

# Agricultural workers and trade unions in the neoliberal food regime: capital–labour relations, conflicts over labour and the agroindustrial transformation of the sugarcane sector in São Paulo

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## ABSTRACT

In the academic and political debate about land grabbing and agroindustrial transformations in the neoliberal food regime effects on labour are neglected. In response to this gap, this paper focuses on labour, unions, their bargaining power and struggles in these transformation processes. Empirically, I analyse the effects of the transformation of the sugarcane sector in the state of São Paulo between 2002 and 2016 by applying the power resource approach. The analysis shows that these processes had mainly negative effects on the rural working class such as increased unemployment, a loss of associational power or less collective struggles; new power resources could not compensate for this.

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans le débat académique et politique lié aux transformations agro-industrielles dans le 'food regime' néolibéral, les effets sur travail sont généralement exclus. En réponse à cette lacune, cet article se concentre sur le travail, les syndicats, leur pouvoir de négociation et leurs luttes dans ces processus de transformation. Empiriquement, j'analyse les effets de la transformation du secteur de la canne à sucre dans l'État de São Paulo entre 2002 et 2016 en appliquant l'approche par les ressources de pouvoir. L'analyse montre que ces processus ont eu principalement des effets négatifs sur la classe ouvrière rurale tels que l'augmentation du chômage, une perte de pouvoir associatif ou moins de luttes collectives; les nouvelles ressources de pouvoir n'ont pas pu compenser cela.

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## Introduction: class relations and conflicts over labour in the neoliberal food regime

Since the 1980s, a neoliberal restructuring of the agricultural sector can be observed. Structural adjustment programmes, free trade agreements and national reforms have created new markets for land and agricultural products and expanded existing ones.

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In this so-called corporate or neoliberal food regime control over, access to, and the use of land have been restructured in favour of a capitalist, industrial agriculture. The regime is characterised by the involvement of new world regions in food production, changes in food consumption patterns, and greater relevance of agrofuels (Akram-Lodhi, Kay, and Borrás 2009; McMichael 2010; Otero 2012). This restructuring of agriculture has been intensified by multiple crises such as the financial, energy and climate crises in the 2000s; global investments in land have increased since then, especially in the global South. These large-scale investments in land (land grabbing) are often linked to an industrial transformation of agriculture (Akram-Lodhi 2012, 137–138). Agroindustrial transformations are profound changes of agriculture towards a capital-intensive production model based on industrial logics and towards a deeper integration into global markets. They are characterised by an increasing concentration of production by fewer companies, the increased use of modern technologies and cultivation methods (Akram-Lodhi 2012; McMichael 2010; Grünwald 2019).

Land grabbing and agroindustrial transformations have different social impacts such as on labour. In contexts of agroindustrial transformation the importance of wage labour in comparison to peasant labour increases. Peasant (family) labour is often replaced by wage labour, as wage labourers mostly work the large agribusiness cultivated areas of sugarcane, corn, or oil palm, plant and harvest the agricultural commodities, and transport them to factories for further processing (Cochet 2018, 1414–1415; Gyapong 2021, 343–347; Pye 2015, 186–187).

The literature on food regimes, land grabbing and agroindustrial transformations, mainly gathered in critical agrarian studies, has so far focused on forms of land appropriation and struggles of land users against expropriation neglecting the impacts on labour and labour struggles (Jakobsen 2021; Brunner and Pye 2019). In recent years, however, the agrarian question of labour has gained importance in critical agrarian studies<sup>1</sup> (Bernstein 2010a; Gyapong 2019). The agrarian question of labour explores the establishment of the relation between wage labour and capital and analyses how peasants become wage labourers through capitalist development. It further focuses on the social impacts capitalist transformations of agriculture have on labourers and their reproduction (Bernstein 2006).

In this debate, Henry Bernstein (2006, 455; 2016, 624) argues, that the neoliberal transformation of agriculture has led to a crisis of reproduction of the rural working class, which he calls ‘classes of labour’. In order to maintain their reproduction, members of this class rely on various precarious employment. This class is therefore marked by different employment relationships or combinations of rural and urban work, wage labour and self-employment, agricultural and non-agricultural work. Categories of difference such as gender, race, origin, and generation further fragment this class (Bernstein 2010b, 91; Lerche 2010; Pattenden 2018, 1040–1042). Bernstein argues, that those fragmentations complicate the emergence of class consciousness and class struggles by workers (Bernstein 2010b, 93). In sum, many authors of critical agrarian studies argue that the situation of classes of labour has weakened and worsened in the wake of agroindustrial transformations in the neoliberal food regime (Akram-Lodhi, Kay, and Borrás 2009, 218; Bernstein 2016, 624; Dörr 2018, 192, 202–203).

In contrast, Ben Selwyn (2007) and Jesse Wilderman (2015) show in their studies of the grape sector in northeastern Brazil and fruit production in the Western Cape region of South Africa that workers can benefit from agroindustrial transformations

and the integration in agricultural world-markets. The two authors draw on the concept ‘power resource approach’ to demonstrate the extent to which workers’ bargaining power changed as a result of these processes. Selwyn (2007) emphasises that workers are not helplessly exposed to global changes, but have agency themselves. His research shows that the integration into global value chains creates new power resources for workers, which they could use in struggles to improve their working conditions.

In this article, I would like to explore the question of whether or not workers benefit from agroindustrial transformations in the neoliberal food regime. For this purpose, I ask how labour, capital–labour relations as well as power resources of workers and unions change in the course of these transformations.

In doing so, I consider it important to go beyond an analysis of class that focuses only on shifts in class structures without looking at aspects of class consciousness and class struggles. I am taking into account a critique of Oliver Pye (2019, 2), who criticises critical agrarian studies research for separating class analyses from political questions of class struggle.

To analyse these questions, I use an approach from labour sociology, the power resources approach (Schmalz and Dörre 2014). The approach shows class power of workers and trade unions and where workers have options for action to assert their interests. It provides explanations of how workers and unions act and when they resort to certain forms of labour struggle.

Empirically, I address these questions through a case study of the agroindustrial transformation of the sugarcane sector in the Brazilian state of São Paulo between 2002 and 2016. I frame the changes in the sector during this period as an agroindustrial transformation because they represent an expansion and deepening of the agroindustrial production model. The year 2002 marks the starting point of a new phase of industrialisation of the sector, the year 2016 as the end point I set primarily for practical research considerations. This phase basically coincides with the period of government of the Workers’ Party *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), which is why this article also refers to the role of ‘left’ governments and their influence on labour and labour struggles.

Brazil as the setting of the case study is particularly interesting. It is one of the main targets of international investment in land, whereby the agroindustrial production model is expanding to new areas or deepening industrial logics in already existing agroindustries (Calcagnotto 2012, 337–338; Mueller and Mueller 2016, 12–14). Under the neoliberal food regime, Brazil was increasingly integrated into global supply chains, making Brazil the leading global producer of many agricultural products such as sugarcane in the mid-2010s (Mueller and Mueller 2016, 14). Brazil is also appropriate as a case study country because of a long history of rural class struggles. These include both struggles over the means of production, such as land, and labour struggles (Welch and Sauer 2015).

I base my empirical analysis on a multiple set of data collected during several field trips to Brazil in the period from October 2015 to April 2017. My primary source are 85 qualitative interviews, which I conducted during my field trips. Interviewees were sugarcane workers, representatives of agricultural and transport unions and trade union confederations, members of landless movements, NGOs, labour inspectors, public prosecutors, labour lawyers, a judge of a labour court, employees of a state social welfare office, representatives of sugarcane companies and the sugarcane industry association and a

representative of a certification company. I complemented the interviews by three focus group discussions, informal conversations, participatory observations during three union events, and a review of newspaper articles, scientific studies, statistics as well as government and union documents such as collective agreements.

The article is structured as follows: First, I introduce my theoretical concepts, the power resources approach and the food regime approach. Then I discuss the agroindustrial transformation of the sugarcane sector, its impact on labour, class relations and power resources and labour struggles of sugarcane workers. I conclude with a discussion of the article's contribution to the debate on the impact of agroindustrial transformations in the neoliberal food regime on labour. I argue that these transformations weaken workers, unions and their struggles, and therefore worsen the situation for a large proportion of agricultural workers.

### **The power resources and the food regime approach**

Originally, Erik Olin Wright (2000) and Beverly J. Silver (2003) developed the power resources approach. However, in this article I use the extended approach by Stefan Schmalz and Klaus Dörre (2014), which covers more dimensions of workers' power and possibilities of action. According to their power resources approach, workers and unions can have four resources of power: structural, associational, institutional and societal power.

Structural power 'results simply from the location of workers within the economic system' (Wright 2000, 962). Schmalz and Dörre distinguish between marketplace bargaining power and workplace bargaining power. Marketplace bargaining power results from the position of workers in the labour market. If the unemployment rate is low or if workers possess scarce, highly demanded skills, their bargaining power is high. Workplace bargaining power is connected to the position of workers within the production process. This applies to workers who can easily disrupt production processes by stoppages (Schmalz and Dörre 2014).

If workers organise and form collective organisations like unions, labour parties or other organisations, associational power emerges. Indicators of associational power are a high degree of union density, (internal) solidarity and solid resources of those organisations (Schmalz and Dörre 2014, 224; Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013, 351–352, 355).

Institutional power is a result of past struggles. Laws (e.g. freedom of strike), constitutional arrangements or (state) institutions of industrial relations (e.g. works councils, labour courts) can strengthen the bargaining position of workers and unions. The specificity of these institutions is the stability over time independent from economic cycles or short-term social changes (Schmalz and Dörre 2014, 227–228).

Societal power can originate from the support of society or societal actors. This power resource can be generated through the cooperation of workers and unions with other societal actors such as social movements, NGOs or churches. Societal power can also be activated, if workers and unions manage to frame public debates and win the support and sympathy of 'society' (Arbeitskreis Strategic Unionism 2013, 359–363).

The power resources approach complements the food regime approach, which can be used to describe structural changes of the agro-food complex on a global scale. The latter is 'a holistic, theoretically and world historically grounded political economy approach to

unlock food production, distribution, and consumption patterns in relation to the development of capitalism' (Dörr 2018, 179). Authors such as Philip McMichael (e.g. 2010) or Harriet Friedman (e.g. 1987), on whom the approach is originally based, divide historical phases of the global food system, also consider labour and class relations. However, the food regime approach lacks an actor perspective and a set of analytical tools to explain workers' resistance or the absence of it in specific moments and places. The power resources approach fills this gap and aims to show how, in a transforming structure, options for action and (political) action of workers and trade unions change.

## **The agroindustrial transformation of the sugarcane sector**

Since colonial times, sugarcane production has always played an important role for the development of Brazil and been interlinked with the development policy of the state. In this paper, I will focus on the industrial transformation of the sector in São Paulo state, located in the southeast of Brazil, between 2002 and 2016.

After years of crisis, in 2002 the sugarcane sector entered a new golden era, especially in the centre-south of Brazil. São Paulo is the centre of sugarcane production in Brazil since the 1970s. After declines in the previous years, the production of sugarcane rose from 176,574,000 tons in the year 2001/2002 to 365,990,000 tons in 2016/2017 (UNICA n.d.-b). The rise of production was reflected by an expansion of the area planted with sugarcane in São Paulo state, from 2,661,620 hectares in 2002 to 5,590,586 hectares in 2016 (UNICA n.d.-a).

Several factors enabled the expansion of sugarcane production. After being elected in 2002, the government of Lula da Silva (PT) supported the sector with cheap credits. Between 2003 and 2010 the state development bank (Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico Social) lent the sugarcane industry credits amounting to approximately 28.2 billion Reais (approx. 5,64 billion euros<sup>2</sup>). Furthermore, the newly invented so-called flex-fuel car, which runs on any combination of ethanol or petrol, was introduced to the Brazilian market in 2003 and led to an increase in national demand for ethanol produced from sugarcane. Besides these national factors, global changes further fuelled a higher demand for sugar and ethanol from Brazil, e.g. lower tariffs for Brazilian exports of sugar to the EU and a growing demand for ethanol due to climate policies (Alves 2009; Garvey and Barreto 2014).

The expansion of sugarcane production was accompanied by an internationalisation process of the sector. Exports of ethanol – although less than expected by the ethanol industry – and especially sugar as well as international investment in the sector rose significantly. Due to the new profit opportunities – after crises like the NASDAQ-crisis 2000/01 or the global financial crisis 2007/08 erased other 'safe' investment opportunities – international investors and corporations like Shell, Mitsubishi or Louis Dreyfus Commodities invested in the sector. These investors often merged with Brazilian companies (e.g. Dutch Shell and Brazilian Cosan founded 'Raízen') or bought smaller, financial instable Brazilian sugarcane companies. The global economic crisis in 2007/08 led to many bankruptcies of smaller Brazilian sugarcane firms – especially due to debts, speculation of the companies and the fixation of the oil price in Brazil – and reinforced processes of internationalisation and concentration of capital (Garvey and Barreto 2014; de Oliveira 2012).

Capital united during the agroindustrial transformation of the sector from the 2000s onwards. Central to this was the unity among companies to build an international market for ethanol (McKay et al. 2014, 6; Thomaz Júnior 2010). McKay et al. highlight that the process of agroindustrial transformation, especially the concentration and internationalisation of capital, 'has enabled tighter policy coordination and greater 'class consciousness' on the part of capital' (2014, 6).

Another part of this transformation has been the mechanisation of sugarcane harvesting. In response to repeated major strikes, sugarcane companies introduced the first machines in the 1980s to discipline workers. Furthermore, harvesting with modern machines is more productive and profitable in contrast to manual harvesting. However, the companies did not have the capital to acquire machinery throughout their operations. Due to the inflow of capital by international investors and financial support by the state, those expensive investments were made feasible in the 2000s. Additionally, the companies and the state had an interest in creating an image of a clean, green 'Bioethanol' to accelerate those exports. Therefore the sugarcane industry changed its position and supported a law enacted in 2002 in São Paulo state – demanded by socio-environmental groups since the end of the 1980s due to health and environmental issues – to prohibit the burning of sugarcane by 2031 (Alves 2009; Reis 2017; Andrade Júnior 2016). In 2007, the government of São Paulo and União da Indústria de Cana-de-Açúcar (UNICA), the association of sugarcane companies, even established a voluntary agreement ('Protocolo Agroambiental') to already end sugarcane burning in 2017. Since the manual harvest of sugarcane requires the burning of sugarcane, these policies implicated the mechanisation of harvesting. As a result, the rate of mechanisation rose from 34.2 per cent in 2006 to 89.6 per cent in 2014 (Baccarin 2016, 122; Fredo et al. 2014).

### **The agroindustrial transformation of the sugarcane sector and its effects on labour**

The transformation of the sector, especially the mechanisation process, had strong effects on labour. Traditionally, work on sugarcane fields was mainly done manually. During the harvest time between April and December, many migrants from poorer regions of Brazil, e.g. the Northeast, came to work as manual harvesters in addition to the local workers. Due to mechanisation, these manual harvesting jobs have largely disappeared, as reflected in the decline of numbers of registered manual workers from 178,510 in 2007 to 55,530 in 2017. The elimination of these lower-skilled jobs left many workers unemployed, and labour migration largely came to a halt. On the other hand, fewer higher-skilled occupations such as harvester or tractor operators were created. The numbers of those 'mechanised' jobs in São Paulo rose from 24,279 to 41,517 during the same period (Baccarin, de Oliveira, and Mardegan 2020, 612; Barreto 2018, 209, 223–230).

In sum, the mechanisation and the crisis of the sector reduced job opportunities in the sector. The resulting unemployment affected communities in the state of São Paulo to varying degrees. Especially in rural areas, where dependence on the sugarcane sector was high and alternative jobs for workers were scarce, job losses due to machinery or factory closures led to high unemployment (Baccarin 2016, 153–162). Few exceptions to these developments were communities, where new sugarcane factories were

established during the expansion phase of the sector and continued to produce despite the crisis. There, new direct jobs were created in the sugarcane sector. This expansion, however, replaced jobs in other agricultural industries such as meat or dairy production (Baccarin 2016, 162).

The transformation of the sector had impacts on the labour process, too: Instead of manual labour, the focus has shifted to mechanised labour. Manual workers – for example as plantation helpers or herbicide sprayers – do all the work, which machines cannot do or where it is cheaper to use manual labour instead of machines (Silva, Bueno, and de Melo 2014).

With regard to labour relations and conditions, there have been different and sometimes contradictory developments, which I will also present in more detail in the course of the article. The number of qualified and better-paid jobs as machine and truck drivers increased, while the number of less qualified and less well-paid manual jobs decreased. In 2016 a harvest machine driver earned on average 1500–3000 reais (300–600 euros), sugarcane cutters 1500–2100 reais (300–420 euros) and all other manual workers 1000–1500 reais (200–300 euros). Most of the workers have official work contracts, a standard that was already established before the agroindustrial transformation. These vary from daily to seasonal to permanent contracts (Reis 2017, 208).<sup>3</sup>

Factors such as age, origin, gender, education, and the behaviour at work of the workers significantly explain access to the better jobs. Sugarcane companies primarily selected younger, more educated men from the sugarcane regions of São Paulo for training as machine drivers, who were conspicuous for their discipline at work. Women, older people or the previously employed migrant workers from poorer regions of Brazil were mainly left out (Reis 2017; Silva, Bueno, and de Melo 2014).

Sugarcane companies use different forms of control over workers to prevent protests and ensure productive labour input, such as through the wage system, supervisors, black lists or layoffs of strike leaders – before and after the agroindustrial transformation of the sector. The labour process in sugarcane companies is characterised by a high degree of direct hierarchical control by the companies over workers and their labour. Souza refers to this style of control as ‘carrot and stick’ (Souza 2013, 115, transl. J.B.), a system consisting of positive incentives like bonuses and punishments like layoffs. Through new technologies and management strategies in the course of the agroindustrial transformation of the sector, the existing forms of control became more sophisticated and widened (Souza 2013). In the case of mechanised harvesting, sugarcane companies collect detailed data on the performance of workers, which are recorded and processed by an on-board computer and GPS systems of the machines (Reis 2017, 142–148).<sup>4</sup> The on-board computer itself not only exercises passive control over the behaviour of workers. In many cases, it is programmed to sound a tone if the machine is idle and workers do not type in a code. One driver described it this way: ‘If I don’t type in a code, the machine will whistle, God forbid!’<sup>5</sup>

### ***Structural and organisational power resources: the development of collective struggles***

Sugarcane workers and their unions have power resources at their disposal that are linked to class structures and class struggles. In the following section, I will elaborate, how the

power resources and class struggles of sugarcane workers changed in the wake of the agroindustrial transformation of the sector.

The mechanisation of sugarcane harvesting divided sugarcane workers into three groups: Workers who found jobs as truck, tractor, or harvester operators, workers who continued to perform manual labour in the sugarcane fields, and workers who lost their jobs.

Mechanisation increased the structural bargaining power of the group consisting of truck, tractor and especially harvester drivers. They have the highest bargaining power and are privileged compared to manual workers, as their level of qualification gives them greater market power. In order to operate the machines workers must complete special training. These workers also have a higher level of education than manual workers.<sup>6</sup> Especially at the beginning of the relatively rapid implementation of mechanisation, qualified personnel was scarce, which is why the drivers had high bargaining power at that time and could virtually choose their employer. In order to meet the growing demand for machine drivers, private training institutions financed by business associations offered special courses at the request of the companies. The companies themselves also trained workers, sometimes in partnership with unions (Reis 2017, 72–73; Baccarin 2016, 151).<sup>7</sup> This increased the supply of machine drivers, which in turn deprived them of some of their newfound bargaining power in the 2010s. The crisis in the sector exacerbated this. The closure of sugarcane companies slowed the growth of new jobs for mechanised workers. As a result, mechanised drivers can now no longer ‘choose’ their jobs, but experienced drivers in particular almost always find a job (Baccarin 2016, 138).<sup>8</sup>

Manual sugarcane workers lost structural bargaining power in the wake of mechanisation. They have a relatively low level of education, measured in terms of years of schooling completed, and therefore generally have poorer labour market opportunities. In addition, they lack specific qualifications. Consequently, these workers are dependent on low-skilled employment opportunities (Baccarin 2016, 123; Souza 2013). Especially in rural areas, where dependence on employment in the sugarcane sector is high and job alternatives for these workers are few, job losses due to mechanisation or factory closures are problematic. In 2009, in 29 municipalities in the state of São Paulo, on average, at least one in five employed persons was a manual worker in the sugarcane sector. Here, the layoffs had a particularly significant impact on unemployment rates, leading to social problems such as poverty in these communities (Baccarin 2016, 155–156). Other communities benefited from the general economic upswing under the Workers’ Party-led government, as new unskilled jobs were created, for example in the construction sector. There, the employment-reducing effects of crop mechanisation were less significant overall than had been feared. Nevertheless, the threat of unemployment increased the pressure on manual workers to secure their jobs.<sup>9</sup>

Another aspect is the strategic position of sugarcane workers in the production process, their production power. A strike is especially effective and costly for the company, if the supply of sugarcane can be completely stopped for several days. Therefore, it is important that all workers on the sugarcane fields go on strike. Unfortunately, different groups of workers and trade unions of different groups of workers in the sugarcane sector in São Paulo do not cooperate much. Joint campaigns at times of collective bargaining or strikes by different unions are rare. This fragmentation was also apparent



in the lack of a coordinated common strategy among the various unions on how to deal with the industrialisation of the sector.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, it is also uncommon for workers' struggles of different workers' groups to unite spontaneously or for workers of other workers' groups to strike in solidarity.<sup>11</sup> Exceptions were strikes, when all groups of workers were affected in the same way by adverse practices by companies and unions actively tried to overcome fragmentation and sought cooperation with other unions. An example was a strike in 2010 at Usina Santa Cruz in Américo Brasiliense of workers on the fields, in transport and in the factory of the company, which organised against outsourcing and related bad working conditions of all workers.<sup>12</sup> Other instances of common strikes and protests of workers of different work areas occurred especially since the beginning of the crisis in the sector in the early 2010s. From that moment on, financially weaker companies had problems covering their expenses and paid the wages of all workers too late, only partially or not at all.<sup>13</sup>

The transformation of the sector affected the various unions differently. The agricultural workers' unions were weakened by the mechanisation of harvest. With the dismissal of many manual farm workers, these unions lost a large part of their membership base. Even the few agricultural workers unions that gained representation of machine operators complained of smaller but still high losses of represented workers.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the decline in membership reduced the financial resources of the unions. Unions have had less money to initiate campaigns, carry out inspections in the field, employ lawyers, or offer other services. Some unions are even on the verge of closing down. This has led to disputes within the agricultural workers' unions. Until 2018 employees paid an annual union tax, which unions shared at the different levels. Due to the lack of funds and partly because of resentment toward the agricultural union on state level Federação dos Empregados Rurais Assalariados do Estado de São Paulo (FERAESP), smaller local unions did not forward the revenue from the taxes to the union on state level. The FERAESP, in turn, responded to this action by filing lawsuits in labour courts against the local unions.<sup>15</sup>

Because Brazilian labour law allows only one union in a municipality to represent tractor, truck and harvester drivers, a conflict arose between agricultural workers' and transport unions over their representation. In Brazil, these disputes are mostly not settled by union confederations, but in labour courts. Thus, in almost every municipality, disputes arose between the two unions over the question of who should represent the tractor, rural truck and machine drivers. This further increased already existing fragmentations between the different unions.<sup>16</sup>

Organisational power also increases when union members are active and can easily be mobilised for class struggles such as strikes by unions. However, the relationship between workers and unions in Brazil is complicated due to historical developments. Brazil's unions often make little effort to actively recruit members – they tend to be bureaucratic organisations (Vellay 2001, 167–168). In São Paulo's sugarcane sector, too, many workers complained in interviews about the work of their unions. They accused the employees of agricultural and transport unions of not seeking proximity to them or not actively monitoring labour standards on the plantations (works councils or similar institutions do not exist in sugarcane companies). In contrast, workers highly valued some unions that regularly seek contact with them.<sup>17</sup>

Especially for manual farm workers and their unions collective struggles such as strikes are an important means to compensate for a lack of market power and to improve working conditions. Due to the high solidarity and class identity of manual farm workers, collective struggles have been a strong means of enforcing interests since the 1980s (Alves 1991).<sup>18</sup> An expression of solidarity and a shared class consciousness was that the initiative for strikes often came from the manual workers themselves. If the relationship with the employees of agricultural workers' unions was complicated, they organised wildcat strikes largely without the support of unions. Partly weekly short work stoppages of sugarcane cutters for better prices per ton for the sugarcane harvest were an expression of this.<sup>19</sup>

However, the mechanisation and crisis of the sector changed the class consciousness of workers, increasing their fear of organising into collective class struggles. Due to the declining employment opportunities in the sector and rising regional unemployment, many workers feared losing their jobs and were therefore more reluctant to organise collectively and accepted worse working conditions. This fear of becoming unemployed cannot only be observed among manual workers, even harvest machine drivers mentioned their discomfort to protest. These workers are aware that they have a relatively 'privileged' employment in rural areas, with comparatively high salaries, health insurance and medical service in the companies, and a formal contract.<sup>20</sup>

Employees of traditionally more conservative trade unions – especially transport unions – became even more hesitant to use strikes as a means of enforcing interests. But even active agricultural workers' unionists are no longer able to mobilise workers for strikes.<sup>21</sup> This estimation is also reflected in the statement of a president of the president of the agricultural workers' union in Jaboticabal who declared 'Nowadays, I lack the army to fight against the companies'.<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence, during the period 2002–2016 fewer strikes and wildcat strikes could be observed. A closer look shows that the decreasing strike numbers in São Paulo's sugarcane sector are mainly due to decreasing mobilisation of manual workers – the number of strikes by drivers remained at a low level. When workers did mobilise to strike, they were smaller in scale, shorter and more selective at individual sugarcane factories. Furthermore, the purpose of the strike became more defensive within this period: Workers increasingly used strikes to defend existing labour standards rather than to fight for new rights.<sup>23</sup>

One exception of these developments was a series of strikes in various companies around Sertãozinho near Ribeirão Preto in 2008, when between 5000 and 10,000 manual workers at the companies Usina Bela Vista, Usina Basan, Usina Carolo and Usina Albertina stopped work at the same time. The reason for the strikes was the intensification of manual sugarcane cutting, accompanied by falling real wages. After wages per harvested ton of sugarcane had already stagnated in previous years and only increased roughly in line with inflation, inflation-adjusted wages, which are calculated on the basis of the price paid per ton, fell significantly in 2008. With the wage cut, a threshold was crossed for the workers. It was a wage for which they did not want to work and be exploited. Accordingly, they demanded an improvement in their income. At the beginning, it was a wildcat strike. However, as the strike progressed, the workers made contact with FERAESP and their local unions, which later supported the workers in their strike and negotiations. With the strikes lasting several days – in

some companies up to 14 days – the workers were able to achieve improvements: the companies increased the basic wage from 450 to 500 reais (90–100 euros) and the price per harvested ton by about 10 per cent. However, after the strikes, the companies dismissed some leaders of the strike (Repórter Brasil 2009, 9–11; Menezes and Cover 2015, 218–219; Folha de S. Paulo 2008a, 2008b).

### ***Institutional power resources and institutional means of enforcing interests***

Workers and unions can also have institutional power resources at their disposal. Due to the loss of structural power and organisational power of the (mainly manual) sugarcane workers, institutionalised ways of asserting interests played an important role.

During the period of government of the Workers' Party from 2003 to 2016, trade unions in Brazil were generally able to expand their institutional power resources (Melleiro and Steinhilber 2012, 227). This development can also be observed in the sugarcane sector in São Paulo.

In the period 2002–2016, the Brazilian government improved conditions for labour inspections of rural work. It increased the Ministry of Labour's and the Public Prosecutor's Office for Labour Law's budget for labour inspectors and labour prosecutors and prioritised the elimination of slave-like labour. In addition, the Ministry of Labour created a labour inspection group for rural areas in São Paulo. A new labour directive, which specifically regulates working conditions (especially health and safety issues) in the agricultural sector (*Norma Regulamentadora 31*) was implemented. Furthermore, the Brazilian government defined the sugarcane sector as a priority for the elimination of slave labour, as it sought to establish the sector as an export sector for which a clean image is necessary. These changes helped labour inspectors and prosecutors to sanction deviant companies (Coslovsky and Locke 2013; McGrath 2013).<sup>24</sup> Unions and workers frequently made use of complaints against sugarcane companies to the Ministry of Labour between 2002 and 2016 due to their greater effectiveness.<sup>25</sup>

Strengthening labour inspection improved the worst violations of labour standards in the sugarcane sector in the state of São Paulo. Better work safety regulations, improved workplace equipment such as fresh water and sanitation facilities and work breaks helped reduce the risk of accidents and work-related health problems, such as several deaths of manual sugarcane cutters due to exhaustion in the mid-2000s. Slave-like labour, which was a major problem in the industry until the mid-2000s, has also been largely eliminated (Capitani et al. 2015; Coslovsky and Locke 2013).<sup>26</sup>

Policy decisions on the agroindustrialisation of the sector in the 1990s were mainly a project of the government and sugarcane companies, with unions having little say in it. Accordingly, the agricultural workers' unions at first reacted positively to the tripartite commission in the sugarcane sector consisting of the Brazilian government, trade unions and the sugarcane industry that President Lula da Silva created in 2008.<sup>27</sup> Those tripartite commissions were typical of his time in office (Melleiro and Steinhilber 2012). The goal of the commission, consisting of the Secretary General of the President, the unions FERAESP and Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura (CONTAG), and the business associations UNICA and Fórum Nacional Sucoalcooleiro was to solve together challenges of the sector, such as the mechanisation of sugarcane harvesting or the extreme exploitation of manual sugarcane cutters (Teixeira 2014).

The outcome of this roundtable was a voluntary agreement, the ‘Compromisso Nacional para Aperfeiçoar as Condições de Trabalho na Cana-de-Açúcar’ (National Commitment to Improve Working Conditions in the Sugarcane Sector) in 2009 (Teixeira 2014). Among other things, the stakeholders agreed to introduce qualification programmes for manual sugarcane workers so that they could take over the newly created jobs such as harvester drivers or mechanics. In total, 6650 workers underwent the project’s education and training between 2010 and 2015 (UNICA 2015), representing a fraction of the nearly 123,000 manual workers laid off between 2007 and 2017 alone (Baccarin, de Oliveira, and Mardegan 2020, 612). Another result was the stated commitment by sugarcane producers to improve working conditions like work safety or the formalisation of work. In return, companies that signed the agreement and allowed inspections by private audit firms were awarded with a seal as an expression of their good working conditions by all participants of the roundtable (Reis 2017, 55).

Some academics, employees of the Ministry of Labour and the Public Prosecutor’s Office and trade unionists criticised the fact that the agreement was voluntary and did not solve fundamental problems in the sector. At the same time, the critics emphasised the problems of certification of ‘good employers’ by trade unions (Teixeira 2014; Thomaz Júnior 2010).<sup>28</sup> Actually, the agreement brought no significant improvements for workers. On the contrary, the Ministry of Labour or the Public Prosecutor’s Office took 60 of the 169 certified companies to court for labour law violations, which also affected the credibility of the government and trade unions. As a result, the government terminated the agreement and the certifications in 2013 (Reis 2017, 55–56).

A further institutional power resource backed by law, collective bargaining, remained an important means for workers and unions to enhance working conditions. However, the loss of structural and organisational power of manual sugarcane workers and rural trade unions led to an increase in labour intensity (manual workers harvested 7.7 tons per day in 2000 and 8.7 tons in 2010) and lower real wages for sugarcane cutters (Reis 2017, 177–178; Repórter Brasil 2009; Baccarin 2016, 130). Machine drivers and usually their transport unions were able to use their higher bargaining power due to their higher qualification level compared to manual workers for moderate wage increases. Nevertheless, they were often unable to impede long working hours of up to 12 h per day for drivers in these negotiations.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Societal power resources: alliances with social movement or international campaigning as alternatives?***

A potential partner for agricultural workers’ unions in the sugarcane sector are landless movements such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), as both are committed to redistributing land and strengthening smallholder agriculture. However, the relationship between the MST and the agricultural workers’ unions in São Paulo is difficult. There are major ideological differences between the more conservative agricultural trade union Federação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar do Estado de São Paulo (FETAESP) and the MST, the biggest landless workers movement in Latin America (Chiovetti 1999, 159).<sup>30</sup> The relationship between the more progressive FETAESP and MST has become complicated in the 2000s after years of cooperation due to personal differences between leaders of the organisations and differences in organisational

structure and culture. Also, the question of how to deal with the PT-led governments between 2003 and 2016 further deteriorated the relationship between agricultural workers unions and the MST in São Paulo (Melleiro and Steinhilber 2012, 209, 227).<sup>31</sup>

The poor relationship between the FERAESP and FETAESP and the landless movements made it difficult for them to cooperate in the sugarcane sector. The layoffs due to crop mechanisation and the current crisis increased the need to create alternative livelihoods for unemployed sugarcane workers. Occupying land and transforming it into smallholder settlements is such a means. At the same time, new opportunities arose to gain land from sugarcane companies for smallholder settlements, as in recent years some sugarcane companies had to declare insolvency due to high debts, especially to the state, but also to workers, companies and banks.<sup>32</sup> The transformation of the sugarcane sector thus represented an opportunity to intensify the relationship between rural workers unions and landless movements because of the common concern of their members. While FETAESP refused to cooperate with landless movements, FERAESP was already working together with a smaller landless movement MST da Base. Furthermore, the leaders of FERAESP showed themselves open to improving the relationship with the MST and intensifying the struggle for agrarian reform on its assembly in 2017.<sup>33</sup>

The weakening of agricultural workers unions and the rise in importance of transport unions also affected the question of societal power of sugarcane workers. Unlike agricultural workers unions, the more urban-based transport unions have no connection to struggles over land. Agrarian reform is not a declared goal of transport unions. Additionally, there is a lack of experience of joint struggles and personal connections between the two organisations. Cooperation between the two organisations is therefore unlikely, which weakens struggles for land and for agrarian reform.<sup>34</sup>

Societal power could also arise by tackling the image of multinational companies. The goal of producing ethanol for external markets and market ethanol as a 'sustainable' alternative increased the pressure on sugarcane companies to create a clean image. Workers and trade unions sporadically tried to take advantage of the international attention gained as a result.<sup>35</sup> FERAESP, for example, is involved in the Shell Network, in which unions from different countries organise under the global umbrella organisation of industrial unions IndustriALL and try to develop joint strategies against poor working conditions at Shell. The joint effort of different unions representing Shell employees, such as the FERAESP agricultural workers' union from Brazil and the Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers, is noteworthy. At the same time, the concrete results of this network and its campaign have so far been quite limited, other than networking and some international publicity (IndustriALL n.d.).<sup>36</sup> A strike organised by FERAESP in Catanduva in 2007 strategically timed during a joint publicity tour in Europe of Lula da Silva and UNICA representatives is also an example of the union's use of the increased international attention for the sector as a power resource. Although the strike was effective, it remained the exception.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

With this article, I have contributed to the question of how labour, class relations and labour struggles change in the course of agroindustrial transformations in the neoliberal food regime. For the analysis of agroindustrial transformations and their impact on

workers' power and resistance, the power resource approach proved to be useful. It shows at which points workers have options for action in order to assert their interests. It thus provides explanations of how workers and unions act and when they resort to certain forms of political action.

The analysis of the agroindustrial transformation of the sugarcane sector in the state of São Paulo between 2002 and 2016 supports the argument that agroindustrial transformations weaken the rural working class and worsens their situation overall. Only very few workers could benefit from these changes.

The main reason for this was rising unemployment and the loss of bargaining power of many workers. Especially the weak class position of manual workers worsened. Manual sugarcane workers had established a class consciousness of solidarity based on common experiences of exploitation and oppression, which expressed itself in collective protests such as strikes – their main power resource to push through demands until the transformation of the sugarcane sector. Fear of unemployment and fragmentation within the working class reduced the willingness of workers to organise collectively. Even mechanised workers, the few winners of agroindustrial transformation, were hardly able to use their greater structural power due to rising unemployment. Furthermore, all workers lost bargaining power, as the agroindustrial transformation of the sugarcane sector further fragmented their unions.

New institutional power resources and means of enforcing worker interests through the Workers' Party government and societal power resources could hardly compensate for the loss of organisational power. Ultimately, improvements in labour relations were created, for example, through better controls by state labour inspectors. However, these were in areas where companies also had an interest in improving them: reports of deaths from overwork or slave-like labour conditions were damaging to the 'clean image' sugarcane companies needed for ethanol exports. On the contrary, higher wages, permanent employment contracts and shorter working hours are the main concerns of workers. But, there were hardly any improvements, rather deteriorations for workers.

In contrast to the rural working class, the class of capitalists united in the process of agrarian industrialisation and gained bargaining power and control over workers. The process of industrialisation of agriculture, as in the sugarcane case, was a project of capital, supported by the state, in which workers and unions had little say. Capitalists dominated the shape of this process.

These results also point to the ambivalent role of the Brazilian government. For example, the 'left' government of the Workers' Party helped improve the worst labour conditions without solving fundamental problems in the sector. At the same time, they gave large amounts of subsidies to the agroindustrial sugarcane sector, strengthening capitalists rather than the classes of labour. On the other hand, the developments in Brazil after the coup in 2016 with the right-wing governments of Michel Temer or Jair Bolsonaro, which severely weakened workers and unions in Brazil through labour and trade union rights reforms, point to the value of 'left' or moderate governments for workers' movements.

For agricultural workers' unions in general, these realisations mean that they should resist and not support projects of agroindustrial expansion. This finding reinforces the fact that Brazil (at least before 2017) was considered a country with worker-friendly

labour laws.<sup>38</sup> Also, the formalisation rate of labour relations, the frequency of labour inspections, and the level of worker organisation in Sao Paulo's sugarcane sector are higher in relation to many other agricultural sectors in Brazil<sup>39</sup> and globally. Furthermore, trade unions should be more engaged in organising not only labour struggles but also struggles over the means of production. The reason for this is not only ideological considerations, but also the question of how the reproduction of agricultural workers can be ensured in the context of agroindustrial transformations in the neoliberal food regime with its negative social effects.

## Notes

1. Here I refer to the 'critical agrarian studies' as a newer field of research (Akram-Lodhi et al. 2021).
2. In this paper, I use the exchange rate of 1 March 2020 for the conversion from Real to Euro, which was 1 Real : 0,2 Euro on that day (OANDA).
3. Interviews, different sugarcane workers and representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
4. Interview, HR manager sugarcane company, Junqueirópolis, 18 May 2016.
5. Interview, harvest machine driver, Flórida Paulista, 5 May 2016.
6. Interviews, different representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
7. Interview, representatives of transport trade union, São Paulo, 8 March 2017.
8. Interviews, representatives transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
9. Interviews, sugarcane workers and representatives of rural trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
10. Interviews, representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
11. Interview, sugarcane workers, Mirante do Paranapanema, 29 April 2016 and Cruz das Posses, 2 June 2016.
12. Interviews, representatives of rural trade unions, Araraquara, 31 May 2016.
13. Interviews, sugarcane workers and representatives of rural trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
14. Interviews, representatives of rural trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
15. Interviews, representatives of rural trade unions, Araraquara, 30 October 2016 and Ribeirão Preto, 29 March 2017.
16. Interviews, representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
17. Interviews, sugarcane workers, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
18. Interviews, representatives of rural trade unions, Araraquara, 31 May 2016 and 31 October 2016.
19. Interviews, sugarcane workers, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
20. Interviews, sugarcane workers and representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
21. Interview, representative of rural trade union, Araraquara, 31 May 2016.
22. Interview, representative of rural trade union, Jaboticabal, 27 May 2016, transl. J.B.
23. Interviews, representatives of rural and transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
24. Interview, labour inspector, Batatais, 28 March 2017.
25. Interviews, labour inspectors, Presidente Prudente, 11 May 2016 and Batatais, 28 March 2017.
26. Interview, labour inspectors, Ribeirão Preto, 4 November 2016.
27. Interviews, representatives of rural trade unions, Presidente Venceslau, 17 May 2016 and Brasília, 13 March 2017.
28. Interviews, labour inspector, Batatais, 28 March 2017 and representative of rural trade union, Ribeirão Preto, 29 March 2017.

29. Interviews, representatives of transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017; Evaluation of various collective agreements, São Paulo state, 2007–2018.
30. Interviews, representatives of rural trade union, Bauru, 5 December 2015 and representative of landless movement, Ribeirão Preto, 28 October 2016.
31. Interview, representative of landless movement, Ribeirão Preto, 10 June 2016.
32. Interviews, representative of landless movement, Ribeirão Preto, 10 June 2016 and representative of rural trade union, Araraquara, 30 October 2016.
33. participatory observation, rural trade union assembly, Bauru, 15 March 2017.
34. Interviews, representatives of transport trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
35. Interviews, representatives of rural trade unions, São Paulo state, 2016–2017.
36. Interview, representative of rural trade union, Araraquara, 31 May 2016.
37. Interview, representative of rural trade union, Cosmópolis, 17 October 2016.
38. Interview, public labour prosecutor, Presidente Prudente, 4 May 2016.
39. Interview, labour inspector, Batatais, 28 March 2017.

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