Gramsci in the Belly of the Beast: Lessons from a Brazilian Union for Political Education in the United States

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In both Brazil and the United States, leftists built labor movements as part of a broader class struggle. In both countries, leftists have utilized various forms of political education to disseminate their ideas to the broader working class so workers could become “subjects, to participate creatively in [the] process” rather than simple objects of exploitation (Freire, 1974, p. 10). For a variety of reasons, however, the U.S. labor movement no longer utilizes political education, which I argue has contributed significantly to its currently weakened position.

After describing the history of both movements and reflecting on the contemporary moment, I examine a partnership between the Brazilian bank workers’ union, SEEB-SP (hereafter called os bancarios – literally “the bankworkers”) and a U.S. union, SEIU Local 26, to transfer political education techniques from Brazil to the U.S. to revitalize the U.S. labor movement. I also discuss how both unions are engaged in a Gramscian war of position and the role political education plays in long-term anti-capitalist struggle. I was a union organizer at SEIU Local 26 for eight years, and thus bring to this paper first-hand knowledge of the dynamics of the U.S. labor movement.

Gramsci and the War of Position

Antonio Gramsci’s writing influences the leadership in both CUT and SEIU Local 26. Gramsci argued that there are two broad categories of revolutionary activity: a war of maneuver and a war of position. The war of maneuver is open combat between the two classes – a la the 1917 Russian Revolution. A war of position, however, takes place under more ordinary circumstances. In a war of position, leftists act to establish a “counter-hegemony” against the capitalist hegemony. Leftists struggle for control over unions, government structures, universities and other institutions, and build alliances across classes to create an “historic bloc” to generate counter-hegemony.

Both os bancarios and SEIU Local 26 are engaged in such a process. Local 26 is creating an emergent historic bloc through a coalitional structure called Minnesotans for a Fair Economy (MFE) (Payne, unpublished). MFE unites multiple classes of people in Minnesota in a common
struggle against the leading members of the capitalist class. Because MFE is not an explicit revolutionary organization, I would term MFE’s struggle “Gramscism in practice,” perhaps without the theory. *Os bancarios* and their trade union confederation, CUT (Central Union of Workers), is likewise engaged in a counter-hegemonic struggle. Leftists established CUT as a Gramscian vehicle for attacking capitalism and later united with other social movements, like the Landless Workers Movement in the Workers Party (PT) to build an historic bloc.

It is not enough, however, for the union leadership to declare a set of principles and work towards them. Paulo Freire calls such efforts by just leadership sectarianism. “For the sectarian, the people matter only as a support for his own goals. The sectarian wishes the people to be present at the historical process as activists, maneuvered by intoxicating propaganda” (Freire, 1974, p. 10). A strong coalition may increase the power of the leadership of the unions and bring them closer to power, but is unlikely to challenge the common sense of capitalist hegemony.

For Freire, Gramsci, CUT, and increasingly for Local 26, the answer lies in political education. Gramsci believed trade unions and the left needed to create their own educative bodies to combat the dominant hegemony. To that end, he helped create working class educational programs in Italy (Mayo, 1995). Freire argued that modern capitalist institutions, like media and schools, lead to “massification” rather than education. If unions are to avoid massification, they must create “an active, dialogical educational program, concerned with social and political responsibility” (Freire, 1974, p. 15). It is through political education that the masses become engaged in the revolutionary process; without it, unions simply recreate capitalist hegemony.

**The U.S. Labor Movement**

The labor movement in the U.S. is in a steady state of collapse. Today just 11.1% of workers in the U.S. are covered by a union contract (BLS, 2015). The numbers are even worse in the private sector, with only 6% of private sector workers organized (BLS, 2015). Union membership levels have not been this low since 1916 – when most workers could not legally organize unions (Greenhouse, 2013).

Unions have responded with a variety of strategies and tactics. One notable trend is the rise of corporate campaigns. Such campaigns utilize professional researchers to plan a variety of
tactics, including shareholder activism, community organizing, political power and negative publicity to supplement traditional workplace tactics, like slowdowns and strikes (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004). SEIU is one of the unions that has embraced this strategy.

Although strikes have become a novelty, others advocate for a return to the picket line (Burns, 2011). No one union fully embraces this strategy; a diverse mix of union activists advocates for it. And while most labor advocates agree that more strikes would probably be good, strikes in the U.S. today have relatively limited impact due to the regular use of scab labor and the frequent use of state power to neuter strikes, as evidenced in several recent strikes by longshoremen on the west coast (Brenner and Weissman, 2014). In addition, many employers have gone on the offensive by preemptively locking out workers, leaving many unions hesitant to strike (Payne, 2014). A significant difference between the two strategies is that corporate campaigns lend themselves to more professionalized bureaucratic unions, favoring specialized knowledge, while strikes lend themselves to more bottom-up unions, favoring worker knowledge.

The weakness of U.S. is also visible in politics as the Democratic Party, the traditional party of labor, increasingly turns its back on the working class. Despite years of Democratic control of the executive branch, labor has accrued few political victories, including much desired reform of labor law.

**The Brazilian Labor Movement**

Not surprisingly, the Brazilian labor movement has followed a very different trajectory. Marxist and anarchist European immigrants formed the first Brazilian unions in the early 1900s in newly emergent industries. Led by the Communist Party, a relatively strong labor movement emerged, only to be smashed by a military dictatorship in the 1960s. The dictatorship faced limited resistance until the late 70s and early 80s, when an opposition coalition, led by a group of unionists called “the authentics” emerged. Two key unions in this coalition called CUT (Central Union of Workers), were the bank workers’ union and the metalworkers’ union (led by Lula). The authentics led a series of audacious strikes in 1979 and became key actors in an emerging pro-democracy movement. The dictatorship came to an end in 1985 (Sader and Silverstein, 1991, Keck, 1992).
CUT, along with other social movements, formed the leftist Workers Party (PT) in 1981 to contend for state power in elections. After several failed campaigns, Lula won the presidency in 2002. His successor, Dilma Rousseff, was recently elected for a second term. PT politicians also control several important state and municipal governments. The strength and stability of the Brazilian labor movement stand in stark contrast to the increasing weakness and paralysis of the U.S. labor movement.

**Political Education in the Historic U.S. Labor Movement**

One of the most important features of successful U.S. unions in the 1930s was the integration of political education and organizing. Communists, socialists and anarchists, who shared a high degree of political education, led the wave of unionization in the 30s. For these leftists, the union movement was one part of a broader class struggle against capitalism. The mission of unions was to educate workers on the dynamics of that struggle.

A clear example is the 1934 Minneapolis Teamster’s strike. This strike began as a relatively small dispute between a Teamsters’ local and the Minneapolis trucking industry. It quickly morphed into pitched street battles between the ruling and working classes of Minneapolis, with President Roosevelt eventually intervening in the dispute. What differentiated this campaign from previous failed union drives in Minneapolis was the union leadership. In the early 30s, a cadre of Trotskyists affiliated with the Socialist Worker’s Party made a strategic decision to organize the trucking industry. Farrell Dobbs, one of the primary leaders of this campaign, credits his political background with giving him and his cadre the discipline and strategic edge to win the campaign (Dobbs, 1973). Similar conditions existed in two other general strikes in 1934, in Toledo, Ohio and San Francisco, CA. Most observers of the U.S. labor movement credit these three general strikes as a turning point for labor (Brecher, 2013).

The Highlander School, a radical people’s school that today uses popular education, heavily influenced the CIO, the left wing of the U.S. labor movement in the 30s and 40s. “By the late 1930s Highlander was serving as the de-facto CIO education center” (Highlander Timeline). The Highlander School also provided a critical educational role in the civil rights movement of the 50s.
Following the mass disruptions of the 30s, the U.S. government drove leftists out of the labor movement, often with the complicity of union leadership. Nowhere was this more evident than in Minneapolis, where following the successful trucking strike and a wave of new organizing amongst strikers, the leftist local found itself fighting their International union more than their employers (Dobbs, 1973). This purge stripped unions of a vital resource for understanding the broader political and economic environment, and is an important factor for understanding the ensuing bureaucratization of unions and current lack of political education departments (Harvey, 2003, p. 51).

**Political Education in Os Bancarios and SEIU Local 26**

*Os bancarios* political education department (*Departamento de Formação*) has two sections: professional development and political education. The professional development section is a formalized university that offers courses and trainings required for bank workers to advance in their jobs. This paper focuses specifically on the political education section, although future research on the professional development section could prove fruitful to understanding how *os bancarios* reach a broader audience.

In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Paulo Freire described the pedagogical practice he utilized in an anti-literacy program. The program begins with an investigation into “the vocabulary of the groups with which one is working” and leads to “the creation of the ‘codifications’: the representation of the typical existential situations of the group with which one is working” (Freire, 1974, p. 46-47). The key lesson is that the materials used in radical pedagogical practice must reflect the existential situation of the people involved, a point also emphasized by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire generally worked with illiterate peasants and the very poor. The membership of *os bancarios*, by contrast, is middle class, and thus are in a very different existential position. Freire wrote that workers in the middle-class generally do not perceive oppression in their daily lives; they have “not yet perceived a limit-situation in its totality” (Freire, 1970, p. 85). For very poor workers and peasants, who do perceive oppression in their daily lives, the educative process begins from concrete oppressive situations. Middle-class workers, however, must “reverse their starting point: they…need to have a total vision of the context in order subsequently to separate and isolate its constituent elements and by means of this analysis achieve a clearer perception of the whole” (Sic, p. 85).
A second important lesson from Freire is that critical pedagogy must be dialogical. For Freire, dialogue “is a horizontal relationship between persons” as opposed to anti-dialogue, which “involves vertical relationships between persons” and “does not communicate, but rather issues communiques” (Freire, 1974, p. 42). Instead of teachers and students, Freire’s methodology creates teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire, 1970, p. 60).

An excellent case study of these principles is the first training in os bancarios political education department program. My analysis here is conducted based on documents provided to me by os bancarios on this training and from conversations with organizers in the education department in January 2015.

The training begins with a handout of a full-page clock with twenty-four hours on it. Workers individually fill out the clock to reflect what their typical workday looks like. Workers next enter into a small group dialogue in order to look for commonalities and differences between their clocks, and to discuss implications of the clock. Workers begin to see how little of their day they are in control of: with six to eight hours of work, often two to four hours of commute, and sleep, they are left very little time with their families and friends, and that time is dominated by media and commodities provided by capitalists. They also begin to perceive gendered differences in days.

Workers next fill in a second twenty-four hour clock with their ideal day. Organizers from the union told me the most striking lesson from this second clock is how limited most workers’ imaginations are. Almost everyone says they want to work less, but very few workers question the logic of the need for waged labor in general. The process of filling in the clocks and discussion is very loose and can take hours. Organizers do not set time limits on discussion.

As is clear from this description, the training is very dialogical, with an emphasis on horizontal relationships between all participants. It also leads middle-class workers to perceive the totality of their existence rather than concrete situations of oppression, which middle-class workers too often dismiss as examples of individual failure. It is from this holistic view of their life that they begin to understand the oppression inherent in a capitalist system.

The political education program at SEIU Local 26 is still in its infancy, and is being developed through the MFE coalition. There are some important lessons for Local 26 to take
from the clock exercise and the rest of os bancarios political education work. First, the materials must be directly relevant to the lives of workers. Local 26 has a very diverse membership, which complicates this process. Current members include mostly Latino and African immigrant janitors, and both white and black security officers. Many security officers once held middle class manufacturing jobs, and have taken a class step backwards in their current jobs. While os bancarios certainly also has a diverse membership, the various class and ethnic backgrounds of Local 26 members will need to be reflected in their materials. Moreover, this is to say nothing of the broader membership of MFE, which includes both highly paid middle class workers, and many people who do not come to the coalition as workers, but instead as community members or people of faith.

Second, Local 26 will need to create a truly dialogical educative process. This is a not a simple feat; the U.S. labor movement is mostly very top down. SEIU in particular is seen as a staff controlled union, and is not viewed as a dialogical union. Local 26 will face major barriers in how members view the role of the union, and in avoiding replicating an organizing culture that lends itself to vertical rather than horizontal relationships.

These lessons, and many other regarding pedagogy praxis, are already in the process of being transferred from Brazil to the U.S. A delegation from MFE came to Brazil a year ago to meet with organizers from os bancarios, who emphasized the critical importance of popular education in building strong unions. I am also part of this process, and plan on studying in detail the political education department at os bancarios, with the intention of bringing lessons back to the U.S. labor movement.

This partnership holds great potential for revitalizing the U.S. movement, thereby combatting the ongoing immiseration of U.S. workers, and as providing a foundation in which to develop an anti-capitalist hegemony. Through my own on-going research, activism and organizing, I look forward to contributing to these efforts.
Works Cited


