

**Strikes in sugarcane mills: The forms of resistance of migrant workers in Brazil**Marilda, M.<sup>1</sup> & Maciel, C.<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Federal University of ABC São Paulo - Brazil<sup>2</sup>Federal University of Campina Grande - Brazil**Corresponding author:** macielcover@gmail.com

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**Abstract**

This paper analyse forms of resistance of migrant workers from rural areas of North-eastern regions of Brazil who labour in the harvesting of cane sugar in sugarcane mills in the state of São Paulo. The focus is the analysis of some “spontaneous” movements taken up by the cutters of cane sugar named as “stopping” or “strikes”, which occurred in the period 2007-2013. The aim is to understand these movements, such as the action begins if there are leaders among workers, what strategies are resorted to mobilise workers, which other social actors are involved: Unions, Ministry of Labour, and Pastoral Care of Migrants. Sources based on field observations, semi-structured interviews with workers and trade unionists, newspaper reports and audio-visual documentation. The findings indicate that many strikes have been happening in the last six years, conducted by seasonal migrant worker. The strikes start without the union presence, who enter in the background afterward, in the moment of negotiation between the migrant workers and the mills. We conclude that the strikes that have taken place in the last six years, many of them conduct by migrant workers, indicate that the strike action is a form of resistance that has not been abandoned, generating outcomes in favour of the migrant workers.

Key words: Agribusiness, over exploitation, public resistance, Unionism

**Résumé**

Ce document analyse les formes de résistance des travailleurs migrants des zones rurales des régions du nord-est du Brésil qui travaillent à la récolte de la canne à sucre dans les usines de canne à sucre dans l'État de São Paulo. L'objectif est l'analyse de certains mouvements «spontanés» prises par les coupeurs de canne à sucre désignées comme «arrêt» ou «grèves», qui a eu lieu dans la période 2007-2013. L'objectif est de comprendre ces mouvements, tels que comment commence l'action, est-ce qu'il y a des leaders parmi les travailleurs, quelles stratégies sont recouru à mobiliser les travailleurs, quels sont d'autres acteurs sociaux impliqués: les syndicats, le ministère du Travail et autres organismes qui s'occupent des migrants. Les sources basées sur des observations de terrain, des entretiens avec des travailleurs et des syndicalistes, des articles de journaux et la documentation audio-visuelle semi-structurées. Les résultats indiquent que de nombreuses grèves se sont produites au cours des six dernières années, menées par des travailleurs migrants saisonniers. Les grèves commencent sans la présence syndicale, qui entre dans le fond après, au moment de la négociation entre les travailleurs migrants et les usines. Nous concluons que les grèves

qui ont eu lieu au cours des six dernières années, beaucoup d'entre elles étaient organisées par des travailleurs migrants, indiquent que la grève est une forme de résistance qui n'a pas été abandonnée, générant des résultats en faveur des travailleurs migrants.

Mots clés: industries agricoles, la surexploitation, la résistance du publique, le syndicalisme

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### **Introduction**

The growing demand for Brazilian ethanol since the 1990s has generated a considerable expansion of the area planted with sugar cane in the state of São Paulo. This fact brought several consequences like environment problems, elimination areas of food crops and increasing the recruitment of migrant workers. Before 1990s, migrant workers proceeded mainly from the region Jequitinhonha Valley (State of Minas Gerais) and the rural areas of state of Bahia. After 1990s grows to hire workers from other North-eastern states like Paraíba, Piauí, Pernambuco, Ceará and Maranhão.

Since 2000s, the sugarcane sector carry out an intensification of mechanization of cane cutting. Although has been a decrease for workers in this activity, has not a total elimination of manual cutting because mechanical harvesting depends of a several factors like to variations in topography, soil and quality of sugarcane. In the sugarcane sector, for example, in 2010, the fronts of planting and cutting cane employed 800,000 workers. Of these, about 400,000 were cane cutters. In state of São Paulo, about 40% of these workers were migrants (DIEESE, 2007). The argument of the lack of workers in the sugarcane region of São Paulo and abundance of work force in rural areas of North-eastern Brazil have been used in various analyses. Although have an availability of workers in the Northeast, we understand that hiring migrant workers is a political strategy of domination and control by sugarcane mills (Novaes, 1993; Menezes, 2002).

One of the arguments used by intermediaries is that the Northeast are good workers to cut sugar cane, because they have physical strength and good productivity, and are obedient to their immediate supervisors as boss and fiscal. Follow this idea, the Northeast migrant, unlike of the migrant workers from Bahia and Minas Gerais, are less adept at participating in "confusion", a term used to describe the actions of individual or collective defence in everyday life in workplace. There is also among the workers themselves, fiscal and intermediaries an image that migrant workers are not adept to involvement in strikes. Thus, these factors are mobilized by different actors to explain why sugarcane mills in the state of São Paulo hire migrant workers from rural areas of north-eastern Brazil.

Among the various mechanisms of domination and control over migrant workers, we emphasize the system of recruitment; the selection conducted by mediators of the localities themselves migrants and the payment by piecework method. Recruitment and selection are performed by local intermediaries that do a kind of "first screening" of workers. They select "good workers", in other words, it has good productivity, do not miss the work, be obedient to the rules of the mills and the boss (Menezes *et al.*, 2012).

Migrant workers are males, aged between 18 and 30 years, and have been socialized in agricultural labour whose body is disciplined to the hard work of cutting cane. The average productivity has increased in the 1980s, the mills demanded that the worker cut an average of five (05) to eight (08) tons of cane per day; in 1990 this average rises to eight (08) to nine (09) tons / day, increasing to 10 t / day in 2000 and for twelve (12) to fifteen (15) tons / day in 2004.

Several studies (Alves, 2007; Novaes and Alves, 2007; Silva, 2006 Scopinho, 2000) show the increased exploitation and degradation of working conditions, the effects of which are deteriorating health and early predation workforce. The workers are engaged in forms of domination, which often puts them in physical violence (Freitas, 2003), slave labour (Smith, 2007) or total surveillance institutions, such as the housing (Menezes, 2002; Cover, 2011). However, there are also forms of resistance woven into the intricacies and loopholes of relations of domination.

In an era marked by the insertion of technology and the ever rising unemployment, eyes and action of the working class, ended up turning to strategies focused on the search for secure employment that implied, including, give up some rights already conquered. In these uncertain times where fear haunts the minds of each worker, the public struggle becomes a remote option, which does not mean that workers accept the level of domination and exploitation to which they are exposed. Nonetheless, a close look at the everyday world of work is able to reveal that such acceptance is only apparent and that the struggle still exists but in other plans. In this sense, there is always the possibility that these everyday forms of resistance erupt on stage, in the public arena, which has been attested by numerous episodes of strikes, work stoppages, access to labour justice perpetrated by migrant workers.

We searched on newspaper reports and account records 14 strikes workers to harvest cane sugar between 2007-2013. Sources of stories are diverse, showing record manifestations of cane cutters in websites regional newspaper circulation (O Estado de São Paulo, Folha de São Paulo, O Diário, TV TEM), unions websites (CTB - Confederation of Workers of Brazil) independent websites (Blog Sakamoto, Portal de Mídia Independente) and political parties websites (Portal PSTU, Portal Vermelho).

Through participant observation, we follow the case of the strike at Vista Alegre Mill in Itapetininga-SP in September 2011. Workers who were in the region of São José de Piranhas State of Paraíba and the city of Barro, State of Ceará conducted a two-week strike, demanding fair pay and better housing. Collect reports on interviews recorded on audio and videos that show the appalling housing conditions and the failure of wage expectation that motivated the protest. This event took place in September 2011. In January 2012, we follow the process of recruitment and selection of workers in their regions of origin in Paraíba.

As a finding, we found that employees who participated in the strike were socially marked, not being rehired by Vista Alegre Mill and having difficulty finding a job in mills that region of São Paulo. At the same time, we found that through social networks of friendship and kinship workers mobilized to seek jobs in other groups that provide services to other mills.

Another important consideration is that public and collective actions of migrant workers, as the case of this strike happen “spontaneously”, in other words, actions initiated autonomously and spontaneously by workers, although in the course of mobilizing other actors can enter in the stage as union leaders, Ministry of Labor and Labor Attorney. These spontaneous actions, leaders emerge from among the workers, unlike strikes in other sectors, where the leaders are part of the union apparatus.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude that the fact of 14 strikes have taken place in the last six years, many of them conduct by migrant workers, indicate that the strike action is a form of resistance that has not been abandoned. Although of intimidation methods of mills, such as not hiring striking workers, the strikes have had been used and gains for workers in the sector. Even though the seasonal migrant workers started the strikes independently of unions, in the process the unions represents and the Ministry of Labour agents are actioned. This fact indicates that, despite the absence of union institutions among seasonal migrant workers, the connexion of different actors as workers, unions and Ministry of Labour contribute to a positive outcome of the strikes in favour of workers.

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