

# MASS STRIKES IN THE BRAZILIAN CONSTRUCTION SECTOR AND IN THE INDIAN AUTOMOBILE SECTOR

## Contemporality and spatial patterns of mobilization in mass strikes

Jörg Nowak  
Kassel University

The years since the onset of the global financial crisis saw a wave of protests all over the world, and among them were a series of mass strikes in the Global South that have not yet been investigated extensively, with the exception of the mass strikes in China and the strikes in South African mining in 2012. My current research on mass strikes in Brazil and India has revealed that there are enormous similarities despite very different local, regional and national contexts and path dependencies. The strike waves in the construction sector between 2011 and 2013 in Brazil and the strikes in the Indian automobile sector are examples of strikes in central sectors of the national economies. These sectors have witnessed continual growth over the past 15 years, and at the same time workers experienced deteriorating working conditions, such as lower wages, an increase in contract work and/or a higher work speed. The focus in the initial phase of the strikes was on wage demands and working conditions, but during the course of the struggles a political dimension emerged quite quickly. In a number of cases, workers organized wildcat strikes or developed activities that could not be controlled by the trade unions, e.g. setting fire to workplace premises, expelling union representatives with violent means or killing managers. And many of these strikes were met with repression, such as the repeated deployment of the national guard and military police to break strikes in Brazil or the arbitrary arrest and long-term imprisonment of workers in India.

According to a categorical assessment of mass strikes, inspired by the seminal work of Rosa Luxemburg (1906), the defining characteristics with which one can distinguish mass strikes from any strike that includes a lot of workers, will be discussed (see also Nowak and Gallas 2014). Beyond general characteristics, mass strikes may have different forms of how they unfold on an organizational and geographical scale. In order to assess these specific dynamics, I will refer to the approach of labour geography

that includes the notion of space into research on the prerequisites of labour struggles (Herod 1997).

I take the following steps in this paper: First, I will give a description of the scope of the mass strikes mentioned. In doing so I will provide some ideas about which kind of solidarity was effective for which reasons and outline the limits for solidarity that exist. Second, I assess the specific dynamics of the mass strikes in question. Finally, I will draw conclusions for a future perspective of transnational solidarity for mass strikes in the age of austerity and global slump.

### **Mass strikes after 2008 in Brazil and India**

The years after 2008 saw a wave of mass strikes in the Global South, with many of these strikes going beyond the established patterns of trade union action. Focusing on the strikes in the construction industry in Brazil between 2011 and 2013, and strikes in the automobile sector in India in 2011/2012, important structural and political similarities are obvious: All three sectors are central sectors of the respective economies, they saw constant growth rates in the past 15 years, while wage levels decreased despite growth. In the following, I will briefly describe the dynamics of the strikes mentioned and the role of transnational solidarity in these strikes.

### **Construction sector in Brazil**

The Brazilian construction sector saw continual growth rates, increasing by 49.6 percent between 2004 and 2012 (DIESSE 2013; Blanford/Cummings 2013). In 2011, 7.8 million workers join the construction sector, 8.4 percent of the total workforce. Between 1998 and 2008 the construction sector saw an influx of 200,000 workers. In 2011 and 2012, the strikes of construction workers saw a peak: 580,000 construction workers went on strike in 2011, and 500,000 construction workers in 19 regional states went on strike in 2012. The major grievances were wage differences between and within regions and workplaces and harsh restrictions on holidays: Many workers work away from their families and were only allowed to leave the workplace every three to six months. Helpers were not allowed any leave in some places. In addition, housing facilities, transport and food for workers were regularly abominable.

The first big and hitherto unprecedented strike wave, the biggest since the strikes in 1980 in the São Paulo area, occurred in February and March 2011 when 170,000 construction workers went on strike. The strike wave started in a number of smaller

construction sites in the state of Bahia in February, including 80,000 workers. In the middle of March, the strike wave extended to the whole country, predominantly to the big construction sites of the government program PAC (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento): The biggest mobilization occurred at two industrial complexes, a refinery and a petrochemical complex, in Suape, in the state of Pernambuco, involving 35,000 workers (Véras 2013, 2014). The hydroelectric plants in Jirau and Santo Antônio in the state of Rondonia saw huge mobilizations as well with 20,000 and 16,000 workers and another focal point in March 2011 was in the state of Ceará at the construction of a thermoelectric plant in Pecém with 6,000 workers on strike. The special feature of the strikes on the sites that belong to PAC was the absence of trade unions in the initial phase of the mobilizations and the practice of burning the housing facilities and other parts of premises by the striking workers. As their protest was directed against the miserable conditions of housing, the demand for better housing was put into practice by setting ablaze the former facilities. The different strikes did not start based on a common call, but broke out more or less independently from each other, though media reports might have had a role in triggering more conflicts after the first strikes started. In the area of Jirau the federal government ordered the national guard (Força Nacional) to break the strike immediately after it broke out.

### **Car production in India**

Car production in India is one of many sectors that is expanding and driving the economy. Passenger car sales grew at 15.2 per cent per year between 2005-06 and 2010-11. Growth in the industry fell after 2011 and collapsed in 2013. At the same time, the real wages of auto workers dropped since 2000 from 80,000 rupees a year in 2000-01 to 65,000 rupees in 2009-10 (Annual Survey of Industries), while the output of cars tripled.

In India, one out of two factories of the biggest car passenger producer Maruti Suzuki saw two wildcat strikes in June and October 2011 and labor unrest in July 2012. The Maruti company was a state enterprise in the past, but is controlled at present by the Japanese multinational Suzuki. The factory at Manesar was seen as a model factory – it opened in 2007 and recruited young workers, and was set up in a new industrial area with only a small village nearby. The management thought that these young workers without experiences in labor organizing, located in a remote area, could be handled more easily and employed at lower wages. Permanent workers only accounted for 25

percent of the workforce, while the remaining employees were contract workers from 60 different contractors, trainees, and apprentices that earn much lower wages. In 2011 contract workers earned about half of the wage of a permanent worker (9,000 rupees vs. 17,000 rupees/month). Only 1,054 workers were permanent in summer 2012, and there were 416 technical trainees, 225 apprentices and 2,700 contract workers (PUDR 2013, <http://www.pudr.org/?q=content/driving-force-labour-struggles-and-violation-rights-maruti-suzuki-india-limited>).

The conflict in the Manesar factory that has unfolded since has gained significance over the wildcat strikes at Honda in Gurgaon in 2005/2006 that were followed by many smaller strike movements. The workers in the Manesar factory aimed to set up their own trade union, the Maruti Suzuki Workers' Union (MSWU), while the company wanted them to join the trade union in the mother plant, Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU). The workers in Manesar saw MUKU as a management-led trade union and insisted on their right to choose their own trade union. The reasons behind wanting to establish their own union were: wage issues, the huge extent of contract labor, high work speed, harassment by supervisors and the lack of breaks that would enable workers to go to the toilet and have food or drinks.

After the company tried to force the permanent workers in Manesar to join the union MUKU, they went on a two-week long wildcat strike in June 2011 during which all categories of workers participated. The company did not recognize the MSWU trade union and resorted to a lock-out of all contract workers in late September. The response to this company move was the blockade of the gates and a second wildcat strike by the permanent workers for another two weeks in October 2011. This time, three neighbouring Suzuki factories that produce engines for Maruti Suzuki and motorcycles also went out on strike, as well as another 14 factories in the area some of which are suppliers to Maruti Suzuki. The striking feature of the Honda case a few years before was that a joint strike of contract and permanent workers in 2005 led to better conditions for permanent workers, and a subsequent strike of Honda contract workers in 2006 remained isolated and unsuccessful. In contrast to these events, it remained a feature of the strike at the Manesar factory that contract and permanent workers acted in solidarity – a fact that caused widespread fear among employers. The second strike in October 2011 ended with an agreement between workers and the company that did not include substantial changes of work conditions. In the course of 2012, the independent trade union could finally register under the name Maruti Suzuki Employees Union

(MSEU), but none of its demands were met and talks with the management collapsed in the summer of 2012. In this already tense situation, a worker was slapped by a supervisor and subsequently sacked after he filed a complaint. That led to negotiations between the trade union and management, and in the course of that day, July 18, 2012, violence broke out in the factory that left 50 managers injured and one dead. After the unrest, the workers fled from the premises and the factory remained closed for one month. The company fired 2,300 (1,800 contract and 500 permanent) workers arbitrarily, and 148 workers were arrested with the charge of murder. These workers have remained in jail until today (September 30, 2014) without bail being granted, and without a sentence.

### **Inorganic Transnational Solidarity**

In order to assess a new form of international solidarity that emerges from the mass strikes, I will combine Luxemburg's insights into the special features of mass strikes (1906) with Herod's insights (1997) into the specific spatial limits and dynamics of labour mobilisation. Rosa Luxemburg puts emphasis on the fact that mass strikes do not follow a ready-made path, thereby distancing herself both from the anarchist myth of 'the general strike as a means of inaugurating the revolution' (1906, 112) and the bureaucratic engineers of the workers movement in German social democracy 'who would, in the manner of a board of directors, put the mass strike in Germany on the calendar on an appointed day, and those who, like the participants in the trade-union congress at Cologne, would by a prohibition of "propaganda" eliminate the problem of the mass strike from the face of the earth' (1906, 116). Instead, Rosa Luxemburg describes the mass strike as an outcome of specific social and political conditions, as a mass action that cannot be directed by political leaders: 'If, therefore, the Russian Revolution teaches us anything, it teaches above all that the mass strike is not artificially "made", not "decided" at random, not "propagated", but that it is a historical phenomenon, which, at a given moment, results from social conditions with historical inevitability' (1906, 117). Luxemburg describes the mass strike as a tactic of the workers movement with five features: (1) Its forms are constantly changing, sometimes mass strikes start with a political programme and end with purely economic demands, or they begin with demands related to the work situation and evolve into full-fledged political struggles (Luxemburg 1906, 127f, 144). (2) Mass strikes disrupt political life and enter into the public debate (Luxemburg 1906, 140f). (3) They have a mobilizing

aspect for the working class as a whole, as workers experience their collective power and receive a quick political education during these strikes (1906, 140). (4) Mass strikes flow from one part of the country to other parts without a proper central organisation (1906, 120-29). (5) Mass strikes are not the final solution for the quest of the workers' movement how to conquer political power: they too have to be transformed into another political strategy: 'The role of the political mass strike alone is exhausted but at the same time, the transition of the mass strike into a general popular rising is not yet accomplished' (1906, 140). It is quite obvious that the strike movements I have described in the first part all match with the criteria developed by Luxemburg with reference to the mass strikes in Russia between 1896 and 1905. But in order to catch their specificities I aim to grasp the spatial dynamics of mobilisation, because these are relevant to the issue of international solidarity. Andrew Herod developed his approach of Labour Geography in order to provide attention to 'workers as active geographical agents' (1997, 2) that 'shape economic landscapes and uneven development' (1997, 1). As it is the case for capital, the agency of workers is restricted due to pre-existing social and political conditions (1997, 16), but labour is like capital establishing spatial fixes as a part of the overall dynamic of capitalist accumulation (1997, 17). Thus, solidarity is conceived by Herod as a successful effort to establish a certain spatial fix (1997, 20). And, most relevant to my account of international solidarity is Herod's claim that workers are also producing the geographical scales on which the conflict with capital is fought out (1997, 18).

All the three different national waves of mass strikes exhibit the characteristics stated by Luxemburg, most of all a quick diffusion of practices and organisational learning on a mass scale, contradicting widespread romanticising and/or conservative notions that describe mass strikes as 'wild' or 'spontaneous'. Nevertheless, these strike waves meet spatial limits and patterns of mobilisation that differ to some extent and can be understood as national and regional specificities. So, what are the organizational and spatial dynamics of the mass strikes that I described in the previous section? Basically, three kinds of dynamics can be found in these three waves of mass strikes: (1) a first pattern is diffusion of a certain form of strike within one sector, copycat strikes; (2) a second pattern is the diffusion of strikes, although not necessarily in the same form, to other sectors in the same national framework; and (3) the third pattern is the establishment of certain forms of strikes and the diffusion of experiences in one industrial region, at times across sectors.

## **Conclusion: Strategies for transnational solidarities in the new global conjuncture.**

The mass strikes since 2008 are part of a global conjuncture of struggles that emerged in the years after the global financial meltdown. If we translate the way strikes referenced each other in the strike waves on the national or regional level, we might have a blueprint to rethink international solidarity. Street protests copied each other without any organic links: The Tahrir Square movement inspired the Spanish indignados that inspired Occupy in the USA, all during 2011. These street protests were seen as a (vaguely) connected movement by a number of commentators that compared the protests since 2011 with the protests around the year 1968 (Castells 2012; Kraushaar 2012; Mason 2013). The connection between these movements were, first, the modes of action, e.g. occupation of squares, and second, the crucial role of educated young people, and third that they happened more or less at the same time within the year 2011. The transnational mass strikes since 2011 were a parallel development to the street protests, starting with mass strikes in Egypt and China in 2010, and expanding into other countries since 2011. I contend that the global wave of mass strikes has to be seen in a similar light as the street protests: A transnational wave, but characterised by national patterns of mobilisation. These mass strikes were mainly based on informal networks between workers. In the case of the Brazilian construction sector there have been no tight organizational structures that organized the strike wave, but many informal contacts between workers (see Luxemburg 1906, 120-129 on mass strikes in Russia). The same goes for the strikes in the Gurgaon region. The circulation of struggles is based on a circulation of experiences, enhanced by quick rotation between workplaces and a high amount of labour migration inside of national states. The solidarity during the strike waves was not based on a unified commando, but on an uncontrolled proliferation of strike movements, although there have been some organized kernels. This is not at all meant to celebrate the strikes as 'spontaneous'. The strikes have been well organized and well prepared in most of the cases.

Beyond any organic connections between the strike waves it was the sheer fact of their contemporaneity over two years which is astonishing: Revolts in Brazilian construction in February/March 2011, occupations at Maruti Suzuki in June and October 2011, uprising at Maruti Suzuki in July 2012, revolt in Suape in August 2012, revolt at Belo Monte in November 2012. Similar trends of investment and restructuring of work, of the global economic downturn, of new expectations of workers and of new

means of communication between workers led to an explosion of unrest in the workplaces – in the same way that street protests were emerging around different continents in the years after 2011. There were spatial limits of the strike waves in terms of mobilisation (Herod 2003). In Brazil these spatial limits coincided with national borders. Given the transnational organisation of domination, this confinement to the national public is a decisive weakness – but it can be the sheer contemporaneity of struggles that becomes a mobilizing factor on its own, and it is this effect and its dynamics that remain to be understood better in research on mass strikes.

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