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Mina de Morro Velho: A Extração do Homem. Uma História de Experiência Operária by Yonne de Souza Grossi

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but scholars who hope to mine police files for previously undiscovered facts will not be able to use this anthology in that way.

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#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Hartmut Keil and Heinz Ickstadt, "Elemente einer deutscher Arbeiterkultur in Chicago zwischen 1880 und 1890," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 5 (1979), Heft 1, 103-124.

Yonne de Souza Grossi, *Mina de Morro Velho: A Extração do Homem. Uma História de Experiência Operaria*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1981.

Yonne de Souza Grossi's study of a Brazilian gold mining community from 1932 to 1964 breaks with the abstract schemas and over-generalizations that have too often obscured our understanding of Brazilian working class life and history. Using a systematic oral history methodology, Grossi has brought us a richly nuanced and detailed view, "from the inside," of the work, aspirations and struggles of the 5,000 to 8,000 workers of the "Morro Velho" gold mine located in Nova Lima, Minas Gerais.

The Morro Velho mine, still in operation today, has a long history stretching back to its initiation in 1834 by the Saint John d'El Rey Mining Company, a British firm which remained in control until 1960. Slaves and free Brazilians made up the labor force prior to the advent of the First Republic in 1889. Their places were taken in the following decades by immigrants, especially Spaniards. By the 1930s, when the shafts reached a depth of 2,543 meters (the deepest in the world at the time), the mine recruited its thousands of workers almost exclusively from the rural areas of Minas Gerais. Although labor unrest was not unknown earlier, it was only in the thirties and forties that the mine's labor force achieved the degree of unity and organization necessary to enable it to contest company power in any serious or organized way.

*Mina de Morro Velho*, based on 42 interviews and 164 oral histories, examines the history of Morro Velho's workers' movement from the point of view of miners of different outlooks and levels of participation as well as supervisors and non-working-class elements. The author, who also included sixteen useful photographs, takes special care to examine this remarkable material carefully, judging it critically in the light of the surviving written record.

Grossi begins her study by taking us into the underground, into the harsh environment where the miners spent ten hours a day. The author, sketching out the hierarchy of occupations and brutal dynamics of work in the mine, makes clear the obstacles that stood in the way of the formation of the workers' movement in Nova Lima. Among them were company policies designed to maximize output by pitting teams of "carreiros" against each other in a never-ending competition. *Carreiros* were the most numerous, exploited and vulnerable group of underground workers, "animals with two feet" who filled the wagons and pushed them to the shaft. They were organized in teams of three, composed of two weaker men who were, in turn, often driven by the third stronger member, a *macho* or "real man."

The Company made further use of common *machista* cultural patterns by manipulating symbols of male virility. The mine's *feitores* (foremen) were chosen from among the ranks of those *carreiros* who had shown the greatest aggressiveness and willingness to use even physical force on behalf of the drive for production.

*Mina de Morro Velho* makes us understand the enormous power and advantages the Company held, its position strengthened by its comprehensive domination of the community. The mine was the only source of employment in Nova Lima and even housing was company-owned, ceded to workers at a symbolic price to help fix a labor force in the city. There was also a company-sanctioned store which, starting in the nineteenth century, sold to the miners on credit while discounting what was due from their pay checks.

The foundation of a union was the initial goal of a small group of activist miners who got together in the early thirties. In 1934, on the anniversary of the freeing of Brazil's slaves, Morro Velho's union was founded and grew rapidly to several thousand members. Receiving legal recognition, the union's initial program was modest given the virulence of the company's opposition to unionization. With an emphasis on rank and file involvement, the union's leaders sought to solidify miners' support by winning enforcement of the new national legislation on vacations and pensions. Above all, they sought to encourage a deepening sense of solidarity among the miners and a sense of participation in the regional and national labor movement.

At the same time, the power to reward and punish gave the Company a continuing basis of support among some of the miners even as the workers' movement gained in unity and strength. In the thirties, the mine's management encouraged the formation of a dual union, subsequently absorbed by its rival, with the minority of pro-company workers remaining a factor within the union. In the crisis period of the late 1940s, the Company organized a parallel association of miners which provided a mass for maneuvers. Under the vigorous leadership of the local priest, pro-company workers were mobilized for physical confrontations with the independent miners' movement.

Nor was the Company at a loss for allies in the state and federal governments. For almost 100 years, the Saint John d'El Rey's role as a powerful English enterprise that paid substantial, if under-reported, tax revenues had guaranteed the automatic and unanimous backing of a succession of Brazilian governments. Even after the

Revolution of 1930, which introduced the 15-year rule of Getúlio Vargas, the federal government showed a remarkable tolerance of the Company's defiance of its newly enacted and much publicized labor and social legislation. In addition, the Company was able, in the late forties, to fully mobilize the state police, the Ministry of Labor and the national judiciary in its efforts to destroy the communist-led miners' movement of Nova Lima.

Yet at the same time, Grossi also shows us the weaknesses of the Company's position and sheds much light on the nature of government/employer/labor relations during the Vargas era. The legislation enacted to legalize and theoretically protect unions, linking them to the state, was not, it is clear, a gift by the government to facilitate the formation of strong, independent or autonomous unions. Yet the experience of Morro Velho shows that such protection, even if fragile, was a new factor that could provide important defensive cover for the workers' movement in the face of unrelenting employer hostility—as happened in 1936 when the seventeen founders of the union were fired.

The Vargas labor and social legislation was resisted by the mine's management as an infringement on its power and pocketbook. On the other hand, miners quickly learned that one could not rely on the government to enforce the law unless there was prolonged and consistent pressure from the union in alliance with others outside the direct sphere of worker/company relations. Grossi shows how the workers used the labor legislation as an opening wedge to aid in the conquest of their demands. For example, the Vargas labor code of 1943 (CLT) authorized the establishment of committees to prevent accidents, which the union used with some success in Nova Lima to make the workplace a somewhat less hellish experience.

Nova Lima's miners and their union were also quick to take advantage of the growing nationalist sensitivities of the era. They pointed to the Company's arrogant refusal to hire Brazilians as administrators and supervisors, their English personnel living a life apart of self-imposed segregation in Nova Lima. The English enterprise, they said, acted as if it were a sovereign entity, casually defying the laws of the land and cheating the government out of needed tax revenues.

Grossi also points to other potential limits on the Company's power. The *carreiros*, for example, had the potential power, more than any other group of workers, to bring the mine's production to a complete halt. Even the Company's domination of the community revealed an important weakness. As one miner put it, aside from the English quarter, all the rest of Nova Lima "was ours; a city made by us; a city made for us, the miners of Morro Velho; thousands of active workers plus their dependents." A firm basis was thus laid for a cohesion in family and social life which helped merge the struggles in the mine with those in the community.

Returning from work, the Morro Velho miner found solace and refuge in the quiet and cleanliness of his home, in his family ties and in the dense sociability of the bars and the streets. The dangerous nature of his work prompted the miner, once home, to talk over the day's events with his wife, whose involvement with the mine led to the popular expression, "talking with the wife of a miner is talking with a miner." Thus his wife's economic dependency, given the lack of possible jobs outside

the home, did not lead to social and political passivity. The mobilization of women became a tradition in Nova Lima, reflected in the organization of street committees, in the monitoring of food prices, and in the community's struggle against the Company store.

Yonne de Souza Grossi stresses the obstacles that stood in the way of establishing the solidarity necessary for collective action among the miners of Morro Velho. Such solidarity, she emphasizes, did not emerge spontaneously from the objective realities of oppression and exploitation in the mine. Nor did the merger of class and community occur automatically as a result of Nova Lima's status as an "isolated industrial community." Rather, it was human agency, organized political practice that transformed the inchoate discontent and revolt of Morro Velho's divided miners into a conscious, organized and *collective* response capable of challenging the vast power of the Saint John d'El Rey Mining Company.

The level of trust the author established with her informants provides us with an extraordinary opportunity to pierce the veil and understand in detail the subterranean process by which a leadership was formed and consolidated among Morro Velho's miners.

Communist Party (PCB) activities had begun in 1932 when three organizers were sent to the city. Grossi traces it step by step, through the slow, invisible and dangerous work of the next decade which saw the formation of the union and the first struggles against the Company, to its high point during the PCB's brief legality from 1945 to 1947, when it had over a thousand members in Nova Lima. In 1947, despite the government's decision to outlaw it once again, the PCB elected the vice-mayor, the justice of the peace and four miners as city councilmen.

Grossi helps us grasp what Communism meant for these miners, allowing us to escape from our general and often abstract notions. The PCB in Nova Lima was, she shows, an expression of its miners, who were often more sensible and well-grounded in their judgments than the Party's state leadership. The book provides us with a wealth of revealing detail on the PCB's organization among the workers. We come to understand the responsibilities of the municipal committee, how trade-union and community work were coordinated, and how fundraising and press distribution were handled. Political education required special methods given the low level of literacy and schooling among the miners.

Grossi's informants talk about recruiting and the special, indeed predominant, role played by more skilled miners, such as plumbers and electricians, who had a certain degree of stability and protection which the *carreiros* lacked. They also let us hear the harried voice of the organizer discussing the problems posed by the varying levels of combativity among the miners or the difficulties faced in attempting to politicize the miner's daily bread and butter conflicts with the company.

The final section of *Mina de Morro Velho* discusses the nature of union activity from 1950 to 1964. The early Cold War years had seen a most unequal contest between the workers' movement in Nova Lima and the Saint John d'El Rey Mining Company and its allies on all levels. There was government intervention in the union, the assassination of William Dias Gomes, a miner and PCB city Coun-

cilman, the unsolved murder of another Party activist, as well as the firing of 51 Communist miners.

1950 thus marked an important moment of transition in the history of the workers' movement in Morro Velho. Grossi gives us a fascinating account of the highly mobilized rank-and-file unionism practiced in Morro Velho during this period. Union Presidents continued to work in the mine during their term of office, which was not required by the labor legislation. Turnover in union leadership was also encouraged as was the training of activists in union commissions organized for each sector of workers. These commissions, formed during negotiations with the Company, aided in formulating demands dealing with each group's special needs and served to involve and mobilize the membership and their families.

The repression and subsequent decline of Communist influence had opened the way for the emergence of other leaderships among the miners. Grossi, having taken care not to confuse a leadership with the class, examines the emergence of new leaders in the union, some linked to a progressive Catholic position. She also demonstrates how the formative years from 1932 to 1950, in which these non-communist leaders were also participants, had created enduring traditions of struggle and organization among Morro Velho's miners.

The book's special contribution to Brazilian and Latin American labor history lies in the degree to which it penetrates the complicated internal dynamics that linked leadership, the union and the class in the case of Nova Lima. It is the highest of tributes to say that it speaks with the voice of its informants. Indeed, this study brims with the matter-of-fact wisdom of several generations of militant miners.

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