

Class coalitions or struggles within the working class? Social unrest in India and Brazil during the global crisis

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ABSTRACT

Here we compare strikes and their links to political protest movements in Brazil and India. We highlight the fact that large strike waves in the automobile industry (India) and the construction and public sectors (Brazil) preceded the emergence of political protest movements with significant middle-class involvement. These movements were directed against corruption and also, in the Brazilian case, against public transport fare hikes, the state of the public sector and the government in general. A key difference was that workers in India were more politicised than workers in Brazil; however, for the street protests, the reverse was true: Whereas the Indian activists just lambasted corruption, the Brazilian movement had a broader political agenda.

KEYWORDS

India, Brazil, Strike waves, Political protest movements, Middle-class involvement

I Introduction

In the past five to ten years many of the emerging economies experienced considerable social unrest – a fact that sits awkwardly with the success stories of rising powers from the global south that were promulgated by numerous social scientists, among them left-wing and progressive ones.¹ In this text, I will look closely at the relationship between mass strikes and street protests and its implications for class politics, focussing on the recent protest movements in India and Brazil. Both countries are emerging global powers with high rates of economic growth that have experienced huge social protests in recent years. While the street protests in both countries attracted a lot of international attention, the mass strikes have only been covered in the national media.

Two things are striking about my cases: first, they go against John Saul's claim² that whereas strikes are organised by the working class, street protests are forms of resistance used by precarious workers, the underclass and the lumpenproletariat. The working class was indeed responsible for organising mass strikes, which often included violent outbursts. However, more precarious strata were at their forefront. In contrast, the street protests, which were more ambivalent in a political sense, were carried predominantly by the middle classes.³ Second, my cases contradict the dominant descriptions of the recent protest movements by "progressive" intellectuals, who largely ignore the strike movements.⁴ In fact, there is a stark contrast between recent events

¹ SCHMALZ, Stefan; EBENAU, Matthias. Ebenau. "Brasilien, Indien und China: Unterschiedliche Transformationspfade in der Krise". In: NÖLKE, Andreas; MAY, Christina; CLAAR, Simone (eds.). *Die großen Schwellenländer*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013, pp. 43-60; MAY, Christian. "Die Dissoziation der BRICs im finanzierten Kapitalismus". *Peripherie*, n. 130/131, 33. Jg., 2013, p. 264.

² SAUL, John S. "Neue Formen des Widerstands. Proletariat, Prekariat und die afrikanischen Aussichten". *Peripherie*. N. 136, 34. Jg., 2014, pp. 487-507.

³ SITAPATI, Vinay. "What Anna Hazare's Movement and India's New Middle Classes Say about Each Other". *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 46, No. 30, July 23, 2011, pp. 39-44; BANERJEE, Sumanta., "Anna Hazare, Civil Society and the State". *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 46, n. 36, December 3, 2011, pp. 12-14; VISVANATHAN, Shiv. "Anna Hazare and the Battle Against Corruption". *Cultural Critique*. No. 81, 2012, pp. 103-111; ESTANQUE, Elisio. "Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)". *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*. n. 103, Maio 2014, pp. 53-80.

⁴ HARDT, Michael; NEGRI, Antonio. *Demokratie! Wofür wir kämpfen*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2012; KRAUSHAAR, Wolfgang. *Der Aufruhr der Ausgebildeten*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012; CASTELLS, Manuel. *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

and the period of the late 1960s. Then, middle-class students started protests, which were most marked in the US, Mexico, France, Germany and Italy. The working class followed suit in some countries with major strike movements, predominantly in France, Germany and Italy, but also in Portugal, Spain and Brazil. In the 2010s, this pattern was reversed: huge strike movements preceded street protests of the middle classes in Egypt, China/Hongkong as well as India and Brazil. It is only recently that accounts of the recent waves of protests have emerged that capture this dynamic.⁵

My aim in this text is to establish the differences between strikes as working class protests and interclass street protests dominated by the middle class, in particular the diverging processes of organisation and politicisation connected to them. In contrast to authors like Saul,⁶ I do not intend to make a general trans-historical statement on which different groups and classes are using which means of political mobilisation.⁷ Instead, I discuss protest movements in a specific historical conjuncture in two countries in order to show that general and transhistorical assumptions about means of mobilisation do not hold. In other words, my analysis refers exclusively to two countries in a specific conjuncture.

Nonetheless, this conjunctural analysis is based on certain non-conjunctural theoretical assumptions: in this respect, I distinguish between a structural class determination and classes as political forces.⁸ With reference to Becker, I contend that classes as structural formations can become the basis for classes as political forces, but that this is not always the case. Political articulations are determined by structurally inscribed class positions, but nonetheless they may constitute themselves as religious or cultural conflicts or may be over-determined by other processes of political formation. I agree with Erik Olin

⁵ NOWAK, Jörg. "Massenstreiks im Bausektor Brasiliens zwischen 2011 und 2014". *SozialGeschichte Online*. n. 17, 2015, pp. 15-50; BEWERNITZ, Torsten. "Globale Krise - globale Streikwelle? Zwischen den ökonomischen und demokratisch-politischen Protesten herrscht keine zufällige Gleichzeitigkeit". *PROKLA*, Vol. 44. n. 4, 2014, pp. 513- 529; KARATASLI, Sahan Savas; SEFIKA, Kumral; SCULLY, Ben; UPADHYAY, Smriti. "Class, Crisis, and the 2011 Protest Wave. Cyclical and Secular Trends in Global Labour Unrest". In: WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel; CHASE-DUNN, Christopher; SUTER, Christian (eds.). *Overcoming Global Inequalities*. London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 184-200.

⁶ SAUL, John S. "Neue Formen des Widerstands. Proletariat, Prekariat und die afrikanischen Aussichten". Op. Cit.

⁷ South Africa is Saul's country of reference. Obviously, certain groups of precarious workers in the country have recently been organising street protests while others took part in the strike action at South African mines.

⁸ POULANTZAS, Nicos. *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. London: New Left Books, 1975; BECKER, Uwe. "Zum Status der Klassentheorie und der klassentheoretisch fundierten Politikanalyse – heute" (1984). In: THIEN, Hans-Günter (Hg.). *Klassen im Postfordismus*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2010, pp. 23-45.

Wright that the largest part of waged workers belong to the working class, but that there are also middle classes existing alongside the bourgeoisie in the classical sense, which have a contradictory class position: the middle classes are not only composed by small entrepreneurs, but also different groups of white-collar workers and engineers with leading positions both in the private and the public sector.⁹

The thesis put forward in this text is that the contradictory class position of the middle classes has an effect on their choice of forms of protest. Middle-class protests are more short-lived, but often more visible than the protests of the working class. Importantly, the middle classes tend to sway between radical left and conservative political orientations – in often surprising twists and turns. Connected to this is an assertion that is backed up by the results of my fieldwork: the protests of the working classes appearing mainly in the form of strikes show a greater degree of consistency and coherence. The different characteristics of the forms of protest explain why working and middle classes find it hard to forge permanent political coalitions.

In order to gather information on the mass strikes in India and Brazil, I started a research project in the summer of 2013. The information I found is from media reports, secondary literature, and political writings. Furthermore, I conducted 60 interviews in India between October 2013 and January 2014, and 75 interviews in Brazil between July and October 2014. In the following, I will first present a detailed overview on the strike and protest movements in each countries and describe their specific contexts. After that, I will spell out the implications of my findings for class politics and class theory.

India: Revolts in Automotive Factories and “India Against Corruption”

Liberalisation and the rise of Hindu nationalism

India has been witnessing a twin development since the early 1990s: in 1991 the domestic market of India was opened, which led to processes of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. Around the same time, the mass mobilisations of the Hindu nationalists began, predominantly organised by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). These mobilisations escalated into the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya and the Mumbai riots in December 1992, in the course of which more than 2,000 people were killed. Thus, the economic liberalisation and the ascent of Hindu nationalism ran in parallel. The BJP won a considerable number of additional seats in the parliament during this

⁹ WRIGHT, Erik Olin. *Class, Crisis and the State*, London: New Left Books, 1978, p. 62.

period of community-level polarisation, jumping from 85 to 182 seats (out of a total of 545) in the lower house (Lok Sabha) between 1989 to 1998. In the same period, economic liberalisation was accompanied by considerable GDP growth, and the trade unions and the Indian left were weakened significantly. During the first government led by the BJP between 1998 and 2004, the party refrained from triggering further religious polarisation; however, it continued to pursue an aggressive, neoliberal path of economic development. Its plan for a wide-ranging flexibilisation of the labour market caused a protest wave in 2003 that was the basis for the return of the Congress Party into national government in 2004, where it remained for the next ten years. On the whole, the Congress Party continued with employer-friendly politics. Nevertheless, it introduced social transfers for the rural population for the first time, most importantly the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA, 2005), which is supposed to guarantee a minimum wage and a form of limited unemployment insurance. The development of wages in India can be characterised by two contradictory tendencies: while the median income has been rising, inequality between different regional states as well as within regional states has been increasing massively since the year 2000.

Between 2005 and 2009, widespread labour unrest occurred in factories in the industrial belt south of New Delhi, primarily in motorbike and automobile factories. In June 2011, protests against corruption and strikes at the biggest passenger car producer Maruti Suzuki were escalating at the same time. The BJP won the national elections in spring 2014. The main causes of discontent with the Congress-led government were the economic recession in 2013, price hikes in electric energy and vegetables and new revelations concerning corruption. Today, the BJP holds 281 seats in the lower house, which represents, for the first time in the history of India, an absolute majority for this party at the national level. Over the medium term, the increasing flexibilisation of the labour market appears to have concurred with the ascent of the BJP, which displays an image of a right-wing, religious and market-friendly party.

Revolts in car factories

During recent years, employment of contract labour has become a contentious issue and a key reason for the increasing labour unrest. While strikes and protests are common global phenomena but violence and killing is not at all justifiable under any circumstances as it is a pure case of disruption of law and order situation. This surge in violence disturbing industrial relations has become a concerning situation for all.

All India Organisation of Employers, November 2012

The automotive industry in India saw a rapid development in the 2000s: production rose from 1.3 to 4.1 million cars per year between 2001 and 2012.¹⁰ Today, India is the sixth biggest producer of passenger cars and utility vehicles worldwide. Moreover, the country is in second position after China in the production of motorcycles, with an output of 14 million bikes per year. During the period in which the production of passenger cars quadrupled, the medium real wage in the industry decreased by about 25 per cent.¹¹

What had happened? The restructuring in the Maruti company explains the process behind it: India's biggest producer of passenger cars, Maruti Suzuki, had been a joint venture between the Indian government and the Japanese multinational corporation Suzuki; since 2007, it has been under majority control of the Suzuki Motor Corporation. In 2000-1, there was a conflict at Maruti Suzuki in its sole factory at that time, which was located in Gurgaon south of New Delhi. This conflict set the future path of the industry. Several thousand workers were offered a "voluntary" retirement scheme – to which they reacted over several months with strikes and assemblies in front of the factory. In the end, the corporation prevailed and installed a subservient trade union in the factory, so that the number of contract workers rose rapidly.¹² This model of labour relations was established throughout the industry in the course of the 2000s. Today, permanent workers in the automotive industry represent about 30 to 50 per cent of the workforce; in ancillary industries, the number is only 3 to 5 per cent. In 2005, the first big conflict of a new cycle of struggles occurred in the factory of Honda Motorcycles (HMSI) in Manesar, a new industrial area at that time. This strike was supported both by permanent and contract workers; however, it ended with wage hikes for permanent workers while contract workers did not see a betterment of their conditions. In the period between 2005 and 2009, the initiative of the contract workers proved decisive for strike movements, and the division between contract and permanent workers remained quite effective. This situation emerged in a *de facto* alliance of management, traditional trade unions and

¹⁰ OICA (International Organisation of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers), 2012: Production Statistics, [<http://www.oica.net/category/production-statistics/2012-statistics/>]. Accessed 07/03/2014.

¹¹ PUDR (Peoples Union for Democratic Rights). *Driving Force. Labour Struggles and Violation of Rights in Maruti Suzuki India Limited*, 2013, p.6. [<http://www.pudr.org/?q=content/driving-force-labour-struggles-and-violation-rights-maruti-suzuki-india-limited>]. Accessed 28/05/2014.

¹² PUDR. *Hard Drive. Working Conditions at Maruti Udyog Limited*, 2001. [<http://www.pudr.org/?q=content/hard-drive-working-conditions-maruti-udyog-ltd>] Accessed 02/06/2014.

permanent workers. It was the strike at Maruti Suzuki in 2011 that disrupted this pattern of conflict.

The labour unrest that has been taking place at Maruti Suzuki since 2011 is widely regarded as the peak of industrial militancy in the car industry, but it was accompanied by other confrontations elsewhere. In 2007, production started in a second Maruti factory, which was located in the Industrial Model Town (IMT) Manesar. In this factory, workers were younger than in the mother plant, and 70 per cent were contract workers, trainees or apprentices – all in all, 4,000 workers who are all male. The wage difference between permanent and contract workers was narrower than in other factories: in 2011, contract workers earned around 6,000 Rupees a month (85 Euros), and permanent workers 12-14,000 Rupees (170 to 200 Euros).

There was wide-spread discontent among workers due to the high work speed in full automatic production (a car leaves the assembly line every 45 seconds) and health problems caused by a lack of adequate breaks. They founded a new trade union, the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU). Importantly, the registration of a new union in the regional state of Haryana requires approval by management (as an informal rule) – despite the fact that this is illegal. Furthermore, permanent and contract workers are not allowed to be members of the same trade union, due to the Trade Union Act. If the contract workers form a separate union, they will only be able to negotiate with their contractor, not with the principal employer.

In this situation, the bosses of Maruti Suzuki tried to force the workers to become members of a puppet union called Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU) that had been installed in the first plant in Gurgaon. As a reaction, 3,000 workers went on strike on 4 June 2011. Notably, the strike was a joint action of contract and permanent workers, although the conflict was about the union of permanent workers that contract workers could not join. Part of it was the occupation of the factory. On 17 June, the factory occupation ended with a compromise, and the management assured the workers that their trade union could be registered.

However, in early October 2011, a second occupation took place when more than 1,100 contract workers were locked out. This time, the permanent workers fought for the contract workers. Workers also occupied three other Suzuki factories located nearby. At around 15 suppliers, workers joined the strike for two days. In order to avoid violent confrontations, the workers left the factories after two weeks, but continued with their strike in four factories until 21 October. While a second agreement with management was

negotiated, the leadership of MSEU was bought out under the threat of prison charges.

Finally, in March 2012, it was possible to register the new union, which was called Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU). Negotiations between the MSWU and management followed, but were broken off on 14 July because the employers refused to make concessions. A fight between a foreman and a worker over break times triggered an uprising in the factory, which left more than 50 managers hospitalised. Furthermore, parts of the factory were set on fire, and one manager died in the flames.

After the confrontation, the factory remained closed for a month, and management dismissed 1,800 contract and 500 permanent workers in an arbitrary fashion. Furthermore, the police arrested 147 workers, some of whom were on holidays or were off sick on the day of the uprising. All these 147 workers including the union leadership were under arrest until spring 2015, for almost three years. Until January 2016, 35 workers remained in jail.¹³

After the Manesar plant reopened, the wages of permanent workers were increased significantly – to around 30,000 Rupees. The bulk of contract workers is no longer employed with one of the 60 sub-contractors that used to operate at the plant, but with Maruti. Their wages have risen to 12,000 Rupees. Importantly, the difference between the wages of the two groups has grown considerably. It seems that the management aims for a closer relationship with permanent workers.

The conflicts that occurred at Maruti Suzuki reveal a transformation of working-class struggles in the industrial belt around New Delhi. The workers understood that only a common resistance of contract and permanent workers could lead to success, and that occupations exert more pressure than strikes in front of factory gates:

It was a constant class war. Permanent workers were an organised force but the contract workers always remain insecure about their job. And the management tried very hard to intimidate a section of contract workers using all sorts of tricks. But the uniqueness of the Maruti Suzuki struggle was that we could strike a unity between contract workers and permanent workers. That scared the management because this practice is all over India. They divide the contract and permanent workers. So there is an

¹³ For a detailed analysis for the conflicts at Maruti Suzuki, see NOWAK, Jörg. “Strikes and Labour Unrest in the Automobile industry in India - the case of Maruti Suzuki India Limited”. *WorkingUSA*. Vol. 19, N. 4, 2016, in print.

emerging unity between contract and permanent workers, it is a sign of upcoming danger for capitalists.¹⁴

In addition, the workers were able to build networks with workers from other factories that often formed part of the same supply chain. However, they did not succeed in mobilising workers at the second plant in Gurgaon. Furthermore, the MSWU remained under the influence of more established unions like AITUC during the occupations in 2011:

None of the trade unions helped us fully. They supported us half-heartedly. They just kept assuring us of help but practically did nothing”.¹⁵

Maruti union was an independent union but we didn't have any experience of trade union activities. Initially we didn't know the character of these big trade unions like HMS and AITUC. They supported us and we too accepted their support. But later on there were some compromises with the company and they were handled by these unions. Later on we could see the double game of these unions. (...) We think an independent union is fine. (...) It is better to remain independent.¹⁶

Eventually, the MSWU became more and more independent from the central trade union federations and increasingly favoured broad coalitions. It has good links to company unions in Gurgaon, but also to intellectuals like Arundhati Roy and to other social movement actors like radical student groups, Maoist organisations and parties, Bolshevik trade unions of rural workers, etc. The union managed to instigate the creation of networks all over the Indian subcontinent: in the course of 2013, two national days of action for the Maruti workers were held in more than 20 cities. All in all, the union pursues a social movement unionism strategy that does not fit into the established patterns focussing solely on negotiations with management. The success of this political approach to mobilisation is also reflected in the results of the union elections that took place at the two Maruti plants in April 2014: the MSWU received the absolute majority of votes in both factories, and gained 11 out of 12 seats on the workers' committee in Manesar, and five out of six seats of union representatives at the other factory in Gurgaon.

After the uprising at Maruti Suzuki, other mobilisations in the sector followed: in the summer of 2013, the second biggest motorbike producer in India, Bajaj Auto, saw a 50-day strike in Pune. In the spring of 2014, Toyota Kirloskar, which is located close to Bangalore, experienced a one-month strike. However, in neither case, the workers made real gains. Two longer

¹⁴ Maruti Worker 9, interview 26/01/2014.

¹⁵ Maruti Worker 2, interview 5/12/2013.

¹⁶ Maruti Worker 9, interview 26/01/2014.

occupations in the industrial belt of New Delhi occurred, one in three factories of Napino Auto ended with a wage agreement, and another at Shiram Pistons & Rings in April and May 2014 ended with police interventions and mass arrests. New protests of contract workers at Maruti Suzuki in Manesar flared up in September 2015. All in all, workers have only achieved small improvements. Given a food price inflation of 20 per cent and an official rate of inflation of about 6.5 per cent from 2011 onwards, the wage hikes at Maruti for contract workers translate into a modest increase of real wages, but not into a qualitative leap. In contrast, the new forms of cooperation of workers across different companies and union federations can be regarded as a leap at the organisational level.

In conclusion, the driving force of strikes since the mid-2000s have been contract workers who cannot be represented by unions of permanent workers because of the Indian system of industrial relations, which reinforces existing divisions in the workforce. It was predominantly the strikes in the automobile sector that became an object of public debate due to massive police interventions and violent protests of workers. The political significance of labour unrest increased with the strike at Maruti thanks to it being a multinational enterprise and the biggest passenger producer nationwide. The arbitrary arrests by police and the inaction of labour courts were discussed in mainstream newspapers, which highlighted the fact that the law was bent in favour of the employers in the wake of the conflicts at Maruti Suzuki.

'India against Corruption' and a new political party

In November and December 2010, a number of corruption scandals roused the public: the irregular access of military veterans to housing (the “Adarsh Housing Society scam”), the irregular access of wealthy individuals to real estate credit and faked auctions of mobile communication licenses (the “2G spectrum scam”). In late December 2010, 20,000 people demonstrated in New Delhi against corruption. A month later, protests against corruption took place in 52 Indian cities, and in mid-January 2011 top managers like Keshub Mahindra voiced their disapproval of corruption in an open letter. On 27 February 2011, 100,000 people gathered for a protest in New Delhi. The most prominent leader of the movement, Anna Hazare, had been fighting against corruption in Maharashtra since the 1990s, initially targeting the right-wing parties Shiv Sena and BJP in 1997-8 and later conducting a death fast against the centre-left Nationalist Congress Party, a split-off from Congress. In 2011, Hazare voiced his support for the presidential candidate of the BJP, Narendra Modi, but later withdrew it. His tactics resemble those of his idol Mahatma

Gandhi, but have been criticised frequently by Dalits and leftists for their association with “upper caste Hindu values” and the urban middle class.¹⁷

In April 2011, Hazare staged a public hunger strike in the centre of New Delhi and demanded a Jan Lokpal Bill – a law that establishes a control commission monitoring corruption, composed of government and civil society representatives. Support for the movement came both from the BJP and from left parties, but for Hazare the distance from all political parties was an integral part of his protest. Soon after, the Congress Party gave in and integrated five leaders of the movement into a committee tasked with discussing the implementation of a Jan Lokpal Bill, among them Hazare and Arvind Kerjriwal.

In early June 2011, another important leader of anti-corruption protests, the TV yoga teacher Baba Ramdev, invited people to join a 40-day protest in Ramlila Square in New Delhi. He demanded a confiscation of black money of Indian companies that are allegedly deposited in bank accounts in Switzerland. On 4 June, the day when Maruti workers occupied their factory in Manesar for the first time, 65,000 of his supporters filled the square and erected a camp. On the following night, 10,000 policemen with teargas and batons attacked the protesters at 1am. All political parties except for the Congress Party protested against the violent suppression of the protests. In 2014, Ramdev voiced his support for Modi, the BJP candidate.

In December 2011, a watered-down version of the Jan Lokpal Bill passed the lower house of parliament. A revival of the protests in spring 2012 against it failed, and in late 2012 Kerjriwal parted ways with Hazare to found the Aam Admi Party (AAP, the party of the common man).

Kerjriwal and others tried to transform the support for the movement into a permanent political force with the new party. In December 2013, the AAP reached second place in the New Delhi state elections with 28 out of 70 seats. It received a large number of votes from middle-class and poor neighbourhoods alike. Contrary to a previous announcement of non-cooperation with established parties, the AAP formed a coalition with Congress. When AAP tried to pass a Jan Lokpal Bill in the regional parliament, BJP and Congress denied approval. Because of this failure to implement the bill, the AAP left the government after only 49 days. The quick retreat from power has been widely regarded as a tactical move ahead of

¹⁷ VISVANATHAN, Shiv. “Anna Hazare and the Battle Against Corruption”. Op. Cit., p. 108.

national elections. But AAP only managed to win four seats in the lower house in the national elections, and thus failed to achieve its goals.

The first climax of the anti-corruption movement coincided by chance with the factory occupation of the Maruti workers, but the connection between both movements remained vague. It was a weakness of the anti-corruption movement that it did not succeed to develop a political agenda beyond the demand for a Jan Lokpal bill. The AAP also encountered difficulties with creating a clear-cut political identity and proved unable to capitalise on the wave of sympathy that had carried them to office in December 2013. Nonetheless, the AAP reorganised itself in 2014 and won a landslide victory in new elections for the city of New Delhi in February 2015, gaining 67 of 70 seats.

The anti-corruption movement had been an interclass movement from the start, receiving support both from influential CEOs, the middle classes and the poor. Its ideology and its leaders represented the moral values of the new middle class whose economic base is in the private sector – in contrast to the old middle class, which is tied to the public sector.¹⁸ The attitude of Hazare, its most prominent leader, to reject political parties altogether, resembled the “anti-political” political forces that have gained influence in several European countries in the wake of the economic crisis, such as the Pirate Party in Germany or the Five Stars Movement in Italy. The party political arm of the movement avoided positioning itself along the left-right axis – presumably out of fear of losing the image of a novel force in politics.

Factory struggles and India Against Corruption – relationship of a non-relation

It was purely by chance that the conflict around the Manesar factory of Maruti Suzuki occurred at around the same time as one of the huge mobilisations against corruption. Both protest movements remained largely unconnected; however, after the uprising in 2012, some of the leaders of “India against Corruption” and high party officials of the AAP expressed their solidarity with the Maruti workers.¹⁹

The working-class struggles that preceded the street protests reflected, to a large degree, the interests of the contract workers, who can only afford basic

¹⁸ SITAPATI, Vinay. “What Anna Hazare’s Movement and India’s New Middle Classes Say about Each Other”, Op. Cit..

¹⁹ NOWAK, Jörg. “March for Justice: The Protest of India’s Maruti Suzuki Auto Workers Against Imprisonment and Dismissals”. *WorkingUSA*. Vol. 17, n. 4, December 2014, pp. 579-586.

amenities that do not include regular access to water or electricity.²⁰ The common interests of permanent and contract workers emerged from the shared experiences on the shop floor – the lack of proper breaks and a high work speed.²¹ Even in cases of bereavement or weddings, the workers did not get any leave without losing a significant share of their wage. The contacts between the different groups of workers did not only intensify at work, but also in the neighbourhoods and while they were commuting on the transport provided by the employer. Since the presence of traditional left-wing parties such as the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in urban life has been dwindling in recent years and the party leaderships are over-aged, a situation emerged in which working-class movements operated in a political vacuum. The militant workers did not build a platform representing their interests at the political level. But the anti-corruption movement reflected the popular anger that had built up with the strikes, and as with other strata of society acted as a platform for integrating working-class interests due to the absence of other alternatives. Nonetheless, the practical relationship between the strikes and the anti-corruption movement remained vague – despite the fact that workers share sympathy for some of the leaders of this movement like Hazare.

²⁰ “The wage was below the subsistence and if you look at the inflation and market rates of Gurgaon, it is a very expensive area and it becomes very difficult to survive and run a family at such a low wage.” Maruti Worker 9, interview 26/01/2014.

²¹ “The very first problem in the factory was that they gave no holiday to the workers. They tortured them. They did not even allow the workers to go to the bathroom. The workload was very high”. Maruti Worker 2, interview 5/12/2013; “Many of the strikes that took place were a revolt against the brutal working conditions and the work pressure (...) And one main problem was about leave. If we didn’t work for one day they used to cut the leave for a whole month. (...) Verbal abuse, mental torture and other harrassment. There was no job security. Permanent was just a word but still no job guarantee. They even did not allow going to the bathroom even in an emergency”. Maruti Worker 9, interview 26/01/2014; “If we used to get late by one second then it was considered as half a day (of wages, J.N.) and on the other hand there was no pay for extra work (...) When the financial crisis was going on at that time all workers were forced to do overtime. And then they started paying Rs. 10 (12 eurocent, J.N.) per hour for over time. But it was nothing. In one hour the production was of 100 cars. (...) At 9am we used to get seven and a half minutes tea break and so you have to have your tea, snacks or whatever (...) within that seven and a half minutes. Time was so less that workers had to carry the tea to the toilets. And before the siren rings one has to reach the workstation. If someone gets late for reaching the workstation after the break the management used to verbally abuse the workers”. Maruti Worker 8, interview 26/1/2014; “That struggle brought out the intimidating and exploitative working conditions and the way we were treated in the workplace, no one knew about this outside. For example, no time for eating or toilet breaks in 8 hours, not a single holiday etc. So these things were not known outside and when media brought these issues out it had an impact. And whatever might be the situation, (they gave) no leave even if somebody dies at home. And for one day of leave they used to cut Rs. 1800 and for two it goes up to Rs. 3200 out of a total salary of Rs. 8000 for permanent workers”. Maruti Worker 7, interview 26/01/2014.

There is a stark contrast between the medium-term mobilisation and organisational formation of the industrial workers during the last decade and the rapid surge and decline of the protests of the anti-corruption movement, which is based on parts of the middle classes, the urban poor and the bourgeoisie. The anti-corruption movement emerged out of protests against the illegitimate access of party or corporate elites to various forms of resources. It was at times articulated with a pro-poor agenda, for example when the AAP demanded cuts to energy and water prices. At the same time, the AAP responded to demands to implement one of its manifesto pledges, that is, the abolition of contract labour, with repression. This was the case both when a bus drivers' strike took place in January 2014, and when the contract workers in the Delhi Metro mobilised in the spring of 2015. Some commentators saw the anti-corruption campaign as a struggle within the middle class: the new corporate middle class mobilised (or was mobilised by CEOs) against the old "corrupt" middle class in the public sector. Thus, the movement can also be seen as a warning given by new corporate elites to established state elites to follow their course, since big corporations have not been at the centre of the corruption scandals that were targeted by the movement.

With the consolidation of the AAP in 2015, the anti-corruption movement has established a political platform, but it also revealed its limits in terms of its preparedness to change labour relations. At the same time, the unrest in factories in the Delhi area has continued. A proper political formation of workers is not yet in sight, although advances in the organisation and coordination of workers have been achieved.

Brazil: Mass strikes at construction sites and street protests against ticket fare hikes

The Lula and Dilma Presidencies

The presidencies of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, both from the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party, PT), seemed to be amazingly successful, combining economic growth with an expansion of social security: extreme poverty decreased from 36 to 16 per cent between 2003 and 2012, the median income rose, the minimum wage saw considerable increases, informal employment went down in favour of regular jobs, and unemployment decreased to six per cent.²² But since the onset of the global crisis, economic growth in Brazil plunged and has yet to pick up again. Since

²² KREIN, José Dari; BALTAR, Paulo Eduardo Baltar. "A retomada do desenvolvimento e a regulação do mercado do trabalho no Brasil", in: *Cadernos CRH*. Vol. 26, n. 68, 2013, pp. 273-292.

2010, the growth rate has remained significantly lower than in other emerging economies, reaching only 0.2 per cent in 2014. Since the end of Lula's presidency, there is a double movement away from the PT: both employers and workers are more sceptical towards the government. When Dilma Rousseff entered the presidency, growth numbers were already quite low, and those parts of the middle class that had been a traditional base for the PT began to distance themselves from the party.²³ The traditional hatred of the middle class towards the poor saw a comeback since domestic employees started to expect higher wages, and the new lower middle class entered social locations that had been the exclusive domain of the old middle classes – expensive restaurants, airports, luxury goods shops, etc.

The strike wave since spring 2011 allowed for an increased visibility of the radicalisation of the low waged sections of the working class. The PT government found itself in a sandwich position between the new demands of workers and the waning support of the middle classes. After Dilma Rousseff won the presidency in the autumn of 2014 with a close vote, right-wing forces started demonstrations demanding a coup d'état by the military, and these demonstrations became mass protests in 2015 that focused on the corruption at the state-owned oil company Petrobras and on opposition to the president.

It was and is a constant problem of the PT that it has remained far from obtaining a majority in the lower and the upper house. As a result, it has entered into coalitions with parties that stem from the old clientelist elite and usually does not hold more than a third of the seats in parliament that these coalitions possess overall. In light of this, it is grossly misleading to refer to the Lula and Rousseff governments as "PT governments". The PT is forced to make compromises that diminish its popularity among the subaltern classes.

Mass strikes of construction workers and urban employees

One of the central objectives of the Lula and Rousseff governments has been the industrialisation of the north and northeast of the country, where the medium income is about a third of that in the economic centres of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The migration of workers from the northeast to the southeast has been a dominant pattern of internal migration in the past, which also drove the strikes of metal workers in 1978 to 1980 in the region of São Paulo. These strikes established Lula as a political leader, and provided the

²³ SINGER, André. *Os Sentidos do Lulismo - Reforma gradual e pacto conservador*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012.

basis for the emergence of the PT in 1980 and the trade union federation CUT in 1983. Importantly, they showed that there are limitations to the control of the military dictatorship over civil society.²⁴ The practical basis for the industrialisation of the northern regions is the programme for an acceleration of growth, *Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento*, (PAC). PAC started in 2007, and continued with PAC 2 in 2010. PAC 1 consisted of an investment of 150 billion Euros between 2007 and 2010, about half of it for energy infrastructure; PAC 2 has a volume of 500 billion Euros. The bulk of the funding comes from state companies like Petrobras and the Brazilian development bank *Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Económico e Social* (BNDES). The PAC programme includes the construction of hydroelectric plants, refineries, steel plants, petrochemical complexes as well as traffic infrastructure like highways and railway lines.

The mass strikes since 2011 occurred to a large extent at the PAC construction sites, most of which were run by multinational Brazilian construction companies like Odebrecht, Camargo Correa and Andrade Gutierrez. In February 2011, a strike wave at smaller construction sites in the state of Bahia occurred in which 80,000 workers participated. In mid-march, the strike wave moved to the PAC construction site in Pecém close to Fortaleza in the state of Ceará. Many workers from Bahia were employed at this site. In 2009, a consortium comprising the Italian company Maire Tecnimont and the Portuguese company Efacec had started constructing a thermoelectric plant for the energy companies EDP (Portugal) and MPX (Brazilian, but with a significant stake of the German energy company, E.ON). 6,000 construction workers organised the strike without the involvement of trade unions and set parts of their dormitories on fire. After a few days, the strike extended to the construction site of Jirau, 3,800 kilometres away from Pecém. In Jirau, in the state of Rondônia, 20,000 workers were building a hydroelectric plant. The strike there became a landmark for Brazilian industrial unrest since the fierceness of the riots and the level of property destruction were exceptional, and the government immediately resorted to tasking the National Guard (Força Nacional) with the suppression of the strike. Shortly after, the strike wave reached nearby Santo Antonio, where 15,000 workers constructed another hydroelectric plant, and two construction sites for a petrochemical complex in Suape close to Recife. There, 35,000 workers struck. Some of them set on fire large parts of the infrastructure, and the government also ordered the National Guard to intervene. During February and March 2011,

²⁴ ANTUNES, Ricardo. *A rebeldia no trabalho. O confronto operário no Abc Paulista: As greves de 1978/80*. Campinas: Editora Ensaio/Editora da UNICAMP, 1988; VÉRAS DE OLIVEIRA, Roberto. *Sindicalismo e Democracia no Brasil. Do novo Sindicalismo ao Sindicato Cidadão*. São Paulo: AnnaBlume, 2011.

180,000 construction workers were on strike. In the entire year of 2011, the number was 580,000 strikers. In all of 2012, 500,000 people participated in stoppages.

The rapid geographical expansion of the strikes without any central organisation can be explained, on the one hand, by the importance of migrant work in the construction sector: most workers are employed on a project basis; thus, construction workers travel across the country and acquire trans-regional contacts. On the other hand, communication with mobile phones and social networks has facilitated the activation of these contacts to a considerable extent. The problems, demands and patterns of protest of workers at different construction sites resembled one another: bad food that led to food poisoning, inadequate housing conditions, poor or non-existent transport facilities, low wages and spatial isolation due to work in sparsely populated areas and rigid holiday regulations. The patterns of protest, for example in Suape in August 2012 and in Belo Monte in November 2012, consisted in considerable damage to property, and in pelting stones at trade union officials and management. These patterns of protest have remained unmodified since the 1980s. They are about the conditions of work and the responses of the state, which consist in the quick intervention of the military or other special forces.²⁵ But there are also historical novelties: the number of strikes in the construction sector is much higher than in the 1980s, and the strikes taking place since 2011 were based on simultaneous activities in several regional states.

More construction sites – like the biggest single construction site for a hydroelectric plant and dam construction in Brazil at Belo Monte with 35,000 workers (September 2014) – were affected by the strike wave in 2012. In Belo Monte, the striking workers formed alliances with the manifold social movements opposed to the construction of the dam. These movements have been mobilising since the 1980s and are composed of indigenous peoples, fishers and women, ecologists and other social groups affected by the construction.²⁶ In order to increase the pressure against this alliance, the federal government installed a permanent squad of 500 soldiers of the National Guard at the construction site in the summer of 2012. This was made possible by a special decree by President Rousseff. The squad had an official

²⁵ CAMPOS, Pedro Henrique Pedreira. “Os empreiteiros de obras públicas e as políticas da ditadura para os trabalhadores da construção civil”. *Em Pauta*, n. 33, 2014. [<https://www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/ojs/index.php/revistaempauta/article/view/13025>] Accessed 19.01.2015.

²⁶ Interviews with Workers 1 and 2 at the Consórcio de Construção de Belo Monte (CCBM), 11/09/2014; Antonia Melo, *Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre*, 10/09/2014; José Geraldo, *Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens*, 15/09/2014.

order to protect the construction site against actions of social movements opposed to the dam, but it was also used to suppress strikes.²⁷ Belo Monte became the third big focus of militant strikes at construction sites alongside Suape and Jirau.

In 2014, the construction site of the petrochemical complex COMPERJ in the state of Rio de Janeiro entered the scene – private security guards had shot at striking workers – and a new construction site in Pecém also became a conflict zone: the South Korean steel giant POSCO used strike breakers in response to a 35-day stoppage of workers demanding wage rises. As a result, scuffles with striking workers broke out, and the strikers burned two company cars and a vehicle of the military police.²⁸ The military police arrested 68 workers.²⁹

The strikes at the construction sites were without doubt the most severe labour conflicts in Brazil in the past years – due to the large number of participating workers at the construction sites, the rank-and-file character of the strike movements and the militant forms of struggle. All in all, those years saw an increase in the total number of strikers compared with the years before 2010, but the biggest total number of strikers came from the public sector. The public sector strikes remained less visible than the strikes in construction – the exception being the national public sector strike in August 2012. After the protest movement in the summer of 2013, bigger strikes occurred in the urban centres, in many cases opposed to the established trade unions: among them were the strike of the teachers in Rio de Janeiro and the protests of oil industry workers, which both took place in the autumn 2013, as well as the strike wave of bus drivers in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Recife, Belém and Fortaleza during 2014. The strike of the street sweepers in Rio de Janeiro during the Carnival of 2014 received special attention and a wave of sympathy from the broader population. In 2015, recurrent strikes in automobile factories against dismissals, long strikes of school and university teachers and a strike at the state company Petrobras against casualisation and the privatisation of the company took place.

The strikes of the construction workers have been a quite consistent and sustainable movement over the course of several years. They are led by strata of the working class that were excluded from the social mobility experienced

²⁷ Interviews with Alexandre Sampaio, lawyer at Asociación Interamericana para la defensa del ambiente (AIDA), 10/09/2014; Thais Santi Cardoso da Silva, *Procuradora do Ministério Público Federal*, Altamira, 11/09/2014; Fernandes Fernandez, labour lawyer, Altamira, 11/09/2014; Aurelio Ganzer, *Secretaria da Presidência da República*, Altamira, 15/09/2014.

²⁸ Interview with Worker 18 at Companhia Siderurgica Pecém (CSP), 29/09/2014.

²⁹ For an extensive case study on the strikes in the Brazilian construction sector, see NOWAK, Jörg. “Massenstreiks im Bausektor Brasiliens zwischen 2011 und 2014”. Op. Cit.

by other strata in the 2000s. The fact that most of the construction sites connected to the PAC programme were public projects in which the government agencies did not enforce legal provisions for secure working conditions nor take adequate care of social and technical infrastructure in settlements close to construction sites created outrage among the workers. Villages like Pecém that had been inhabited by a few thousand people until recently were suddenly faced with the doubling of the number of inhabitants without additional means of transport, medical assistance, financial services, etc. In light of this, the workers saw many of these conflicts, to some extent, as conflicts with the state.³⁰ In Pecém, it was obvious that state institutions did not intervene into the illegal employment of hundreds of Korean strikebreakers³¹ but they did intervene immediately when the workers downed the tools.

As a result of the strikes in the construction sector, there were several rounds of wage hikes above inflation and improvements to the infrastructure, predominantly in the areas of transport, accommodation, holiday regulations and lodging. Concerning the forms of organisations of workers, it is significant that no major network of workers emerged from the strikes beyond the existing trade union federations, *Força Sindical* and CUT. The Trotskyite trade union federation *Conlutas* supported the strikes in a conspiratorial manner, but only at some of the construction sites.³² The lack of self-organisation of workers in the form of visible organisations is connected to the overall marginalisation of construction workers (reflected in low levels of education, etc.) but also to the short-term perspectives of workers due to the migrant nature of construction work.

Nonetheless, it is a new and remarkable phenomenon that construction workers – who are seen as non-qualified workers by the public – were able to launch a sustained wave of strikes over a number of years without any formal frame of organisation. Thus, the construction workers became a reference for workers in other sectors. The tense relationship that the striking workers maintained with the PT as the main government party hints at the inherent contradictions of the political project pursued by the Lula and Dilma presidencies since 2003. The industrialisation of new parts of the country is supposed to generate more material well-being overall, but it is replicating the uneven forms of development dominant in the country with adverse

³⁰ Interviews with Workers 1 and 2 at CCBM, 11/09/2014; Worker 18 at CSP, 29/09/2014.

³¹ Interview with Francisco Gérson Marques de Lima, Procurador at the *Ministério Público de Trabalho*, Fortaleza, 10/10/2014.

³² Interview with Zé Goutinho, *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores na Indústria da Construção Civil de Belém*, 03/10/2014.

working conditions and low wages for the construction workers who erect the industrial complexes.

The street protests in the summer of 2013 – Fare hikes and police violence

The PT-led government soon found itself in a sandwich position – between the protests from below and a middle class that increasingly revived its old class prejudice. This constellation of forces left its imprint on the street protests that began in June 2013. The left-wing movement in favour of free public transport led by anarchist and student activists had been attacked massively by police forces at a rather small demonstration in São Paulo. This led to outrage and solidarity from other social groups. A key role for the dissemination of these protests was played by the right-wing mainstream media that entertained a hostile stance towards the government. Thus, the significance of the street protests grew due to an informal alliance between left-wing activists and right-wing media. But the demands that dominated the protests had been the classical repertoire of the Brazilian left: better funding for public education and health services, and a cheaper and more integrated public transport infrastructure.³³ The street protests expanded rapidly all over Brazil. In some places, the PT and other left parties participated in their organisation; in others the protests were mainly organized by anarchist groups. After one week, the demands of the protests were subject to change and the issue of corruption took centre stage. In Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, members of traditional left organisations were violently attacked during this second phase of the protests, both by right-wing forces and by anarchists. Elisio Estanque emphasises that the participation of well-educated people from rich neighbourhoods was growing in São Paulo when the demonstrations got bigger³⁴; it was also during this period that the attacks against left-wing protesters occurred. The social composition of the demonstrators in São Paulo mirrored those across the country. According to several surveys,³⁵ the participants in the demonstrations were disproportionately well-educated compared to the overall Brazilian population.

Notably, the anarchist activists perceived the PT and the other left-wing parties as their “main enemies”.³⁶ Nevertheless, all the existing political

³³ GOHN, Maria da Glória. “A Sociedade Brasileira em Movimento: vozes das ruas e seus ecos políticos e sociais”. *Caderno CRH*. Vol. 27, n. 71, 2014, pp. 431, 433.

³⁴ ESTANQUE, Elisio. “Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)”. *Op. Cit.* p. 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.* GOHN, Maria da Glória. “A Sociedade Brasileira em Movimento: vozes das ruas e seus ecos políticos e sociais”. *Op. Cit.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

currents from left to right tried to benefit from the protest movement, even the government. President Rousseff and the PT attempted to embrace and suffocate the movement. Both the small, Trotskyite parties PSOL and PSTU and the right-wing opposition voiced their support. The anarchists tried in vain to maintain the upper hand in the movement. Traditional popular organisations like the landless workers' movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, MST) and the homeless workers' movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto*, MTST) represented the core organisers of demonstrations in many cities. Later in 2013, the protests were directed against the Confederations Cup, which preceded the football World Cup held in 2014. The World Cup was a symbol for the alliance of the left party PT with the old elite because the World Cup construction projects (which had also been part of PAC) were profit machines for the sizeable Brazilian construction companies that had emerged during the military dictatorship. The World Cup was also the reason why new roads were built and slums were cleared.

Brazil saw a broad debate about the existence of a new middle class due to the rising income of a sizeable part of the working class.³⁷ Estanque regards the protests in the summer of 2013 as an encounter of middle class and working class people who all tend to see themselves as part of the middle classes due to similar levels of consumption – despite the fact that the living conditions of working class people in terms of their continuous access to median-level incomes are more unstable due to short-term labour contracts.³⁸ He highlights that the enormous fragmentation of the working class, “fruit of the metabolism of global capitalism”³⁹, was reflected in the fragmentation of the mass movement that had emerged: for Estanque⁴⁰ the various elements of this movement were only able to forge precarious, temporary, and partly non-existing alliances. During a teachers' strike in Rio de Janeiro in September 2013, which was directed against a conservative governor, new modes of

³⁷ SOUZA, Jessé de. *Os batalhadores brasileiros: nova classe média ou nova classe trabalhadora?* Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 2010; POCHMANN, Marcio. *Nova classe média? O trabalho na base da pirâmide social*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2012; NERI, Marcelo. *A nova classe média: o lado brilhante da base da pirâmide*. São Paulo: Fundação Getulio Vargas/Editora Saraiva, 2012; BARTELT, Dawid Danilo (ed.) *A nova classe média no Brasil como conceito e projeto político*. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Heinrich Böll, 2013.

³⁸ ESTANQUE, Elisio. “Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)”. Op. Cit. p. 54.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 59; Translation J.N.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 59. See also SCHERER-WARREN, Ilse. “Manifestações de Rua no Brasil 2013: encontros e desencontros na política”. *Cadernos CRH*, vol. 27, no. 71, 2014, p. 427; GOHN, Maria da Glória. “A Sociedade Brasileira em Movimento: vozes das ruas e seus ecos políticos e sociais”. Op. Cit. p. 435.

action such as black bloc tactics⁴¹ were employed, for the first time, in a sectoral labour conflict. This contributed significantly to the visibility of the strike. Similar alliances emerged, for example, during the strike of street sweepers in Rio de Janeiro in February 2014 and during the metro drivers' strike in June 2014.

The street protests articulated a lack of satisfaction with the government. It had achieved improvements for the poorest strata of society since 2003. However, it did not address the elite dominance of national politics and did not manage to trigger a more profound transformation of property and power relations. The alliance of the PT with big capital created crucial strategic constraints – and the problems in public transport were a symptom of more profound problems: the rise of medium wages led to an increase and partial collapse of individual car traffic because more people were able to afford passenger cars. In big cities like São Paulo, the poorer inhabitants are more dependent on public buses since their neighbourhoods are not connected to the underground or to suburban trains – which means they suffer most from an increase of individual traffic. A lack of investment and delays in the construction of public train systems led to long commutes in most major cities. The younger generation has grown up with the PT-led governments. It has pushed forward new demands that go beyond the eradication of absolute poverty. Faced with meagre economic growth and the questionable compromises of the Lula and Dilma governments, they have been driven by the dissatisfaction that a further improvement to the conditions of everyday life seems out of reach.

⁴¹ GOHN, Maria da Glória. “A Sociedade Brasileira em Movimento: vozes das ruas e seus ecos políticos e sociais”. Op. Cit. p. 433.

The interaction between the strikes and the street protests

In Brazil, the two forms of protest, street protests and mass strikes, were articulated more closely than in India. During the protests against the Confederations Cup in summer 2013, the World Cup became a symbol of both the adverse working conditions that led to many deaths of workers and of the “wrong” priorities of development projects pursued by the government. Labour issues were not openly discussed by the demonstrators, but the public welfare system was a central issue. While the social composition of the two protest movements differed to a large extent, and there were few immediate references to the other side, a common direction seemed to emerge between September 2013 and June 2014 when the strike movements and street protests came together in some of the major cities, most visibly in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. But in the months after Rousseff won the presidential elections in October 2014, it was mainly the right-wing opposition that benefitted from the momentum of the protests. It was able to launch a conservative protest movement against Rousseff that peaked in March and April 2015. While the “Fora Dilma” protests dominated the Brazilian mass media (which is quite selective in its coverage), it was the series of strikes in automobile factories, educational institutions, banks and the state company Petrobras that triggered a strike movement that was more stable than the conservative protests. The strikes escalated when 15,000 automobile workers of Volkswagen blocked the central highway in the industrial hub close to São Paulo in January 2015 (which led to their demands being met), and when striking teachers in the state of Paraná were attacked by police forces with teargas and water cannons in April 2015. In September and October 2015, various street protests were held against the austerity programme of the government, mainly led by the MST, the MTST, the CUT and by striking teachers. Thus, one could say that one current of the 2013 street protests joined the conservative movement while another current united with the strike movements and established an “anti-austerity” front. In contrast to India where the street protests led to the creation of a liberal left party, the mixed composition of the street protests in 2013 ended in a polarisation into two camps, one of which established links with the strike movements. The “progressive” wing achieved sustained mobilisation in Brazil in 2015, but was not able to dominate the national political scene in the same way that the 2013 movement had. Currently, there is a stalemate between the two camps. Importantly, the conservative wing is backed by a larger number of politicians and the powerful elite, which controls vast amounts of wealth, has considerable political influence and owns most of the productive assets in the country.

Conclusion: India and Brazil – Similar patterns of organisation, different political contexts

In India and Brazil, the sequence and social composition of the protests show some resemblances: the street protests witnessed a strong participation of the middle classes. They were preceded by long-lasting strike movements of industrial workers. It can be assumed that the social movements emerging in the workplace during strikes resonated with the middle classes who voiced their dissent in street protests that are ambiguous politically. The recurring claim that precarious sections of the working classes organise in street protests⁴² does not hold in the two cases examined: they were the driving forces of the mass strikes in India and Brazil.

Beyond these common features, there are also crucial differences: the workers in the automobile sector in India are far more politicised due to the influence of Maoist and Bolshevist organisations, and they established much more coordinated modes of action compared with the construction workers in Brazil. This is facilitated by a stronger tradition of independent trade unions in India – some of these independent unions are apolitical business unions or launched by management, but this model of organisation does also allow for leftist variants. In contrast, the political consciousness of the construction workers in Brazil is more ambiguous. This is the result of their high degree of marginalisation, their low level of education and the migrant nature of construction work. The supremacy of the right-wing trade union federation *Força Sindical* in the big construction works reinforces this tendency towards depoliticisation. The often remote and isolated locations of big construction units impede the interaction with other sections of the working class, and the exchange of ideas. Nevertheless, construction workers tend to engage in militant forms of action. Some of the urban strike movements were able to connect and interact with the more leftist sections of the street protests in Brazil since 2013. In contrast to that, the rather loose connections between strikes and anti-corruption protests in India did not extend to cooperation – in fact the opposite occurred, the striking contract workers in urban transport in Delhi were threatened and attacked by the government of the new anti-corruption party, AAP.

The street protests in India were far less politicised than in Brazil, since they had an exclusive focus on corruption as the presumed basic flaw of Indian society. In the Brazilian street protests in 2013, corruption was one among many topics – ticket prices in public transport, police violence and public services were other issues that linked the demands with the ideas of an

⁴² SAUL, John S. “Neue Formen des Widerstands. Proletariat, Prekariat und die afrikanischen Aussichten“. Op. Cit.

extension of the welfare state. Both variants of street protests had in common that they did not last very long compared to the strikes – they emerged as quickly as they vanished. In Brazil, the street protests came back in 2015, but had split into two radically opposed currents. The strikes in the Brazilian construction sector, but also those among urban workers, expanded throughout the country. The same can be said about the street protests. In India, strikes and street protests were focussed more strongly on the capital region around New Delhi.

Regarding the class-specific forms of articulation of the strikes and protests, the mass strikes are characterised by a war of position with episodic outbursts of violence. The workers make small advances, but they expect a lot more. With waves of dismissals after strikes and the intervention of state security forces against striking workers, a deadlock emerged. It would have only been possible to bypass this deadlock if a unified national strike movement had formed. However, such a movement is hard to organise. There are splits between union federations and a lack of a combative attitude among some of the unions. What is more, two cleavages emerged in the Brazilian and the Indian case: a cleavage between workers and their traditional unions, and another one between workers and the traditional left parties like Congress and the PT. In both cases, the root causes lie in the alliances and compromises of political parties and unions with capital. In India, the unions and Congress made compromises with big capital already in the 1960s and 1970s. These compromises have become more neoliberal and less social democratic since the 1990s. In contrast, the compromise of the PT with big capital is a more recent phenomenon, which has emerged since 2003. All in all, the conflicts between workers and trade unions only rarely affected the biggest trade union federation CUT, but rather the conservative union federation *Força Sindical* or other smaller trade unions.

The street protests of the middle classes exhibit a different profile. One could say that while the working class got organised, the middle classes were mobilised for short periods: the latter called for quick political changes and were prepared to delegate responsibility for reform projects to politicians, which explains the rapid decline of the protests and the fact that demands were less focused and uniform. In the case of the Indian anti-corruption movement, the demands were focused on a specific law project, the Jan Lokpal Bill. After a watered-down version had been passed in parliament, the movement lacked a clear-cut objective beyond demanding amendments.

The street protests in both countries revealed that the participants demanded a higher quality of life and a fair distribution of wealth – not a radical

transformation of society. For the Brazilian case, Gohn captures this sentiment in an apt phrase: “They do not attack the state, they demand a more efficient state”.⁴³ It is one aspect of this political abstinence that a central feature of a new social movement as defined by Alan Touraine, the *common identity*, was completely absent in the case of the Brazilian street protests.⁴⁴

What are the implications of this new and messy situation for a Marxist theory of class? One can of course argue that in Marx’s times the class composition of society was rather messy and not clear-cut, but this does not relieve one of the task to redefine and re-evaluate central concepts. Estanque uses the concept of the “middle classes”, but questions it at the same time, since he states that today it does not refer to the small property holders that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels referred to.⁴⁵ In his view, the concept of middle classes should refer to former workers that have climbed up the ladder by successfully leading class struggles for a welfare state, enabling them to reach a level of consumption similar to that of the old middle classes. However, these new middle classes do not share the elitist attitude of the old ones and are increasingly facing an insecure status due to high job rotation and the casualisation of labour relations.⁴⁶ According to Estanque, these new middle classes constitute something similar to a labour aristocracy – and due to their past and their lack of income security, they have a disposition to acts of rebellion. At the same time, they are not able to assume the position of a vanguard or a voice of the subaltern groups as a whole.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, it has to be underlined that these new middle classes exhibit some commonalities with the old ones that were discussed by Marx and Engels: first of all, there is a lack of political orientation. Estanque locates the root causes for this in the fragmentation and precarisation of labour relations and a specific pattern of movement formation where movements rise rapidly, seem to be very determined and then disintegrate with the same speed.⁴⁸ Another commonality between the old and new middle classes is the relevance they attach to ethics and values.⁴⁹ And third, there is the tendency to oscillate

⁴³ GOHN, Maria da Glória. “A Sociedade Brasileira em Movimento: vozes das ruas e seus ecos políticos e sociais”. Op. Cit. p.436. Translation J.N.

⁴⁴ TOURAINE, Alain. “An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements”. *Social Research*. Vol. 52, n.4, 1985, pp. 749-788; ESTANQUE, Elisio. “Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)”. Op. Cit. p.55.

⁴⁵ ESTANQUE, Elisio. “Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)”. Op. Cit. pp. 60, 76.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.76. For the case of India, see the similar observations by SITAPATI, Vinay. “What Anna Hazare’s Movement and India’s New Middle Classes Say about Each Other”. Op. Cit.

⁴⁸ ESTANQUE, Elisio. “Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)”. Op. Cit. p. 58. See also SITAPATI, Vinay. “What Anna Hazare’s Movement and India’s New Middle Classes Say about Each Other”. Op. Cit. p.44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43; ESTANQUE, Elisio. “Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos

between left-wing and right-wing positions as is perfectly illustrated by the Brazilian case.⁵⁰

In any case, the differences between the social movements, strikes and street protests are noteworthy. A rigorous separation of “proletariat” and “precariat” as proposed by some social scientists does not hold if applied to the recent protests in India and Brazil.⁵¹ After all, the bulk of the working classes is exposed to informal and unsecure conditions of work even if they work in formal jobs. Formal employment is embedded in a larger context of informality, resulting in discontinuities in terms of the regular and complete payment of wages, a lack of security, a high exposure to health risks at work and a lack of job security. While a strict separation of “proletariat” and “precariat” does not conform to the social reality in much of the Global South, the same can be said of the claim that there is a unified “precariat”. We cannot deduct from the cases of Brazil and India that certain parts of the “precariat” do not engage in strikes. The challenge lies in doing justice to the differentiated nature of classes in contemporary capitalism without losing sight of the big picture. Obviously there are many street protests triggered by the “precariat” in South Africa, but it is not legitimate to conclude from that that other groups of precarious workers in South Africa and in other countries refrain from going on strike, for example, the contract workers in mining.

At the level of social action, it makes sense to define a second bloc of the middle classes, apart from the different layers of the working class. This second bloc is composed of public employees, urban employees with degrees, and technical and IT engineers. For this bloc, it makes perfect sense that a part of these middle classes are objectively a part of the working class.⁵² But the issue of social status does play a major role at the political level for this group. It is much more fragile on the level of social action than the working class and its political identity is much more diversified and blurry, and thus often almost impossible to grasp. Sitapati detects four ideological currents as the defining features of the anti-corruption movement in India⁵³ while

sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)”. Op. Cit. p. 75; GOHN, Maria da Glória. “A Sociedade Brasileira em Movimento: vozes das ruas e seus ecos políticos e sociais”. Op. Cit. p.4 33.

⁵⁰ ENGELS, Friedrich.1852. “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany”. *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 11, p.10.

⁵¹ SAUL, John S. “Neue Formen des Widerstands. Proletariat, Prekariat und die afrikanischen Aussichten“. Op. Cit.; STANDING, Guy. “Understanding the precariat through labour and work”. *Development and Change*. Vol. 45, n. 5, September 2014, pp. 963-980.

⁵² ESTANQUE, Elisio. “Rebeliões de classe média? Precariedade e movimentos sociais em Portugal e no Brasil (2011-2013)”. Op. Cit.

⁵³ SITAPATI, Vinay. “What Anna Hazare’s Movement and India’s New Middle Classes Say about Each Other”. Op. Cit.

Estanque and Grohn underline the extremely ambiguous nature of the street protests in Brazil. Thus, there is not only a lack of a proper encompassing progressive narrative that would bind working and middle classes together, but also income differences and ideologies of social status that keep both classes apart from each other. Although income differences between a construction worker in Brazil and an office clerk might be small, the clerk will ascribe a higher status to her work and position in society. At the same time, both workers share the insecurity of overall conditions of work and life. A political force that can bind both classes, or at least segments of both classes together, would have to address this overall feature of insecurity.

