

**A CATEGORY IN TRANSFORMATION: CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES
ACROSS GENERATIONS OF METALWORKERS IN THE ABC REGION**

**UMA CATEGORIA EM TRANSFORMAÇÃO: MUDANÇAS E PERMANÊNCIAS
ENTRE GERAÇÕES DE METALÚRGICOS DO ABC**

**UNA CATEGORÍA EN TRANSFORMACIÓN: CAMBIOS Y PERMANENCIAS ENTRE
GENERACIONES DE TRABAJADORES METALÚRGICOS DEL ABC**



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ABSTRACT: The article analyses generational transformations among metalworkers in the ABC region of São Paulo, based on interviews, survey data, and observations conducted in automotive factories. Drawing on the classical literature on the subject, the article identifies four generations—foundational, strike-era, productive restructuring, and “4.0”—which are defined by their distinct historical experiences and workplace socialization trajectories. The analysis focuses on the productive restructuring generation, which constitutes the core of the qualitative research and is characterized by tensions between the legacies of the Fordist model and recent changes in work culture. The findings emphasize the coexistence of both continuities and ruptures, notably the loss of the symbolic centrality of the working-class condition, growing individualization, and challenges in promoting collective engagement. At the same time, industrial employment remains relatively relevant within a broader context of precarization. Finally, the article problematizes the notion of a “4.0 generation,” emphasizing its heterogeneity and highlighting the challenges for trade union action and future research.

KEYWORDS: Generations. Industrial work. Metalworkers in the ABC Paulista region. Productive restructuring. Culture of work.

RESUMO: O artigo analisa as transformações geracionais entre trabalhadores metalúrgicos do ABC Paulista, a partir de entrevistas, survey e observação em montadoras automotivas. Inspirado na literatura clássica sobre o tema, identifica quatro gerações—fundadora, das greves, da reestruturação produtiva e “4.0”—, delimitadas por experiências históricas e trajetórias de socialização no trabalho. O foco de análise recai sobre a geração da reestruturação produtiva, cerne da pesquisa qualitativa, marcada por tensões entre heranças do modelo fordista e mudanças recentes na cultura do trabalho. A análise evidencia a coexistência de permanências e rupturas, com destaque para a perda de centralidade simbólica da condição operária, a crescente individualização e as dificuldades de engajamento coletivo. Ao mesmo tempo, o emprego industrial mantém relevância relativa em um contexto de precarização mais ampla. Por fim, problematiza-se a noção de uma “geração 4.0”, ressaltando sua heterogeneidade e apontando desafios para a ação sindical e futuras pesquisas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Gerações. Trabalho industrial. Metalúrgicos do ABC. Reestruturação produtiva. Cultura do trabalho.

RESUMEN: El artículo analiza las transformaciones generacionales entre los trabajadores metalúrgicos del ABC paulista, a partir de entrevistas, encuestas y observación en plantas automotrices. Inspirado en la literatura clásica sobre el tema, identifica cuatro generaciones—fundadora, de las huelgas, de la reestructuración productiva y “4.0”—, delimitadas por experiencias históricas y trayectorias de socialización en el trabajo. El foco del análisis recae en la generación de la reestructuración productiva, núcleo de la investigación cualitativa, marcada por tensiones entre las herencias del modelo fordista y los cambios recientes en la cultura del trabajo. El análisis evidencia la coexistencia de permanencias y rupturas, destacando la pérdida de centralidad simbólica de la condición obrera, la creciente individualización y las dificultades de involucramiento colectivo. Al mismo tiempo, el empleo industrial mantiene relevancia relativa en un contexto de precarización más amplio. Por último, se problematiza la noción de una “generación 4.0”, resaltando su heterogeneidad y señalando desafíos para la acción sindical y futuras investigaciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Generaciones. Trabajo industrial. Trabajadores metalúrgicos del ABC Paulista. Reestructuración productiva. Cultura del trabajo.

Introduction

The research conducted by Beaud and Pialoux at the Peugeot factory in France between the 1980s and 1990s, which gave rise to the well-known book *Retorno à condição operária* [Return to the Working-Class Condition] (Beaud; Pialoux, 2009), inspired several subsequent studies interested in analyzing generational dynamics at work in contexts of transformation. In particular, the work became a necessary reference for researchers in Brazil seeking to understand, between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the impacts of productive restructuring and neoliberal policies on industrial labor. In the country, some analyses focused on metalworkers in the ABC Paulista region, given their prominence, their combative history, and their centrality to reflections on a “working-class condition” and as the ultimate reference for formal, protected employment with rights.

Those studies on the ABC addressed at least two generations: a first one composed of “veterans” or more experienced workers, forged in the struggles and strikes that took place between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, culminating in the creation of the CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores) [Unified Workers’ Central] and the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) [Workers’ Party]; and a second one made up of the then “young workers,” who entered the factories in the context of the 1990s and early 2000s, strongly affected by productive restructuring. Today, about 25 years after some of those studies, we return to the ABC and encounter another reality: those young workers of that period have become a generation of experienced workers who went through turbulence caused by drastic technological and managerial transformations, as well as changes in modes of trade union action. However, new workers continue to arrive, entering work in Industry 4.0 and in a context of an even more acute crisis of formal labor, saturated with praise for entrepreneurship and appeals to individualism, configuring a possible new generation³.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the generational changes perceived in industrial work in the current context. We seek to address transformations in the conduct, practices, and values of workers from different generations, considering the ongoing transformations in the culture of work (Lima, 2024). Our focus is on metalworkers, especially those employed by the three major automotive assembly plants in the ABC Paulista region, located in São Bernardo do Campo, São Paulo—Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen, and Scania. Within the local metalworking sector, workers in these assembly plants formed what may be considered a kind

³ See the article by Rodrigues and Lima (2026) in this dossier for a more detailed characterization of this group of workers.

of “first tier” among those active in the ABC Paulista region, generally regarded as the working-class elite of the Brazilian working class.

The data analyzed here resulted, first, from approximately 30 in-depth interviews conducted with trade union leaders and metalworking leaders from the three remaining assembly plants in the ABC, notably unionists and representatives of the CSEs (Comitês Sindicais de Empresas) [Company Trade Union Committees], in addition to information obtained from a survey administered to 906 rank-and-file workers⁴ and observations carried out in those factories⁵. The proposal is to engage directly with previous studies, such as Tomizaki (2005), Rodrigues (2009a, 2009b), Rodrigues; Martins (2005), Martins (2001), Corrochano (2001), Santos (2008), and Araújo (2015).

In the next section, we seek to map the different generations, situating them within the distinct historical moments in which they were established, and to clarify the terms in which we approach the notion of “generation” in this article. In the following section, we analyze what we call the *productive restructuring generation*, addressing its current profile, as well as changes and continuities in relation to its characterization in previous studies, in which its members appeared as “young workers.” The final section, preceding the final considerations, is devoted to this generation’s perceptions of workers who arrived and continue to arrive at factories in a more recent context. We also analyze some attributes of this new *4.0 generation*.

Generations in the ABC metalworking sector

Sociological studies involving the generational question find in Karl Mannheim a fundamental reference. In presenting a proposal to overcome the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism (Weller, 2010), the author reiterates that a generation is not a concrete group. The fact that a set of people was born in the same period does not necessarily imply the adoption of similar behaviors, although they may share certain experiences or witness common events. The author unfolds the notion of generation into other categories—location, connection, and generational unit—highlighting the different possibilities that emerge when one considers, on the one hand, belonging to the same age group and living in a given historical

⁴ Among the respondents, nearly 98% are unionized. Although there was no selective preference for union members, the survey was distributed through union channels, which certainly impacts the results.

⁵ The data stem primarily from the research project “*A condição operária revisitada: os trabalhadores da indústria automotiva paulista no início do século XXI*” [The Working-Class Condition Reconsidered: Automotive Industry Workers in São Paulo at the Beginning of the 21st Century], coordinated by Prof. Iram Jácome Rodrigues and funded by CNPq (grant number 407953/2021-3).

and social context and, on the other, the emergence of similar orientations and behaviors or effective bonds (Mannheim, 1982).

Starting from this broader conception, it is important to emphasize that, within the scope of this article, we do not intend to develop an in-depth reflection on the generational question, but rather to mobilize the notion of generation as an operational category for understanding the changes observed in the reality under analysis. We understand that age helps delimit a generation, but at the same time this concept is not restricted to the biological factor alone; therefore, we use other variables to characterize the generations presented here. The data obtained through the survey indicate that the variable “time with the company” may be an important marker for delimiting generations. Analyses conducted in previous studies with these agents (Rodrigues, 2009a; Rodrigues, 2009b; Rodrigues; Martins, 2005; Tomizaki, 2007) show that workers’ similar trajectories, together with collective experiences lived in everyday work, may shape a generation independently of age group, since what characterizes it are the experiences and understandings that the work, economic, and social contexts convey to these workers and that significantly condition their individual choices (Morel; Pessanha, 1991; Mannheim, 1982; Tomizaki, 2007). It is also important to consider that other social markers—such as class, race, gender, and territory—also combine in shaping experiences and perceptions.

For the purposes stated here, four generations were identified among the ABC metalworkers, delimited on the basis of data from previous studies and evidence obtained in our own research. For each generation, we assigned a nomenclature based on the “experiences that may be considered foundational in the formation of their identities as workers” (Tomizaki, 2007, p. 42).

The first was identified as the *foundational generation*, formed by workers who entered the category beginning in 1956—the year in which new automobile industries arrived in the ABC region⁶—and characterized by Leôncio Martins Rodrigues in *Industrialização e Atitudes Operárias* [Industrialization and Working-Class Attitudes] (2009a). This generation was composed predominantly of migrant workers from the interior of São Paulo—many with previous experience in agriculture—with low levels of schooling, no technical training, and whose learning of the trade occurred in everyday work. Marked by low unionization and low politicization, this generation consumed almost no cultural goods (radio, television, cinema,

⁶ Bicev (2019) points out that General Motors had already been present in the ABC region since 1927, but the incentives provided by Juscelino Kubitschek for the nationalization of automotive production brought new factories to the region: Mercedes-Benz (1956), Volkswagen Anchieta (1957), Scania (1962), Toyota (1962), and Ford (1967).

newspapers). For Rodrigues (2009a), these workers had not yet been incorporated into capitalist urban society, with behaviors close to those of community groups. Their lives revolved around the home, the family, and the neighborhood. With regard to their wives, they preferred that they not work, remaining at home to care for the children, not only to reduce expenses but because they understood that “a woman’s place is at home.” According to the author, although these workers had not yet been incorporated into urban dynamics, they would represent the beginning of what, from the second generation onward, would take shape as “ABC metalworkers.” The prospect of upward social mobility appears as a structuring element of their trajectories, motivating migration and insertion into industrial work.

The second generation was named the *strike generation*, closely associated with New Unionism. The workers who compose it entered factories in the mid-1970s and experienced the period of strikes that began in 1978, having higher levels of schooling than workers in the foundational generation.

However, alongside these workers with low levels of schooling, a layer of factory workers emerged with a relatively high educational level, with eight or more years of formal education. This was one of the aspects in which one of the most important changes occurred within the Brazilian working classes: the existence of segments of the factory proletariat with extremely low levels of education (which, in more developed countries, would make their absorption into the industrial sector practically unfeasible) alongside workers with eight or twelve years of schooling (Rodrigues, 2009b, p. 103, author’s emphasis, our translation).

It was in this generation that the image of ABC metalworkers was formed as a highly unionized and politicized category, which would come to lead trade union and political struggles from the 1980s onward, contributing to the formation of the PT, the CUT, and to the construction of Brazil’s main union leader, who, years later, would become President of the Republic. These were, above all, migrant workers of rural origin, who constituted the first generation of industrial workers in their families, with trajectories marked by work since childhood. They were workers with medium or semi-specialized qualifications, who mainly occupied manual jobs, with experience in other sectors and in smaller metalworking companies before entering the assembly plants. Entry into the automotive sector represented an improvement in living conditions, associated with access to labor rights and relatively high wages, considering the national industrial average.

This group, however, also experienced high job turnover, as well as violence and humiliation by superiors, elements that mobilized political action. The working-class identity

of this generation was strongly associated with values such as discipline, responsibility, effort, and pride in work, traversed by references to masculinity and virility linked to the valorization of physical strength. Their forms of sociability extended beyond the factory space and were also structured in the working-class neighborhoods of the ABC, in churches, in the union, and in everyday practices such as soccer, the consumption of alcoholic beverages, and smoking (Tomizaki, 2005).

The third generation is identified as the *productive restructuring generation* and appears in the studies by Tomizaki (2007) and Rodrigues and Martins (2005), comprising the youngest segment investigated by those authors. Formed predominantly by individuals born in the state of São Paulo, it came onto the scene mainly in the 1990s, in the context of productive restructuring, marked by production downsizing, workforce reduction, the implementation of new work processes, and increased automation. The schooling level of workers in this generation is higher than that of the previous generation, with at least complete secondary education. “Studying, therefore, is part of a strategy defined by young people and their parents with a view to the future, affirming belief in education as an instrument of social mobility” (Rodrigues; Martins, 2005, p. 238).

This is a group with technical qualifications, trained mainly through SENAI (Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial) [National Industrial Training Service] (Rodrigues; Martins, 2005). The arrival of this group, considered more educated and better prepared, produced a sense of aging at work among members of the previous generation, who claimed recognition for their practical knowledge and for their material and symbolic achievements (Tomizaki, 2005). According to Rodrigues and Martins (2005), although they recognized the importance of the union for working-class identity, in the context of that research this generation (the productive restructuring generation) did not identify as closely with militancy as the generation that had been involved in the struggles of the late 1970s and part of the 1980s.

Their trajectories were marked by greater instability and by different expectations regarding work in the automakers plants. In this context, entry into the sector ceased to represent, as clearly as it had for the previous generation, a promise of stability and upward social mobility. However, the studies conducted by Rodrigues and Martins (2005) and Tomizaki (2007), as well as the data obtained in our research, show that there is a certain symbolic value related to work in the ABC assembly plants that is present across all generations.

Finally, there is the *4.0 generation*, identified through the data from our research. The workers who compose it entered the assembly plants beginning in the 2010s, in a context in

which the automation of production lines became irreversible. It is marked by the incorporation of new technologies into the productive environment, especially those associated with the so-called Industry 4.0⁷. It is a connected generation, in which communication takes place predominantly in digital form, so that virtual social networks constitute an important space of socialization for this group. It is also the generation that most concretely faced the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic. It is composed of educated workers, although, in this respect, without significant changes in relation to the previous generation.

After these initial delimitations, we turn to the analysis of the characteristics and experiences of the so-called *productive restructuring generation*, the “core group” of our in-depth interviews.

The productive restructuring generation

It is possible to say that the group of workers who participated in the qualitative interview stage of our research corresponds, approximately, to the *productive restructuring generation*. These are workers who have more than 15 years with the company and are concentrated in the 40-to-55 age range, although, as we have emphasized, generations are not defined here merely based on age criteria⁸.

This group would also correspond, approximately, to the youngest segment identified by Tomizaki (2005) in a study conducted at Mercedes-Benz in the early 2000s and to the young workers profiled by Rodrigues and Martins (2005) in research carried out in the four main assembly plants in the ABC in 2003. As noted, this group entered the labor market when the transformations produced by productive restructuring were already underway, that is, from the mid-1990s onward. In 2003, these young workers were predominantly male (96%), mostly self-identified as white (79%)—Black and brown workers corresponding to the remaining 21%—and were mostly Catholic (66%), while 13% had no religion (Rodrigues; Martins, 2005).

This generation is composed mostly of individuals born in the capital or in the ABC region itself, largely children of migrants and metalworkers, whose family trajectories were marked by processes of upward social mobility. Among our interviewees, however, there are

⁷ The so-called “Industry 4.0” refers to the incorporation of advanced digital technologies into production processes, including various resources related to the Internet of Things, big data, robotics, and artificial intelligence, among others (Schwab, 2016).

⁸ In fact, a significant portion of those with less than 15 years of tenure at the company are also included within this same age group.

migrants who are the first metalworkers in their families. In general, this is a group that experienced strong family influence toward entering the factory, with more regular and prolonged educational paths, and passage through SENAI as a rule, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

[...] born here in the ABC, I live in Santo André. When you are born in the ABC, parents usually say: “You’re going to attend SENAI to get into some company, some industry.” And that’s what happened. When I turned 14, I took the entrance exam for SENAI in Santo André (Mauro⁹, 49 years old, our translation).

If previous studies (Rodrigues; Martins, 2005; Tomizaki, 2005) had already pointed to a strong tendency for these then young workers to access higher education, this movement is confirmed in the trajectories of the interviewees in this research, many of whom hold university degrees. This relatively high level of schooling did not prevent most of them, however, from beginning their working lives while still in adolescence. Before entering the metalworking sector, many of these workers performed other activities or different “odd jobs,” especially informal or subsistence occupations—such as street vending, work at open-air markets, mechanical workshops, as well as jobs such as office boy or helpers in construction. Several trajectories were also marked by passages through other companies in the metalworking sector in the region before entering the assembly plants. This group of interviewees presents a set of characteristics marked by continuities and tensions in relation to the inherited sociocultural pattern. Regarding life, career, and family projects, their trajectories remain relatively linear, strongly anchored in the nuclear family model and in values associated with Fordist culture, as illustrated by the following statement:

Because [...] the upbringing at that time, you thought about getting into a company, right? Having a job, having a salary, building a family, buying a little house to live in, having a little car to go out, going to the beach. That was the desire of that time, the dream. I think today’s youth no longer have that same desire (Álvaro, 49 years old, 32 years with the company, our translation).

Among our interviewees, however, a considerable number of divorces and people in second or third unions drew attention. In this respect—as well as in others to be analyzed—it is necessary to consider that the group is composed essentially of politically and union-active militant interlocutors¹⁰, which generally has impacts on family arrangements. Despite this fact,

⁹ The interviewees’ real names have been replaced with pseudonyms in this article.

¹⁰ For a broader discussion on trade union leadership, see the article by Martins and Melo in this dossier.

the configuration observed indicates the persistence of a stable normative horizon, even though it is strained by contemporary transformations. The working-class identity of this group is still deeply marked by intergenerational transmission or by an inherited life project, which links professional destiny to family trajectory, as can be seen in the following account:

My father worked for 21 years at Mercedes-Benz. He left in 1987; he retired and left the factory, but before he left, he managed to find an opening for me [...] I have been a worker at Mercedes-Benz for 38 years now. [...] So, I am the son of a worker; my father was not a union or party militant. Some memories I have of my father, in the late 1970s and 1980s [...] when he came home, sometimes he would bring a small newspaper in his pocket, which was the union's *Tribuna Metalúrgica* [Metalworkers' Tribune], and at dinner time he would sit the children down and read the *Tribuna* (Milton, 58 years old, 38 years with the company, our translation).

The classic instances of working-class socialization—notably the factory, the church (although less important than for previous generations), and the neighborhood or community—remain relevant in shaping these subjects' experiences and worldviews. In the religious sphere, the family Catholic heritage predominates, but it is crossed by questioning and processes of secularization, alongside a minority, though growing, presence of evangelical affiliations, which, according to the accounts, are increasingly expressive on the “shop floor” (representing about 24% of all survey respondents). In the realm of leisure, traditional practices such as soccer and the consumption of alcoholic beverages remain present for this group, although apparently with less centrality than in previous generations, making room for a diversification of habits. This is a generation situated in an intermediate condition between the analog and the digital, which implies specific difficulties of adaptation and belonging in this space with regard to technological and communicational aspects, with important implications for its relationship with younger workers, as we will see below.

At the level of cultural and political dispositions, what stands out is this generation's effort to incorporate identity-based agendas and to break with historically rooted patterns of sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia, both in their individual trajectories and in their activist agendas. This movement, however, coexists with the perception that the social movement itself, its agendas, and its forms of communication are aging, suggesting a mismatch between inherited repertoires and new sociocultural dynamics.

Although they still assess factory work as a good job, especially when considering wages, rights, and guarantees, the interviewees recognize losses—both concrete and symbolic—associated with the working-class conditions that have occurred in recent years,

making employment in the metalworking sector less attractive than it was in the past. In symbolic terms, working in large assembly plants conferred social *status* on these workers in their milieu, as one of our interlocutors points out: “The guy worked at Volks, the neighbor would point and say, ‘that guy over there works at Volks and so on’” (Laércio, 55 years old, 40 years with the company).

This dimension is also felt when we ask these workers whether they would like their children to work in the factory. If, on the one hand, many of the interlocutors defend this idea, reinforcing the importance of transmitting a legacy and the positive aspects of this employment—which is reinforced by quantitative data indicating that almost 72% of this group would recommend this work to a child, relative, or acquaintance—another part emphasizes the difficulties of the work, uncertainties regarding the future of industry, as well as the concrete possibilities that their children may access other opportunities in the labor market. We will return to this in the next section.

Losses in terms of sociability and the collective dimension of work and factory life are also particularly felt and verbalized. Whereas previous generations built unity out of the oppression they experienced and their common needs, the current reality is described as more individualized, distant, and competitive. In this respect, changes in shared leisure and sociability spaces and practices, as well as the rise of mobile phones and virtual social networks, are said to have weakened collective bonds, as shown in the complementary accounts below:

In the past, I think the factory, out of necessity, was more united. Because of the pressure there was, the demands that existed, the working conditions, the need to move forward, both in terms of wages and outside the factory as well, housing issues and everything (Reginaldo, 46 years old, 31 years with the company, our translation).

I see that relationships were better in the past. [...] There were many activities, many events involving workers. [...] I don’t know whether because of people’s day-to-day tasks or because of virtuality, today things are somewhat different. But this interpersonal relationship, I saw that it changed a lot; it is a more distant relationship, let’s put it that way. [...] And I also see a lot of competitiveness (Cristian, 42 years old, 28 years with the company, our translation).

It is interesting to note, based on Tomizaki’s research (2005), that, as workers age, many of the discourses of the *productive restructuring generation* begin to converge with the discourses, ideas, and concerns of the *strike generation*. In other words, this group began to critically attribute to younger workers characteristics similar to those that had been imputed to

them in the past. In this regard, accusations concerning lack of commitment and engagement stand out, as well as ignorance—and consequent non-recognition—of the history of the metalworking category in the ABC, of which these workers would be heirs and beneficiaries. Thus, retaining younger workers in their jobs and, above all, renewing working-class leadership appear as some of the main challenges and concerns for this generation.

Finally, before properly examining the perceptions that this generation develops about workers who have been entering factories in recent years, it is important to point out the existence of significant differences in discourses and representations within this group itself. Such differences are manifested especially between the younger interviewees (in their thirties or early forties) and those who are approaching or have already passed the age of fifty, revealing relevant internal cleavages. In the discourses of the younger members of this set, alignments in terms of fundamental values with the previous generation are observed, but also greater empathy and proximity toward traits associated with the subsequent generation. Among the elements that express this cleavage, greater familiarity with and ability to use virtual means of communication stands out, including as a tool for union action.

A 4.0 generation?

In the case of ABC metalworkers, it becomes difficult to know what the behavior of young people as heirs will be when they, in fact, take the place of their parents, whether in the factory, in the union, or in their families. The first question that arises is whether they will occupy these spaces, since up to this point most of them consider themselves to be “passing through” the working-class condition (Tomizaki, 2005, p. 264).

In the excerpt we adopt as the epigraph to this section, Tomizaki (2005) refers to the productive restructuring generation (as we classify it here), composed of the youngest segment of workers at the time of her research. The previous section sought, to some extent, to answer the questions raised there. However, it is striking that those young workers already perceived themselves as “passing through” the working-class condition—a perception that also appears recurrently among those we call the 4.0 generation, according to our interviewees’ accounts. This recurrence suggests that elements often identified as “new” or characteristic of contemporary youth may not, in fact, constitute something properly new.

The title of this section is followed by a question mark because, when analyzing the data, we raised the question of, first, to what extent it is possible to speak of a 4.0 generation

and, above all, how to delimit it. Even while reaffirming that age criteria alone are not sufficient to define this group, and that this marker must be combined with time with the company, there is a certain heterogeneity perceived in the data that must be problematized. Considering other markers, we are referring to a set of workers who entered this work in a post-2008 crisis context and, therefore, in a period of economic decline and falling automotive production, and who have strongly experienced the incorporation of new technologies within the scope of Industry 4.0.

We will seek to contrast, on the one hand, the data obtained from the qualitative research, namely the discourses of the productive restructuring generation—the focus of our in-depth interviews—about this more recent generation and, on the other, the survey data, through which we can access, to some extent, what workers of the 4.0 generation say about themselves. Without disregarding the fact that we are mobilizing data of different kinds, we outline some analyses that may be further developed in future research.

A first element to be considered is the perception that the set of workers entering the factory in the most recent context, especially the younger ones, do not have a perspective of remaining in industrial work, which would function as a “springboard” to other activities or experiences. In other words, this work would be seen as a transitional situation or as a means to achieve other objectives or projects.

You will notice that today's worker in an assembly plant no longer has the prospect of retirement. Work in an assembly plant, which in the past was the peak of the job you could have, was the best job, right? Today, work in an assembly plant is also a springboard job. [...] It is there that the guy will structure himself to pursue another type of career, usually in IT, something like that. So he no longer dreams of staying in the assembly plant as in my time (Laércio, 55 years old, 40 years with the company).

Absolutely! They are passing through! So much so that, in the latest hires made at Volkswagen, 100 people were hired and 50 left. Then you look at the group: 20 years old, 19 years old... 20 years old, 23 years old, 24 years old, who have never worked in industry, who do not know the importance of industry, why industry exists, right? And we had to replace those areas. [...] Even with benefits, transportation, meals, health insurance, and everything else, they prefer another field... (César, 46 years old, 28 years with the company, our translation).

The accounts above are highly illustrative of what we heard in the interviews. According to the interlocutors, it is very common for younger workers to choose to leave the factory after only a short time with the company, after having saved some money and, above all, when the

opportunity arises to obtain financial compensation as part of a PDV (Programa de Demissão Voluntária) [Voluntary Dismissal Program], as shown in Reginaldo's statement (46 years old, 31 years with the company): "some do not even do the internship; once the SENAI course is over, they leave; others still do the internship, are hired, and after a while take the PDV and leave."

The quantitative data indicate, however, that this general perception must be nuanced. Among the questionnaire respondents, it is noteworthy that a significant share of the younger workers expects to remain. When asked what they think about work in the future, among those with up to 15 years with the company, 75% intend to retire from the factory, including those up to 30 years old. Of course, when time-with-the-company ranges are observed, the longer these workers have been in the factory, the greater the tendency for them to want to remain there. In this sense, it also seems plausible to state that the statements referring to the ephemerality of workers in their jobs refer to processes that are, in fact, more recent and to very young workers, who are also a very small minority in the survey, suggesting the need to better understand the profile of young people who actually remain and the profile of those who quickly leave these companies.

The fact that more than 40% of the workers who responded to the survey have been in assembly plants for more than 16 years and that half of them began their processes of work socialization in the industrial sector suggests that the factory is seen, because of generational transmission itself (Tomizaki, 2010), as the natural space for the beginning of working life and perhaps the only possible one. Rodrigues and Martins (2005, p. 239) had already pointed to this tendency. In analyzing the data produced by their research and by other studies with young workers (Corrochano, 2001; Martins, 2001), the authors observe that young people of that generation understood factory work as "[...] provisional, as something they should go through at that stage of life, while acquiring skills and competencies, at school and on the job, that would allow them to rise professionally and socially." (Rodrigues; Martins, 2005, p. 239, our translation). However, 20 years ago, the authors also already recognized that "[...] this provisional condition seems to become definitive, and few are those who manage to escape the working-class condition" (Rodrigues; Martins, 2005, p. 239, our translation).

When we analyze the data obtained from the survey, we observe a predominance of workers who would correspond to the productive restructuring generation. Among respondents, more than 50% are over 41 years old (62%), and almost 30% are in the 31-to-40 age range, while about 60% of the total entered the factories from 2010 onward (15 years with the company

or less). The data indicate a process of aging, with an increase in the age range of workers in factories, intensifying a trend already noted in research from the early 2000s (Tomizaki, 2005; Rodrigues; Martins, 2005). It is striking that, among questionnaire respondents, only 8% are up to 30 years old, although the percentage with up to 10 years with the company corresponds to about 28%. This datum may indicate lower permanence among younger workers in this type of occupation, a hypothesis supported by the qualitative interviews with members of the productive restructuring generation, in which the difficulty of retaining younger workers was mentioned recurrently.

In addition to the dimension of permanence in jobs, there is a clear perception in the interviews with leaders that, despite the union's efforts, younger workers do not engage with union agendas or in the struggle for better working conditions—despite the high unionization rate observed in the *survey*—among other reasons because they do not expect to remain for long. Although our interlocutors consider working conditions, pay, and benefits in these companies to be very satisfactory, they recognize the degradation of the working-class condition in recent years, resulting from organizational, technological, contractual, and wage-related changes, among others. Beyond the objective dimension, however, there is a loss of the symbolic value of being an ABC metalworker and of all the representations associated with this condition—security, stability, and rights. This is evident in Galvão's statement (56 years old, 37 years with the company): “In the past, we would put on a little company badge—‘look, I’m a metalworker’; ‘wow, the guy is a metalworker’—like that, and today you no longer see that enthusiasm. The challenges are enormous, because there is a cultural change in society.”

The perceived impermanence would be closely related to broader transformations in values and worldview. In this sense, individual values tend to prevail over interests and concerns related to the collective or, in other words, to class belonging. As Elton (48 years old, 28 years with the company) seems to summarize, “our project of society no longer inspires.” Consequently, there is a consensual assessment that it is very difficult to communicate with younger workers and to find a language that reaches and mobilizes this group in particular. It is in this sense that one of the interviewees formulates some questions:

Are we, as leaders, attentive to the movements in our production chain, attentive to the new young people entering the labor market? Is industry today as attractive to young workers as it was in the 1980s? To the young people who started there as *office boys*, right? And who were trained and became foremen, supervisors, managers, factory directors? Does industry provide that today? That stability for these young people? Because today there are apps, and apps are much more attractive to young people, who do not want any kind

of constraint or commitment to their schedule, because today it is not simply an eight-hour workday. Depending on where you are located, in the ABC, in São Paulo, in Sorocaba, it takes two hours in traffic to get to the factory, then another two hours to get back home. We are talking about a twelve-hour workday, not an eight-hour workday, but a twelve-hour workday. Does today's young people envision freedom or envisions having a better, healthier life, including training, qualification, concern for their health, practicing a sport, going to the theater? (Leonardo, 40 years old, our translation).

The accounts recognize that work in industry is no longer as attractive as it was in the past, but beyond this observation, they indicate that aspirations in terms of freedom/autonomy and personal fulfillment have not been met by more traditional and formal forms of work, which, although they offer benefits and a certain degree of security, are rigid in terms of schedules, procedures, and hierarchies. In this context, activities that would, in theory, allow greater freedom, even with few or no rights, can exert attraction, especially among younger people. Platform work or even other ways of “making a living”—various forms of entrepreneurship, digital commerce, investment in the stock market and cryptocurrencies, and even *online* betting—have gained prominence, strongly guided by digital influencers (Pires; Perin, 2024; Pires; Rizek; Oliveira, 2026). These transformations in the culture of work (Lima, 2024) are captured by the interviewees:

And nowadays you see that it is people's choice, they choose... Today, the worker, the young person, chooses not to be inside a factory eight hours a day on a production line, at a frantic pace. They choose: “I don't want that for myself.” So, the relationship is different. They choose to work informally as an Uber driver, for example, where they say: “I manage my time. I am my own boss. I don't have anyone breathing down my neck.” So that is it. This relationship has indeed changed. I even said that, in the past, people dreamed of getting into an assembly plant. Today we have SENAI inside the assembly plant, which trains the SENAI kids and workers' children, and when these kids graduate, depending on the grade they achieve, the factory is required to hire them. So, they are hired, but when they arrive in production, the first thing they ask the union leaders is: “When will there be a PDV?” because they want to take the PDV and do something else. They do not see themselves there. So, this has changed, okay? This relationship has changed a lot; workers' interest in industry today is no longer very strong—unless it is very well paid. Which is not something we find out there. So, to earn R\$ 2,000 or R\$ 3,000, I'll earn R\$ 2,000 or R\$ 3,000 as an Uber driver or doing anything else, you know? (Ricardo, 56 years old, our translation).

Changes in values are reflected in the difficulty of communication. Although communication between different generations always poses challenges, the constant use of *smartphones* and engagement with social networks create important obstacles to the collective

dimension, to workers' socialization in the workplace, and to openness to dialogues and discourses that would enable the transmission of working-class culture, as can be observed in the excerpt below:

We still have not understood how to deal with workers through our networks; somehow, we are not attractive. In fact, young people want to watch a 30-second video on their phones that is funny or talk about something they like: gym stuff, cycling, fishing, everything. And we still do not know how to pierce that bubble; we have not yet learned how to pierce that bubble (Alexandre, 42 years old, 15 years with the company, our translation).

As mentioned, the productive restructuring generation was still largely socialized in environments—the factory, the progressive Catholic church, the working-class neighborhood—that favored the incorporation of more collective values oriented toward security and stability. In the interviewees' view, the digital sphere has acquired such influence and prominence that the struggle for hearts and minds has become significantly more challenging. In this respect, the growth of neo-Pentecostal religions also represents another significant challenge (which we will not address here in greater depth). The statement below is illustrative:

I have a soccer team, and I am in contact with many young guys; at no point do I see anyone saying: "I want to get into a metalworking company, get into a factory." I do not see that. Today they want to be *YouTubers*, they want to work with social media, but I do not... Even my daughter—I have a daughter who is 26, 27—she has never said, never considered saying: "Wow, maybe you could get me a job at some company." [...] Today, when young people enter a company, when they do, it is only for them... that is, when it is not to buy a motorcycle to become a delivery worker, which happens a lot. They enter, save money, buy a motorcycle, and become delivery workers, because then there are no schedules, nothing; they do it... so unfortunately... (Mauro, 49 years old, our translation).

Although the accounts recognize these trends, the questionnaire data show that just over two-thirds of workers consider working conditions to be good or excellent, and more than half feel secure in the company—including those with up to 15 years with the company. Even so, there is concern about job loss: in this group, about 27% are very concerned and 49% are partially concerned.

Despite hierarchy, difficulty accessing more qualified positions, work intensification (Bicev, 2019), and the symbolic loss of the metalworking category, workers recognize that their conditions are still better in a market marked by *pejotização* and precarization. Industrial

employment remains mostly formal, with wages and benefits above the average: a study by Confederação Nacional da Indústria (CNI) [National Confederation of Industry] (2025), based on the PNAD Contínua [Continuous National Household Sample Survey] of 2024, indicates earnings 15% higher than in the agricultural and service sectors.

Even with recent precarization—associated with changes in labor laws, automation, and the reduction of employment in assembly plants—work in automotive companies in the ABC Paulista region still guarantees stable income and relatively better conditions. Despite the union crisis (Santana; Rodrigues; Diéguez, 2023), the Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC [ABC Metalworkers' Union] remains relevant in maintaining these conditions.

The transition to other sectors, especially services, requires higher levels of schooling and specific qualifications, particularly in areas such as finance and technology (IBGE, 2025). This contrasts with the trajectory of the majority: among workers with up to 15 years with the company, just over 55% have only completed secondary education. In addition, socialization in industrial work and previous experience themselves make insertion into other sectors more difficult, especially when associated with age.

In this context of economic crisis, political instability, and technological advancement, remaining in the working-class condition may seem less risky for this group that continues in the factories: it guarantees employment, wages, and survival. This is not a matter of lack of ambition, but rather the recognition of a harsher and more uncertain scenario. Despite the difficulties, the factory remains a familiar space, in which these workers orient themselves with greater security.

Finally, reflecting on the possibilities of generational transmission, it is observed that the interviewees from the productive restructuring generation attribute high value to their own trajectories in the factories, as well as to the history of metalworkers in the ABC. In this sense, they express the desire that their children know and, in some way, continue this legacy; however, not necessarily inside factories and not for long periods in production, still recognized as “hard work”:

Because I think that today, for a young person to arrive and enter a metalworking company and become stagnant there on the shop floor is difficult. It is difficult to build a family, pay rent. But I would be very happy if he [his son] joined, but did not remain stuck there, if he studied and pursued a career. But I would be very happy, yes! And I talk to him a lot. And he has this expectation of turning 18 and entering a factory. Hopefully he will manage to do so or, perhaps, find something better as well” (João, 45 years old, 22 years with the company, our translation).

No [he does not wish his daughter had the same job as him]. I believe we are living in a different moment. She will not experience the moment I experienced. Today, working conditions are much better, in my opinion, but I want to give her what I could not have and what I am able to provide today. Today, I have a decent salary, my wife also works, so I will do my utmost. I may be selfish, but that is what I think: if my daughter can be a doctor, she will be a doctor; if my daughter can study, as much education, training, schooling, and support as I can give her, I will provide it, so that she can have a better life than I had. [...] a profession that will give her more comfort” (Manoel, 53 years old, 25 years with the company, our translation).

Some of the accounts revealed an active effort by many interviewees to encourage and create means for their children to enter factories. However, there is recognition of the difficulties of this work—including its physical dimension—and of changes in the industrial world. The group of interviewees had access to more prolonged schooling and to positions with higher pay and prestige, in addition to training through political activism, which enabled them to provide their children with good educational conditions and, consequently, to envision a career outside the factory or a more qualified insertion into the factory environment, with aspirations for rapid hierarchical advancement, or, in some way, to remain in the sector, but in occupations that do not directly involve the shop floor, such as Information Technology, Engineering, Administration, Law, and so on.

Final considerations

The analyses developed throughout the article allow us to state that the transformations observed among metalworkers in the ABC region cannot be understood as a simple generational rupture, but rather as a process of continuous reconfiguration of the working-class condition, in which continuities and shifts are intertwined.

The notion of generation, mobilized here as an analytical tool, has shown that differences among groups are not exhausted by age-based criteria, but are structured through shared historical experiences, trajectories of socialization, and specific material conditions. In this sense, the so-called *productive restructuring generation* occupies a particularly revealing position, as it condenses both legacies of the Fordist model and tensions specific to a context marked by flexibilization, work intensification, and the loss of the symbolic centrality of industry.

At the same time, the data indicate that the perceptions constructed by this generation regarding younger workers—often associated with temporariness, individualism, and

distancing from collective action—must be analyzed with caution. On the one hand, such readings update a recurring pattern of intergenerational interpretation, in which new entrants are seen as less committed or engaged; on the other, they reflect broader transformations in the culture of work, traversed by the diffusion of values associated with autonomy, flexibility, and individual fulfillment. The apparent tension between the qualitative and quantitative findings thus suggests the need to complexify the idea of a “4.0 generation,” recognizing its internal heterogeneity and avoiding homogeneous or normative interpretations of its dispositions and expectations.

Within this framework, one of the study’s central findings lies precisely in the coexistence of seemingly contradictory processes: while the erosion of the symbolic value of the working-class condition and the weakening of traditional forms of sociability and collective organization can be observed, work in the assembly plants of the ABC region continues to be perceived as a relatively positive reference in a labor market marked by precarization. The persistence of relatively long trajectories, even among those who initially perceive themselves as “passing through,” reveals the concrete limits of the available alternatives and points to the persistence of the factory as a structuring space for labor-market insertion and social reproduction for segments of the working class.

Finally, the results presented here open a set of questions for future research. There is a need to deepen understanding of the different profiles of young people who enter and remain—or do not remain—in industrial work, as well as of the ways in which new technologies, forms of communication, and cultural dynamics reconfigure the possibilities for constructing collective identities and political action. Moreover, it becomes essential to investigate the extent to which union and organizational repertoires will be able to reinvent themselves in the face of this new scenario, marked by transformations in the productive, symbolic, and subjective spheres, and what the effects of these changes will be for the future of collective action and the world of work.

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