

**BETWEEN THE FACTORY AND THE FUTURE: THE TRAJECTORY OF A
WORKING-CLASS LEADERSHIP IN THE FACE OF CHANGES IN WORK AND
TRADE UNIONISM**

***ENTRE A FÁBRICA E O FUTURO: A TRAJETÓRIA DE UMA LIDERANÇA
OPERÁRIA DIANTE DAS MUDANÇAS NO TRABALHO E NO SINDICALISMO***

***ENTRE LA FÁBRICA Y EL FUTURO: LA TRAYECTORIA DE UN LIDERAZGO
OBRERO ANTE LOS CAMBIOS EN EL TRABAJO Y EL SINDICALISMO***



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ABSTRACT: This report presents excerpts from an interview with Wellington Messias Damasceno, conducted in August and September 2025 as part of the project Revisiting the Working-Class Condition: Workers in the São Paulo Automotive Industry at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century. Recently elected President of the ABC Metalworkers' Union, Wellington recounts his professional and union trajectory, shaped by the legacy of labor struggles, vocational training at Volkswagen's SENAI school, and early involvement in trade union activism. His testimony combines family memory, professional qualification, and political engagement while examining the transformations of industrial work driven by automation, robotics, and production reorganization. It also discusses the contemporary challenges faced by trade unions in response to technological, generational, and organizational changes, emphasizing the growing difficulty of maintaining workers' engagement. Finally, the interview reflects on the future of the automotive industry, global productive restructuring, and their impacts on labor relations and workers' organization.

KEYWORDS: Industrial labor. Metalworkers' union. Automotive industry. Trade union movement. Productive restructuring.

RESUMO: O presente relato apresenta trechos de uma entrevista com Wellington Messias Damasceno, realizada em agosto e setembro de 2025 no âmbito do projeto A condição operária revisitada: os trabalhadores da indústria automotiva paulista no início do século XXI. Atual presidente eleito do Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC, Wellington reconstrói sua trajetória, marcada pela influência das lutas operárias, pela formação no SENAI da Volkswagen e pela atuação sindical iniciada na juventude. O depoimento articula memória familiar, qualificação profissional e engajamento político, evidenciando transformações no trabalho industrial decorrentes da automação, da robotização e da reorganização produtiva. Também analisa os desafios contemporâneos do sindicalismo diante das mudanças tecnológicas, geracionais e organizacionais, discutindo as dificuldades de mobilização da base trabalhadora. Por fim, reflete sobre o futuro da indústria automotiva, a reestruturação produtiva global e seus impactos nas relações de trabalho e na organização dos trabalhadores.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Trabalho industrial. Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos. Indústria automotiva. Movimento sindical. Reestruturação produtiva.

RESUMEN: Este relato presenta fragmentos de una entrevista con Wellington Messias Damasceno, realizada en agosto y septiembre de 2025 en el marco del proyecto La condición obrera revisitada: los trabajadores de la industria automotriz paulista a comienzos del siglo XXI. Recientemente elegido presidente del Sindicato de los Metalúrgicos del ABC, Wellington reconstruye su trayectoria profesional y sindical, marcada por el legado de las luchas obreras, su formación en el SENAI de Volkswagen y su temprana participación en el movimiento sindical. Su testimonio articula memoria familiar, formación profesional y compromiso político, al tiempo que analiza las transformaciones del trabajo industrial derivadas de la automatización, la robotización y la reorganización de la producción. Asimismo, examina los desafíos contemporáneos del sindicalismo frente a los cambios tecnológicos, generacionales y organizativos, destacando las dificultades para mantener el vínculo con la base trabajadora. Finalmente, reflexiona sobre el futuro de la industria automotriz, la reestructuración productiva global y sus efectos sobre las relaciones laborales y la organización de los trabajadores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Trabajo industrial. Sindicato de los metalúrgicos. Industria automotriz. Movimiento sindical. Reestructuración productiva.

Presentation

The account presented below refers to excerpts from an interview conducted with Wellington Messias Damasceno. The interview was carried out by the research team of the project ““A condição operária revisitada: os trabalhadores da indústria automotiva paulista no início do século XXI⁵” [The Working-Class Condition Revisited: Workers in São Paulo’s Automotive Industry at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century] and took place on August 29, 2025, and September 1, 2025, with a total duration of 3 hours and 21 minutes.

Wellington Damasceno is an important and promising trade union leader in Brazil, with broad international circulation. At the time of the interview, he was Administrative Director and had recently been elected President of the Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC (SMABC) [Metalworkers’ Union of ABC], taking office in July 2026. Born in 1985, he is expected to be the youngest president to assume this position at SMABC since Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. His trajectory is deeply connected to the metalworking sector and trade unionism in the ABC region of São Paulo. The son of a metalworker, he began his professional training at age 16 in the mechanics course at SENAI (Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial) [National Industrial Apprenticeship Service] inside Volkswagen, the company where he also worked in production beginning in 2003. At the same time, he earned a degree in Law and completed a postgraduate degree in Labor Relations. His path in the movement began in the metalworkers’ youth organization and developed into leadership positions, including terms on Volkswagen’s factory committee, on the board of the Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC [Metalworkers’ Union of ABC], and as Brazil’s representative on Volkswagen’s world workers’ committee.

During a long conversation, the interviewee offers an in-depth reflection on continuities and ruptures in contemporary trade union and working-class experience, providing a fundamental interlocution for research in the fields of industrial labor, the automotive sector, and trade unionism.

In the excerpts selected for this publication, the account connects family memory and professional training with the process of political socialization and union engagement, highlighting the legacy of working-class struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. It then addresses changes inside the factory, marked by automation, robotization, the reorganization of production lines, and the intensification of productivity targets, with direct impacts on everyday work and relations among workers. The testimony also discusses contemporary challenges for

⁵ This research was coordinated by Prof. Iram Jácome Rodrigues and funded by CNPq — National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (grant/process no. 407953/2021-3).

trade union action, especially in the face of new communication technologies, generational changes, and the difficulties of maintaining ties with the working-class base. Finally, it broadens the reflection to the future of the automotive industry and work in general, problematizing discourses about the “end of the car”, global productive restructuring, and the transformations affecting different economic sectors.

The beginning of a factory trajectory: family heritage, training, and the approach to activism

In this first section, Wellington briefly presents his trajectory as a metalworker in the ABC region of São Paulo. His experience is deeply marked by the legacy of the working-class struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. The narrative brings together family memories, social mobility, professional training at Volkswagen’s SENAI [National Industrial Apprenticeship Service], and his approach to trade union and political activism.

Wellington Damasceno: Let’s go. Well, like a large part of the “generation” my age, I am already the son of a metalworker father. I take in the results of the working-class struggle of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. My father was active during that period, especially from 1980 to 1990, so I already belong to the generation that inherited the achievements and improvements in the workplace brought about by that generation. My father, from Minas Gerais, came from Minas to São Paulo, like many stories of male and female workers from that time. He initially started at Mercedes, worked at Mercedes for about 10 years, and left during the 1978 strike. In the ‘78 strike—the major strike at Mercedes—he was fired. In 1980, he joined Volks. My father also has this thing, this privilege, of having worked at two major automakers. My mother, although born in Paraná, is from São Paulo. She was born in Paraná only by coincidence, with the family searching for opportunities. My grandfather was a chemist. And, well, my mother is also that woman whose father went out to work and whose mother took care of the children—in my case, three; I am the oldest of three siblings.

Look, the first thing one can say is how life has changed across generations. My father’s generation created a much better life for, for example, my children today. So, the condition I have, very similar in terms of salary, right? I am not updating it according to the INPC [National Consumer Price Index], no, but rather referring to the company’s own salary scale. So, my position today is very equivalent to the one my father held, and the salaries, in theory,

should be the same. The living conditions my children have are much better than the ones we had, for “n” reasons.

I was born in 1985, so you, especially as scholars, will remember. I was very little, three or four years old, and I was experiencing redemocratization, the constituent assembly, Sarney, the Cruzado Plan, every plan there was... I do not know whether Bresser⁶ belongs to that period, but anyway, we can check that later. Inflation of 100% [...], meat shortages, lines at the market to buy things. These were difficulties my children did not have, even though my father and I were at equivalent levels in the same company, right? Both at Volkswagen. So, I think this is an important context, because we do not value the macro-achievements that resulted from the struggle of a generation; we treat this very automatically or only in terms of the conjuncture, but we do not give importance to what the struggle of that period meant so that we could have a better situation today.

But since you asked about my experience, about how I got into the company: at Volks there is... Volks and Mercedes are the only companies—and those in the ABC region—that have an internal SENAI [National Industrial Apprenticeship Service]. So, SENAI, which we know as providing professional qualification for all of Brazil, has one unit at Volks and one at Mercedes. From the time I was small, since I am the oldest son, I grew up hearing my father talk about that blessed little school inside Volks, where students went, studied, wore uniforms, graduated, received a salary, and ate at the workers’ cafeteria, and so on. So, I grew up with that idea, as many children of Volks employees do, wanting to get into that little school because you would graduate, already have a job, and have a salary at 15 or 16 years old—which is not a very normal reality. So, I think both because of my father’s faith and because I wanted to get in, I entered. I took the SENAI entrance exam and passed Volkswagen’s SENAI. And I will tell you: the competition is tough, okay? In my time there were 30 spots and, I don’t know, about 1,000 applicants; even today there are many people, right? You can compare it to the university entrance exam at USP [University of São Paulo] in terms of candidates per spot, and only children or siblings of workers take that exam. It is not open to the community. Recently, they opened spots for the community and will expand them, but the community spots are outside Volks; they are through the affiliated SENAI, in the standard style we know from other

⁶ The Bresser Plan, launched on June 12, 1987, was an emergency economic measure by the José Sarney administration, led by Minister Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira, to curb hyperinflation, based on a hybrid freeze of prices, wages, and exchange rates.

companies. The internal spots continue to be specifically for children or siblings of workers at Volks. The worker introduces the candidate.

So, that is how I started: at 16, entering SENAI [National Industrial Apprenticeship Service] to study mechanics, I already knew part of the union representation because of my father, right? When I was little, I used to go to the house [...] of Luiz Marinho⁷ and other representatives who were friends of my father, who spent time together and so on; I already came to the union, so I kind of already knew what the union was, knew what the union was, knew what the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) [Workers' Party] was, knew what the PT was. My father ran for city councilor in São Caetano in 1988, right? A crazy thing, but he did—because, at that time, there was also a lot of encouragement, when the PT was being formed, in the first elections, for militants to run in elections, right? My father was a candidate in 1988; I was three years old; my father's campaign workers were my mother, who [...] would ask for votes shyly, hand out the little leaflet shyly. My mother is shy to this day; imagine in 1988. And I, little, three years old, was being dragged along. And family stories are the kind of thing someone always remembers: my mother would hand out the leaflet, and I would see the leaflet with my father's picture on the ground and open my mouth wide crying because I had to pick the little paper up from the floor. I was already practicing recycling back then; I did not want paper to be wasted [laughs].

Other than that, [...] I entered SENAI [National Industrial Apprenticeship Service] at 16; at 18 I graduated from SENAI and went into production [...]. I was lucky to land in an area where there were many union militants, so from then on, I started talking a lot with the people, I started participating in the activism in my area. It was/is the largest area of the factory; it was the area with the greatest union engagement. I started participating in activism and started trying to take part in the metalworkers' youth group, because the agenda came out in the Tribuna and there were youth meetings. So, I said: "Man, I'm going to take part in this thing," and the people really encouraged me to participate. Well, I went to talk to the guy at Volks who was running the youth group, but he was kind of discouraged because he had not passed a preliminary vote to be a candidate for the factory committee; he was kind of angry. I went to talk to him, and he said: "Man, that thing doesn't lead anywhere. Don't even get involved in that [...], forget it." But, since there were people, I came to the union. I said: "I'm going to that

⁷ A Volkswagen worker, trade unionist, and federal congressman (PT-SP), he is a former president of both the ABC Metalworkers' Union and the CUT (Unified Workers' Central). He also served as mayor of São Bernardo do Campo (2009–2016) and is the current Minister of Labor and Employment.

meeting to see what it is about.” I got here and found only three children of God; the meeting had four people. We say things are bad today [...], but they have been worse too, you know? Maicon, whom you know, [...] was the coordinator at the time, and another comrade whose name I do not remember, but who, in fact, left the category a long time ago. Then I started participating, so much so that I even coordinated the youth collective of the federation in our FEM (Federação dos Sindicatos de Metalúrgicos da CUT – Central Única dos Trabalhadores) [Federation of CUT Metalworkers’ Unions – Unified Workers’ Central] even before having a union mandate.

I became coordinator at FEM [Federation of CUT Metalworkers’ Unions] in 2006, and I came into the union mandate on the factory committee at Volks in 2007. So, I took on that role a little earlier. And I served only one term in the coordination because afterward it became a youth secretariat, and then we elected a comrade from Pindamonhangaba. Later, it became a collective again, but, anyway, that period was also very rich. Our metalworkers’ youth group put many issues on the agenda in collective committees; we obtained many clauses in the conventions. So much so that we managed to create the secretariat within the federation [FEM].

Between robots and targets: perceptions of changes in the factory environment

Next, the interviewee addresses the profound transformations that have taken place inside the factory over recent decades, highlighting technological, organizational, and productive changes in industrial labor. Drawing on his experience at Volkswagen, he points to processes of automation and robotization, the reduction in the number of workers, and the intensification of productivity demands, making it possible to understand how productive restructuring has altered everyday factory life, labor relations, and forms of union organization.

Wellington Damasceno: *Look, the change in the factory... that one, someday, if you want, we can schedule a visit for you to go to Volks—since Volks is the factory where I work. Because the factory has changed considerably—considerably! We do not notice it, we do not stop to make these analyses, these reflections, but I will talk about when I entered.*

I joined Volks in 2001, at SENAI [National Industrial Apprenticeship Service], and then I went into production in 2003. In the area where I worked in the yard alone, there were three production lines: there was the line that exists today, which we called the Polo line, and today we call it... today we do not call it anything because it is the only one, but at one time we called

it HB; there was the line that made the third-generation Gol, so I experienced the transition to the fourth generation, the third and fourth generations, which were the old Gol lines, the chain line, right?—later I can explain the difference between one and the other; Santana was also made on that line. Santana used to have its own line, but when I joined it no longer did; it already ran together with the Gol—and, on the ground floor, there was the Kombi line. So that Kombi line has not existed since 2013. When the Kombi stopped in December 2013, that was when the operation ended, the line was dismantled, and the Gol line also no longer exists, the one that had that chain upstairs and the pre-assemblies downstairs.

So, imagine a gigantic area that had three lines—it had more before I joined, but I will not talk about what I did not see—but today there is only one line, which is the line we called the Polo line (and today it does, in fact, make the Polo). And this line produces, in three shifts, something around... the number is 1,161, to be exact, but almost 1,200 vehicles, just so you have a reference. The three lines there, when I joined, did not produce 1,200 cars per day, okay? I think that is also an important difference. Today it produces 830, okay, folks? Today it does not produce 1,200 because there is no interest, but that is another conversation too. But, just to give you this first idea, you had three lines producing different models and with many people on those lines; today, you have just one line producing several different models, so you do not need so many lines to produce different models, with different mixes, and with far fewer workers. Because the Kombi line required a lot of manual [work], the Gol line was intermediate, but there was a robot applying glue to attach the glass; the Kombi line did not have that robot. This new line has the robot that applies glue to the glass, the robot that positions the glass, the robot that removes the door, there is the robot that applies another glue to another glass, you have... we did not go further into this conversation, but there was supposed to be a robot installing wheels. So, there is already a higher level of robotization and automation. Even though this line is not as robotized as others, it already has very high technological levels.

I remember that on the Gol line, for example (where I did work), we would bump into one another; workers lived very close to one another. Today, you begin to see workers farther apart because the line effectively no longer has as many people as the others did—this is about assembly, which is where the largest number of workers in the factory are. If we go to body framing, I got to the Kombi framing area, which had one robot. There was one robot in the Kombi framing area; the rest were all manual operations. There was also the Gol and Saveiro framing area at the time, which already had many robots, but they were still very manual. The

Polo—at that time, the Polo line—was already an innovation with 400 robots; that was a lot. Today, that line has... I would not know the level of automation, but it must certainly be much higher than 80%—much higher! And it is low compared with some other lines, for example. The FIAT line has 97% automation in the body framing and bodywork process, but it is a line where you no longer see that many workers in the process; it is highly robotized.

So, you have this perception of the number of workers versus the quantity of product that comes out. Everyone says: “Ah, Volks produced, in the [1980s], with 38,000 workers, less than it does today [...]”. Those of us who are there every day end up not stopping to evaluate it, but everyone usually says that the main street at Volks, that street that goes up through the middle of the factory, the one in the old photos⁸, with all those people, all that movement of people... today, you hardly see a worker passing by. So, that is what you will notice: the emptying out of factories, changes in organization; you no longer have so many workers loose in the departments, carrying paper around, and you have concentration. You have the use of computing; you reduced [things] with computing and reduced the movement of people because of paper. So, this changes factory organization. Again: we do not stop to reflect on these things, but they are very important reflections for us to understand and even comprehend where we are heading so that we can organize ourselves. So, that is one perception of change.

A second perception is the company’s greater demand regarding what is now called productivity. It has had other names before, but today the nice name, the current name, the trendy one, is productivity. So, you have a daily constant from the company through its engineering departments, and this, in the case of Volks, is negotiated with the union; the union has to monitor it, has to give the “okay,” has to follow the tests, but it is a daily pressure for productivity. What is that, in the end? It is how you use the work, how you remove one screw here, one screw there, one screw over there so that you can reduce one worker. So, in practice, at the end of the day, they have a reduction target, and the reduction is of workers, not just process improvement or speeding up the process. No. Productivity is compared with how many cars you make with X workers. [...] So, this is another process, one that you did not have in such a... I would even say violent way, but today it is explicit, right? It happened, but it happened in a more moderate, more diluted, more disguised way. Today it is not disguised. Today every worker knows that the factory does this and practices this, tests this. In short, this

⁸ This refers to the old photographs displayed in the company’s small museum, which show workers arriving at the Volkswagen factory in previous decades, contrasting sharply with the drastic reduction in the number of employees today.

is something we even talk about on the sound truck; it is provided for in the collective agreements. So, you did not have this so apparent, so laid bare as it is today. I think this is another major difference.

Generations and social media: contemporary challenges for trade union action

Next, Wellington reflects on recent transformations in forms of trade union action and in the relationship between representatives and the working-class base, emphasizing the impacts of digital technologies and generational changes. The account shows how tools such as WhatsApp have altered communication dynamics, intensified demands and, at the same time, produced new challenges for building bonds of trust, collective participation, and workers' identification—especially among younger workers—with the union.

Wellington Damasceno: *Look, I always like to give an answer, but this is an answer that, honestly, I do not know how to give [referring to changes in the factory]. Because, from before, from the accounts of those older than me and later from what I was able to experience, we always have the same contradictions. We are inside the factory every day, walking the line, and every day the worker says we did not go by the line. Honestly, it is very hard for us to go by the same place every day, right? So, in practice, it may take, I don't know, a week for you to see that worker at his workplace.*

I even have a very quick story (because, for me, it illustrates the logic of the shop-floor worker): one day I was at the factory, and I liked to stay in a place I call the Roost. And every time I go there, I stay in that place, because that is where I am, I punch the clock there, so a little line forms there, and I can see people without having to go up into the area. A worker went there, greeted me, gave me a hug, went to work, and I went somewhere else, fine. The next day, I was there again and the guy arrived and said: "Man, it's been a long time since I saw you." I said: "Stop lying, you saw me yesterday!" He laughed, right? And left. Because, in practice... there was a comrade at the factory—he has passed away now, he was from my area too—his name was Benjamin, and I remember him saying in an assembly: "Yeah, every hour someone says: 'Where is Benjamin?' I'm going to buy a bag of benjamins and hand one out to every worker there; everyone will have a Benjamin." [...] Benjamin is that thing you use to plug a bunch of outlets, a bunch of cables, into one socket. So, this is a chronic problem: every time we hold an activism seminar, a food-service seminar, the presence of the representative in the

area comes up. That does not change. The older shop-floor worker complains that we do not go by enough; the younger one also complains—and those ones learn and practice that complaint well.

But, in practice, the older representatives went to the area much more because now there is this “thing” called WhatsApp, which is a tool from hell. And it is bad for two reasons: it is bad because you receive a load of demands that you cannot handle. And here, I cannot handle it, I have already given up; if you look at my WhatsApp now, there are 600 conversations. I can answer about 100 a day, but I answer 100 and 200 more arrive. I never catch up. I say: “Folks, if you want to talk to me, call me, do anything, but WhatsApp just doesn’t work.” But internal representatives receive a lot of demands through WhatsApp, so much that they cannot handle them. One thing is to walk the line; he will pick up a lot of demands on that line and then leave the place and dispatch the demands. Some demands you solve quickly, some will require negotiation, some will take time, some will not be solved. I have a demand to open up the wall, put a window in the wall there in the area; I have had this demand for 10 years. It will not be solved unless they tear down the building, I don’t know, but it exists. So, with WhatsApp, demands come from everywhere, in every way, and at every hour. You no longer have the representative from the first shift, “we’ll go there and talk on the first shift.” Because he will receive demands... his phone number is on the board; my phone number is also there on the board. So, if someone wants to demand something from me, they will. So, first: it increased too much; we lost control, the organization we had, kind of this natural division of receiving and forwarding demands. So, WhatsApp has already tied our heads in knots.

The second is that WhatsApp sometimes, with reason and sometimes without reason, has also made the representative a little “lazier”: not going to the area because the demand is already complete. If he stays seated there, his WhatsApp will ring and through WhatsApp itself he will be able to forward the demand; he will not need to go to the department, he can send it on. And this has created a certain accommodation for the representative, which is not good. This is one of the things I argue a lot about with the guys there. I say: “People, okay. We know the demand arrives, we know there is a lot to dispatch, but do not give up contact with the shop-floor workers.” Contact is irreplaceable; this thing of talking to the person, reaching out to the person, showing empathy with their problems, that is irreplaceable; the cell phone does not solve that, WhatsApp does not allow you to be empathetic. So, this is an important change in the union relationship because, again, the worker no longer needs to find you to talk to you. In

the beginning, a message was one thing, but you could not talk to the person by phone. I would send a message asking the person to get back to me; today, no. Today, the message has become something instant: I send you a message and you are necessarily required to answer me. If you do not answer in 10 minutes, the guy seems to feel ignored, or whatever, and gets angry.

So, this changes the worker's profile in setting the agenda for the representative, and it changes the way the representative deals with the worker and with the company itself. You have a great deal of interaction with the worker, but you create fewer bonds of trust with the worker. Even if you receive the WhatsApp messages, answer the WhatsApp messages, solve the WhatsApp problem, you have less of that perception of trust, of direct interaction. This may be... we have not yet experienced this in an acute way, but it may lead to fragmentation when you need to organize a mass movement. I have that concern. Again: I cannot give you an example of whether this has happened or whether it will happen. The times we have called the workers, they have responded, but I feel that this may create a distance between us and the base to the point that, when we need to hold a mass action, we may have difficulty because of the lack of closeness or empathy between the representative and the represented.

Other than that, there are the general problems, and I would say that younger people...—I have a lot of difficulty saying this because I do not have this... When I was in the factory, it was much more noticeable; I could produce these statistical data in my own head or these social assessments (although I am not a sociologist) in my own head as well, better. Today I have more difficulty measuring this, but it seems to me that, in the same way young people have this thing of not going... “Oh, I don't want to have a car,” but not all young people. In the same way that they say: “Oh, I'll just get around by app, I use Uber, I order food through iFood, I do whatever,” it also shows that the union seems to have become something very old, very archaic, very different from the world of younger people. But, again: I am only saying that this may be the case; I cannot say that it is. Because we have many young people affiliated with the union. Our unionization rate does not change because someone is young; it is very similar. Young people participate in assemblies, participate in actions. And now we have difficulty bringing young people when we call a union plenary. We see that the plenary has many more workers over 40 than under 40. So, I am not even taking a youth cut-off, okay? I am cutting it at up to 40.

So, perhaps, I would say that, looking at the snapshot, you have more difficulty bringing young people into this type of movement. Now, I do not know how young people identify—or do not identify—with the union, and how much they find it problematic that the union structure is

more outdated, from a technological point of view, than other tools they have in their hands. I cannot say that. But it is a fact that unions—and this is a criticism—are very, very, very bureaucratized organizations, and young people today do not like bureaucratized structures. Because the internet, the cell phone and, now, artificial intelligence give you very close access to things. So, the perception of de-bureaucratization is very strong, and the union conveys a perception of a lot of bureaucratization, even where it is not. But it seems that way. We are very verticalized, very much this thing of “Oh, you have to go there and so on,” few digital tools. So, I still cannot measure it, but I think we will still have a major problem ahead of us in relation to this.

From the factory to the office: the relationship between the union and the administrative sector

In the excerpt below, the interviewee addresses the persistent difficulty of bringing the union closer to workers in the administrative sector, showing how this relationship has developed very little over time, despite changes in the composition of factories. Based on comparisons among different industrial plants and on an analysis of the distribution between production and administrative workers, the account discusses the mismatch between the structure of union representation and changes in the profile of the category, pointing to the growing challenges of incorporating this increasingly numerous segment into union agendas, practices, and forms of organization.

Wellington Damasceno: *Look, those [relations between the union and the administrative sector] remain as bad as they have always been. We have not yet managed to make progress on this point, which is a debate we have been having in the union for at least 20 years. I will be very brief here, but I will say three things to keep it simple. Our level of unionization in administrative sectors remains the same as it was in the 1980s, in percentage terms. It is the same. The problem is that factories have changed. At Volks here, you had 38,000 workers, 35,000 in production. Today you have 8,000 workers, 2,000 in administration. So, the proportion has changed a great deal. Comrade Flávio Benites⁹ was here and spoke about the Volks factory in Wolfsburg. You had 60,000 workers, 45,000 in production, 15,000 in*

⁹ President of IG Metall Wolfsburg, Germany.

administration—that was in the 2000s. And today, 20 years later, you have 45,000 in administration and 15,000 in production.

This is not only in Germany. When Toyota was here in São Bernardo, it had 1,500 workers (it closed, but it had 1,500 workers): 300 in production and 1,200 in administration. If you go to Toledo here in São Bernardo, I will not be able to give you the exact number—I can even send it later—but two thirds of the factory are administrative. In other companies, newer companies included, this characteristic is even stronger. And this is to say that the number of workers has grown in administration, but our unionization numbers [in this sector] have not grown. And our level of representation is low. And I am no longer talking only about unionization; I am talking about union action, whether from the point of view of dialogue, from the point of view of these workers' participation in union activities, or from the point of view of clauses in collective agreements that deal directly with the needs of this public.

So, look, I am talking about very different things, but they complement one another. If we take any collective convention of this union or collective agreements produced by this union, we will see many things there that are characteristic of production workers. Little refers to administrative workers. You might say: “No, but the things are general.” Yes, they are general, but the general items are very similar to the demand profile of shop-floor workers, even if they may also serve administrative workers. Now, it is unlikely that you will see something and say: “Wait, this is an agenda that emerged from, or is specific to, administrative workers.” It is unlikely you will have that. Very unlikely. Perhaps you will see there a digital basket for workers who work from home, or a work-from-home agreement, [...] a payroll-deducted loan for home-office furniture, but very much because of working from home, and very little because of their specificities: working directly with the boss, not having space, not being able to go to the assembly, or thinking about a virtual assembly.

So, this already shows you the distance the union has from them, because if it were closer, it would certainly be gathering more demands, more needs, more of the feeling of what is necessary, and would be connecting the union. And even in the representations, when you look at the representations, they all have administrative workers; it is almost like a water glass, right? At Volks, we have three; we have the Organização Pelo Trabalhador Administrativo [Organization for Administrative Workers], and you have the representatives of monthly salaried workers. At Mercedes you have the administrative worker; at Ford there was the administrative worker; in other smaller companies you no longer have this figure, perhaps there may even be workers from that area, but not directed toward that area [...]. We are talking

about people from the administrative sector who have passed through here, who tried to organize a collective in the union of monthly salaried workers, of administrative workers, just as we organize collectives for youth, women, and people with disabilities to try to organize an agenda. Even so, you can see that it did not evolve; it even came to an end. There are no longer meetings with these workers, and to this day we have not managed to sit down even minimally to hold a workshop and debate how the union looks at this sector, which in a short time should be the majority of our category. The trend in our category is for production workers to decrease because you have process digitization, implementation of new technologies, and everything else; so production workers decrease and administrative workers increase for the same reason, because you have the implementation of technological levels that demand a more qualified worker, and this more qualified worker is an administrative worker. So, this is a challenge placed before us; we just need to get out of “bed” and, in fact, face the challenge.

The future of industry and work: impacts on union organization

Finally, Wellington analyzes more broadly the future of the automotive industry and of work, problematizing contemporary discourses about the “end of the car” and the replacement of traditional industry by new mobility models, while also discussing the effects of digitization, automation, and the recent crisis of work on different economic sectors, highlighting the persistence of inequalities and the speed of ongoing transformations in social and productive organization.

Wellington Damasceno: *Look, regarding the automobile issue, I have a question for you, since you are researchers, scientists, and so on. Everyone says that the new generation no longer wants to own a car and so forth. I think this has a lot to do with the future of the automotive industry. First, the automotive industry will continue to exist; it will adapt, but it will continue to exist. Because cars will continue to exist; whether [the person] buys the car or requests a ride in a car through an app, the car will be there, so this will continue to exist. Each company, at a certain point, began to change its name and said: “No, we do not sell cars, we sell mobility,” and then they began to set up... create vehicle rental companies. Some effectively began to provide sharing services, but they also began to pull back, okay?*

What I do not think—if we take a country like ours, and this is a very personal opinion—is that we have such a homogeneous society that everyone can no longer want to own a car, or

everyone can no longer want to have a formal employment record, or everyone can no longer want to work in industry. These are those great truths we hear. You turn on the radio and hear that. I do not think so; I think we have a bit of everything. You have children of generations that were consistently evolving in terms of wages and improvements in living conditions. We always say: "Today's metalworker is different from the metalworker of the past." I told you that, comparing myself with my father. So, it is very possible that my children will not want to work in industry; it is very possible, because I wanted to work in industry, but my experience was one thing, and my children's experience is another. I am also giving them possibilities to dream about things I never even imagined dreaming of. So, it is possible that they will not want to work in industry, just as it is possible that we will hand over such a bad world to the next generation that they may want to return to industry, to see whether they can fix what we are ruining today.

So, it is difficult to say this. I am saying this, but there is someone close to me who cannot stand opening a laptop and holding a meeting like this, online, right? And who is struggling to bring food home for his child; and perhaps, for him, working in industry is a dream, right? He did not have the opportunity to get training, because "oh, nobody wants to work in industry." Fine, but there are lots of people who want to work in industry, and the guy says: "No, you do not have qualifications." Damn, but the guy was not given the opportunity to qualify, and he wants to work, and then you say he does not want to. Then, on Saturday, talking here with my family, with some cousins of mine, one said: "Yeah, 3,000 vacancies and nobody wants to work"—because a piece of news like that had come out. I said: "But how is that?"; "No, there is the baker, the bakery, and the guy said he has to provide a baker's course to work there." Then I said: "But what is the salary?"; "Oh, it did not say." I said: "Then go there and see; maybe you can go work there." "No, not me, I work." "You do not want it, but you want it for someone else, right?"

So, there is this issue that I have also already mentioned to you. I will take Brazil as an example, but it is not only Brazil; this subject is not exclusive to Brazil. Wages are extremely depressed, and the post-pandemic period was much worse for workers: working conditions, demands increased, wages fell, but the cost of living rose. And I am saying that this is not exclusive to Brazil because when you go to Europe, for example, [...] the cost of living increased and wages in Europe did not keep up either. So, of course, the salary compared with ours is very discrepant, but for their reality, the cost of energy, the cost of food, and the inflation they were not used to also generated a [problem] that they are not used to either.

So, returning to the question, I think the automotive industry will keep reinventing itself: it will move toward combustion cars, electric cars, hybrid cars, or cars associated with this mobility service, but it will continue to be a very strong industry, very present in our lives. It is not because I work in the automotive industry that I am passionately in love with it, but it is effectively an industry with a very long chain. So, clearly, national governments will always seek to preserve automotive industries because of these chains' capacity to generate jobs and taxes. Second, they have a very great capacity for technical and scientific development and generate a great deal of research, development, and innovation. And third, because we need to get around, and I do not think that... although flying cars are now in vogue, with many people talking about them, I do not think flying cars are something we will commonly see. I do not think so. So, we will still need cars, trucks, and buses to continue making this mobility possible.

Now, the world of work will change, right? Again: there is an enormous difference between the electric car and the combustion car—not only in the car itself, not only in the issue of emissions, but in the production and manufacturing process. If a combustion car has 60% more components and parts than an electric car—I am talking about the lower part, not the upper part—if the lower part of a combustion car has 60% more parts and components compared with the electric car, when factories [all] migrate to electric cars, that 60% is not only 60% of workers at the automaker; it is 60% of auto-parts companies that will simply disappear, as in the emblematic case, the emblematic case, not to mention Brosol¹⁰, right? So, look how many “Brosols” will disappear along the way. Mahle, which is a company here in our base, [...] produces bearing shells, and bearing shells are used in truck combustion engines. The day the truck no longer has a combustion engine, bearing shells will no longer be manufactured, so this Mahle will stop... either it will produce some part for the electric car or it will stop producing.

So, if I am not mistaken, [...] the question goes back to those challenges you mentioned earlier in the question: the difficulty we are having today is understanding where work in society is heading. I am saying this here... since your question refers to the automotive sector, but when we go to banking—which has already been going through technological innovations for much longer than the automotive sector—you go to branches and almost no longer see workers. In fact, I was with some colleagues at a lecture on Thursday, and there were some girls accompanying the comrade from Sorocaba, and the guy said: “Oh, the bank and so on,” and the girl said: “But I have never been inside a bank!” She is in her twenties and has never

¹⁰ Brosol is an originally Brazilian automotive distributor (auto parts), currently owned by the Stellantis Group.

been inside a bank. Today, the bank is not even anymore... look at these fintechs, what are they? They are banks without physical branches, so you no longer have the bank, you do not have the figure of the bank worker, which was once a very important category.

When we look at commerce, you have these self-service systems today. You go to the market and can choose the checkout with a person, but you can also go there yourself, pay for your purchase, and leave. But back in the 1990s, they had already tried to implement this at Carrefour, with gas stations, do you remember? In Europe it is like that, right? You go there yourself, fill up yourself, and leave. When I talked about this Industry 4.0 thing [...] I always gave examples of some stores that still exist in São Paulo, where you enter the store, pick up your product, leave the store, and do not talk to anyone, do not pass through any [place]; simply, when you enter, there is already recognition, they already recognize you, recognize you and your credit card, you take something from the shelf and leave, it recognizes that you left with that product, and that product already goes to your bill. I talked about this back in 2017, 2018, 2019, so that was 6 or 7 years ago.

See, the world is changing, and not only in industry. We are used to productive restructuring in industry, change in industry. No: there is a change taking place in commerce and services that is much more advanced and has much deeper effects than in industry itself. That is why I mentioned the difficulty of discussing the organization of work, because we do not know how fast this will move next year. It is no longer about the next decade; it is about what the big novelty will be next year, which will create turmoil in the way we organize work, but also in the way we organize society. Society is reorganizing itself very quickly. We are living through the transformation, but whoever writes about this transformation of ours may say: "Man, they lived through a social transformation that took, I don't know, 30 years, while previous generations perhaps took 300 years to reach that degree of deepening change in the way we organize ourselves as a society." Imagine work in the midst of all this "mess," right?

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