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Industrial Workers and the Birth of the Populist Republic in Brazil, 1945-1946

by
John D. French*

Brazilian industrial workers played a central role in the political transition of 1945-1946 that ended the Estado Novo dictatorship and opened the era of electoral democracy known as the Brazilian Populist Republic (1946-1964). Unlike studies that emphasize the continuity of a paternalistic and authoritarian relationship between the government and workers, this essay argues that the events of 1945-1946 are best seen as a radical break with the past marked by the dramatic entry of the urban working class into Brazilian political life.

Brazil's rapid industrialization since the turn of the century had led to the emergence of an industrial proletariat, numbering over one million in 1945, within a restrictive political system that limited electoral participation and popular inputs. In Brazil, unlike the United States, mass enfranchisement followed rather than preceded the emergence of a wage-earning working class. While the details of the intra-elite conflict need not detain us, the faction led by Getúlio Vargas was prepared in 1945 to gamble on the political potential of this urban working-class constituency.

This article begins by demonstrating that Vargas's 1945 electoral legislation was consciously and successfully designed to alter Brazilian electoral life through effective mass enfranchisement in urban areas. It then examines the nature of grass-roots mobilization in the industrial region of greater São Paulo, named ABC after Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, and São Caetano. As Brazil's fourth largest industrial center with well over 40,000 workers, ABC's socially homogeneous factory districts represented the most dramatic concentration of modern large-scale industrial production in 1945.

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For too long, the relationship between Vargas and the workers has been seen as a one-sided manipulation of the masses by the state and elites. The absence of serious, month-to-month studies of industrial working-class communities in 1945-1946 has left us with little understanding of the dynamics that underlay an upsurge of popular activism that utilized the ballot and the strike to advance working-class interests.¹

In the past, these extraordinary electoral, political, and trade-union events have been seen as a natural outcome of the popular appeal of Getúlio Vargas or, to a lesser extent, the Communist Luis Carlos Prestes. Consciously focusing on the state, trade unions, and political parties, even the best existing scholarship has failed to explain the outlook and behavior of the masses of Brazilian industrial workers (Maranhão, 1979). Why did they respond with such startling unanimity to the mobilizational appeals of Vargas and Prestes? What characteristics distinguished supporters of Vargas from those of Prestes?

To understand postwar "trabalhismo-getulismo" and "communism-prestismo" in ABC, this paper argues that we must establish the contours of mass working-class consciousness, its characteristics, psychology, and direction of development. We will also need to examine the crucial question of organization, the means through which change was wrought. This will enable us to better understand popular *getulismo*, the surprising popular vote of December 1945, the relative strengths of the Partido Comunista Brasileira (Communist Party, or PCB) and the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (Labor Party, or PTB), and the nature of the postwar trade-union movement.

1945: THE POPULIST GAMBLE OF GETÚLIO VARGAS

In early 1945, Brazil seemed set on the path to an uneventful transition to a democratic republic within the traditional limitations of Brazilian oligarchical politics. Marginalized by the candidacies of two conservative military men, Vargas regained the initiative with a bold gamble that would alter the structure and terms of Brazilian politics. In slashing attacks on his enemies, Vargas issued a dramatic call in May 1945 to Brazil's industrial workers, urban laborers, and employees to actively enter the political arena in defense of their interests through his newly founded PTB.

Getúlio's ambitious plans for the PTB could easily have come to naught, given the political marginality and electoral inexperience of its

proposed constituency. To make this opening to urban workers bear fruit, Vargas had to unilaterally alter the terms of the upcoming election. The electoral legislation that emerged from Vargas's cabinet differed radically from earlier Brazilian laws and even from the recommendations of the committee that Vargas himself had appointed in February 1945. In every aspect, the legislation was systematically designed to effectively enfranchise the working class and favor urban over rural voter registration and electoral participation.

Locked in conflict with his elite opponents, Vargas sought to prevent the return to political power of the conservative landed classes with their millions of dependent voters. As part of his effort to create an urban-industrial counterweight to the *coroneis* (colonels, or local bosses, who still held monopoly power on the local level in the countryside), Vargas maintained the literacy requirement for voting, first established in 1891, which excluded half of the adult population. Much criticized then and later as undemocratic, the literacy requirement in the short run strengthened the left-of-center parties based in urban areas where literacy rates were higher.

To guarantee participation by working people in significant numbers, Vargas made voting obligatory for virtually all literate Brazilians (only women who did not work outside the home were free from a fine if they did not vote) and established an ex-officio voter registration procedure designed to favor urban over rural areas. While most Brazilians had to individually register with the local electoral notary, this form of ex-officio group registration benefited all full- or part-time employees of public offices, professional associations, and private, mixed, or state businesses.

The little studied ex-officio registration procedure has most often been depicted, as it was by Getúlio's opponents, as a form of "officialized fraud" that affected mainly government employees (Souza, 1976; Kinzo, 1980). In fact, the largest number of ex-officio voters came through factory payroll enrollments. The appropriate company official was required to submit a list of employees to an electoral judge, who returned the required electoral identification cards for distribution within the factory. Since the lists submitted did not have the signature of the applicant, many illiterate urban workers thus escaped disenfranchisement despite the law's literacy provisions.

Getúlio Vargas's ambitious and carefully crafted strategy was accompanied by a daring presidential rhetoric of protest. Popular mobilization marked the latter half of 1945 as workers awoke to politics

through the officially sponsored *queremista* movement (from “Queremos Getúlio,” “We Want Getúlio”) which operated in informal alliance with the newly legalized Communist Party (PCB) of Luis Carlos Prestes. After the fears thus aroused among conservatives led to Getúlio’s ouster in October, few established politicians expected the *getulista* political triumph revealed in the elections of December 2, 1945.

Defying the elitist “common sense” of the traditional holders of power, Vargas had opened the way for the participation of millions of Brazilians from the urban popular classes in the affairs of politics and government. In 120 years of elections, Brazil’s economic and political elites had grown accustomed to a highly restricted politics of the few. The electoral marketplace in 1945, however, was totally transformed as participation increased from 10 percent of all adults in the 1930s to 33 percent in 1945, out of a total adult population that was about 50 percent literate.

As intended, electoral participation increased most dramatically, by 400 percent to 500 percent, in the country’s urban and industrial heartland. For the first time in Brazilian history, the state of São Paulo displaced Minas Gerais as the nation’s largest state contingent of voters. As the centers of Brazilian industry, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the national capital, also had the largest number of ex-officio voters. Fully 33 percent of the paulista electorate had been registered ex-officio compared to only 15 percent for the less developed state of Minas Gerais.

Mass enfranchisement clearly meant that electoral politics was no longer the exclusive realm of the traditional rural oligarchies. Ex-officio registration procedures and the literacy requirement also combined to dramatically increase the clout of urban areas within a given state. While holding only 23 percent of the state’s population, greater São Paulo provided 44 percent of the total electoral turnout. Half of the voters in the state’s urban and industrial centers were registered ex-officio, compared to only a fifth of the electorate from rural areas.

Urban electoral politics was transformed by this precipitous expansion in participation. After dominating electoral politics for decades, ABC’s politically active middle class found its small and narrow patronage networks overwhelmed by a mass of new working-class voters. From 6,000 voters in 1936, electoral participation in ABC jumped five-fold to 28,000 in December 1945. Not surprisingly, the conservative parties did poorly in ABC, garnering under a third of the total vote.

The 1945 election results revealed that a new popular voting bloc did indeed exist in urban and industrial regions. Even the victory of Getúlio's conservative former minister of war, General Eurico Dutra, in the presidential race still demonstrated Vargas's political leverage. After refusing to endorse the man responsible for his ouster, Getúlio's successful last minute appeal for Dutra demonstrated that he could deliver support among the urban masses even to a candidate repudiated by many of his own followers.

The 1945 election results in every major urban center were startling in their uniformity, with the PTB and PCB receiving an absolute majority of the votes cast. In the ABC region, the two class-identified popular parties received a staggering 71 percent of the total vote (compared to only 32 percent on the state level). Participating in electoral politics for the first time, ABC's working-class voters had directly expressed their common class identity in the political arena.

Yet modern urban and industrial areas differed most radically from the prevailing political norms in the degree of support given to the candidates of Luis Carlos Prestes and the Communist Party. The 600,000 votes received nationwide by the PCB's symbolic presidential candidate, the noncommunist Yedo Fiuza, was surprisingly high for a newly legalized party, with fewer than 1,000 members, little funding, and no history of electoral success.

As Glaucio Soares observed, the PCB's 10 percent of the national vote came entirely from urban and industrial regions, giving the party an electoral profile even more skewed and concentrated than the other urban-oriented party, the PTB (Soares, 1973). In São Paulo, the PCB did astonishingly well in all of the state's working-class cities. The PCB's candidate, Fiuza, came in first in the legendary "red port" city of Santos, tied for second place with the candidate of the União Democrática Nacional (UDN), Brigadeiro Gomes, in the capital, and beat the UDN's candidate in both the textile city of Sorocaba and the ABC region.

THE MASS BASE OF POPULAR GETULISMO

Content with references to the popularity of the "charismatic caudillos" Getúlio Vargas and Luis Carlos Prestes, few scholars have provided detailed explanations for these surprising outcomes. Although the power of propaganda is still cited by some scholars, most have

simply taken mass support for Vargas and Prestes at face value. They have thus been unable to explain the motivation of urban voters as a whole or the relationship between support for the PTB versus the PCB (Silva, 1976; Skidmore, 1967; Bourne, 1974; Burns, 1980; Dulles, 1967; Flynn, 1978; Chilcote, 1974; Conniff, 1982; Almeida Júnior, 1981; L. Rodrigues, 1981). Even the authors of two excellent local studies of workers in postwar Minas Gerais note but do not explain the origin of this political and trade-union militancy (Grossi, 1982; Loyola, 1980).

In many discussions, commentators seem to have accepted the getulista explanation that support flowed from the material benefits provided to workers under his regime's "advanced labor legislation" (Maranhão, 1979; Conniff, 1982). While ABC wage earners did benefit from the wartime abundance of factory work, these advantages were offset by the economic suffering brought about as wages fell behind the spiraling increases in the cost of foodstuffs. Wartime black marketeering was accompanied by a general deterioration in working and living conditions.

Indeed most of the measures hailed by Vargas in 1945 as the "workers' code of economic emancipation," including the eight-hour day, had been suspended as part of the wartime industrial production drive. Thus despite Getúlio's claims, it is clear that the material existence of the majority of workers had not been markedly improved by government action during the war years.

Others have visualized a patronage chain extending from the national Ministry of Labor, which organized the PTB, down through the bureaucratic trade-union hierarchy to the local unions and to the workers. Pension payments of the Instituto de Aposentadorias y Pensões dos Industriários (Pension Institute of Industrial Employees, or IAPI) and trade-union *assistencialismo* (medical, dental, and social welfare programs) were the patronage benefits for which votes for Vargas were exchanged.

Yet the simplicity of this explanation fails on many fronts. There were few labor ministry or IAPI functionaries in ABC in 1945 and most workers had received no direct benefits from these programs. As for the trade-union structure, none of the paid union functionaries at the state federation level had any direct ties to the unpaid local union leaders in ABC. Nor did ABC's trade unions, plagued by employer refusals to pay the required *imposto sindical* (union tax), have the funds to support any real program of medical and dental assistance to their members. Finally,

the diminutive membership of local unions in 1945 could not account for the results of the balloting.

The *getulismo* of ABC's workers cannot, therefore, be explained as a result of direct material benefits or the patronage exercised by the bureaucracy said to staff the corporatist state-linked trade unions. Perhaps one might then accept the oldest and most common explanation for popular *getulismo*: that ABC's workers had been won over by Vargas's propaganda and loose prolabor rhetoric. Indeed, susceptibility to populist "demagoguery" has long figured in explanations from both the left and the right. Unaware of their own interests, it is said, inexperienced workers were manipulated by a dictator who had done nothing real for them and who had repeatedly crushed their efforts at independent organization.

The use of these populist techniques of manipulation and "political control," it has often been said, resulted in the loss of class autonomy and left urban workers as a mass base for maneuvers by bourgeois groups (Erickson, 1975; L. Rodrigues, 1966; Cardoso, 1961; Weffort, 1978). The PCB's decision to cooperate with Vargas in 1945, it is further argued, contributed to the workers' dependence upon the state and their mystification by nationalist developmentalist ideologies. The failure of these postwar workers to develop "independent class politics," as conceived by later writers, is then explained as a result of misleadership or betrayal (Weffort, 1972, 1973).

As elsewhere, scholars had sought to link Brazilian populism to the shift in the composition of the working class after 1930, as labor was drawn from the countryside. Lacking political experience and "proletarian traditions," these new workers of rural origin were said to seek paternalistic relations similar to those in their areas of origin. Easy prey for demagogic populist politicians like Vargas or Adhemar de Barros, the traditional attitude of these rural migrant workers is thought to have inhibited a class perception of the world. This new working class is then contrasted to the allegedly class conscious, antistatist militancy of the immigrant working class of the First Republic (Ianni, 1970; L. Rodrigues, 1966; Hobsbawm, 1967).

Lacking a firm foundation in empirical research, these generalizations fail to explain the political or trade-union behavior of São Paulo's urban workers. The arguments overlook the specific political dimension of the special circumstances of World War II. The world conflagration was not an abstraction for the people of ABC and other urban areas. Their everyday lives were affected in fundamental and visible ways. No

worker could fail to see the direct tie between the war and the expansion of industry, with its corollary of near full employment. As newcomers to industry, few workers in 1945 had any memories at all of the repression of labor between 1935 and 1937.

Moreover, economic difficulties, the high cost of living, high-handed employers, and repressive governmental authority were not new experiences for Brazil's working people, whether of urban or rural origin. Within the wartime context, however, these problems were invested with a broader and potentially political meaning. World War II was sold to the world's peoples as a "democratic" war in which the defeat of a common menace required the sacrifice of all—even if the burden was clearly unevenly distributed, as in Brazil.

The workers' reward would come, so they expected, at the conclusion of the war, an understanding fostered and encouraged by the regime's wartime promises. If the measures taken by Getúlio were still small, the workers accepted them as a good-faith downpayment on what was due them after victory was achieved. In his classic study of the strike of 400,000 U.S. steelworkers in 1919, David Brody showed that the combination of wartime grievances and hope for postwar change, whether realistic or not, was an explosive combination that led easily to labor militancy (Brody, 1969).

Indeed, a heightened, almost millenarian, sense of the possibilities of change gripped ABC's workers in mid-1945. Although the exact road to a better life was unknown, there were few workers who did not feel that they were heading toward a better future. Their feelings of political efficacy were enhanced by the division of Brazil's ruling groups that led Vargas to opt for building a popular urban electoral base.

To achieve his goals, Vargas consciously encouraged and stimulated these popular expectations. While seeking to blur the lines between social classes by using the term *trabalhadores* (laborers) rather than *operários* (workers), the effect of Getúlio's rhetoric was to foster a common group identity among ABC's discontented but expectant factory workers. For them, the distinction between "laborers" and "workers" was academic since either term translated into "us and them" in their own lives.

Rather than hindering the development of class consciousness among workers, Getúlio's populist appeals actually served as a rallying point that helped to unify the working class and to increase its confidence. As for Getúlio's elite opponents, workers quite rightly expected nothing from groups who failed to even promise anything to workers.

Indeed, the local middle-class supporters of the UDN and the Partido Social Democrático (PSD) were snobby elitists who still publicly debated, in 1945, whether workers were capable of exercising the right to vote.

Vargas's populist appeals would have had less of a mobilizational impact if he had been able to maintain unchallenged control of the urban popular arena. Yet despite Vargas's publicly avowed intention of preempting left extremism among workers, the peculiar context of elite division and conflict in 1945 brought him into a *de facto* alliance with Prestes. This alliance of convenience precluded the anticommunist attacks and rhetoric that might have turned Getúlio's followers against the PCB.

Working parallel to Vargas, the PCB avoided open collision with popular *getulismo* while establishing a fruitful dialogue with this powerful current of working-class self-assertion. Placing itself on the same side of the barricades, the weakly organized PCB grew as an expression of a class appeal to the left of *trabalhismo* ("laborism"), yet within the more general unity expressed in the broader *queremista* movement. The evidence bears out the critics of Francisco Weffort when they characterized the PCB's policy in 1945-1946 as one of "competition in alliance with *varguismo*" (Martins and Tavares de Almeida, 1974).

The emergence of a rival to the left of the PTB spurred a competition for the workers' support that forced Vargas to go even further in emphasizing his commitment to working-class interests. The avoidance of fratricidal divisions among workers had a powerful impact on mass consciousness during these crucial months. The lines of division were not drawn between workers of different outlooks but between workers and industrial employers with their conservative middle-class allies. This reinforced the workers' sense of a common identity and united and invigorated their movement in ABC.

This dynamic of mass opinion among the workers holds the key to understanding the political crystallization that took place in ABC in 1945-1946. Support for Getúlio, whether grudging or enthusiastic, served as the single most important defining point of popular sentiment—as shown by the PTB's 43 percent share of the total vote in the most industrialized districts of Santo André and São Caetano. Yet even Getúlio, it must be emphasized, did not control these working-class voters. Even though 63 percent of ABC's voters voted for Dutra, fully 28 percent ignored Getúlio's well-publicized appeals by voting for a PCB presidential candidate in 1945 who had no chance of being elected.

Clearly, many workers, despite enthusiasm for Getúlio, were fully capable of making their own decisions.

It would be easy, perhaps, to see these 7,000 PCB votes for Fiuza as a protest by class-conscious workers against the demagoguery of the former dictator Vargas. Although an expression of dislike for Vargas by some, the PCB presidential vote was for most the strongest possible protest against Vargas's ouster by Dutra and the military. Thus even the PCB's share of ABC's vote was shaped by Getúlio's popular appeal, as even Communists grudgingly admitted at the time. Ironically, the PCB voter may well have been the strongest getulista in 1945.

To achieve their goals, both Getúlio Vargas and Luis Carlos Prestes would have to come to terms with these currents of mass consciousness which they had not created and did not control, despite the charges of their conservative opponents. Indeed the striking labor rhetoric of these two leaders would have been meaningless without a working class ready to respond to their message of struggle. While decisively influenced by Vargas and Prestes, these new working-class voters were already demonstrating that they were far from being automatic followers simply manipulated from above.

THE DYNAMICS OF WORKING-CLASS POLITICAL OPINION: TRABALHISMO AND COMMUNISM

Enjoying massive working-class support, Getúlio's PTB should easily have established itself in a dominant position in ABC's political and trade-union affairs. Yet the PTB organization was weak in postwar ABC and support for organized *trabalhismo* would consistently decline over the next two years vis-à-vis the PCB. Why did this occur and what did it imply about working-class sentiment? (Benevides, 1989).

First, we must put aside the idea that the PTB-PCB split coincided with a simple distinction between migrants and "class conscious" second generation industrial workers. The collective biography of ABC's Communist militants of this period reflects the same demographic reality to be found in marriage samples and factory payrolls; the majority of ABC's industrial working class was from the paulista countryside. Thus the evidence does not bear out the established view that, until recently, linked workers of rural origin exclusively to populist and not class forms of political mobilization.²

The populist PTB's crucial weakness was conceptual and organizational. While Getúlio's popularity guaranteed the PTB the largest bloc of votes in 1945, mass getulista sentiment required organization in order to become an effective, sustained force in ABC's political and trade-union life. Vargas had spent much of 1945 urging Brazil's laboring classes to involve themselves in politics. His appeal was mobilizational, yet the getulistas lacked an efficient vehicle to give shape to this popular participation. The open political conditions of 1945 exacerbated the PTB's problems since there could be no *a priori* elimination of potential competitors. As Ricardo Maranhão has pointed out, the result was a curious paradox: The PTB was weak at the grass roots, in ABC and elsewhere, although it represented the broadest current of working-class opinion (Maranhão, 1979).

The PTB's difficulties flowed from its mix of daring populist appeals with a style of mobilization and organization still shaped by traditional Brazilian politics. Innovative in the choice of themes, targeted audience, and the creative use of the new medium, radio, the PTB still relied on older techniques of bureaucratic patronage to build its new "popular" party. The builders of the PTB came from a tradition of top-down politics in which parties were fictions without lives of their own at the local level. Yet such traditional patronage chains broke down at the local level where the party had to connect with the workers. In ABC this problem was worsened by the control of the local PTB by middle-class politicians from the old school who had no interest in connecting the PTB with even its union supporters.

Getúlio's massive popular support was not, therefore, translated into an effective organization that could shape the inchoate protest of ABC's thousands of workers. The effective mobilization of ABC workers' desire for change fell to the PCB who helped to give organizational expression, at the grass-roots level, to the popular participation encouraged by Vargas in mid-1945.

Under the leadership of Luis Carlos Prestes, the PCB benefited from a better understanding of the demands of mass politics in the new, urban, political arena. While lacking bureaucratic and monetary resources, the Communists emerged as the heart of a whirlwind of grass-roots activity conceived on a participatory basis. In the ABC community, the PCB created women's organizations and dozens of neighborhood committees (Comitês Democráticos Progresistas, or CDPs) that agitated for local improvements while also engaging in more specifically political activities (French with Pedersen, 1989).

At the same time, the PCB also linked this innovative style of community politics with trade-union work, centered in the workplace. Gaining strength among an emerging group of trade-union activists and leaders in ABC, the PCB successfully promoted itself as the “party of labor” in 1945. Nominating the local president of Santo André’s metalworkers, the PCB candidate Euclides Savietto was almost elected federal deputy with 6,000 of the 6,800 PCB votes for federal deputy in Santo André and São Caetano—far exceeding the votes of any other candidate in ABC. This PCB tie to the unions was the foundation of its long-term growth in ABC.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE POSTWAR LABOR MOVEMENT: LEFT, RIGHT, AND CENTER

Unlike earlier studies, this essay argues that the Brazilian trade-union movement played a crucial role in determining the direction of working-class politics in 1946-1947.³ Yet the nature of postwar trade unionism has been obscured by an excessive preoccupation with the legalisms of Getúlio’s paternalistic and authoritarian *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* (CLT) of 1943. Scholars have long pointed to the survival of the dictatorship’s “corporatist trade-union legislation” into the postwar democratic order as the most striking feature of 1945-1946 (Weffort, 1972, 1973; Maranhão, 1979; Loyola, 1980; Füchtner, 1980).

Writing far from the factory gate, most commentators have presented the state-linked labor structure largely as a form of “capitalist control” of the working class in the interests of “capitalist accumulation” (Lowy, 1980; Barbosa Alves, 1984; Bernardo, 1982; Werneck Vianna, 1976). Focusing exclusively on the repressive aspects of the labor relations system, they have overlooked the long-standing employer opposition to even the most controlled forms of union organization. Brazilian industrialists, confident of their ability to control their workers, rejected the intervention of any outside forces that might alter the prevailing balance of power.

The employers’ long-standing suspicion of state intervention, even under a dictatorial regime, was amply confirmed by the labor relations impact of Getúlio’s search for a popular base of support after 1942. Eager to utilize the unions as part of his transition strategy, Vargas encouraged union membership and lessened the repression of worker

activists after 1942. This loosening of control created the space within which the leadership of a future, more militant, unionism could evolve in industrial areas like ABC.

The prevailing emphasis on formal corporatist structures has blinded observers to the evolution of Brazilian trade unionism prior to 1945. Although defined by law as "organs of collaboration," the legal trade unions existed only because of the objective clash of interests between wage earners and their employers. Even under the Estado Novo, local unions increasingly attracted discontented workers eager to do something, within the possibilities of the moment, about the grievances of their factory, industry, or class. Although prevented from attaining mass memberships, ABC's unions did develop an extensive network of hundreds of activists within the local factories between 1942 and 1945.

It is impossible to understand postwar developments without examining this emerging core of working-class activists (a group which the anarchists of earlier days had called "militant minorities"). The initial decision to become a union member already made the incipient activist different from the average worker. Once actively involved, the unionist ran a serious risk of reprisal by the employer, if not the government. These punitive sanctions against those who stood up for the workers' rights made such frontline local posts of little interest to ambitious and unscrupulous office seekers (J. Rodrigues, 1979).

This new group of activist workers did not reject Vargas; they perceived the positive elements of his new direction. Responding enthusiastically to his populist appeals, they welcomed the loosening of repressive control over unions in mid-1945 (such as ending the requirement of police attendance at union meetings). Their *getulismo* strengthened their confidence and encouraged them to push harder as conditions improved with the end of the Estado Novo. Nothing, after all, is achieved without struggle, they thought, and even Getúlio needed help in order to defeat labor's many enemies.

While ABC's handful of veteran Communists might find them naïve, these incipient activists were expressing the very illusions that characterized the mass mood of their fellow workers. While open to "manipulation" by the government of Vargas, they did so out of a sincere belief that they were advancing the workers' interests. Employer opposition to the legal trade unionism promoted by Vargas reinforced their willingness to accept what their ally Getúlio said at face value. Yet these emerging unionists were sincerely concerned about resolving the griev-

ances of their fellow workers, even if uncertain as to how to go about it in mid-1945.

Lacking self-proclaimed labels, this amorphous group encompassed a range of implicit views and outlooks in political terms. Easily ignored by contemporary polemicists and later scholars, they have been subsumed under a two-camp characterization of trade-union leaders as either class-conscious radicals, like the Communists, or *pelegos*, a derogatory term for union "sellouts" (the term derived from the word for the blanket that protects the horse from the rider's saddle). To understand postwar unionism, we must go beyond this simple dichotomy that lumps all nonradicals into one negative reference group.

This largely unorganized grouping is best understood if it is characterized as the labor center, distinct from the labor left or the labor right (the classic *pelegos*). The existence of these center forces, if not the label, has been noted in several recent studies. Describing postwar unions in Juiz de Fora (Minas Gerais), Loyola has insisted that these non-Communist leaders, "although *getulistas* and *janguistas*," were not *pelegos* and are best called union independents (Loyola, 1980; Grossi, 1981).

Yet the labor center was neither static nor monolithic. Encompassing a variety of perspectives, the postwar political and trade-union experiences of these activists resulted in a process of political crystallization in late 1945 and early 1946 that determined the direction of the postwar trade-union movement. The prevalence of naïvely progovernment views was decisively undermined when the ouster of Vargas in October 1945 was followed by the openly antilabor policies of President Dutra.

ABC's handful of Communists were ideally situated to benefit from the process of political definition undergone by these activist workers. Long active in the unions, PCB activists had established their credibility with this center group through close cooperation in union affairs and during the *queremista* movement of 1945. Moreover, labor activists of any sort were far more likely than a rank-and-file worker to perceive a gap between Getúlio's promises and reality. Every day these unionists confronted the practical obstacles that stood in the way of resolving the workers' problems—even under the world's "most advanced labor legislation."

Coming into contact with Communists whose union participation had a prior political rationale, these activist-workers became the PCB's natural recruiting ground. While only a minority of ABC trade unionists became communists, the PCB and the broader labor left of which it was

a part played a leading role within the local trade-union movement. Moreover, many union activists and workers who did not join the PCB nonetheless voted for the PCB presidential candidate Fiuza as a protest against Dutra. Others welcomed the PCB candidacy of the metalworkers' union president Euclides Savietto as an affirmation of a shared trade-union consciousness.

While the PCB benefited from its union ties, Getúlio's PTB once again suffered the negative impact of the party's dependence upon coronelistic patronage techniques. Mobilizing support from the top down, the PTB tied its fate in the trade-union movement to a narrow stratum of top union functionaries that comprised the main base for the labor right, the pelegos. The mass influence of these holders of bureaucratic middle-level union posts, even when they were of working-class origin, was doubtful at best.

The PTB's cadre of leading unionists could have worked to consolidate getulista union supporters by operating within the broader currents of postwar labor. Instead, the labor right sought to pit the PTB and Getúlio's prestige against the majority of the union movement, including the centrist getulistas. Nurtured under the noncompetitive conditions of the *Estado Novo*, this stratum of functionaries feared that the new ferment in labor would cost them their salaried positions. Indeed, rightist PTB unionists like Diocleciano de Cavalcanti perceived such local getulista unionists as a greater threat to their positions than even actual Communists.

By incorporating such rightist labor figures into their party's structure at the national and state level, the PTB weakened its own influence within the labor movement. Union getulismo in ABC was not, after all, limited to the isolated rightist PTB leadership of Henrique Polleto in the textile workers' union; even the leftist metalworkers' leadership contained many enthusiastic getulistas. In forcing a choice, the labor right isolated itself and the PTB from those centrist getulista sympathizers.⁴

The labor right's selfish and divisive policies polarized a labor movement that sought, above all else, to gather and unite its forces in order to better serve the workers' interests. If the repressive *Estado Novo* era dictated caution, the "new, more favorable conditions" prevalent after mid-1945 were explicitly cited as the spur to a bolder and more ambitious trade unionism. Having won the allegiance of an activist minority, most of ABC's unions set out in mid-1945 to expand their ranks by recruiting and involving a larger circle of workers.

The policy differences between the labor right and the emerging left-center coalition that prevailed in most of ABC's unions was already clear in 1945. The rightist PTB leadership of the textile workers' union followed the policies that have come to be associated with the term *peleguismo*. While the textile union sought an increase in union dues, other ABC unions declared dues amnesties, abolished entrance fees, and sought to encourage involvement even by those who had not yet joined. While the textile workers held few general meetings, ABC's other unions organized dozens of general assemblies and separate factory meetings, open to members and nonmembers, to discuss demands to be presented to employers in their *dissídios coletivos* (labor court procedure for collective bargaining).

While the local textile union fits our notion of a bureaucratic unionism dependent on the Ministry of Labor, the predominant union leadership in ABC was rank-and-file oriented, alive with new ideas, and eager to break away from government restrictions on its freedom of action. Thus the evidence from ABC does not support Weffort's notion of an excessively politicized, denatured "populist trade unionism" in the postwar years (Weffort, 1973).

The evolution of postwar trade unionism was also closely related to the outlook and consciousness of its working-class constituency. Their recruitment efforts benefited from Vargas's encouragement of union membership while talk of workers' rights and popular participation facilitated labor mobilization. While the workers' mood cannot properly be called "extremely radical," their militancy, born of hope and illusion, had been strengthened by both their real and perceived electoral victories in December 1945 (Harding, 1973).⁵

Characterized by a general mood of protest and expectation, workers responded enthusiastically to the innovative mobilizational initiatives of the new left-center trade-union leaderships (Maranhão, 1979). The result was a general strike movement in February and March 1946 that involved, at its height, 100,000 workers in the metropolitan São Paulo region. In ABC, 9,000 workers, a fifth of the total work force, joined this spontaneous upsurge of large-scale industrial militancy.

A baptism of fire for the new unionists, the strike movement led to the definitive consolidation of the left-center political complexion of the mainstream of the postwar union movement. Eager to curry favor with the employers and the government, the rightist leaders at all levels had publicly opposed and sabotaged the strikes. In doing so, the right

had betrayed obvious workers' interests that mattered a great deal to the average union activist.

The coalition nature of this postwar union upsurge has often been overlooked by past observers. Many talked of the new opportunities for communist "infiltration" created by the connivance of Vargas and the legalization of the PCB (Alexander, 1957, 1965; Skidmore, 1967). Others have assumed a general PCB predominance which was, in fact, far from a reality in most union leaderships (Maranhão, 1979). The first view overlooks the Communist presence in union leadership between 1942 and 1945. The latter argument ignores the clear evidence that the effectiveness of PCB leadership stemmed from its ability to win over some noncommunist unionists while working with other centrist forces within the unions.

Thus the new trade unionism was the product of a broad coalition of the left and center, of Communists and *getulistas*, which isolated the **peleguista** current of upper-level trade-union functionaries. This left-center trade-union movement emerged from the strikes with a greatly enhanced credibility and more of a mass membership. It held the key to the political success of São Paulo's Communist Party between 1946 and 1947, when compared to the PTB, as many active unionists and workers came to rely on the PCB as the party of labor.⁶ This would lead to the election of a PCB trade unionist as ABC's only state deputy in January 1947 and to a PCB sweep of the mayoral and city council elections in Santo André in November 1947.

WORKERS AND POPULISM

The birth of the Brazilian Populist Republic in 1945-1946 has been incorrectly seen as merely a change in the juridical forms of elite rule in Brazil. In examining the transition from dictatorship to electoral politics, scholars have emphasized the paternalistic and authoritarian continuities with the Estado Novo regime and the absence of significant or independent popular input or mobilization. Having failed to understand the nature of Getúlio Vargas's populist gamble in 1945, scholars have overlooked the dramatic and significant role that Brazilian workers played in their first major foray into electoral politics on a mass scale.

This essay also challenges the prevailing consensus on Brazilian workers and populism which emphasizes manipulation of workers by a

charismatic personality, by a paternalistic state, or by union bureaucracies. In examining the ties between populist leaders and workers, scholars have long held that populist appeals, such as Vargas's in 1945, undermine class consciousness and are uniformly and inherently demobilizing for workers. My research on the postwar political conjuncture demonstrates, however, that such populist appeals can actually serve to foster, deepen, and consolidate class consciousness among Brazilian industrial workers.

This essay has also shown how popular enthusiasm for Getúlio Vargas in 1945, which led to support for the PTB and other candidates that Vargas favored, could also lead to mass working-class support for the more radical, leftist alternative represented by Luís Carlos Prestes and the Communist Party. More important still, working-class political behavior is shown to possess a degree of autonomy that in turn shaped the politics of leaders such as Vargas and Prestes.

While workers remained overwhelmingly Getulista, Vargas's Labor Party (PTB) failed to take root in industrial areas such as ABC because opportunistic PTB party and union leaders failed to provide the effective organization needed to shape the workers' growing desire for political, community, and trade-union participation. By contrast, the Communist Party gained strength between 1945 and 1947 precisely because its grass-roots leaders and activists adapted to working-class needs and opinions and provided the organizational forms needed to advance workers' interests.

Finally, this essay demonstrates that the postwar Brazilian labor movement should not be dismissed as an ineffectual creation of the corporatist state. The decision of worker activists to operate within the trade-union structures legally sanctioned by the state did not automatically lead, as has long been assumed, to a denatured form of bureaucratic and unrepresentative unionism, *peleguismo*, that converted unions into a rubber stamp for a government eager to control workers' struggles.

Indeed the Brazilian labor movement that emerged from the Estado Novo was not in fact dominated by the so-called *pelegos* or labor right. The internal politics of postwar labor was marked by a complicated interplay between the minority labor right, the numerically dominant labor center, and a growing labor left represented by the Communist Party. The key to the left-center political complexion of the postwar labor movement lay precisely in the trajectory of this evolving if

amorphous labor center that has been consistently overlooked or misunderstood in the past.

Was this postwar Brazilian outcome inevitable, a natural expression of the workers' inherent class consciousness? In fact, it would be a serious mistake to underplay the fluidity of the political alignments among Brazilian workers and unionists. Indeed the possibility of a different outcome, a different direction of labor, is suggested by even a cursory comparison of Brazil and Argentina during 1945-1946.

The comparative possibilities are fascinating. For one thing, we can easily test the impact of the very different policies toward populism adopted by the Argentine Communists in 1945 who eschewed any cooperation with Perón—a policy that seemed foolish to Luis Carlos Prestes in 1945 (Neruda, 1978). Unlike its weaker Brazilian counterpart, the Argentine Communist Party thus went down to humiliating defeat with the motley “democratic opposition” to Perón, rejected by the workers they sought to lead.

Subsequent Argentine developments suggest that the left-center alliance that predominated in the Brazilian workers' movement could have been easily prevented if Vargas had remained in power after 1945. Argentina's populist president Juan Perón very quickly outflanked the remnants of independent labor radicalism, including the Communists, in 1946-1947. While making free use of the government's powers of repression and intervention, the key to the “Peronization of Argentine labor” lay not in coercion but in the Peronist sympathies of an emerging core of center trade unionists much like those in ABC. Thus Vargas's failure to retain power between 1946 and 1950 contributed decisively to the far less complete domination of Brazilian labor by *trabalhismo* than was achieved by Peronism within the Argentine labor movement.

While such counterfactual speculation knows no bounds, it can serve to restore the conjunctural to its place in historical explanation of Latin American workers and populism. By discarding the sense that every outcome in a given country is “natural,” such cross-national comparison can help us establish causal hypotheses to explain the radically different outcomes of similar sociopolitical processes. In so doing, we can return to Latin American workers the full complexity of their struggle to advance their interests through trade-union and political action.

NOTES

1. This article summarizes conclusions reached on the basis of oral history interviews and extensive research in contemporary Brazilian newspapers, municipal and electoral court archives, and U.S. Embassy and consular records. For a fuller discussion and relevant documentation, consult chapters six and seven in my Yale University dissertation (French, 1985).

2. This standard view derived from a misinterpretation of a famous article by Azis Simão. Acknowledging rural migrant support for both the PCB and PTB, Simão actually made far finer distinctions among rural migrants: Between those who came to the capital before the war and the newcomers between 1940 and 1946 (Simão 1956).

3. In his classic work, José Albertino Rodrigues argued that unions in the immediate postwar years did not participate in politics in an "active" and "organic" manner. He contrasted the postwar period, said to be characterized by individual party recruitment of union leaders, with the developments of the 1950s. The evidence, from ABC at least, suggests that unions were more important to political mobilization in 1946-1947 than they were at any later point in the populist republic (J. Rodrigues, 1979).

4. An understanding of the tripartite political division within labor's leadership has very practical applications for those interested in studying union politics. An even more finely grained analysis can be reached by recognizing that the labor center itself contained a spectrum of views that varied from union to union. It is possible in ABC to distinguish between the more cautious center forces who, although allied with a weaker left within their unions, still sought to straddle left and right and those center unionists who enthusiastically embraced unity with the left. Thus, we can distinguish between center-left trade unions in ABC, such as the rubber and furniture workers, and *left-center* organizations, such as the local chemical and metalworkers' unions, where the left was the leading force in the leadership.

5. Even the election of the conservative military man Dutra as president in 1945 was seen by many workers, at that time at least, as a victory for Getúlio Vargas and hence themselves. Indeed the combination of strong popular support for both Vargas and the Communists in December 1945 led the new president to resist efforts to cancel Vargas's political rights, as urged by many civilian and military anti-getulistas. Analyzing the election results, the Dutra administration recognized that such an action would strengthen the PCB and leftist "extremism." Thus, the decision of many getulista workers' to vote for the PCB in 1945, in defiance of Vargas's appeal, served to assure Vargas's legal right to run for and be elected to the presidency in 1950.

6. This tendency played a major role in the outcome of the next major postwar elections of January 1947 when Adhemar de Barros was elected governor of São Paulo with PCB and PTB support (French, 1988).

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Roger Burbach Recovery Fund

As readers may know, Roger Burbach, director of the Center for the Study of the Americas (CENSA) in Berkeley, suffered serious injuries while on a working trip to Nicaragua. The swimming accident fractured his facial bones, neck and vertebrae and left him paralyzed from the chest down. Three non-profit organizations with which Roger has worked over the years (Pacific News Service, Neighbor-to-Neighbor and the Institute for Food and Development Policy) have established a fund to support CENSA and assist Roger's family during his period of rehabilitation. The editors of *Latin American Perspectives* join Roger's many friends and colleagues in wishing him a speedy and complete recovery, and we encourage readers to contribute to this special fund. Checks made out to CENSA are tax-deductible and may be mailed to CENSA, 2288 Fulton, #103, Berkeley, CA 94704.