing, childcare, wage adjustment, shorter work hours, meal ticket readjustment...

During our interviews with teleoperators and trade-unionists from the rank and file at the start of 2006, we recorded the Atento strike. However, having been overly influenced by the prevailing defensive trend at the beginning of 2000, we incorrectly interpreted this movement as part of the struggles that were more or less related to the recognition of an individual's dignity – against psychological harassment, for the right to bathroom breaks, longer breaks, an improvement in the snacks... In reality, however, more offensive shut-it-down movements began emerging at that time. Since we were not worried about closely analyzing trade-unionist movements, we didn't understand the importance that some key factors, relative to the work process in the CTAs, served in the formation of class solidarity among the teleoperators. In the first place, while it is true that the characteristics of a first job in telemarketing, linked to the high turnover of jobs in call centers, tend to block class-based political action, and while it is also true that in a labor market where for every three jobs created in non-agricultural private enterprise, two are found in companies with up to ten workers who earn on average R\$633.03, the call center industry came to be regarded by many as a more or less inescapable occupational horizon.

Despite the intense job turnover in this sector (42% per year), we managed to interview teleoperators with as many as ten years of experience in telemarketing. This means that the union bonds are not simply "lost," but frequently taken from one company to another. Moreover, the progressive monopolization of the Brazilian call center industry further toughened the working conditions, a fact that feeds diffuse dissatisfaction in the rank and file workers. Finally, it is worth pointing out two aspects: from the point of view of the working process, the emphasis on the need to reach goals through cooperative teamwork tends to nurture solidarity ties between teleoperators who demonstrate during occasions of conflict with the company. In addition, the shared experience from being discriminated on the basis of gender, sexual orientation and race, often further reinforces these ties of solidarity, thereby creating a certain inclination toward collective mobilization.

This is not to imply the simplistic impression that teleoperators form a group mobilized by unions. Rather, what we have are workers who, despite the difficulties imposed by the industry to mobilize collectively, *have started to form an embryo of collective consciousness, strong enough to guarantee some important steps on the path to union self-organization.* In fact, the rapid and concentrated growth in the call center industry in the country added to the accumulation of experiences in the sector on the part of the teleoperators has tended to favor the emergence of certain more offensive demands. This may not seem much, if compared to the history of the Brazilian union movement, but if we take into account the model of labor organization predominant in the industry, as well as the group's very recent formation, we realize that *any image that associates teleoperators with the absence of*

the basic conditions for participation in the class struggle, must be immediately rejected.

In fact, observing this post-Fordist sub-proletarian group has allowed us to test the “the passive Brazilian revolution” hypothesis, which we outlined with Alvaro Bianchi during Lula’s first election. At that time, we put forward two scenarios: 1) Lula’s government would not simply be another “neoliberal” example, à la Fernando Collor or Fernando Henrique Cardoso, precisely because, in order to constitute certain margins of popular consent, he would have to respond to certain demands pent up in the social movements. We used the – rather weak, we admit – notion of “social-liberalism” in an attempt to address the emphasis on income distribution policies, even if they are shaped by the reproduction of the rentier orthodoxy. And 2) the “transformist” direct relationship of the high level union bureaucracy with its pension funds might not be sufficient to generate a “new class,” as Oliveira said, but would certainly pave the “new trade-unionism’s” one-way street toward the globalized financial system of concentrated economic power/accumulation. We argued that this path would completely destroy any possibility, on the part of this bureaucracy, of defending the historical interests of Brazilian subaltern classes again. We called this process the “financialization of the trade-union bureaucracy.”

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The experience of the city of São Paulo’s trade-unionisms within the telemarketing sector also allowed us to test this hypothesis. In fact, we found both tendencies in action. On the one hand, we noted, in particular, a resolute initiative on Sintratel’s part to narrow the gap between the union’s demands and those formulated by the social movements in the country throughout the 80s and 90s: struggles for gender, race and sexual orientation equality, access to university, social protection... Furthermore, Sintratel sought not only to associate with other unions in countries where Atento maintains operations, but also to coordinate with the Human Rights Secretary of the President of the Republic in order to develop projects against psychological harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation. Thus, the union, in its way, helped promote the increase in the margins of popular consent among the teleoperators, bringing them close to certain historical demands of the country’s social movements.

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On the other hand, Sintratel supported the union reform fostered by Lula’s government, in an attempt to take advantage of the situation: during our research, we were able to follow the outbreak of a series of conflicts within the union – with reports of physical aggression between leaders – which were motivated, in large part, by the process of disaffiliation from the CUT federation and the building of a new federation (the CTB), created by the Communist Party of Brazil exclusively to receive a larger portion of the tax destined for the trade-union associations. In one

way or another, the result of the encounter between the demands pent up in the social movements and the “trade-union transformism” undoubtedly represented an increase in the control of the trade-union movement by the State apparatus.

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After researching these post-Fordist sub-proletarians and their unions, the image that remains is NOT that of a class fraction which is supposedly incapable of constructing autonomous forms of organization that would turn to the State for the path *par excellence* to reducing social inequality. In fact, the teleoperators constitute a remarkably ambiguous phenomenon in ideological terms. While it is true that possess very little political experience, they have already started organizing their own strikes; although they are not interested in parties, they do know how to manifest their dissatisfactions in and out of the companies; they associate the rise in popular consumption to the continuity of Lulism, but do not delude themselves with the “miracle” of subsidized credit by the government.

With regards to the cycle of economic growth with relative distribution of wealth between those who make a living wage, this group drew lessons that, instead of an attitude dependent on the State, foster a more or less permanent state of *social unrest*. They momentarily adhered to Lulism, but let us not fool ourselves: this sign of passivity simply does not explain them. On the contrary, it is more likely a type of diffuse popular pressure, all too familiar to the trade-unionists that work in the sector, that negates the present and projects itself into the future. This project might spill over the barriers of the trade-union movement in order to further reduce popular support for the government, if the standard of living of those who make a living wage were to be undermined. If we consider the historical characteristics of semi-peripheral capitalism, it should come as no surprise that Dilma Rousseff’s government already announced serious cuts to the federal budget and forced Congress approve a minimum wage adjustment far lower than the trade-unions had expected.

Back to the history of Brazilian populism, let us remember that exaggerating the virtues of non-manual jobs by newcomers in the workforce was a phenomenon widely documented by the ethnographies that dealt with the formation of the new Brazilian working class between 1930 and 1960. Unfamiliar with this type of work amidst their initial contacts with factory despotism in semi-peripheral conditions, the workers envied desk jobs and wished that their daughters could study, abandon their housekeeping jobs and occupy such positions in the future. The rising sociology of Brazilian professional labor interpreted this as a clear indication of the individualism that, supposedly characteristic of this social group, dissolved the workers’ identification with the social environment of the worker, the aspiration to free itself from the furious work pace of the assembly line, and taking refuge in office work, was mistaken for a feeling of helplessness in the face of the large Fordist company.

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The history of the emergence of a new trade-unionism, with Lula at its head, at the end of the 1970s, showed that sociological imagination simply was not capable of correctly capturing the aspirations of Brazilian workers. On the contrary, it was instead the trade-union leadership that arose from the 1970-1980 strikes. Currently, the daughters – and grand-daughters – of those workers attend a private night college, abandon their housekeeping jobs and settle into desk jobs. As we have seen, there is no shortage of positions in the post-Fordist call center industry, especially in the Northeast of the country. Whether or not they will keep quiet faced with low wages, high turnover, intense work hours, racial discrimination, psychological harassment and illness, all of which are prevalent in the sector, remains to be seen. Or perhaps they will decide to follow in their fathers' and grandfathers' footsteps, of some thirty years ago.