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STRUGGLES TO CONTROL WORK: CASES FROM THE FORMAL SECTOR

Introduction

This chapter is based on case studies which illustrate the various ways that workers in the formal sector, (industry and services), regularly challenge work demands that potentially cause health problems. These health problems include repetitive strain injuries, work accidents, mental health and psychosomatic problems. Research has already demonstrated that daily life in the workplace is dependent on the way work processes are organized, largely configured by contexts which restrict the ways of working, of relating to others, of dealing with time, with space and with equipment known to be dangerous to health (Seligmann-Silva, 1986 and 1994; Borges, 1997; Silva Filho and Jardim, 1997; Kalimo et al., 1987; Vezina, 1998; Kristensen, 1995; Karasek et al., 1981). In addition, other research has demonstrated that an adequate strategy to prevent problems related to work organization depends on the appropriate planning of work processes in order for a wide range of problems to be anticipated and prevented before they occur. (Gardell, 1982a e 1982b; Spink, 1991b).

We know that questions about workers’ health are strongly influenced by the relative power of capital and labor, and the distance between managerial and workers’ interests in specific historical, political and social contexts. Beyond the application of conventional hazard prevention techniques, workers’ health depends on the way in which various social actors are able to deal with the contradictory, different and antagonistic interests that organize and motivate their day-to-day activities in the workplace.

Work relations in Brazil

Some characteristics of work relations in Brazil are outlined to enhance understanding of the limits and possibilities of negotiating changes in the organization of work processes and of the significance of conflict and the development of countervailing powers in the formal sector.

“Modern Brazil appears to be a kaleidoscope of many periods, forms of life and work, ways of being and of thinking” because “the capitalist present, which is industrialized, urbanized, co-exists along with various bygone moments. Quite different forms of life and work come together in a remarkable totality. Simple monetary circulation, commercial and capitalist circulation come together in a whole in which the amplified reproduction of capital commands the show, on an international scale.” (Octavio Ianni, 1994, 60-61)

In this historical journey, negotiation is an instrument which is little used to resolve disputes between labor and management. This fact should be understood in the light of a number of factors which mark the history of work relations, and political, economic and social inequalities in Brazil. According to Ianni (1994), these factors include, firstly, our colonial history, and secondly, the existence of several centuries of slavery that determined social, political and cultural life. “The centuries of slave labor produced a whole universe of values, standards, ideas, doctrines, ways of being, thinking and acting’ (1994, 57-58) A third factor was the ‘combined and unequal development’ of the economy which was dominated by quite specific products (gold, sugar, coffee, rubber etc.), one product succeeding the other in its
dominant role. In this way a complex social structure emerged, a structure that accumulated a number of diverse and contradictory forms of work and living conditions.

Even after the abolition of slavery, (only a little over a century ago), European migrants were treated as white slaves. This situation demonstrates how a culture is influenced by the position filled by work and workers, (and continue to fill), in society.

Beyond this, values of citizenship in Brazil were built up and lived out in a tension between two opposed but complementary codes – the moralizing and the impersonal. Within this context, the word citizen is imbued with values that emphasize inequalities rather than referring to equality of rights between people (Damatta, 1985).

For example, the word ‘citizen’ is always used in negative situations in Brazil, to denote the position of someone at a disadvantage or in an inferior position. When someone says “the car belongs to that citizen…”, one knows that universalizing and impersonal treatment is being used in order to leave the problem unsolved or even to make the resolution of the problem more difficult” (Damatta, 1985, 67).

Allied to the inheritance described above, the more recent history of years of military dictatorship stifled the general development of social movements, especially trade unions, and also hindered the action of unions in workplaces, culminating in the following situation described by Leôncio Martins Rodrigues.

“Brazilian unions don’t have any significant influence within companies. They are not consulted by employers or heard when technological or other changes are planned in workplaces. In the absence of ‘factory commissions’, where union delegates discuss problems relating to personnel (firing, holidays, professional classifications, etc.) with management, the liberty for action by Brazilian employers is limited only by labor legislation. The general procedure adopted by employers is to take decisions and to wait; if they (the decisions) don’t please the employees, let them send their complaints to the Labor Court” (Rodrigues, 1974, p. 90).

Even though Rodrigues is referring to a reality which existed prior to the democratization process, and the public mobilization of urban workers and unions which occurred at the beginning of the 1980s, the pattern he outlines still remains. Negotiations around questions involving workers’ health and and the organization of work occur only in isolated situations (Bonciani, 1996). They occur only where significant progress has been achieved due to union action. This can be seen by the creation of an inter-union organization in this area, DIESAT, (Inter-union Department for Study and Research into Health and Working Environment) and action directed towards worker interests by state organizations such as public services which pay attention to these questions (Sato, 1992; Lacaz, 1996; Sato, Lacaz and Bernardo, 2004).

It is understandable that given this historical journey, freely constituted worker committees, organized in workplaces are much more the exception than the rule. (Rodrigues, 1991 and 1994) Health and safety committees (CIPAs), while compulsory by law, have many difficulties in developing effective and critical action.

In this context, it is uncontestable that the strong presence of legal regulations serves as a guide to daily practices related to health in workplaces, as Lacaz (1996) and Dwyer (2000)
have shown. These authors argue, however, that such a presence does not necessarily lead to improvements in working and health conditions.

Indeed, it proves difficult to bring about changes in work processes through organized action with regards to health issues. It is pertinent to observe that, (in a similar manner to that seen in other dimensions of daily life in Brazil), those who do not represent dominant interests, have to deal with a situation of asymmetric power relations and individual and collective control over their work. They seek to have their subjective limits respected (Sato, 1993), and to make other organizational choices and re-plan their own work (Trist, 1976; Murray, 1970; Orstman, 1984). In this way they can go beyond the limits of those historically constructed obstacles that are so concrete and powerful.

Please note that the cases examined in this chapter occurred in firms in São Paulo City, headquarters to the most important urban-industrial complex in the Southern Hemisphere and which has historically had important and active urban trade union movements, before, during and after the period of military dictatorship.

The dynamics of micro politics in workplaces

Studies using qualitative approaches, from a social psychology perspective, observe how conflicts occur and how countervailing power develops. (The construction of countervailing power in work situations is described by Elton Mayo (informal groups) (Brown, 1979), by researchers associated with the Sociotechnical School (Orstmann, 1984; Kelly, 1978; Cherns, 1976), and by Frederico (1979), Linhart (1980) and Dwyer (1991), among others.)

In the cases referred to here, the study of micro politics, (i.e. the politics in and of daily living), came from a comprehension of the images produced through language and practices, (interaction and tasks), used by workers on a day-to-day basis. In both cases, we started from the observation that workers were seeking to avoid arduous work which, (from an inter-subjective perspective), is characterized by a work context which generates suffering, lack of comfort and requires extreme physical and mental effort, in situations where workers do not have control (Sato, 1993).

Recognizing that power is a key element for the exercise of control and that power depends on organizational structure and dynamics, it becomes clear that the degree of democracy in the workplace is intimately related to arduousness.

Two different methods of constructing countervailing power will be presented. The first is characterized by a secret conflict and the unilateral building of strategies to avoid suffering - “adaptive actions” (Sato, 1993). The second is characterized by processes of micro-negotiation developed in daily work (Sato, 1997 and 2002).

Unseen conflict and the unilateral construction of countervailing power - “adaptive actions”

In the first case, urban bus drivers in the city of São Paulo, (at the time of the study, employed by a company owned by the municipality), observed that the city had intense traffic and that it’s 10 million inhabitants were poorly served by the public transport system. We can
understand the meaning of arduous work and how it is dealt with through the eyes of these workers.

Adaptive actions frequently occur in the shape of provisional and unilateral attempts to resolve problems, actions consciously adopted and performed by workers in order to avoid suffering. During interviews these adaptive actions were verbalized and their rationality explained.

Adaptive actions do not resolve the question of lack of control because, in reality, they change the relation of forces between the primary group and those who plan their activities. On the contrary, such actions work around problems, and show the difference between prescribed and “real work”, (as defined by ergonomics), (Daniellou, Laville and Teiger, 1989). Because adaptive changes remain confined to the private sphere, (they are silent, hidden forms which often lead to small transgressions), managerial planning provides motives for the maintenance of two organizational realities - one conceived by management and one invented by the drivers. Adaptive actions are not the subject of dialogue between planners/managers and operators (drivers and fare collectors).

Operators become familiar with all aspects of their job as they accumulate experience, so they identify other possible rationalities and organizational choices as they search to transform work and its environment (to the extent that this is possible), into a single livable space. In this manner, the work post (i.e. the drivers’ area), often reflects the characteristics of the driver, e.g. colored curtains are hung in the space separating the driver’s seat from passengers or small decorative objects are hung on the support for the internal mirror, etc. It is not unusual for drivers to carry a toolkit so they can make ergonomic adjustments to their seat; a small bottle of homemade cleaner to remove mist from windows and mirrors; a dust cloth; an extension to the gear stick to reduce the effort involved in changing gear; a seat cover and curtain. The search by drivers to inhabit and transform the company bus into their ‘own bus’ was also supported by observations of practices such as a driver washing the floor of ‘his’ bus daily, and another who installed a small sound system.

The statement of one driver deserves special attention. After a period off work because of health problems, (of an emotional nature), he justified the installation of a small sound system and of the objects described above, as a way through which he could tolerate the physical and psychological efforts that were part and parcel of his working day.

Ultimately, we are talking about practices which aim to personalize the environment to make it function to meet personal needs, which can be seen in part as a method of reducing the effort, discomfort and suffering caused by work.

The language that drivers create appears to be another important instrument through which they seek control because, even when viewed by the public, drivers and fare collectors are able to maintain their private space. Although they speak Portuguese (like the rest of the population), these workers construct and label realities specific to their lives, the significance of which can only be understood by these workers in their particular context. The language employed is characterized by the use of words and expressions which gain significance locally and specifically permit the utterance of incomplete and codified sentences made up of a whole series of implicit ideas and “etceteras”. These sentences come together with a specific intonation, glances and gestures, and serve as indicators of ‘practical sociological knowledge’, (see Garfinkel (1994)). In this way, workers permit themselves to refer to themes that only
they can understand and to maintain such interchanges in secret even when in the presence of passengers.

These examples combine to demonstrate how functional the ‘culture’ of this occupational group is when examined from the viewpoint of worker health, since it seeks to preserve or to build an environment which respects the workers’ subjective limits (Sato, 1993).

In addition, a series of small aberrations (adaptive actions) by drivers can be observed, which together make a difference to their working conditions. Such changes include small modifications to defined routes, disobedience of traffic rules, performing dangerous procedures when driving, (cutting off other vehicles, sudden braking, fast accelerations, etc.), and installation of devices which reduce the sound of the signal used by passengers to indicate they wish to descend. In such cases, adaptive actions are recreated on a daily basis because the same problems of excessive suffering, effort and discomfort continue. It is a secret struggle that expresses a search for control over externally imposed dimensions of work.

When we spent time with the operators we could see the reasons why they took these actions. They had developed a ‘common sense epidemiology’ by assembling their own impressions and discussing them with colleagues. Drivers list occupational morbidity factors, which (importantly) include identification and repetition of situations that produce ‘jumpiness’ in drivers, resulting in osteoarticular, gastrointestinal and cardiovascular problems. These factors are associated with the context in which operators work and their adaptive actions aim at reducing the harmful effects of work.

Secret conflict and modifications to daily work life: Tactical and astute micro-negotiations

The second type of conflictual interaction leads to modifications in work routines through micro-negotiations, a situation observed in the study of an important food-processing factory in São Paulo City. We accompanied shop floor workers for about 8 months, observing and talking with them about their work (Sato, 1998 and 2002). We observed that the primary group, motivated and activated by common people with no role in representing collective interests, was able to negotiate reorganization of work processes despite the largely asymmetric distribution of power and the presence of arduous work. The company we researched employed 350 manual workers who worked a rotating roster of three shifts, (8 hours per day from Monday to Saturday). The factory manufactured a great variety of products and totally manual processes were mixed with automated processes. The majority of activities such as packaging, preparation and transport of materials, did not require high levels of schooling and were carried out by production hands. These jobs are generally repetitive and monotonous, which explains the high rate of repetitive strain injuries.

Micro-negotiations are both tactical and astute (Certeau, 1994), almost invisible, and only observed and recognized when an attentive and trained eye focuses on events, and their signification, occurring in the workplace. Even in a factory where work is planned so that repetitive and monotonous activities must be performed, the day-to-day work in the factory is shaped by unpredictable and unusual events. During these events, problems are solved. The resolution of problems is not limited to those defined by management, (e.g. relating to productivity, product and manufacturing process quality), but also to problems which affect the interests of workers, (e.g. excessive exertion, pain, suffering, interpersonal conflicts, etc).
Taking advantage of the quality discourse

The first type of day-to-day negotiation develops through the tactical and astute capturing of managerial discourse, in this case, the discourse about “quality”, diffused widely throughout the company.

The workers know what type discourse is permitted, i.e. the quality discourse introduced by management. Workers use this discourse to open up symbolic spaces that allows them to demand changes that favor their interests, such as changes in the definition of production lines, improvement in hygiene and health conditions, reductions of physical and mental exertion through the reduction of machine speed and increasing the number of workers on production lines.

When we first arrived at the factory and saw how the word ‘quality’ was used, it seemed as if they had a totally effective organizational ideology in place because everyone referred to the necessity for quality at work. However, a deeper understanding of what “quality” meant to each person, permitted us to see that there were multiple meanings which allowed a range of arguments and defenses to be based on the word, by widely diverse and (even) opposite interests. For example, when management is dealing with ‘quality’, it may mean the adoption of a series of control procedures during production, such as statistical control of a process. However, at the shop floor level, work on ‘quality’ may mean they want management to respect bearable limits on workload, such as reduced speed of work speeds or additional staff.

The astuteness of the workers lies in their capacity to develop tactics which result in their interests being ‘heard’ without conflicts of interests being made explicit. This is done by workers using ‘quality’ as an argument, as illustrated by the following example. A production manager requests that the speed of work on a line be increased but the machine operator concerned argues that while machinery could be speeded up, this action will hurt quality! With this reply, the operator can avoid the intensification of work and all the problems that flow from it, (complaints from packing staff, frequent stops to adjust the machine, greater exertion, suffering and tiredness). In this way the asymmetrical power relationships in the workplace are bypassed and workers’ interests end up being valued, at least minimally. While it is not unreasonable to assume that an increase of work speed may have led to some deterioration in product quality, this was not the main result that the worker sought to avoid. Rather, he sought to avoid results that would have an impact on his interests and on those of his colleagues on the production line.

Taking advantage of circumstances in order to develop countervailing powers

The second example has a storeroom worker (Paulo), as the protagonist. Paulo is dissatisfied with the general work environment, (space, drinking fountain, ventilation, equipment, layout, etc.), and his dissatisfaction is shared by a number of his colleagues who work in the same space (around 30 to 40).

Although this dissatisfaction has been felt for some time, the opportunity to negotiate with management to improve the situation occurs when Paulo discovers that inspectors will soon be visiting the factory. When he sees how management and supervisory staff are concerned to
prepare the company for the visit, (preparing reports, standardizing procedures, etc.), Paulo begins his research on how to marry his personal interests with managerial ones.

While “simulating submissive behavior in order to hide his insubordination” (Thompson, 1998), Paulo also recognizes that it is impossible for him to explain his reasons and interests in the managerial discourse by saying “Here in the company everybody speaks the same language!” Following this, Paulo employs a euphemism. Instead of making demands, Paulo makes “suggestions for improvements”, “ideas”, and tries to “find solutions”, and also tries to “collaborate”. In this way, by using fashionable words that are a part of managerial discourse, he ensures that his demands are heard, and everyone working in the factory knows that the firm, within its program of empowerment, wants to “discuss ideas because we have got too many problems, and they [management] want you to suggest possible solutions.” This language, and manner of publicly presenting proposals, sidelines conflicts but, it is through them that negotiations, (called “conversations” by the workers), develop.

In this manner Paulo discreetly contacted a manager and ”suggested” where drinking fountains should be located, spaces for traffic flow widened, ventilators installed and other solutions that would result in greater comfort for workers. The argument that Paulo used when making his suggestions was that if the environmental conditions were improved, this would greatly improve the image of production management in the eyes of the inspectors. Accepting the arguments, the manager supported the suggestions and made appropriate moves for resources to implement the suggested improvements.

Paulo recognized that, in order to develop countervailing power, it was necessary to be submissive and to hide his insubordination. When I asked him if workers are free to talk about inadequacies in the firm, he replied; “I am going to speak? Going to speak for what? I’m not crazy!” and concluded:

“A lot is said about autonomy, initiative, creativity…. but hierarchy, my dear Leny, has to be followed, because they say, and it will always be true, the chain always breaks at its weakest link, that in this case, means us. We work here… as I said before, I defend the firm, it’s just that for me, in my mind, I am certain that one day I could leave here without being in any way valued, you know what I mean?...conscious that the firm is not ours.”

While it is possible to develop these countervailing powers, Paulo’s statement also teaches us about the limits found in capitalist production relations.

These two examples show that, in spite of the fact that power and control clearly favor management and capital; workers are astute in creating mechanisms that have an effect on negotiations. In this way, even though a reality in which ‘communicative action’ exists but was not observed, we are not talking of a context of radical democracy (Habermas, 1987). It is through ‘dramaturgical action’ (Goffman, 1985) that the parties develop arguments which take into account the world of things, the world of norms and both their own subjective world and that of others. In what can be seen as analogous to a ‘public space’ in the workplace, a range of opinions are compared and, extracted from the ‘private space’ where they had been confined in silence. However, the formation of a ‘public space’ is neither made explicit, nor can it be seen as something that has been permanently conquered. It should be clear that given this discussion, there are limits to what can be achieved through such negotiations. There are possibilities for agreement, but we recognize that such agreements have considerable implications, especially from the workers’ point of view from within the workplace, in
contrast to our own, outside position as critical spectators, who desire important and immediately visible changes throughout the whole organization.

A synthesis

Many other cases we observed could have been examined in this chapter to explain how countervailing powers are developed as a way of dealing with conflicts, particularly conflicts that cannot always be talked about or that become the object of open negotiations or open conflict.

Three points from the above cases should be considered. Firstly, each of these cases can initially appear to be simplistic, easy to understand, and to lack political significance. Secondly, they appear similar to classic cases from long ago which show that multiple rationalities and multiple ‘organizations’, (i.e. the informal groups in the Human Relations School, the detailed descriptions in ergonomics theory and of the Sociotechnical School), are not specific to Brazilian reality. Thirdly, it is possible to question the influence of such practices in the area of prevention of workers’ health problems.

Even though the phenomena of adaptive action and micro-negotiations may not be new, this type of struggle to bargain for the control of the workplace has significance for Brazil. Given the specific context and the dynamics of work relations in Brazil, adaptive actions and micro-negotiations offer the only possible means of reaching some level of prevention of health problems related to work organization in many cases. Moreover, growing unemployment tends to undermine the emergence of conflicts that could become explicit. Thus, in order to deal with asymmetric power and control over the workplace, workers must resort to astute tactics, profiting from the openings offered by managerial planning, the opportunities that emerge and the ambiguity of situations. It is in these gaps that we can see both conformity and resistance and workers expressing their subjectivity (Chaui, 1993).

As researchers we should not have a naïve view which considers that all the problems of planning and modifications of work organization can be solved through these daily negotiations. Nor should we adopt an arrogant view, which only sees changes where researchers consider they have occurred. In the same way, some types of adaptive action have costs for workers, notably when those actions go in the same direction as the safety rules. The difference between adaptive actions and micro-negotiations is that the latter seek to affect the public sphere, to the extent that they seek to have an issue negotiated between parties, even if such dialogue occurs in a “pre-capitalist” manner (Thompson, 1993). Both cohabit and express the limits and possible conditions for the adoption of, (in one way or another), the development of countervailing powers.

Following in the line of Gardell (1982b), we understand that the modification of work, aimed at improving health, should be conducted at various levels, with the central trade union organizations, the unions, workplace organizations, workplace health and safety committees and the shop floor workers, benefiting from the strengths of each organization. The importance of considering the day-to-day practices described above, is also based on the fact that any change involving agents and, which is decided at other levels, must always refer back to daily life where it is founded in the practices and knowledge constructed by the primary group.
The above examples reaffirm that, in spite of management conceiving, planning and designing activities and procedures of a strictly technical nature, to be conducted unilaterally by management itself, people on the factory floor modify work in order to carry it out. They do this through their knowledge, built up through practice, in order to reduce the expenditure of effort, to show political resistance to managerial control and power or, to make it possible to carry out activities planned by someone else. The evidence all comes together to reaffirm that daily life on the shop floor is created and recreated. It is the place where people give meaning to their doings, oriented by practical methods, denominated as ‘practical sociological reasoning’, giving shape to organizational and micro political processes (Garfinkel, 1994).