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Gargalos fornecem poder aos trabalhadores da logística? Uma crítica à abordagem dos recursos de poder à luz da greve dos caminhoneiros de 2018 no Brasil

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Resumo

Os gargalos nos transportes e na logística foram identificados como dispositivos cruciais do poder dos trabalhadores nestes sectores. A greve de 11 dias de cerca de 400.000 caminhoneiros brasileiros em mais de 750 bloqueios em Maio de 2018 exerceu um bloqueio extremamente eficaz da economia nacional, mas apenas conduziu a magros resultados. O artigo tenta identificar as razões deste desajuste entre o poder de bloquear o fluxo de mercadorias e a falta de poder para alcançar melhorias significativas da situação dos caminhoneiros. Demonstra que análises centradas nos recursos de poder dos trabalhadores numa perspectiva sectorial podem não compreender a maior dinâmica em jogo. O artigo propõe portanto uma economia política do trabalho como um dispositivo analítico para compreender a influência económica e política dos trabalhadores nos transportes e na logística.

Palavras-chave:

transporte, logística, gargalos, caminhoneiros, Petrobras

Introduction

The Brazilian truckers strike in 2018 successfully mobilized 400,000 truckers, built 750 blockades and shut down the Brazilian economy for eleven days. If truckers are able to exert such an effort, does this mean that workers in transport and logistics do wield sufficient power to achieve improvements of their situation? Conventional power resources approaches (PRA) in labour studies would argue yes, if they develop their strategic capabilites to a sufficient degree (AK Strategic Unionism 2013). Thus, how do we account for the limited success of the Brazilian truck drivers despite a seemingly high degree of workplace bargaining power and societal power?

Explanations based on the PRA have several key gaps since they cannot account for constraints built into a) global production networks, b) long-term development strategies of national economies and accompanying state capabilities, and c) political-ideological issues. All three aspects are rooted in national and international class relations to a large extent, but in a broader sense than the sector-focused perspective of the PRA allows to grasp.

First, the specific political context of the Brazilian market, as it has developed since 2014, includes a structural gap between the cost and the price of freight transport, which makes Brazilian truckers more vulnerable to government and business preferences to keep prices low (and thus lowers their income). The pressure on transport costs is immediately linked to the competitive position of Brazilian agribusiness on the world market. Second, due to long-term development strategies, the Brazilian state lacks the infrastructural capability to improve transport networks in a way that would benefit truckers, and it lacks the institutional capacity to regulate transport prices in an effective manner. Third, the organizations of truckers in Brazil are focused on sectoral problems, lack a broader agenda due to their supposedly apolitical ideology, and thus lack the political vision to address the energy policies of the federal government and the lack of infrastructural state power as the key devices to improve their position.

In other words, in order to understand the dynamics of the truckers´ strike we need to understand not only the structural and societal power of Brazilian truckers, but also the position of the road freight sector in the global economy and Brazil´s position in the international division of labour and the concomitant development processes and strategies. The high amount of economic power and societal power that the blockades exercised did not translate easily into political power which was needed to meet the demands of the truckers, i.e. a lower price of diesel and minimum freight prices guaranteed by law. While both demands were met after the strike, the lower price for diesel was only in place for a duration of six months, and the freight prices were legally established, but not implemented, in other words shippers do not pay the minimum prices.

There is a vague consensus in labour studies that workers in the transport and logistics industry have at their disposal significant resources of power (Alimahomed-Wilson/Ness 2018), and

some authors identify 'logistical power' as a specific subset of the power resources of workers (Schmalz et al. 2018). Kim Moody (2017) goes so far as to qualify workers in logistics as the successor of the once powerful industrial working class, due to their concentration in large workplaces. In this article, I develop the claim that a limited focus on transport and logistics as a sector and the potential power resources of workers in this sector will not provide a proper explanation of the problems of Brazilian truckers and their strategies of mobilisation. Therefore, this article provides a critique of the PRA in labour studies since it remains focused on economic-corporate interests of workers, even if it includes broader areas of resource mobilisation like societal and institutional power (AK Strategic Unionism 2013; Schmalz et al. 2018, 121ff). Instead, I propose to analyse the issues that workers in logistics are facing, and the role of logistics itself for production networks in the broader context of the social formation in which these workers are located.

This requires an investigation into the political economy of labour in logistics which I understand as a broader complex of energy systems (Malm 2016; Newell 2019), traffic infrastructure (Easterling 2014), and the global production networks which include producers, buyers, transporters and national and supranational state policies (Henderson et al. 2002; Coe/Yeung 2015; Dallas et al. 2019). While there has been a recent call to pay more attention to the significance of labour relations for international political economy and global value chain analysis (Selwyn 2015; 2019), there is a widespread lack of an integration of political economy into global labour studies (Brookes/McCallum 2017), especially in the area of workers in logistics (Bonacich/Wilson 2008; Cowen 2014; Alimahomed-Wilson/Ness 2018). Given this gap, I aim to show why a political economy of labour in the broad sense, including aspects like energy policies, infrastructure development and state capacities, is crucial in order to understand labour conflict. I will demonstrate the usefulness of such an approach and the limits of a sectoral and resource-focused perspective with respect to the truck drivers´ strike that took place in Brazil in May 2018. The empirical research is based on 23 interviews conducted between July and November 2018 in various regions of Brazil. The respondents were selected according to their significance for the object of the research conducted, and therefore consist of leaders of truck drivers, union leaders of petroleum workers, staff at the Ministry of Transport, staff at transport agencies of the government, staff at government think thanks, staff at consultants of agrobusiness, representatives of agrobusiness and representatives of NGOs who work on infrastructure issues. All interviews were conducted in person as semi-structured interviews which were audio recorded, and audio recordings were accompanied by written notes.

2. The Truckers´ Strike in Brazil in May 2018

The truckers' strike in Brazil from May 21 to June 2, 2018 was primarily organised via Whatsapp and Facebook. Its immediate trigger was an increase in the price of diesel by state company Petrobras. The special nature of the truckers' strike in Brazil in 2018 was the high amount of mobilisation with about 400.000 truckers who erected around 700 blockades and paralysed the country´s economy for eleven days, and the fact that other parts of society, and especially petroleum workers decided to join the strike. The strike ended after the CEO of Petrobras, Pedro Parente, had stepped down from his post, and the government conceded to policy measures that had truckers lift the blockades. The main outcomes were a temporary freeze of the price of diesel, monthly changes of the diesel price instead of daily ones, and minimum freight prices defined by the government. All measures were vaild for six months, until the end of the Temer presidency.

Strikes of truck drivers have not been exactly a new thing to Brazil, and neither were blockades by truck drivers since they continued to happen during a number of years, e.g. in July 2012 in twelve federal states, in July 2013 in nine federal states and in February 2015 again in twelve federal states. The strike of truck drivers in 2015, for example, led to about 120 different blockades around the country.[1] The high frequency of those mobilisations reflects the amount of problems in the sector – the central problem are falling freight prices which go back to an overabundance of workers in the sector, and the lack of power of truckers to raise freight prices in the face of rising costs.

However, since there were recurrent strikes and blockades of truck drivers in 2011, 2012 and 2015 – why did the truck drivers´ strike in 2018 create so much attention and economic havoc? First of all, there was a change in the price policy of state oil company Petrobras in July 2017: diesel and gasoline prices would change daily according to world market prices, while during the government of Dilma Rousseff (2011 to 2016) changes in the international fuel prices were brought to the national market with much delay. Keeping diesel prices low was used by Rousseff as a macroeconomic instrument to keep inflation at low levels (Infra Partners 2018). When diesel prices spiked in April and May 2018, not only were truckers affected financially. They were not able to calculate their costs since freight contracts are signed weeks in advance and thus prices that would cover costs were harder to calculate due to the daily adjustments of the price of diesel. The change of prices and the daily adjustments were the specific trigger for the strike in 2018.

Second, the other special feature of the 2018 strike was the sheer number of participants, and the overwhelming public support for it. Police estimates count 400,000 truckers participating with their vehicles in more than 700 blockades, and the economic damage of the strike was immense.

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[1] These data are based on an evaluation of the archive of the Brazilian business newspaper *Valor Economico* by the author of this article.

Apart from the truckers, the strike attracted taxi and Uber drivers, delivery drivers and all kinds of workers from the transport sector who joined the blockades together with different layers of the general population. The strike effectively canalised the high amount of frustration among the general population with the then outgoing Temer government which also explains the high amount of public support gathered by the strike (between 60 and 70 per cent due to various polls). In the last two days of the eleven day long truckers strike, petroleum workers of state company Petrobras joined in.

If one would have to look for proof that workers in logistics and transport are able to block the flow of goods and of profit-making, the Brazilian truck drivers´ strike in 2018 would be the perfect example. But, paradoxically, the high amount of power of the truck drivers and all the groups that joined them to block transport, did not translate into results that would change the situation of truck drivers. I will first provide some general insight into the position of Brazil in the global division of labour, the political conjuncture at the period of the strike and the characteristics of the freight industry in Brazil. In a second step, I will take a closer look into the mobilisations, negotiations and political debates that emerged around the strike in order to understand the mismatch between economic and political power, or between the effectiveness of the blockades and the inability of truckers to have their demands met.

The costs for truck drivers consist mainly in the items of fuel, tires, and vehicle repair. They kept rising with inflation but freight prices did not keep up since Brazil entered into an economic crisis in 2014. Other chronic problems of the sector are the bad state of the infrastructure for freight transport on roads, i.e. shaky or muddy roads, leading to a high number of accidents or damage to the trucks; a lack of security on long distances without much settlement, leading to a high amount of theft of freight; a lack of car repair, gasoline, accommodation and food provision infrastructure along the roads; and overcrowded roads leading to delays. Solutions that have been found as responses to earlier strikes tended to aggravate the problems in the sector in the mid-term: Federal and regional state programs came with incentives to replace old with new trucks, mainly between 2010 and 2014 (Infra Partners 2018). The effect of those programs – intended to modernise the fleet and thereby increase the speed of road transport, and to reduce pollution – was an increase in the total number of trucks since companies kept older ones and added new trucks, and more autonomous drivers entered into the sector since it became easier to finance a new truck. Until 2010, GDP growth and transport fleet growth were in line, and after 2010 transport fleet growth clearly disconnects from GDP growth. The size of the transport fleet remains stable after 2014 but GDP fell considerably between 2014 and 2018, thus the already existing mismatch increased (Infra

Partners 2018). Freight prices plummeted when the economic crisis hit Brazil in 2014 and transport volumes went down. A price-cost gap for truckers was building up since 2014 and increased over time: Estimates are that in May 2018 truckers were facing a cost gap of 12.6 per cent, i.e. their expenses were on average 12.6 per cent higher than their income (Infra Partners 2018). In other words, autonomous truckers on average paid for their work and did not earn anything, while in 2012 the margin in the sector was still between 5 and 15 per cent.

There was an official call for the strike in 2018 by a professional corporate body, *Associação Brasileira dos Caminhoneiros* (ABCAM) which claims to represent 600.000 autonomous truckers. It is not a trade union, but part of the corporatist body *Confederação Nacional de Transporte* (CNT), representing interests of various actors from the transport sector in Brazil. The complaints of truckers to the corporate organisation ABCAM had been increasing in the weeks ahead of the strike, and ABCAM sent several letters to Brazil's then president Temer, warning about the probability of a strike and calling for meetings with officials. The calls remained unanswered, and ABCAM sent out a strike call on Friday, May 18, 2018 via Facebook. The beginning of the strike was scheduled for the next Monday, May 21, and the Facebook message called for truckers to stay at home during the strike. But the practice of road blocks had already become well established among truckers, and the strike got quickly out of the hands of ABCAM. [2] Massive blockades all over the country started on May 21 and remained intact for 11 days.

It was characteristic for the constellation at that time that the federal government entered into negotiations quickly but was unable to stop the strike. Negotiations were led with 12 different organisations representing truckers and transport companies. One key characteristic of the negotiations was that the government dealt with a massive strike, but that both the transport companies and the truckers were strictly speaking entrepreneurs. The shippers are split up among many groups like agribusiness, retail, industry and others, and truckers did not have an immediate adversary, so the government was called upon by the truckers. The government acted de facto as a representative of shippers who lobbied the government not to raise freight prices. But there were no direct negotiations between shippers and truckers.

Early on the government called the strike a lockout by transport companies – this was not entirely untrue, but it turned out that the overwhelming majority of blockading truckers were autonomous truckers. However, the government tried to stop the strike by threatening employers to sue them for an illegal lockout, and to send in the military against the blockades. Both strategies did not have much effect since they were seen as empty threats in the face of general unrest, and the military was not sent after all. After a few days of strike the government announced a second time

[2] Interview with Caroline Brangel, ABCAM, September 19, 2018, Brasilia.

that it had led successful negotiations with truckers, but, however, again this had no effect on the strike since only a few of those organisations had agreed to the measures. ABCAM as the biggest representative of truckers had left the negotiations various times in protest against what it regarded as insufficient proposals of the government.[3]

During the course of the strike, the demand of some truckers that the military should intervene in the strike, without ever specifying what exactly the military should do, made headlines and a part of the news media therefore placed the strikes on the political right wing. Nonetheless, it was obvious that those truckers meant the military should move against the unpopular Temer government, which was itself placed on the right-wing of the political spectrum. Extreme right-wing presidential candidate at the time and later president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, famously supported the strike in the first week but spoke out against it in the following week. In spite of his wavering position, Bolsonaro is seen as an ally of the truckers in the public. Other observers of the strike and interviewees underlined that only a section of truckers launched demands for military intervention and that the significance of this group had been exaggerated by the news media. However, due to the involvement of some transport companies in the strike and the demand for military intervention of some strikers, the strike was perceived by the general public as politically ambiguous.

Another angle of politicization of the strike was the question of the price policy of Petrobras, the original trigger, but not the underlying cause, of the strike. Many demands of the truckers were focused on abolishing any taxes on diesel, and therefore the federal state was seen as one adversary of truckers. 23 per cent of the price of diesel goes back to taxes, of which 9 per cent are taxes that go to the federal government, and 14 per cent are taxes of the federal states (Gil Dantas 2021).[4] The federal taxes go into unemployment payments and salary components of workers in the public and private sector, and only to those workers who are in formalised employment, and into pension payments and the public health system. The tax rate for diesel that goes to the federal states varies somewhat across states. The taxes that fund the social security system benefit formal workers to a larger extent than autonomous truckers.

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[3] Interview with Caroline Brangel, ABCAM, September 19, 2018, Brasilia.

[4] 47 per cent of the diesel price goes to Petrobras, 14 per cent are a subsidy for the production of biodiesel, and the remaining 16 per cent go to distributors and resellers of diesel (Gil Dantas 2021).

Some truckers raised demands to privatize state company Petrobras[5] since it was seen as responsible for the high price of diesel. The link of the strike to diesel prices and the price policy of Petrobras led the unions of petroleum workers to join the strike with the aim to exercise some influence on the debate.[6] The unions of petroleum workers are notorious opponents of the privatization of Petrobras and defend a national energy policy that guarantees some amount of economic independence from global oil markets and North American and European oil companies that dominate the business. About half of the unionised workers at Petrobras are aligned to largest union federation *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) in the *Federação Única dos Petroleiros* (FUP), and the other half are afiliated to independent left-wing unions. The strike of petroleum workers started on the last days of the truckers strike and was quickly banned by courts, but it gave the decisive impulse for the resignation of new Petrobras CEO Pedro Parente on June 1, 2018 – the day when the petroleum workers started their strike. Parente had introduced the practice of almost daily adjustments to global energy prices. The resignation of Parente was seen as a key move to end the strike since it served as a signal that another mode of adjustment to global energy prices would be installed. The period of adjustments was modified after the strike from daily to monthly adjustments, but only until the end of 2018.

As a result of the strike, the federal government launched the following measures in early June 2018 that were in place until December 31, 2018, the end of the legislative period of the Temer presidency: 1. The diesel price was reduced to the amount of 46 centavos per liter (about 10 euro cent); the diesel price per liter was 3,60 Real at the beginning of the strike. 2. The diesel price was frozen at the level at which it was on May 28, 2018 (minus 46 centavos) for the next 60 days, and price adjustments of diesel prices for consumers will only occur monthly. The price rise of diesel between May 2017 and May 2018 was about eight per cent in the context of an inflation of one per cent in the same period. 3. Empty trucks with suspended axes were exempted from tolls – before, they were charged the full amount for long trucks even if their axes were suspended. 4. The National Supply Company *Companhia Nacional de Abastecimento* (Conab) was obliged to transport 30 per cent of its freight with autonomous truckers. 5. A table with minimum freight

[5] The Brazilian state has a 36.8 per cent stake in the company, and controls 50.5 per cent of the voting rights. The majority of the seats in the administrative council of the company are filled by persons appointed by the federal government of Brazil.

[6] Interview with Cloviomar Cararine Pereira, Federação Única dos Petroleiros (FUP), October 17, 2018, Rio de Janeiro; interview with Sergio Pope Edisen, Sindicato dos Petroleiros do Rio de Janeiro (SINDIPETRO-RJ), October 17, 2018, Rio de Janeiro.

prices was established, intended to establish a minimum price that covers the expenses of truckers. The minimum prices for freight transport were legally valid but de facto were not implemented on a broad scale, leading to recurrent threats of truckers to go on strike again: e.g. there was a first unsuccessful call for a strike in September 2018 and a small strike in December 2018 that only lasted two days; and the changes in the diesel price policy lasted only 6 months. From January 1, 2019 on Petrobras adapted diesel prices to the world market price in irregular intervals, with a maximum price freeze of seven days (Ramalho 2021). When diesel prices went up again due to a hike in the international oil price in spring 2019, truckers called for a smaller one day strike in late March as a warning, and a larger mobilisation was building up for 30 April 2019. The Bolsonaro government could prevent the latter mobilisation via negotiations with representatives of truckers and transport companies, establishing new minimum freight prices, promising to monitor their implementation, and issuing a larger program for road infrastructure and subsidies for the replacement of tires. Although this program was smaller than similar programs that had been set up in the 2000s, it successfully prevented a new massive mobilisation in early 2019, at the beginning of Bolsonaro's term as president. At the same time, as other programs preceding it, the program did not address any of the structural problems of the sector and the grievances of truckers remain unresolved to date. Another measure was that from April 2019 on diesel prices changed only in intervals of a minimum of 15 days, but already in July 2019 Petrobras returned to the policy of irregular intervals (Ramalho 2021) which has been kept in place until the time of writing (March 2021). New strike mobilisations of truckers took place in December 2020 and February 2021, with low adherence of truckers. Nonetheless, the rather small mobilisation on February 1, 2021 led president Bolsonaro to announce a change in the presidency of Petrobras on February 19, 2021 and to abolish the federal taxes on diesel for two months, for the period of March and April 2021.

3. Conclusion

An analysis of the dilemmas and challenges that Brazilian truck drivers are facing, requires a look at Brazil's position on the world market and in the global division of labour, the long-term economic strategies built into the development trajectory of the Brazilian social formation, the power relationships between transporters and shippers, and the politics and ideology of both the federal government and of truckers and their representatives. Taking these aspects into account leads to the following conclusions for the situation of truck drivers in Brazil:

As long as the Brazilian economy does not see new overall growth and there are no new employment opportunities in other sectors, the excess capacity of truck drivers will remain which will keep freight prices low -- if there is not any substantial intervention in the sector with regard to state regulation of freight prices. The example does not only show that the so-called logistical

power cannot be understood in isolation from the wider context. In the end, the case boils down to two crucial issues: truckers were not able to pass through their expenses to shippers and they were not able to create or to link up with a larger political agenda. It is here that the political-ideological linkages (or the lack thereof) between different actors come into play (see Fox-Hodess 2017) which remain outside of the conceptual grasp of the PRA. For example, the right-wing allegiances of one section of the truck drivers prevented a united action of truckers against the new government of Bolsonaro from 2019 on, and alliances with the main trade union organisation CUT with a strong left-wing identity.

The analysis of the particular case of Brazilian truck drivers demonstrates that the broader approach of a political economy of labour provides a deeper understanding of why workers yield power (or not) to change their conditions of work and wages. This cannot be grasped with the analysis of resources or their context-specific combination, but requires a political-economic analysis at various levels. It follows that any successful mobilisation of Brazilian truckers would have to address some of the structural characteristics of the Brazilian social formation with a broader political strategy. In order to develop such a broader strategy, the sectoral perspective of truckers would need to be transcended. It is at this point where the most structural and most diffuse and ideological issues link up: any transformation of the structural constraints that have a negative impact on truckers would require changes in the collective identity of truckers.

The low quality of transport infrastructure in Brazil is a weak spot of the accumulation strategy of Brazilian agribusiness, and while the truckers are the labour force at the centre of this weak spot, their demand for higher earnings - if met - would increase the problems for Brazilian agribusiness. Without any changes both at the level of the development strategy in the Brazilian social formation and the ideology and politics of the truckers themselves, their power to block choke points will not yield much result.

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