

BRAZIL

Answering the Call

by Marcel Paret

In 2002, the celebrated union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was elected president of Brazil, bringing the Workers' Party (PT) to power. This victory raised important questions for Brazil's labor movement: How would workers respond? Would they sit back and wait passively for the new government to deliver? Or would they continue to challenge the state and press for political and economic change?

Sociology professor Ruy Braga of the Universidade de São Paulo offers a third possibility. During Lula's presidency (2003-10), the working-class was a key component of government support. They backed Lula's reelection in 2006 and recognized his contribution to increased living standards. But workers were far from passive. Working-class consciousness was palpable and manifested in ongoing strike activity. Workers supported the state while continuing to press for political and economic change.

Braga's conclusions are based on a study of the telemarketing industry, which spanned six of Lula's eight years at the helm of the Brazilian state (2003-08). The telemarketing industry exploded during this period, employing 1.2 million operators by 2010. Braga conducted field research in two of the largest telemarketing businesses in São Paulo, Brazil's most populous city, and in two telemarketing unions. The study included a survey given to over 300 workers as well as participant observation of work activities and interviews with workers, managers and union officials.

Telemarketing office jobs might appear to be comfortably white collar, but in reality, they are poorly compensated and working conditions are less than ideal. Brazilian "teleoperators" earn between \$3,400 and \$4,500 a year, comparable to housekeepers and markedly less than in other countries. Similar workers make three times as much in South Africa and 10 times as much in the United States. Long hours, limited breaks and repetitive computer work also have detrimental effects. Workers reported physical fatigue, dizziness, repetitive stress injuries, tendonitis, depression, vocal chord damage and even urinary tract infections caused by bathroom deprivation. These effects, Braga points out, must be viewed in the context of a broader trend of declining work conditions under Lula's government. Between 2003 and 2008, the number of "work-related accidents" increased from roughly 400,000 to over 700,000 per year.

Despite these deteriorating conditions, support for Lula remained significant among both trade-union leaders and rank-and-file activists. Support was justified by comparing Lula to his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, whose policies were viewed as less favorable to labor. Also important were the state resources, such as the Worker's Relief Fund, which funded trade union development and educational programs. The labor movement thus remained supportive of Lula despite his mixed track record. It is noteworthy that a 2008 "Telemarketing Law," which protects consumers but does little for workers, did not provoke a single protest.

Another reason why telemarketing workers have failed to pressure the state is the weakness of their unions. While 70 percent of telemarketers are covered by collective bargaining agreements, unions in the industry face a number of organizing challenges. The prevalence of temporary work contracts is among the most important of these obstacles. Temporary contracts result in extremely high turnover rates (42 percent per year) and put more power in the hands of employers, who can easily terminate actively involved union members by not renewing their contracts.

Another defining characteristic of the telemarketing industry is that the workforce is dominated by the most underprivileged workers. The majority are young, black women, many of whom are the sole breadwinners in their families. Braga notes that employers purposely hire single mothers, which in turn has "a very strong disciplinary effect." There are also a substantial number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transvestite, transsexual and transgender (LGBT) workers who have found the telemarketing industry, with its relative anonymity, to be a refuge against discrimination in the broader labor market.

While many telemarketers have little experience with labor politics, the study nonetheless revealed evidence of militant working-class consciousness. While appreciating their jobs, the workers also expressed dissatisfaction with their wages and working conditions. They were not content to wait for the state to deliver. Despite their lack of political experience, workers began to mobilize in the middle of the 2000s. Strikes began to occur, year after year, registering demands for profit-sharing, childcare, higher wages and shorter working hours, among other things.

Braga rejects the idea that these low-wage workers are simply passive recipients of the Lula state. He also



Photo by Andre Fenner/Associated Press.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his successor, Dilma Rousseff, both represent the Worker's Party (PT).

argues that their mobilizations are not simply a product of union leadership. He believes they “have started to form an embryo of collective consciousness, strong enough to guarantee some important steps on the path to union self-organization.” In other words, the Lula victory did not make the working class defensive or passive: working-class resistance is alive in Brazil.

One of the study's most inspiring discoveries was the evidence of ties being built between this emerging labor movement and non-labor social movements. Due to the prevalence of black women and LGBT workers, the telemarketing union Sinratel has turned to alternative forms of solidarity along the lines of gender, race and sexuality. One of the most notable expressions of this solidarity is the union's participation in the São Paulo LGBT Pride Parade. Sinratel is one of the only unions or professional associations that is consistently involved in the event. In turn, many of the LGBT workers have begun to participate in the labor movement as active rank-and-file members.

Braga hopes that social movement alliances will reignite the labor vibrancy of the 1970s and 1980s. It was, indeed, the inclusiveness of this earlier unionism that made the Brazilian labor movement so successful. But the benefits of an outward-looking unionism are not limited

to Brazil or even to Latin America or developing countries. Inclusive, social movement unionism helped to usher out authoritarian regimes in countries such as Korea and South Africa. Similarly, immigrant workers are remaking the labor movement in the United States. Unions have abandoned their hostility to non-citizen workers and become actively engaged in citizenship struggles. The potential of the labor-immigrant alliance was illustrated by the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides in 2003 and the massive protests for immigrant rights that captured the nation's attention in 2006.

These examples provide a glimpse of the potential in Brazil. The organizing successes in the telemarketing industry are only a beginning or, as Braga puts it, an “embryo.” But if the labor movement continues to be inclusive and outward-looking, the results are likely to be significant. For those who are interested in working-class politics, the situation in Brazil requires close attention.

Ruy Braga is a professor in the Department of Sociology at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP). He spoke for CLAS on April 4, 2011.

Marcel Paret is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at UC Berkeley.