

Labor conflicts and the super-exploitation of rural labor under Brazilian dependent capitalism: an inventory of strikes and acts of resistance in the countryside between 2000 and 2022

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to survey the experiences of rural strikes in Brazil over the first two decades of the 21st century. To do this, we took a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive approach using bibliographical and documentary research techniques, the fruit of an award notice promoted by the Observatory of Contemporary Capitalism of the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. We used as sources the data produced by the strike monitoring system of the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (DIEESE) between 2000 and 2022 and the records of the labour conflicts section of the documents 'Conflicts in the Countryside' produced by the Pastoral Land Commission between 2000 and 2021. Among the main results was the existence of 56 strike movements recorded by DIEESE and 154 resistance actions in labour conflicts, according to the CPT. It was concluded that observing the incidence of this phenomenon in the context of transformations in Brazilian capitalism sheds light on some of the elements that shape the overexploitation of rural labour in the country. We hope that this text will serve as a guiding tool for resistance to this situation, as well as for new research approaches.

Keywords: Manifestations; conflict; financialization of agriculture.

Conflitos trabalhistas e superexploração do trabalho rural no capitalismo dependente brasileiro: um levantamento das greves e ações de resistência no campo entre 2000 e 2022

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é fazer um levantamento das experiências de greve rural no Brasil ocorridas ao longo das duas primeiras décadas do século XXI. Para isso foi empreendida uma abordagem qualitativa, de caráter exploratório e descritivo utilizando técnicas de pesquisa bibliográfica e documental, fruto de um edital de premiação promovido pelo observatório do capitalismo contemporâneo do Instituto Tricontinental de Pesquisa Social. Utilizamos como fontes os dados produzidos pelo sistema de acompanhamento de greves do Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos (DIEESE) entre 2000 e 2022 e os registros da seção de conflitos trabalhistas presente nos documentos "Conflitos no Campo" produzidos pela Comissão Pastoral da Terra entre 2000 e 2022. Dentre os principais resultados foi observada a existência de 56 movimentos pagedistas registrados pelo DIEESE e 154 ações de resistência em conflitos trabalhistas conforme contabilizou a CPT. Concluiu-se que observar a incidência desse fenômeno na conjuntura de transformações do capitalismo brasileiro ilumina alguns dos elementos conformadores da superexploração do trabalho rural no país. Pretendemos que o presente texto sirva de ferramenta balizadora para resistências frente a este quadro, bem como a novas abordagens de pesquisa.



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Palavras-chave: Manifestações; conflito; financeirização da agricultura.

Conflictos laborales y sobreexplotación de la mano de obra rural en el capitalismo dependiente brasileño: un relevamiento de huelgas y acciones de resistencia en el campo entre 2000 y 2022

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es relevar las experiencias de huelga rural en Brasil durante las dos primeras décadas del siglo XXI. Para ello, se realizó un abordaje cualitativo, exploratorio y descriptivo, utilizando técnicas de investigación bibliográfica y documental, resultado de una convocatoria promovida por el Observatorio del Capitalismo Contemporáneo de la Tricontinental: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales. Se utilizaron como fuentes los datos producidos por el sistema de seguimiento de huelgas del Departamento Intersindical de Estadística y Estudios Socioeconómicos (DIEESE) entre 2000 y 2022 y los registros de la sección de conflictos laborales de los documentos “Conflictos en el Campo” producidos por la Comisión Pastoral de la Tierra entre 2000 y 2022. Entre los principales resultados se constató la existencia de 56 movimientos de huelga registrados por el DIEESE y 154 acciones de resistencia en conflictos laborales, según la CPT. Se concluyó que observar la incidencia de este fenómeno en el contexto de las transformaciones del capitalismo brasileño arroja luz sobre algunos de los elementos que configuran la sobreexplotación de la mano de obra rural en el país. Esperamos que este texto sirva como herramienta de orientación para la resistencia a esta situación, así como para nuevos enfoques de investigación.

Palabras clave: Manifestaciones; conflicto; financiarización de la agricultura.

Introduction

The process of capital expansion embodies particularities and contradictions that together constitute the social totality shaped by the productive structure. Grasping this dynamic at a less abstract level requires viewing it as a “synthesis of multiple determinations” (Marx 2008, p. 257). In this regard, private land appropriation and the social relations of labor are treated in the present study as concrete elements of Brazilian capitalism, which, in turn, exhibit specific contours insofar as they represent fundamental determinants of the particular objectification process of capitalism in Brazil (Oliveira 2007).

Social relations of labor in the countryside were forged amid both economic and extra-economic violence. The experiences of expropriation of the means of production and of labor reveal a dynamic intrinsic to this process of capital accumulation in our social formation (Oliveira 2013). Consequently, the monopoly of private landownership and the modalities of production and labor organization within the agrarian sphere are subordinated to export interests and speculative pressures, rendering the super-exploitation of labor one of the particular, structuring features of the Brazilian reality.

Against this backdrop of struggle and conflict, the present study seeks to systematize records of strike phenomena and other labor-rights mobilizations in the rural

context. The presented research analyzes data on rural strikes compiled by the Strike Monitoring System of the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE) from 2000 to 2022, adding them to the records in the “Conflicts in the Countryside” section of the documents produced by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in its editions also published between 2000 and 2022.

The combination of these sources creates a descriptive framework that will be unpacked throughout the text, using the phenomenon of the various forms of action and demands by rural workers as a benchmark for analyzing the particularities of capitalism and its internal effects on land-ownership concentration and labor exploitation, structuring dynamics that encompass class contradictions, conflicts, and resistance by workers and their organizations. Therefore, we conclude that these are central indicators for a better understanding of the phase of capital accumulation in the Brazilian reality, its position in the global capitalist system, and in the international division of labor.

Methodological Procedures

The methodology used in this research followed a qualitative approach (Flick, 2009), since its focus was on understanding the dynamics of social relations in the context from which the data were drawn, and therefore analyzed not only numerically. Throughout the study, exploratory and descriptive bibliographic and documental research procedures were employed (Richardson, 2012; Cellard, 2008) to systematize the records of strikes and other forms of collective mobilization in conflicts involving labor demands in the Brazilian countryside.

It is important to note, for the purpose of clarifying the timeframe covered in the text, that the data collection underpinning this work was conducted between October and December 2022, under a competitive grant organized by the Tricontinental Institute for Social Research through its observatory of contemporary capitalism.

Therefore, aiming to outline panoramas related to twenty-first-century contemporaneity, the scope of the investigation sought to document occurrences of rural strikes and other collective labor mobilizations between 2000 and 2022. To this end, two primary sources were used in tandem: the Inter-Union Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos (DIEESE - Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies) and the Centro de Documentação Dom Tomás Balduino (CEDOC - Dom Tomás Balduino Documentation Center) of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT - Pastoral Land Commission).

The analysis of the strike records produced by DIEESE between 2000 and 2022 is reported based on data extracted from its Strike Monitoring System (SAG – DIEESE). The primary systematization by the department compiles information about strikes carried out, and the SAG–DIEESE obtains these via an aggregation of news items published in both corporate and union-affiliated newspapers, whenever such events are reported.

Following direct contact from this research, DIEESE provided us with the notification spreadsheets corresponding to the requested time frame. In all cases, we were able to collect and systematize details such as the year of each mobilization and its state-level location. A more detailed record of the issues raised and demands made, as well as their outcomes, was available only partially, depending on the content of the original news report that triggered the system notification. This gap necessitated selecting the most emblematic cases for description in this paper, chosen based on the richness of the available data.

In addition to this first source, data on acts of resistance were gathered from the labor conflict section of the “Conflicts in the Countryside: Brazil” reports produced by CEDOC – CPT. CEDOC is part of the documentation division of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), and for this work it drew on multiple teams of agents, research networks, and contributions of information received directly from social movements, unions, churches, and other organizations active in rural areas.

Under the coordination of this CPT division, a data mapping effort compiles informative documentation on the occurrence of conflicts and rights violations affecting those whom the movement has designated as “workers of the land.” Among the various categories of violations recorded, there is a specific section covering incidents arising from labor conflicts. To date, CPT is a pioneer and a reference point in the documentation of conflicts and the preservation of memory in the countryside. When explaining its recording method, the entity informs us of some concepts around which the notifications are organized. Regarding these categorizations, the entity itself explains:

The Pastoral Land Commission records conflicts, which are understood as acts of resistance and confrontation that take place in different social contexts in the rural sphere, involving the struggle for land, water, rights, and for the means of work or production [...] Labor Conflicts comprise the cases in which the labor-versus-capital relationship indicates the existence of slave labor and super-exploitation. Strikes also form part of the set of labor conflicts (CPT, 2022, p. 1-13).

Based on this data organization method, 04 types of notifications concerning rural labor dynamics are classified, namely: slave labor (physical, psychological, etc.); super-exploitation (when unpaid work hours exceed the most common rate of exploitation); labor rights violations (covering broader issues related to breaches of protective labor

legislation); and, finally, acts of resistance, the latter appearing as a category intended to encompass both strikes and other forms of labor-related mobilizations and demands.

In this article, we chose to document and analyze specifically acts of resistance in labor conflicts. Thus, the category “acts of resistance” mentioned here is employed in the sense that it refers to recorded occurrences of demonstrations for labor rights.

From the information available in the CEDOC-CPT records, it was only possible to compile, in more general terms, the number of occurrences by state location each year, among which records of acts of resistance in labor conflicts were found in the publications from 2000 to 2012.

The discussion undertaken in this paper sought, on the one hand, to place these sources — which currently perform the fundamental work of recording workers’ mobilizations — in dialogue with one another; and, on the other hand, to contextualize these data on strikes and labor mobilizations in the rural sphere through analytical lenses drawn from works across diverse fields of knowledge. This literature review primarily involved historiographical interpretations of rural labor in the Brazilian context, the conflicts inherent to capitalist accumulation processes, and their effects on labor relations in the countryside. This choice stems from the need to overcome the difficulties imposed by the very language that constitutes us as specific knowledge communities and by the inescapably interdisciplinary nature of the topic (Porto-Gonçalves, 2006).

Land Monopoly and Rural Labor among the Particularities of Objectification of Brazilian Dependent Capitalism

The struggle for land in Brazil, as a rallying cry underpinning denunciations and mobilizations, remains situated within an objective framework whose agrarian-space characteristics in the country “are primarily embodied in subordination to imperialism, in the preservation of a latifundia-based land structure, predominantly oriented toward export or land speculation, and in monopolistic ‘modernization’” (Chasin, 1980, p. 28).

The development of a truly capitalist economy in Brazil took place with a fundamental and constant concern: to modulate the dynamics of the economic and class structure according to the interests of domestic and international bourgeoisies. In interpreting the intertwining of the land monopoly issue and the forms of rural labor, Moura’s contributions (1994) help us understand a continuity trait in the Brazilian class structure, characterized by the persistent tendency of modernizing impulses that are, paradoxically, shaped to accommodate the positions of the internal fractions of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. In his words:

[...] Keeping the land in the hands of the same owners and making its acquisition difficult for other groups—who might share power with them—was a matter to be resolved before the anticipated modifications to labor relations, especially in the countryside [...] these were strategies of domination by those classes that witnessed the modernization of the slave system in Brazil and sought in this transition process a modernization without social change (Moura, 1994, p. 99).

Historically formed under this backdrop of strong slaveholding tradition, the dynamics of labor division and organization in the countryside remain marked by a modernization process that preserves intense labor exploitation and a particular heterogeneity of labor-exploitation forms, heavily influenced by the diversity of workers' relationships with land ownership.

Santos (2021) characterizes the modernization of Brazilian agro-export society, situated at the end of the nineteenth century, and the class structure in the countryside. In his interpretation, the ties binding the laborer to large landowners were embodied in relationships that were not merely economic but also servile, and thus not purely wage-based.

This historical trajectory of rural labor-division structuring has structural legacies closely linked to the formation of the latifundium in Brazil. As Guimarães (2009) explains, unlike classical capitalist formations — where large private estates arise through the destruction of small peasant holdings — in Brazil this antagonism developed in the opposite order. The latifundium was established first, as a central feature from the colonial system's inception, only beginning to loosen its rigid dynamics much later. In this context, a heterogeneous framework of labor relations emerged; Santos (2021) describes that there existed:

Pure rural wage laborer (very few), intermediate level rural wage laborer and small landowner, or part of the small landowner's family group, and sharecroppers of various types formed the bulk of the Brazilian agricultural proletariat and semi-proletariat [...] the situation did not change substantially until the mid-1960s (Santos, 2021, p. 48).

Regarding this historical phase, José Graziano Silva (1980) notes that the increasingly pervasive penetration of capitalism into the countryside — which began in the late 1950s and early 1960s — can be characterized by agricultural expansion, accelerated urbanization, and the industrialization of farming. From this, it can be said that “the latifundium became bourgeois and internationalized [...] the great landowners today are also banks and large multinationals” (Silva 1980, p. 102). Given the contemporary trajectory, Silva frames the agrarian question and agrarian reform as follows:

“[...] The agrarian question today permeates a series of fundamental problems of Brazilian society. At its core, all of them have to do with the parasitic nature that the specific form of capitalism's development in the country has taken [...] Agrarian reform is no longer today in Brazil a demand

of capitalist development, but rather a questioning of the form that this development has taken” (Silva, 1980, p. 104-105).

From these intense structural transformations in the rural milieu, Palmeira (1989) also argues that this process of conservative modernization is strictly linked to a proletarianization of the countryside population. Such a finding demonstrates how — even today — the issues of labor and regimes of access to land ownership remain mediations within a super-exploited integration of rural workers into the forms of capitalist accumulation in Brazil.

In the second half of the twentieth century, especially from the 1960s onward, a Brazilian agro-industrial complex materialized more intensely, whose consequences are described as follows:

This modernization, which occurred without altering the structure of rural land ownership, had, in the economists’ words, ‘perverse effects’: land ownership became more concentrated, income disparities increased, rural exodus intensified, the rate of labor exploitation in agricultural activities rose, the rate of self-exploitation on smaller holdings grew, and the quality of life of the rural working population worsened (Palmeira, 1989, p. 87).

Starting from this point, understanding the processes of political organization in rural areas and their instruments of mobilization necessarily involves a social and class structure that has created a context of overexploitation for workers.

Marini (2013) addresses the concept of labor super-exploitation as an intensification of the degree of exploitation in the capital-accumulation process and its objectification in peripheral or dependent social formations. In the Brazilian case, this process employs various expedients — whether the disproportionate increase in the labor force, the lack of regulation of working conditions, or even the rupture between labor remuneration and its real value. As he details:

[...] The increase in surplus labor time tends to occur without altering the necessary labor time, thereby failing to return to the worker the equivalent of the value created during the necessary labor time. [...] The labor force is compensated at a price below its real value, and the worker is subject not only to a degree of exploitation but also to super-exploitation (Marini, 2013, p. 173-174).

Conceiving the Brazilian reality as a dependent social formation requires understanding the center-periphery relations of the global capitalist system and how these concrete realities present different degrees of labor exploitation in the appropriation of surplus value extracted in production and capital accumulation (Marini, 2013).

Thus, labor super-exploitation emerges as a structural characteristic marking dependent capitalism, encompassing the dynamics of legal and state forms and the necessity for the working class to face more difficult political conditions when claiming better terms or compensation for these high levels of labor exploitation. As Silva (2020) explains:

[...] In dependent capitalism there is a systematic violation of the law of value, embodied in the super-exploitation of the labor force—a structural characteristic of dependency—which contradicts the constitutive dynamics of capitalist social relations. Therefore, super-exploitation is guaranteed by extra-economic factors, especially of a political nature (Silva, 2020, p. 161).

Equipped with these analytical keys, examining the development of capitalism in Brazilian agriculture requires observing the different means of political struggle employed by rural workers, since their forms of action and demands are essential for analyzing the particularities and transformations of the country's capital-accumulation model and the class contradictions generated by this dynamic. On these premises, it is fundamental to document the incidence of collective struggle instruments used by the working class—ranging from strikes to other forms of mobilization.

Inventory of Strikes and Acts of Resistance in Rural Labor Conflicts in Brazil between 2000 and 2022

The intensification of precariousness in rural life and work is also marked by the struggle of workers, who play a central role in these relations. The strike experiences of rural categories, as well as the unions and social movements articulating these segments, continue to reorient and update their motivations for struggle (Medeiros 1989).

Some initiatives to record and systematize data on strikes and rural mobilizations have produced information that is fundamental to discussions on the topic under analysis. Strikes recorded by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE) accounted for a total of 56 (fifty-six) work stoppages between 2000 and 2022 in the states of Pernambuco, Bahia, São Paulo, Mato Grosso, Minas Gerais, Ceará, Maranhão, and Goiás, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Quantification and geographic location of strikes between 2000 and 2022.

Year	Number of strikes by state
2000	Pernambuco (03)
	Bahia (02)
	Pernambuco/Bahia (01)
2001	São Paulo (01)
	Bahia (01)
2004	Pernambuco/Bahia (01)
2005	Pernambuco (01)

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2006	São Paulo (05)
2007	Minas Gerais (01) São Paulo (03)
2008	São Paulo (10) Goiás (01)
2009	São Paulo (02) Maranhão (01)
2010	Paraná (01)
2011	São Paulo (01)
2012	Minas Gerais (01) São Paulo (01) Ceará (01)
2013	Bahia (02) São Paulo (05)
2014	Maranhão (01)
2015	Minas Gerais (01)
2016	Pernambuco (02)
2018	Mato Grosso (02) Minas Gerais (01) Pernambuco (01)
2021	Minas Gerais (01) São Paulo (01)
2022	São Paulo (01)
Total	56 strikes

Source: DIEESE (2022); Organized by: Júlia Carla Duarte Cavalcante (2024).

Through the strike-record documents provided by DIEESE, it was possible to observe that, of the 56 rural strikes that occurred over the last twenty years — viewed in broad terms — most took place within the perimeter of the company or unit, with only six occurrences encompassing the entire sector. Of these, at least twelve cases are particularly emblematic, given the greater volume of available information and the analytical potential of the events that unfolded during the mobilizations to interrogate the relationship between the dynamics of the labor conflicts involved and the structural features of Brazil's distinctive capitalist development.

This is exemplified by the case that occurred in 2012 in the state of Ceará, where workers at one of the branches of the fruit-growing division of the multinational Del Monte Fresh Produce Brasil, located in Limoeiro do Norte, launched a strike and initiated a mobilization to denounce a series of irregularities.

The workers demanded the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); an end to practices of moral harassment — including reports that supervisors used machetes as a form of intimidation; the cessation of abusive imposition of overtime; and compliance with occupational health and safety medical recommendations for the transfer of employees handling pesticides. Regarding this last aspect, the Rural Workers' Union of Limoeiro do Norte and the Ceará Federation of Agricultural Workers also joined the mobilizations to

report that they had collected various testimonies, including accounts of workers who committed suicide after learning they had been exposed to carcinogenic products.

As a form of action, the strikers stopped work and camped in front of the company; in parallel, there were some attempts at collective bargaining mediated by the Labor Public Prosecutor's Office and the representatives of both sides. Negotiations did not advance, since the company's position was to refuse the demands and even to threaten to hire labor from the neighboring state to replace the striking workers.

The strike mobilization continued for several days; on the seventh day of the action, the workers reported having been assaulted by the military police, and the company's legal department had also petitioned the labor courts to declare the movement illegal. The strike, which began on June 25, 2012, only ended on July 6 of that year with the adoption of a collective agreement signed by the company, in which most of the demands were accepted.

This strike record is emblematic because it brings together in a single case a series of elements characteristic of the broader context in which workers in Brazil's fruit-growing supply chain operate. Another strike documented during the preparation of this paper occurred at one of the several branches of the Del Monte corporate group; the labor conflict unfolded in the Chapada do Apodi region, which, according to Pinto et al. (2016), is marked by an intense history of land and water conflicts combined with the socio-environmental issue of indiscriminate and improper pesticide use.

The agro-export model hegemonically adopted by Brazil operates without breaking the essential patterns of labor and natural-resource exploitation. Direct police violence against strikers — and even military-police interference in recording strikes and worker actions — is likewise not uncommon. Finally, the choice of the adversarial arena of the labor judiciary is invoked by the employer as one of the instruments against the strike, by seeking the declaration of the movement's illegality.

It is by no means secondary that the judiciary emerges as one of the arenas in which these labor conflicts are brought. Cunha (2017) addresses the function of law in Brazil based on the particular determinants of national capital objectification and states:

[...] while the political stage served to reconcile the dominant classes (namely, agro-export capital and the ascending urban-productivist capital) in the absence of a rupture, the legal arena mediated the conflict of these dominant classes with the developing proletariat, accordingly [...] whereas in the classical pathway political mediation grounded in a process of liberal rupture with mass participation appears primarily in capitalism's developmental processes (the French Revolution is typically emblematic of this), and only subsequently highlights the legal arena as the mediation for acquiring rights [...], in the colonial pathway, given its closed character toward the masses and without rupture from the agro-export past, this relative sequence did not exist. The protagonism is political and legal simultaneously, but with caveats since they do not carry the same weight or function (Paço Cunha, 2017, p. 18).

In this sense, it is essential to understand that legal instruments and the judiciary represent one of the aspects present in the contradictions surrounding the struggle for rights by Brazil's rural labor categories and that in this quadrant they are under the influence of class disputes among the subjects composing these litigations.

In another case of rural strike, the DIEESE registration system pointed to a strike movement that took place in the state of Pernambuco in the 2000s. Workers at the Barão de Suassuna Plant, located in the city of Escada, organized a strike where they gathered in front of the company's headquarters to protest against late payment of wages and the thirteenth month salary, as well as the employer's failure to pass on union dues. One of the main reasons was also that the plant had been paying its employees with vouchers, which were exchanged directly for goods at a market in the city of Escada. This record, for example, recalls to an old employer practice in the sugar-alcohol sector of illegally binding workers to company-designated establishments for the redemption of wages.

In 2005, the category of sugarcane cutters in Pernambuco's Zona da Mata mobilized in a strike that brought together approximately 88,000 workers over a period of about eight days. During the course of this period of mobilizations, various actions were carried out, such as pickets blocking workers from entering to cut cane and preventing loading trucks from passing. The military police intervened, deploying officers armed with machine guns to the blockade sites and, in addition, seized a sound truck and detained a union organizer in the city of Arassuába. Negotiations between the mill owners' union representatives and the cane cutters took place under great tension. The workers demanded an increase to the minimum wage floor and new rules for defining tasks and weighing the harvested cane. At the end of negotiations, a modest adjustment to the wage floor was approved, full payment for the days halted was secured, and the cane-weighing procedures were regularized.

In another case, in 2008 in Paraguaçu Paulista, São Paulo, workers at the COCAL Mill launched an open-ended strike demanding an increase to the wage floor; higher piece-rate pay for cane cutting; improved lodging conditions; and an end to unjustified absence notations on their records. The strike leadership emerged spontaneously, mainly from workers who had migrated from other states, and quickly spread to others, eventually attracting some 1,800 participants. Approximately 300 workers camped on company grounds, preventing loading trucks from entering; once again, the military police were called in to break up the mobilization, threatening the protesters with arrest.

In 2009, about 500 workers at the TG Agroindustrial Ltd. cane-processing plant in Aldeias Altas, Maranhão, initiated a strike. Their principal grievances included the employer's

failure to honor the Collective Bargaining Agreement and a super-exploitation of labor, characterized by grueling work shifts combined with a lack of basic health, hygiene, and safety conditions; inadequate transportation; and manipulation of workers' production records. As their strike action, the workers attempted to blockade access to the facility. The Military Police were called in and attempted to disperse the strike using tear-gas grenades and by firing rubber and live bullets.

Through another source, data were observed on acts of resistance recorded by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in the annual publications entitled "Conflicts in the Countryside: Brazil" covering the years 2000 to 2022. Of this total 22-year period, notifications in the "acts of resistance" category appear only in the first nine years, that is, between the 2000 and 2012 publications. The records of labor conflicts in the remaining documents analyzed up to 2022 included only notifications in the "super-exploitation" and "slave labor" categories. Within the methodological scope chosen in this paper, this analysis specifically encompasses the records of mobilizations.

From this available documentation, whose data are organized in Table 2, the record of all the resistance actions in 2005 is striking, in which, in addition to 6 strikes distributed among the states of Bahia, Paraná, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, it also reported the existence of a mobilisation in protest at the occurrence of deaths due to labor super-exploitation at the Bonfim Mill, located in Guariba, SP.

Table 2: Quantification and geographic location of resistance actions in labor conflicts between 2000 and 2022.

Year	Number of strikes by state
2000	Pernambuco (06) Bahia (04)
2005	Bahia (01) Paraná (01) Pernambuco (01) Rio de Janeiro (01) São Paulo (03)
2006	Alagoas (01) Bahia (02) GO (04) Maranhão (01) São Paulo (01)
2007	Alagoas (06) Goiás (17) Mato Grosso (01) Minas Gerais (01) Paraná (01) Pernambuco (01) São Paulo (08)
2008	Goiás (07) Alagoas (03) BA (01) Ceará (01) Rio de Janeiro (02)

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	São Paulo (07) Paraná (02)
2009	Alagoas (15) Bahia (01) Maranhão (02) Rondônia (01) São Paulo (03)
2010	Alagoas (02) Pernambuco (01) Rio Grande do Norte (01) Rondônia (01) Minas Gerais (01) São Paulo (03) Paraná (03) Santa Catarina (01)
2011	Alagoas (08) São Paulo (07)
2012	Alagoas (11) Bahia (01) Ceará (01) Pernambuco (03) Minas Gerais (02)
Total	154 resistance actions

Source: CEDOC - CPT National (2000 a 2022); Organized by: Júlia Carla Duarte Cavalcante (2024).

In light of the survey conducted using the two sources cited here, it becomes evident that rural workers' resistance remains active in the early years of this century. Of the elements captured from these mobilization processes and by the way we intend to structure the discussions in this paper, it is less relevant to consider the quantification of such mobilization experiences than to examine the factors that characterize and give rise to their emergence — especially in their continuities — as they inform aspects related to the issues that contribute to advancing the overall organization of these segments.

Nevertheless, when analyzing the quantitative data on the occurrence of these movements, it is indispensable to take into account the aspects that permeate and distinguish the rural union structure and labor struggles in this setting (Costa, 1996), the current stage of the capitalist mode of production that organizes and structures the relations and conflicts described in the text, as well as the present role of union representation in light of these changes.

Within the field of unionism debates, there still remains a certain hegemony regarding the treatment of workers' and urban entities. This fact points to the need for inclusion and dialogue with the experiences that characterize segments of rural unionism, thereby requiring an understanding of its more specific trajectory and its correlations with social movements for land rights.

In this scenario, the unions and associations through which rural workers have historically organized form a framework of representational heterogeneity, highlighting the

very contradictions contained in the process of capital valorization and the specific demands of Brazilian capitalist development, which introduce new elements into the union discourse. Along this path, the heterogeneous framework includes: small landowners, small squatters, small tenant farmers, and wage earners, a group that itself contains variations (Silva, 1980).

In the trajectory of structuring and developing rural union categories, it is important to consider that there was no monopoly of the union apparatus in leading struggles for working-condition improvements (Thomaz Júnior, 2002). Besides the unions, other peasant social movements also emerged and consolidated, especially in the context of the 1980s (Medeiros, 1989).

In this setting, Brazilian rural unionism was forged amid the particular elements of political organization in the countryside at its time of origin. There is a long history of these entities driving and conducting more traditional mobilization instruments, such as strikes, which played a significant role in advancing workers' movements not only within these segments but also for workers in general (Abreu and Lima, 2004).

The process of organizing rural union entities — from the pre-1964 period — left many contributions for new generations, even having a great impact on maintaining union activity in the countryside during the “years of lead” of the Brazilian dictatorship. In this sense, there are records of strike actions that broke out, especially throughout the 1970s and 1980s, concurrently with the processes of urban worker mobilization in the country's southeast. This demonstrates that the legacy of that period of mobilization for contemporary unionism undeniably also included the participation of rural-category experiences (Oliveira et al. 2019). In an assessment by Medeiros (1989):

Strikes reappeared, many unions renewed their practices, bringing not only new forms of expression but also a radical critique of the union structure. [...] the struggles in the countryside diversified and intensified, bringing to the political scene not only the ever-renewed fight for land but also wage-earners' strikes (Medeiros, 1989, p. 15).

In temporal terms, there were cycles of rural strikes: an eruption in the pre-'64 period, which was marked by the agenda of structuring and formalizing the union apparatus of these categories and the drafting of social-labor regulations for these worker segments. Throughout the dictatorial regime — a moment characterized by a milder yet continuous movement — the resistance took the form of union opposition to the entities that had undergone military intervention, followed by an upsurge in the 1970s and '80s with, for example, strikes to defend the social gains achieved in the earlier period (Abreu and Lima, 2004; Momesso, 2008).

More contemporarily, to understand and monitor rural labor mobilizations, it is necessary to view them under the brutal effects of capital's productive restructuring, which

imposed new organizational conditions on Brazil's various worker categories. Antunes (2011) describes these reconfigurations in unionism and worker organization more generally, noting that:

[...] "At the turn of the 1980s to the 1990s, the economic, political, and ideological trends responsible for inserting Brazilian unionism into a regressive wave and a retreat in class struggle began to emerge, resulting both from the global productive restructuring of capital — which was intensely introduced into Brazil in the 1990s — and from the rise of neoliberal pragmatism [...]" (Antunes, 2011, p. 139).

In this sense, understanding the Brazilian reality and the forms of modernization of its class fractions — especially its agro-exporting wing — demonstrates how the processes of labor exploitation of rural categories are based on a liberal and deeply authoritarian stance, strictly related, in a subordinate and dependent manner, to monopolistic capital and its impositions on internal dynamics so as to serve expanded accumulation on a global scale (Santos, 2021).

If we analyze the most recent agricultural census data, conducted in 2017, we find a total of 15,105,125 persons employed in the agricultural sector. In percentage terms, this sector's employment rate represents 13.55% of all employed persons in the country, according to the same source. Moreover, by comparing census data from 1975 and 2017, one can observe a continuous trend reflecting: 1) a decline in the employment rate; 2) an increase in the sector's mechanization; 3) a decrease in permanent crops alongside an increase in temporary crops. In Table 3 these numbers are described:

Table 3: Dynamics of cropland occupation areas and mechanization in the agricultural sector by year (1975 to 2017).

Census/Year	1975	1980	1985	1995-1996	2006	2017
Employed personnel	20.345.692	21.163.735	23.394.919	17.930.890	16.568.205	15.105.125
Permanent crops (ha)	8.385.395	10.472.135	9.903.487	7.541.626	11.679.152	7.755.817
Temporary crops (ha)	31.615.963	38.632.128	42.244.221	34.252.829	48.913.424	55.761.988
Tractors	323.113	545.205	665.280	803.742	820.718	1.229.907

Source: IBGE, Agricultural Census (2017); Organized by: Júlia Carla Duarte Cavalcante (2024).

Conducting a joint analysis of these data illuminates the existence of continuities and discontinuities in labor relations in the rural milieu, where a contradictory context is evident in which — even in the face of changes in the dynamics of agricultural capitalism — a logic of structural accommodation persists, continuing to foster high standards of labor exploitation in the countryside. The phase of financialization in the global economy and its

new production paradigms therefore signify cutting-edge technologies aimed at agribusiness coexisting with novel forms of labor exploitation for workers in these circuits.

This stage of capital accumulation also accentuates systemic vulnerabilities, leading to economic crises and intensifying their social repercussions. Although this is a globalized movement, its effects at the national level impact the entire domestic economic system and interfere with levels of productive activity and employment rates in the sectors most affected by this trend (Chesnais and Plihon, 2003).

On this aspect, Silva (2024), commenting on the intense transformations in the sugar-alcohol sector — one of the historical protagonists in rural strikes and mobilizations in Brazil — points to the significant impact on the workforce of that sector in the face of mechanization and technological modernization, stating:

[...] From 2009/2010 onward, we will increasingly observe the intensification of the mechanization process, until today's so-called Agriculture 4.0, which is characterized by the use of large machinery and by the mastery and control of Information Technologies (ITs). According to Conab data, from 2008 until now there has been a major transformation. For example, in 2008, 70% of cane was cut manually; today, 99% is cut mechanically [...] which means that you no longer have the presence of the cane cutter as you did all those years (Silva, 2024, p. 11).

Recent research addressing the development of capitalism in agriculture points to the existence of a current phase marked by the new technological cycle, which has been termed Agriculture 4.0. According to Martins (2024), this stage in agriculture has unfolded in such a way that:

As part of the mechanisms of financial capitalism, we have witnessed a broad development of information technologies and the formation of enormous data-managing technology conglomerates, such as Microsoft, Google, and Amazon. With them, vast digital platforms (clouds) were created that store information and process it with algorithms, generating great economic and political power for these corporations. The digitization of information involves not only agricultural production but also the edaphoclimatic conditions of regions, including the capture of data from processing industries, transportation, and distribution (wholesale and retail), extending to the eating habits of the population, outlining consumer profiles, and even encompassing the digitization of genomes of different living species. We are experiencing a transition in production and consumption patterns. Information technologies are increasingly present in agriculture, with a trend toward integrating companies that supply agricultural inputs and machinery with those that control data and information flows (Martins, 2024, p. 131).

In this scenario, there is a change in the very profile of the rural workforce. The Brazilian countryside demonstrates its complexity insofar as this social subject who continues to work the land is simultaneously shaped by the structural elements that hark back to the

country's colonial and slaveholding past and by the transformations related to labor dynamics imposed by the development of new capitalist accumulation models.

Therefore, when we analyze the data on strikes and acts of resistance in the rural sphere, it is unavoidable to notice a significant level of retrenchment. In light of this, it is necessary to take into account these current challenges to union representation and even to the rural social movements themselves. In an interview on the memories and metamorphoses of rural work, researcher Silva (2024) points to another relevant aspect: the profound transformations in both the profile and subjectivity of rural workers and the repercussions of these transformations for the collective representations of these sectors. Referring to sugar-cane cultivation, she notes:

[...] But I see that change reaches this point: you have a new ontology of the being who works in the cane fields [...] The rural worker is the one who deals with poison, the one who cuts, the one who will take part in some complementary activity in sugarcane planting—those, yes, those are rural workers, the ones down there, different from the machine operator or the collaborator. It is another subjectivity that has been gestated. If there is any problem, it is a matter to be resolved between the worker and the company, without the presence of the union. It is individualized work, because each has their own machine (Silva, 2024, p. 16-17).

It is precisely in this dynamic of coexistence between “modernization of the archaic” and “archaization of the modern” (Fernandes, 2005) that the agendas which mobilized political organization in the countryside are renewed. Tracing collective resistances over time continues to illuminate the targets and challenges that are intended to be met if one observes the difficult, yet ongoing, continuity of mobilizations and, above all, the more general characterization of the elements that permeate these occurrences.

Final remarks

Historically, the insignia of the struggle for land and for labor in the countryside are intertwined both concretely and within the theoretical concerns of classic and contemporary interpreters of the Brazilian reality. This axis of analysis thus informs fundamental characteristics of the dynamics of capitalism's development in Brazil and its mode of insertion into the domestic and international division of labor in agriculture.

Looking at the trajectories of rural strikes and acts of resistance in labor conflicts throughout the process of development and reconfigurations of Brazilian capitalism helps to situate this phenomenon amid the mediations of the broader and more abstract process that explains the dynamics of national issues that are historically connected, such as: the social

consequences of mechanisms of private and expansive land appropriation and the trends in maintaining high levels of labor super-exploitation.

From the present study, we propose the idea that these are mediations present in a super-exploited integration of rural workers and peasants into Brazil's forms of capitalist accumulation, who, in turn, have historically continued to organize resistances to this landscape of precarious living and working conditions.

In light of all these theoretical and research contributions, thinking about the data this paper highlights requires crossing them with a reflection on the dynamics of the current conjuncture, which is complex and challenging. There are changes of many orders: objective, in terms of the new production pattern and organization of labor relations, and subjective, regarding the distinct processes of organization and composition of the rural working class as one of the main factors causing the steep decline in the quantity of mobilizations.

Finally, after developing this overview, we consider that the data survey under discussion raises at least two fundamental issues for debates on preserving memory and forming statistics about rural workers' strikes and other protests in the contemporary moment: 1) the great challenge of recording and systematizing the completeness of actions that develop in this context; and 2) the need for data, research networks, and systematizations to be viewed more jointly and in an articulated manner with the aim of producing analyses with greater potential for conjunctural syntheses in the Brazilian scenario.

We believe that the documentary sources cited in this paper perform a salutary task in this regard; on the other hand, the research revealed an enormous problem concerning the difficulty that these existing registration and documentation systems currently face in accounting for the completeness of acts of labor resistance that occur in the country, being certain that there is still significant underreporting. Therefore, following this initial survey, we bring to light one aspect of this challenge: the promotion of initiatives for communication, documentation, and recording of strikes and labor-oriented protests. Furthermore, we hope that this work will contribute to fostering discussion in the scientific and social spheres about more joint ways of developing analytical syntheses and methodologies for cross-referencing sources and data produced among researchers and the various sectors involved in the bases and organizations of these mobilizations.

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