WORKING WOMEN, WORKING MEN

São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil's Industrial Working Class, 1900–1955

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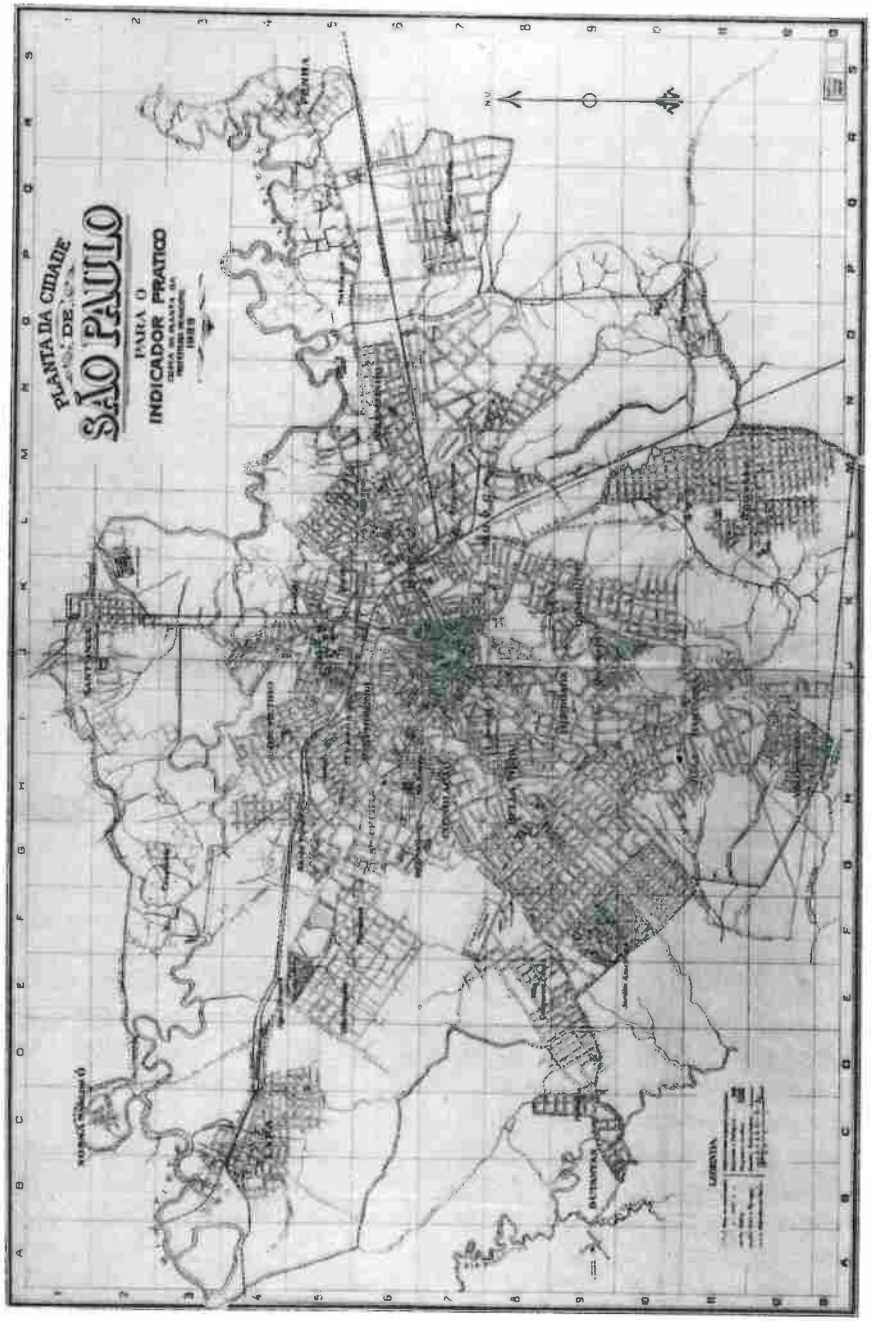

São Paulo, Brazil circa 1922. (*Courtesy Harvard College Library*)

Introduction

Speaker after speaker came forward on the stage to denounce the *pelegos* (government unionists) who controlled the state-sanctioned *sindicatos* in the city. They demanded an end to the onerous *imposto sindical* (union tax), called for the abolition of state intervention in industrial relations, and blasted the cozy relationship between the pelegos and the industrialists. Factory commission activists from metalworking establishments throughout the *município* of São Paulo and its suburbs of Osasco, Garulhos, Santo André, São Bernardo, São Caetano, and Diadema packed the rented hall in the Liberdade section of São Paulo. These insurgents from grass-roots factory commissions staged their rally far from union headquarters to energize rank-and-file metalworkers in São Paulo for the upcoming election of a new union directorate. Speaker after speaker called on those gathered to throw out the entrenched pelegos and bring the open politics of their factory commissions to the closed state-sanctioned unions.

What impressed me most about this May 1987 rally was how much its rhetoric mirrored that of the struggles for union democracy São Paulo's metallurgical and textile workers had waged in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The 1987 calls for union democracy were near-perfect representations of the language of rank-and-file insurgency expressed in similar meetings held throughout the mid-1940s and early 1950s.[1] Along with the language of union democracy, these workers in 1987 continued to rely on a system of factory commissions as their own form of independent organizing. These factory-based groups of anywhere from five to fifty workers first played a role in grass-roots protests in the 1910s. At times, the commissions were workers' only institutions for negotiating wage increases and changes in work conditions. At other times, the commissions made up the grass roots of the city's unions. In the late 1970s, workers from insurgent factory commissions succeeded in breaking the power of the state-sanctioned sindicatos and created an alternative structure known as the "New Unionism," which workers later institutionalized as the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).[2] These calls for a grass-roots insurgency to oust pelegos and to take con-

trol of the unions—which have been part of a nationwide PT platform since its founding—reveal the importance of working-class historical memory and the development of a syndicalist tradition among São Paulo's industrial workers that stretches back to the first decades of the twentieth century.

This book is about the rise of Brazil's industrial working class to a position of political prominence in the first half of the twentieth century. It is the story of how workers experienced Brazil's industrialization and how they struggled to gain control over their lives within a highly authoritarian political system. It is also the story of how workers' struggles shaped that political system. By studying those struggles, this book details the historical origins of the New Unionism. But this is not just an exercise in locating origins. Rather, this book places industrial workers firmly within twentieth-century Brazilian history by revealing the important connections among people and ideas from different historical epochs.

This book focuses closely on the experiences of two divergent groups of industrial laborers—textile and metallurgical workers—over a long and formative period in Brazilian history in order to describe the formation and various transformations of São Paulo's industrial working class. Class formation is not an inevitable result of structural circumstances; instead, it is the "making" of a social class by those individuals whose common experiences—in the labor market, neighborhoods, and marketplaces, and in relation to their employers and the state—encourage them to band together to act in their perceived common interests. Further, the process of class formation is an ongoing one, and the composition of the working class, as well as its worldview and goals, changes accordingly.[3] Thus, the story of the formation of São Paulo's industrial working class is not the story of the "masses" lumped together indiscriminately, but of individual workers or groups of workers separated by sex, skill, industry, and ethnicity.[4]

The development of São Paulo's industrial bourgeoisie was closely tied to the rise of the city's working class. The engine of class struggle shaped the formation of both classes, and neither can be understood without reference to the other.[5] This double focus also reveals important aspects of the roots of Brazil's modern bureaucratic-authoritarian state.[6] As both the state and federal governments grappled with the issue of "social control," they created institutions in an effort to manipulate workers and their independent organizations. The bureaucratic-

authoritarian state, then, was not the result of a unique post-1945 political conjuncture; rather, it was the product of nearly a century of class struggle between Brazil's working people and their rulers.[7]

This book analyzes how both male and female industrial workers in São Paulo overcame many obstacles to form—during certain key periods—a powerful workers' movement, and by the mid-1950s a representative and vibrant union movement.[8] It examines workers' ongoing struggles within their factories and neighborhoods, and describes how their own informal organizations related to unions, industrialists, and the state. A basic theme is that neither the formation of the working class nor its operation in Brazilian society can be understood without a close analysis of the interaction of four sets of actors: the industrial working class, union and Left organization leaders, industrialists, and state policymakers.

In considering the interaction of these four sets of actors, it is particularly important to make a distinction between the rank and file and leaders of formal Left and labor groups. Compared with some other Latin American countries (e.g., Argentina, Chile, and Mexico), Brazil has not sustained a large-scale, politically active *formal* labor movement. Brazilian labor leaders' and state makers' failures to speak to the rank and file's needs or to deliver real social gains hindered the development of a powerful labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century.[9] Brazilian workers have, however, created and maintained their own local, independent organizations that survive state intervention and violence because of their strong roots among the rank and file, and because their informal levels of organization have made them elusive targets for industrialist and state repression. These very features have also made this type of worker organization and mobilization difficult for historians to locate.[10]

Workers most often organized themselves into factory commissions and avoided participation in formal unions. This fact helps explain two aspects of São Paulo's labor history. First, it reveals the tension workers experienced between their need to maintain their own independent social movement—a working-class movement based in the commissions—and the opportunities and costs associated with tying their commissions to institutions (anarchist and later state-run unions) that they, as the rank and file, had played little or no role in creating.[11] Second, workers' reliance on an informal factory commission structure provided them opportunities and social spaces to articulate and spread

their ideas about their bosses, unions, the state, and other issues. By studying workers' factory commissions, this book uncovers workers' "hidden transcripts" of independent rank-and-file activism.[12]

Analyzing these developments over the *longue durée* explains the durability of the working-class movement even when the formal labor movement had been weakened by state intervention. Moreover, the focus on these hidden transcripts challenges the tendency to characterize strikes and other working-class organizing and protest activities as "spontaneous." Instead, this book details how such activities were most often products of an ongoing, informal, popular social movement organized around factory commissions.

Social movements are not abstractions; they are groups of people who organize together to push for common goals. Because this book focuses on Brazil's industrial working people the analysis concentrates on the lives—in their factories, neighborhoods, unions, and other organizations—of two groups of factory workers in the country's leading industrial city, São Paulo.[13] The first group is textile workers. As in most countries, Brazil's first experience with industrialization was with textiles. Textile production took place in large, highly mechanized factories with "semiskilled" labor.[14] Further, women workers tended to dominate this field. The second group of workers studied are those in São Paulo's metallurgical industries. As the city's industrial base expanded, craftsmen opened small machine shops to meet the increasing demand for spare parts and agricultural tools. These shops employed "skilled" workers who retained a large measure of control over the labor process.[15] And the majority of the city's metalworkers were men.

I concentrate on these two groups of workers for several reasons. First, they represent two extremes of factory laborers. Textile workers were considered semiskilled, and metalworkers skilled. Textile factories were large industrial establishments (often employing more than five hundred workers), while metalworking shops tended to be small (generally employing fewer than thirty). These two industries utilized contrasting labor processes with different types of workers. Moreover, these two industries offer the opportunity to compare and contrast the work, living, organizational, and protest experiences of female and male industrial laborers. Finally, the textile and metallurgical sectors employed more factory workers than any other two industrial sectors in Brazil, and they eventually produced two of São Paulo's, and therefore Brazil's, leading industrial unions.[16]

The development of these two leading unions was not a linear or smooth process. Unions, like social classes, are made by workers and individuals who assume leadership roles, and through their relations with industrialists and state policymakers. Moreover, conflicts among various rank-and-file groups—especially between women workers and male unionists—often defined the organization and politics of these unions. Workers' continued reliance on their own factory commissions also contributed to the making of small, unrepresentative formal unions in São Paulo. State intervention in the 1930s and 1940s solidified this process of rank-and-file alienation from the union structure.

Both the factory commissions and the unions that developed out of these processes articulated—often through public pronouncements and always through praxis—highly gendered notions of working-class politics. Because *gender* is defined as a socially constructed set of definitions of appropriate behavior for each sex, it often changes over time. Thus, this book traces not only the role gender ideologies played in shaping working-class organizing and protest activities but also how those activities and the reactions they brought in turn shaped gender ideologies.

The complex issues associated with the concepts of consciousness and hegemony often muddle labor histories. In this book, consciousness is analyzed as the totality of the impressions, thoughts, and feelings that constitute an individual's or group's worldview. And because consciousness is shaped by social experiences, it often changes. Accordingly, I reject the notion that there is one appropriate political class consciousness, especially one that is introduced by intellectuals, a party, or some other non-working-class group.[17] Instead, I argue that people are drawn to ideologies that speak to important aspects of their lives, and they often shape and reformulate those ideologies to address the specifics of their condition. In this way, individuals and groups of both sexes and various ethnicities and classes socially construct ideologies. By uncovering both working-class ideologies and their making, this book reveals the role historical memory has played in helping São Paulo's industrial workers articulate and maintain ideologies of opposition and resistance to both employers and the state. Accordingly, my analysis demonstrates how workers have avoided being duped by so-called hegemonic ideologies.[18] Tracing the development of this working-class historical memory that values local, independent forms of organizing also helps us connect the rhetoric and praxis of São Paulo's New Unionism with the legacy of workers' struggles against their bosses and the state, and for representative and open unions in the first half of the twentieth century.