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Book Review

Jeffrey Sluyter-Beltrão (2010) *Rise and Decline of Brazil's New Unionism: The Politics of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores*. Oxford: Peter Lang. ISBN: 978-3034-3011-45

REVIEWED BY *Gay W. Seidman, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA*

In the mid 1990s, the chill winds of neoliberal globalization blasted labor unions across the global South: from Brazil to South Africa to South Korea, militant labor movements forged in the cauldron of authoritarian industrialization began to realize that democratic elections marked only the end of one struggle. Now, unionists faced different challenges: democratic transitions reduced the threat of direct repression, but global trade rules promoted by the then new World Trade Organization handed all the cards to business investors. Across the developing world, democratically-elected governments found themselves following the new orthodoxy, slashing tariffs, removing subsidies and local-content rules, and privatizing state-owned companies – an economic restructuring which undermined the ability of semi-skilled industrial workers to disrupt production that lay at the heart of labor militance.

In Brazil as elsewhere, unions scrambled to devise new strategies that might protect their members' jobs and wages, and the impact on 'social movement unionism' was immediate. Jeffrey Sluyter-Beltrão writes in his thoughtful new book, *Rise and Demise of Brazil's New Unionism*, that when he arrived in Brazil, in the early 1990s, a Brazilian colleague asked him, half-joking, if he was an archaeologist: the shopfloor-based militance that inspired his research trip was already a thing of the past. By 1994, labor's inclusive discourse of citizenship – a powerful mobilizing tool in the face of authoritarian regimes and intransigent employers – was already riven by divisions over electoral strategies on the one hand, and debates over how to respond to global 'market forces' on the other.

Meanwhile, the membership of Brazil's Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) was itself being redefined: when public sector unions were legalized in 1988, new organizing drives attracted many members with backgrounds and tactical strength that were markedly different from those of the industrial workers who had previously dominated the confederation. At the same time, members of the CUT's new private sector affiliates were as interested in jobs and pensions as they were in participating in strikes. Union membership offered Brazilian workers their only access to government-funded pensions and social security programs, and in the context of the 'restructuring' of the early 1990s, many workers looked to the CUT more for social protection than for militant actions.

At the height of their opposition to the military regime, Brazil's 'new unions' claimed to offer unusual space for grassroots debates. Sluyter-Beltrão's new book focuses on how internal organizational changes silenced internal factions – especially the more vocal left groups which had

previously been energetic participants in challenging the state and employers. In contrast to the many academic accounts that emphasize democratization and macroeconomic shifts in explaining unions' turn toward negotiation, Sluyter-Beltrão argues that internal pressures forced the CUT to moderate its militants. His careful account suggests that electoral concerns from the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, or Workers' Party) prompted labor leaders to moderate their tone, while PT-affiliated unionists drew on access to government and donor funds to sway affiliates to a more moderate stance.

Informed by a wide reading of Brazilian debates and interviews (mainly conducted in the mid-1990s), Sluyter-Beltrão does not explore the responses of ordinary union members, but his data clearly supports his claim: as the PT sought to build broad electoral support among informal sector and rural workers, unionists affiliated with the party joined sectoral chambers and other bargaining councils, arguing that they needed to negotiate in order to preserve jobs and wages during restructuring, and silencing militant voices in order to broaden the PT's electoral appeal.

Perhaps because he is seeking to explain labor's turn to moderation, Sluyter-Beltrão tells us little about the converse: is it possible that unionists' concerns have also had some impact on party policy? Especially since Lula's 2006 reelection, Brazil has combined steady economic growth with redistributive policies, raising incomes of poor households at a rate that is about twice the national average. As political scientist Wendy Hunter recently pointed out, radical factions have found it difficult to mobilize critical opposition against a president who 'presided over a set of policies that yielded growth, kept inflation at bay, diminished poverty and appeared to make some inroads into Brazil's long-standing socio-economic inequality' (Hunter 2010: 176).

Sluyter-Beltrão offers only a handful of comments about the CUT today. Shifting instead to a broader perspective, he uses comparative material from South Africa and South Korea to remind us that 'social movement unionism' is a highly contingent, contextual phenomenon. This is, of course, a useful corrective to those who use the term as a strategic prescription, forgetting that the phrase was originally merely descriptive, meant to capture the heady sense of excitement and possibility that came when labor activists realized that even in authoritarian settings, workers could use their shopfloor strength to support broad-working class goals.

Sluyter-Beltrão seems ready to dismiss the CUT's turn toward negotiation in the context of electoral democracy as a betrayal of a more transformative class project, but a more careful look at Brazil today might evoke a little more optimism. Democratic Brazil is hardly a workers' paradise, but poor and working-class Brazilians have experienced very real changes in their daily lives. Have Brazilian labor leaders simultaneously managed to promote workers' long-term interests after all? These are pressing questions for labor activists everywhere, and while reexamining CUT's past is an important first step, it is not yet the whole story.

REFERENCES

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