

**UNDER NEW GEARS: RECONFIGURATIONS OF INDUSTRIAL WORK AND THE
WORKERS' EXPERIENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

***SOB NOVAS ENGRENAGENS: RECONFIGURAÇÕES DO TRABALHO INDUSTRIAL
E DA EXPERIÊNCIA OPERÁRIA NO SÉCULO XXI***

***BAJO NUEVOS ENGRANAJES: RECONFIGURACIONES DEL TRABAJO
INDUSTRIAL Y DE LA EXPERIENCIA OBRERA EN EL SIGLO XXI***



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Presentation

The aim of this dossier is to examine contemporary forms of industrial labor and union activity, seeking to reflect on recent transformations in the “working-class condition.” Its starting point was the research project “*A condição operária revisitada: os trabalhadores da indústria automotiva paulista no início do século XXI*” [The Working-Class Condition Revisited: Workers in São Paulo’s Automotive Industry at the Beginning of the 21st Century] funded by CNPq (Edital Universal 2021–2024), a study conducted primarily in collaboration with the three automakers in São Bernardo do Campo—Mercedes-Benz, Scania, and Volkswagen—and involved administering more than 900 questionnaires and conducting approximately forty interviews, in addition to field visits to the factories and the ABC Metalworkers’ Union. However, in addition to presenting the results of this study, this dossier also brings together contributions from other Brazilian researchers dedicated to the topic, addressing the consequences of the industry’s territorial reorganization and the digitization and fragmentation of production in the automotive sector. Seeking to broaden the scope of these reflections and establish comparative dialogues with Latin America, this dossier incorporates discussions on recent transformations in Argentina’s industrial and labor union landscape, with a focus on the automotive sector.

Industrial labor and union activity have undergone significant changes in recent decades. Despite the unprecedented strike movement that led to the emergence of large-scale mobilizations of social actors linked to the world of work in Brazil in the late 1970s, more than forty years into this process, labor activism has cooled down, and unions have recently been facing an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. The 1990s were difficult times for workers in the country. There was an increase in outsourcing, as well as changes in the geography of production, with companies relocating to areas with lower unionization rates and, consequently, a weaker tradition of worker organization and lower wages; there was also a reorganization of production driven by technological and organizational changes that made production more “lean.”

This situation has led to growing insecurity in the world of work, undermining—for various reasons—the organization and mobilization of workers. In other words, new factories, new technologies, the increasing use of outsourcing, the re-spatialization of production, the denationalization of industrial sectors such as auto parts, and the privatization of public companies were changes that profoundly affected the industrial working class. Only during the 2003–2016 period—under the Workers’ Party governments—did this process see some

reversal. After this brief interlude, there was a radical shift in the government's relationship with workers and their representative bodies, and, as a result of the 2017 Labor Reform, union power was further weakened. Among the consequences of this reform are a sharp decline in union membership rates in recent years, cuts to financial resources for unions, and changes to collective bargaining rules, among other factors—a situation exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In technological terms, the industries established in the 1990s and in the following decades were characterized by a declining reliance on the workforce, reducing the number of jobs without, however, standing out in terms of innovation when compared to their parent companies abroad. For workers, this spatial and technological reorganization meant lower wages and the entry of new generations of workers who were better educated but lacked industrial work experience and a tradition of union activity, and who were strongly imbued with an entrepreneurial mindset. New technologies based on digital work and outsourcing became a dilemma when it came to building a collective identity among these workers. The fragmentation of the labor movement, reflected in the geographic dispersion of the new industrial facilities, has diminished the unions' ability to mobilize workers. Even so, in the case of the ABC region of São Paulo, workers at the automakers and their union continue to represent an elite among factory workers due to the persistence of Fordist-style work—albeit one that is constantly being eroded—with union gains represented and maintained by the In-House Union Committees (CSEs). In other words, in this case, the ABC Metalworkers' Union managed—through workplace organization across a range of companies—including large and medium-sized industries—in particular, at the three automakers located in the municipality of São Bernardo do Campo—to mitigate the most pernicious effects of these changes.

This dossier aims to examine this process and the challenges it poses in terms of changes in automakers' technological standards, their continued presence in the country, and the consequences for a category of workers that has emerged as a key collective actor in the social struggles of recent decades. Starting from this environment of change, we sought to reflect on the prospects for industrial labor and the future of the labor movement, investigating and characterizing what might be considered a “new” working-class condition resulting from concrete changes in work culture—one strongly marked by an individualistic and entrepreneurial mindset—and the weakening of the collective perspective characteristic of social struggles.

In the first four articles, this dossier discusses the results of research conducted in the ABC region of São Paulo, involving workers and leaders within the automotive sector and the metalworkers' union movement. The themes addressed in these initial chapters cover the following points: the profile of automotive industry workers and the role of the union in shaping a working-class identity; generational shifts and changes in the work culture of these workers; union leadership—its trajectories and perceptions of the world of work, including challenges and prospects; and the political education of metalworkers' activists and leaders as a strategic union action.

In the first article, “*A condição operária revisitada: os trabalhadores da indústria automotiva e o protagonismo sindical*,” Rodrigues and Lima present a profile of this new working class, highlighting its origins, age group, educational background, and union involvement. It is clear that this class is not all that new, with most workers being over 35 years old and highly educated. It was observed that the continuity of union activity leads them to identify as workers and view the union as a point of reference; the union, in turn, maintains constant dialogue with the workers, demonstrating a continuity of action that explains the reason for their strong leadership even in an unfavorable economic context.

Next, Pires and Diéguez, in the article “*Uma categoria em transformação: mudanças e permanências entre gerações de metalúrgicos do ABC*,” identify four generations of workers—the founding generation, the strike generation, the industrial restructuring generation, and the “4.0” generation—each with distinct experiences and different trajectories of socialization in the workplace. They highlight the generation of productive restructuring—the focus of the study—and the tensions within it between a resilient Fordist model and recent changes in work culture. The article concludes by pointing to a continuous reconfiguration of the working-class condition—rather than a generational rupture—marked by the heterogeneity of generational experiences and by tensions between individualization and collective action, while noting the persistence of the factory as a reference point for social integration in a context of increasing precariousness.

In “*A Formação Política como Ação Sindical Estratégica*,” Costa and Arruda analyze the Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC [ABC Metalworkers' Union's] political education policy, highlighting its strategic role since the historic strikes of the 1970s and 1980s. They point out that the creation of the Departamento de Formação Sindical [Department of Union Education] made it possible to train activists and leaders, strengthening the organization of the workforce in the face of employer offensives and political challenges. Over more than four

decades, this training has contributed to collective bargaining, job preservation, and adaptation to technological innovations. The question raised is how this policy supports the renewal of union leadership and the organization's capacity to confront challenges in different contexts.

In “*Lideranças metalúrgicas no estado de São Paulo: um perfil social e trajetórias de formação da militância sindical*” Martins and Melo discuss the profile of metalworkers' leaders organized by the Federação Estadual dos Metalúrgicos da Central Única dos Trabalhadores (FEM-CUT) [State Federation of Metalworkers of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores] in the state of São Paulo, based on a questionnaire administered at the institution's plenary session, which took place in May 2025 in the municipality of Itanhaém. In addition, the trajectories and prospects for the labor movement among some leaders in the ABC region of São Paulo are analyzed based on in-depth interviews conducted between 2024 and 2025.

The following three articles are derived from other studies on the sector in Brazil and Argentina, and discuss the challenges posed by increasing fragmentation and integration of production, as well as the dynamics of the capital-labor relationship.

In “*Relações de trabalho e ação sindical em territórios greenfield: o caso da Stellantis em Goiana (PE)*,” Costa Lima and Barcellos discuss the challenges faced by union action in the face of spatial and institutional transformations in the Brazilian automotive sector, using the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias Metalúrgicas, Mecânicas e de Material Elétrico de Pernambuco (SINDMETAL-PE) [Union of Workers in the Metalworking, Mechanical and Electrical Materials Workers' Union of Pernambuco] at the Stellantis plant located in Goiana (PE) as a case study. The Stellantis Goiana Automotive Hub, inaugurated in 2015 as a greenfield project, and is representative of the recent spatial restructuring of the automotive industry in Brazil. Based on interviews with SINDMETAL-PE executives, the study shows that the plant—considered Stellantis's most modern facility worldwide—perpetuates an anti-union organizational culture, a characteristic observed at other global units of the company, thereby exacerbating tensions in relations between the union and the company.

Cató, Spinosa, and Bosisio, in “*Trabajadores automotrices y sindicatos frente a las políticas de desindustrialización del gobierno de Milei*,” based on collaborative projects by CONICET (National Council for Scientific and Technical Research) and the University of Buenos Aires, analyze the impact of the Milei administration's austerity and deindustrialization policies on employment, job quality, and labor relations in Argentina's automotive sector, focusing on the Northern Corridor of Greater Buenos Aires, which is home to three major automakers—Ford, Volkswagen, and Toyota. These three major multinational automakers and

auto parts manufacturers were examined, considering both the statistical profile of the sector and an analysis of the territorial space and its relationship to labor. Through interviews, the voices of workers and unions are gathered to assess how these transformations have affected working conditions and union strategies.

Continuing the analysis of the situation in Argentina, Drolas, Delfini, Tomasini, and León, in “*Digitalización de la producción y rupturas en las dinámicas laborales. Un estudio sobre el sector autopartista de Rafaela, Provincia de Santa Fe,*” discuss the effects of digital transformation on labor dynamics in the auto parts sector in Rafaela, Santa Fe Province. Using a qualitative methodology based on interviews with union representatives and industry leaders, the study sought to understand how digitization—associated with Industry 4.0—has reshaped the organization of production, working conditions, and labor relations. The research analyzes the depth of technological changes within companies and their consequences for training systems and adaptation strategies in the face of new production demands in the automotive sector.

In “*Ensaio: tecnologia e trabalho,*” Salerno discusses how production systems for the distribution and marketing of goods and people are being digitized. To accomplish that goal, he characterizes the digital transformation and its implications, particularly the dilemma faced by some companies in not adopting digital transformation—a dilemma similar to that of not automating or not reducing inventories through just-in-time and similar schemes. Based on this characterization, the author discusses the impacts on the world of work and on collective action—understood here in its entirety, including so-called self-employed workers, sole proprietors, and outsourced workers—impacts that are idealized projections of a social situation “frozen in the face of the indeterminacy of the political-social game.”

To conclude this dossier, we present an interview with Wellington Messias Damasceno, titled “*Entre a fábrica e o futuro: a trajetória de uma liderança operária diante das mudanças no trabalho e no sindicalismo,*” conducted by the research team behind “The Working-Class Condition Revisited.” In the interview, the interviewee—the newly elected President of the ABC Metalworkers’ Union—discusses his career and offers an in-depth analysis of the transformations in the world of work and in contemporary unionism. He addresses the structural changes in the automotive industry and the new challenges facing worker organization in the face of precarious employment and Industry 4.0—a discussion that is fundamental for research in the fields of industrial labor, the automotive sector, and trade unionism.

This dossier, grounded in research conducted within the automotive sector in various locations, reflects both on the challenges facing the future of work—arising from transformations in production, work culture, and the working classes’ sense of belonging—and on the changes related to the worldview of large contingents of workers and the broader implications of this process for organized labor and the capital-labor relationship, since, “unions are fragmented, while companies are global, and although the struggle continues, it seems to be getting harder,” as Salerno puts it in his aforementioned article. In other words, is this dynamic merely an expression of the relationship between humans and machines, workers and companies, or does it represent a certain *ethos* of contemporary capitalist societies?

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