Social Movement Unionism and Neoliberalism in São Paulo, Brazil: Shifting Logics of Collective Action in Telemarketing Labor Unions

David Flores
University of Michigan

Fábio P. M. Silva
University of São Paulo, Brazil

Vitor C. Vaneti
University of São Paulo, Brazil

Ruy Braga
University of São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract
Neoliberal policies have radically altered the global economy. This is particularly evident in São Paulo, Brazil, which has undergone the rapid privatization of resources and services since the 1990s, as well as a major shift from an industrial to a service economy. How do new labor unions responding to a new service-based economy differ from those that have traditionally focused on an industrialized work force? How are labor unions in the global south meeting the challenge of unionizing under neoliberal policies? Finally, how do labor unions build solidarity for collective action among a new and demographically diverse working class? In this article we examine how São Paulo’s newest telemarketing labor union, Sintratel, creatively employs a Brazilian version of social movement unionism to thrive in a post-neoliberal society. Moreover, we address the difficulties for collectively organizing young workers with a strong sense of individualism and competitiveness who endeavor to succeed in Brazil’s emerging economy.

Keywords
Neoliberalism, Social Movement Unionism, Labor, Telemarketing, Brazil

Telemarketing is arguably the fastest growing industry in São Paulo, Brazil. Their labor unions are working to unionize over 615,000 telemarketing workers using a brand of unionism known...
as ‘social movement unionism,’ (Voss & Fantastia, 2004) in which improving wages and working conditions for workers are grounded in broader issues of economic, social justice, and human rights for the working class as a whole. The turn toward social movement unionism has provided some hope for the future of labor in countries such as the United States and Canada to put the ‘movement’ back into the labor movement (Meyer, 2005; Ross, 2007). At the same time, unions throughout the world have reached out beyond national borders to build an even broader international labor movement based largely on the issue of global human rights (Evans, 2000). This article examines how Sintratel creatively employs a Brazilian version of social movement unionism to thrive in a post-neoliberal society. Moreover, we address the difficulties for collectively organizing young workers with a strong sense of individualism and competitiveness who endeavor to succeed in Brazil’s emerging economy.

The social movement unionism model is not new to Brazil. During the 1980s, industrial labor unions in São Paulo’s ABC region merged workplace, citizenship, and human rights against a repressive dictatorship (Seidman, 1994). Known in Brazil and South Africa as ‘new trade unionism,’ labor unions launched a host of campaigns against labor repression that involved broader struggles for democracy and citizenship (Seidman, 1994; Adler & Webster, 2000). The success of countries in the global south in combining citizenship with labor rights inspired effective organizing campaigns throughout the world. During the 1990s, in the United States in particular, new trade unionism became a model for organizing service sector workers who combined workplace and community struggles. Labor movements spearheaded by the United Farm Workers (UFW), Justice for Janitors campaign, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) moved away from a business unionism model toward logics of collective action now defined as social movement unionism (Waterman, 1998; Lopez, 2004). However, in Brazil, after militant labor movements successfully negotiated labor contracts with state-owned industries and services in the 1980s, they gradually moved in the opposite direction and aligned themselves with a more traditional business unionism model, which focused specifically on wages and working
conditions. Then during the 1990s, when São Paulo rapidly shifted from an industrial to a service based economy, and state-owned industries became privatized, labor unions lost the advantage of negotiating with state-owned companies, and suddenly faced the new challenge of negotiating contracts with a multitude of privately-owned companies working under neoliberal policies.

Neoliberal policies of the 1990s have significantly changed the global economy (Bonacich, 2008). Its dimensions and dynamics are global, yet they also manifest in different ways across time and space. Scholars have written extensively about neoliberalism, noting everything from its underlying theoretical economic assumptions (Friedman, 1962), to its changing form over time (Harvey, 2005), to its profound influence on globalization (Ritzer, 2010). For the purposes of this article, we focus on two separate, yet intertwined processes which comprise the core features of neoliberalism as it manifests in Brazil: 1) the transfer of government control over resources and services to private corporations, and 2) a shift from an industrial to an increasingly service-based economy. Both processes emerged simultaneously and brought new challenges for Brazil’s labor movement. In the telecommunications sector, the former transferred ownership of state-owned Telebras to a variety of privately owned companies; while the latter has encouraged the “deskilling” of labor throughout the telecommunications industry and underlies the growth of telemarketing call centers in São Paulo, Brazil.

Latin American countries provide a rich terrain in which to examine the effects and processes of neoliberalism (Moncada, 2009). It made its first leap from theory to practice in Chile during the 1970s and ‘80s under the military dictator Augusto Pinochet, along with a group of University of Chicago-trained Chilean economists known as the ‘Chicago Boys’ (Kilne, 2007). In response to the economic crisis in Latin America during the 1990s, leaders of countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay adopted and implemented neoliberal policies as well (Portes & Roberts, 2005). Due to neoliberal policies that exacerbated the disproportionate distribution of wealth between the rich and poor, neoliberalism is now facing its greatest resistance in Latin America (Kline, 2007). Under the leadership of former labor organizer and
Brazilian President Luis Ingnacio Lula da Silva, otherwise known as ‘Lula,’ and the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT), Brazil has arguably followed step with other socialist-leaning administrations in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela that have begun to work against neoliberalism’s corrosive effects (Bianchi & Braga, 2005).

Over the past twenty years, Brazil has experienced the rapid privatization of its resources and services, while at the same time refocusing economic growth toward the service sector (Guimãraes, 2007). The process of turning government functions over to the private sector in Brazil began in 1991 when Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello worked earnestly to release powerful state control over the economy, which was left over from Brazil’s dictatorship era (1964-1985) and post-dictatorship President (1985-1989). Brazil’s largest city, São Paulo, developed a powerful industrial economy in the 1980s, only to see it shift to a service economy in the 1990s, while industries also became privatized under the administration of President Fernando Enrique Cardoso (Telles, 2006). Today, over 21 million people live in metropolitan São Paulo, and work in service-oriented jobs such as salespersons, waiters, cooks, motor boys, and telemarketers.

During the 1980s, mass migrations of people from the northeast of Brazil entered São Paulo’s industrial workforce and helped to create powerful labor unions (Seidman, 1994). However, during the 1990s, Brazilians experienced high unemployment rates along with the expansion of neoliberalism, which led to the weakening of labor unions (Guimãraes, 2007). The combination of rising unemployment, the shift from an industrial economy to a service economy, and the massive privatization of resources and services during the 1990s completely changed the conditions of labor and nearly dismantled São Paulo’s organized labor force.

In São Paulo during the 1980s, all telecommunications workers had worked for the state-owned company, Telecomunicações de São Paulo (Telesp), and these workers belonged to one labor union, Sindicato dos trabalhadores em telecomunicações (Sintetel). In 1998, Telesp lost its monopoly over the telecommunications sector when the Cardoso government privatized the telecommunications industry. As a result, Sintetel was now forced to negotiate with a mul-
titude of telecommunications companies rather than a single state-owned company (Rombaldi, 2007). When private corporations introduced new technology overhauling telecommunication services, telephone operators – whose work, consisted of manually connecting calls via a massive switchboard – were rendered obsolete. Moreover, telephone operators served as Sintetel’s core organized labor force, but the privatization of telecommunications also gave rise to a new industry in the service sector – telemarketing. By 2005, seven years after privatization, call centers employed over 615,000 workers, and telemarketing had become one of the largest employment sectors in the state of São Paulo (Junior, 2005). With its traditional core of operators gone, Sintetel responded to these changes by wisely, and successfully, shifting its attention to unionizing telemarketing workers. When the telecommunications sector became privatized in 1998, Sintetel managed to negotiate collective bargaining agreements with two of the largest telemarketing call centers in São Paulo: Atento and Contax. As a result, new telemarketing employees are automatically unionized and 1% of their salary goes to union dues. These negotiations have enabled Sintetel to unionize over 30% of São Paulo’s telemarketing workers and endure major setbacks as a result of privatization. What Sintetel did not expect, however, was the way in which telemarketing workers also constituted a new kind of labor force with a completely new set of concerns beyond wages and working conditions. Hence, soon after the privatization of telecommunications, telemarketing workers created their own labor union, Sindicato dos trabalhadores em telemarketing (Sintratel), which places social issues at the forefront of labor organizing along with wages and working conditions. How has Sintratel, a new and inexperienced labor union, been able to unionize 20% of São Paulo’s telemarketing workers in the shadow of Sintetel, which previously held a monopoly over all unionized telecommunications workers in São Paulo? The answer lies in Sintratel’s logics of collective action, logics broadly categorized as social movement unionism.

If white male industrial workers were the face of São Paulo’s unionized labor force of the 1980s (Rombaldi, 2007), today’s increasingly unionized service sector workers are comprised of a very different set of faces: these faces are predominantly young,
non-white, female, and openly gay. Responding to these changes, both Sintetel and Sintratel have adopted new strategies of organizing to some extent—new strategies that we characterize as Brazilian social movement unionism. However, Sintetel has been much slower in making the turn toward social movement unionism and remains more tied to the business unionism model, which relies on negotiating contracts for workers with major companies in the industry. Sintetel's relative lag in this respect is, in many ways, understandable, as it was this model that provided Sintetel with its ideals and victories during the 1980s. Nonetheless, given Sintetel's monopolization of unionized telemarketing workers in Sao Paulo’s largest call centers, how is Sintratel, a newer, and more inexperienced labor union successfully unionizing telemarketing workers? In this study, we trace Sintratel’s unique logics of collective action in order to explore a number of questions: How do new labor unions, responding to the shift to a service economy, differ from labor unions that traditionally focused on an industrialized workforce? How are labor unions in the global south meeting the challenge of unionizing under the effects of neoliberal policies implemented during the 1990s? And, finally, how do labor unions build solidarity for collective action among a new and demographically diverse working class?

In 2009 we conducted three months of participant observation along with twenty in-depth interviews with union directors and stewards, as well as twenty-four brief street ethnography interviews with rank-and-file workers during their smoke breaks on busy São Paulo sidewalks and at union functions. Because many telemarketers are students at vocational schools, our research was very well received after we identified ourselves as researchers from the United States and the University of São Paulo. In addition, labor union directors provided us with access to their workspace, invited us to their organizing events, and introduced us to telemarketing workers.

In what follows, we contrast traditional models and understandings of unionization with the new conditions for labor, particularly in São Paulo, Brazil. We then review business unionism and social movement unionism as two models which can help to shed light on these changes and the efforts of unions to adjust to
them. Finally, we explore the logics of collective action of Sintratel, in particular, because it represents the most radical departure from traditional unionism and provides the most promising strategy for the future.

**Labor Pains and New Challenges for Unions**

As labor unions throughout the world are struggling to reinvent themselves in order to keep pace with continuing shifts in the global economy, their new challenge is to build solidarity among a new working class based primarily in the service sector (Silver, 2003; Lee, 2007). The decline of unions has forced earlier union strategies, which concentrated on wages, benefits, and working conditions, to broaden their focus to include issues of social justice, human rights, and economic inequality (Gordon, 2005; Fine, 2006). Thus, ‘inventive campaigns of collective action focus on economic and social justice, rather than contracts and rules’ (Voss & Fantastia, 2004, p. 37). Examining Brazilian social movement unionism provides a unique opportunity to analyze a complex bundle of conditions: how labor unions are reinventing themselves after the implementation of neoliberal policies (Telles, 2006), the shift from business unionism to social movement unionism, and the challenge of building solidarity among the new working class in a post-neoliberal society.

The privatization of government-run industries through the 1990s in Brazil coincided with a rapid shift in São Paulo from an industrial and strongly unionized work force, to a service-sector based work force weakened by anti-union neoliberal policies. Since the privatization of telecommunications in 1998, unions have been working vigorously to adapt to the changes brought in its wake. The ‘deskilling’ (see Braverman, 1976) of workers was incorporated in the neoliberalist project during the privatization of government-controlled industries, and São Paulo’s telecommunications industry was no exception (Braga, 2006). The telemarketing industry has become one of the largest employers in São Paulo for young, working class people who have little to no prior work experience. They are eager to work in an office environment, make money, and participate in Brazil's growing consumer economy. Young telemarketers accept low working wages,
tolerate extreme pressure from employers, and surrender complete autonomy to a script that they are made to follow when speaking with customers (Braga, 2007). As one telemarketing worker described:

What caused me to become more involved in the union is the large number of injustices that you see in telemarketing. It's a group of people who are totally uninformed, they are either young, and it's their first job, or they're older and afraid of losing their job because the job market is really bad. So we are submitted to certain things that in normal times we would not be submitted to. I mean like not even being able to leave your station all day, you can't even go to the bathroom sometimes. It's absurd things like that, it's very complicated.

Telemarketers do not build or assemble anything tangible. They are completely detached physically from the product that they sell, and from the customers to whom they sell. Hence, they represent a working class unlike the more traditional industrial working class. They are a new proletariat of service workers known as ‘Infoproletariats’ (Antunes & Braga, 2009). Most are between the ages of 18 and 25. Over 74% hold a high school diploma, over 76% are women (Junior, 2005), and about 87% are full-time employees. The average yearly income for a telemarketing worker in São Paulo is US$4,513.00 per year, and 50.4% belong to a labor union. Telemarketing is also the first job for many of these workers, and there is a significantly high turnover rate with 44% remaining less than one year on the job.

The classic Marxist analysis of worker power argued that worker solidarity was created by the mines and factories of industrial capitalism, which drew people together in shared settings where they would develop common grievances and common antagonists (Burawoy, 2008). Telemarketers are service workers who, in Marxist terms, do not develop a sense of solidarity in the factory, or even within the neighborhoods in which they live. They have little to no engagement with each other, and spend their work hours on a telephone engaged with a person they do not see
and a product that they do not build.

In the case of São Paulo, they live disbursed throughout a metropolitan area which stretches over 3,000 square miles³ and has a population of over 21 million people.⁴ Telemarketers represent a new type of labor, for which each minute of the workday is completely controlled, regulated, and monitored by supervisors who use ‘innovative’ technology to eavesdrop on workers (Braga, 2006). As one telemarketing worker described:

It’s very stressful work. It’s stressful because you are required to keep the headset on your head, you’re also constantly being checked up on. There is always someone who could be listening to you. [Interviewer: you mean the monitors?] Yes, and that could reflect upon your commission, not your salary, because you know that we have a fixed salary, but it’s difficult to live on the fixed salary, you have to earn commission! So, you end up staying, and doing more work, it’s stressful, you have to know how to handle people. You have to call people, the person is angry, they don’t want to speak with you, they treat you bad, they are not satisfied with the service provided by the company, so they monitor how you handle those people.

How do unions develop strategies to organize these workers and build solidarity for collective action? Sintetel has grown comfortable with the business unionism model after successfully negotiating contracts with multinational companies to represent telemarketing workers.⁵ However, Sintratel developed organically from telemarketing workers who sought to challenge the conditions of labor beyond the issue of wages. For example, Sintratel’s most recent labor dispute involves a transsexual by the name of ‘Luna’ who works as a telemarketer. Luna demanded to use the female restroom rather than the male restroom. However, the call center where Luna works obligated her to use the male restroom because the company still considered Luna a man. Sintratel was victorious in representing Luna in the judicial proceeding against the call center, winning Luna the right to use the female restroom. This labor dispute, spearheaded by Sintratel and the LGBT com-
Community, reached beyond working conditions for the individual employee to address broader issues of human rights and homophobia in the workplace throughout the city of São Paulo. Hence, Sintratel’s success as a labor union is based on a highly effective social movement unionism model that works in collaboration with other social movements to build a sense of solidarity among the union, workers, and diverse racial, ethnic, and gay communities throughout metropolitan São Paulo.

Business Unionism and Social Movement Unionism

Business unionism is a model that literally treats the union as a business that sells labor (Kimeldorf, 1999). Business unionism has been the dominant model throughout industrialized countries since the 1890s when, in the United States, AFL President Samuel Gompers rejected a longer vision of working-class solidarity in favor of ‘more, more, more’ in terms of wage increases and contract negotiations. A long string of scholars have defended the model by arguing that unions need to abandon ideology in favor of more ‘pure and simple’ goals, such as improving wages and working conditions, in contrast to ‘social’ unionism, which emphasizes the welfare of the working class as a whole (Lipset, Trow & Coleman, 1956; Lester, 1958; Bell, 1960; Perlman, 1966). The business unionism model adopts a corporate hierarchal top-down structure, which serves the purpose of providing an effective way of giving workers on the shop floor a voice in national level policies and politics. For example, this model was adopted by powerful industrial unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which uses a rigid hierarchy that allows rank-and-file members to elect union representatives to negotiate with big business and organize for collective action.

In contrast to business unionism, social movement unionism complicates the established habits of business unionism’s focus by integrating labor unions with broader coalitions for human rights that benefit the working class as a whole. Social movement unionism first emerged as ‘new trade unionism’ in India, South Africa, and Brazil where labor unions combined workplace, citizenship, and human rights to build a robust movement against
authoritarian governments (Seidman, 1994). The new trade unionism model inspired effective organizing campaigns for service workers throughout Europe (Beaud & Pialoux, 2005), Canada, (Ross, 2007) and the United States (Clawson, 2003; Fantasia & Voss, 2004; Milkman & Voss, 2004; Milkman, 2006; Turner & Cornfield, 2006; Burawoy, 2008) where it later became known as social movement unionism. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in the United States provides the most cited example of social movement unionism (Milkman, 2006; Marable et al., 2006; Burawoy, 2008), with Los Angeles and Las Vegas serving as prototypical sites for its success (Voss & Fantasia, 2004; Milkman, 2006). However, the new trade unionism model in Brazil that service sector unions in the global north have looked to as a source of inspiration is now outdated, and over the past twenty years Brazilian labor unions have adapted their organizing strategies to address political, economic, and social changes as a result of neoliberal policies.

The Case of Sintetel and Shifts in Logics of Collective Action

The privatization of state-owned companies, deregulation of labor rights, and reduction in public services are key dimensions of the neoliberal transformations that took place in Brazil. The fragmentation of telecommunication companies, shifts in work practices, and changes in the demographics of workers fundamentally damaged worker solidarity, and had a decisive impact on union actions in São Paulo, Brazil. Prior to privatization, telecommunications workers in São Paulo established a very strong identity with the state-owned telecommunications firm, Telecomunicações de São Paulo (Telesp), and their sole labor union, Sintetel. Moreover, there existed a very short turnover rate in jobs and work routines were relatively homogenous. Thus, workers developed durable ties between themselves and state-owned Telesp, creating a sense of identity for workers, which was then projected into Sintetel. The maintenance of that symbolic identity through the routinization of work over a long period of time permitted Sintetel directors and the rank-and-file to share in a sense of collective solidarity. Even if union managers were distant from the everyday routine of the shop floor, rank-and-file workers felt integrat-
ed and well-represented by the management of the union. As Gay Siedman (1994) describes in her study of South African and Brazilian industrial labor unions during the 1970s and 1980s, militant labor movements were strong enough to put their demands on the national political agenda due to massive strikes and work stoppages that spontaneously erupted on the shop floor and were strongly supported by the community.

However, in today’s post-privatization period, new telecommunications workers lack identification with the company or with the union. Moreover, post-privatization union actions are met with major obstacles such as job instability, high turnover rates, and the reduction of wages. After privatization of the telecommunications industry, and during the period of high unemployment rates in the 1990s, Sintetel diminished the scope of union fights. Claims for major wage adjustments were replaced by requests for the establishment of more jobs, which were a result of São Paulo’s high unemployment rate and population growth. Moreover, a younger workforce with high turnover rates demanded unions to replace benefits, such as job security on the basis of seniority, with individual wage complements that include direct commission and discounts at for-profit private vocational colleges that are flooded with working class students because of their minimal acceptance rates. Hence, demands for broader benefits related to long-term expectations were replaced by demands for individual short-term benefits (Oliveira, 2006, pp. 292-297). As one telemarketing worker who is also a union steward put it bluntly:

Telemarketing workers are a consequence of the present society. What is that present society? It’s a postmodern society that says: that business of collective organizing is a thing of the past, for my grandparents, for my ancestors, the business here is Big Brother, each person for themselves and God for everyone. Each person does their part and who is more able will cry less. It’s the exacerbation of individualism. So, we telemarketing workers are a reflection of present society.

The demand for short-term individual benefits in the case of Sinte-

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tel has resulted in a collective action model that is characterized by pragmatic contract negotiations and minimal confrontation (Rombaldi, 2007, pp. 60-65, 83-85). According to Sintetel's Director of Communications, ‘the last major strike supported by Sintetel was in 1985.’ Sintetel has adapted to São Paulo’s political, economic, and demographic changes by shifting toward an organizing model more closely aligned with business unionism, wherein the individual worker takes precedence over broader working class struggles. In the words of Sintetel President Almir Munhoz:

What is in the interest of a union, in our point of view, is that the worker leave as the beneficiary, and done in a way in which the worker is not hurt. It does not benefit the worker for me to advance my own political position, my own radical political tendencies, and that the worker not benefit as a result of that. We fought against privatization—we were not successful, therefore, we are going to be participants then. Why? Because the worker cannot be hurt as a result of privatization.

Although Sintetel has reconfigured certain characteristics of the union by recruiting young leaders with more advanced schooling, its executive management and secretarial offices continue to be staffed by trade unionists from the period prior to privatization. As a result, any attempt at making change are bound by symbols and practices rooted in logics of collective action of the 1980s, when Sintetel was much larger and had greater bargaining power. In addition, the solidarity between union managers and rank-and-file workers, as well as the bonds with the company that once created a sense of identity and ties of sociability, are now disrupted by the fragmentation of the telecommunications sector after the privatization of Telesp. Due to high turnover rates, the nature of telemarketing work, and a large number of workers who attend courses at for-profit vocational colleges, workers lack the available time to participate in political events such as meetings, assemblies, and plenary sessions that had once taken place on the shop-floor, and were organized by labor unions with powerful leverage over state-owned companies.

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Sintetel maintains a strong collective memory of the union’s history and the struggles overcome by current directors to negotiate successful labor contracts with Telesp before Brazil implemented neoliberalism. The union’s predominantly white male leaders embody still powerful symbols of mass collective actions taken during the 1980s. This history provides the leadership with a resilient source of legitimacy that allows them to continue to occupy key positions in the union hierarchy, as well as to influence the next generation of young union leaders. Before the privatization of state-owned Telesp, spaces for mobilization were formed through the routinization of work, which created solidarity among telecommunications workers. With the new fragmentation of work routines and anti-union policies implemented by privately-owned telecommunications firms, Sintetel has struggled to mobilize workers using the methods of the past. In addition, ‘the union chooses young and highly educated workers, detached from the rank-and-file, and encourages them to enter like managers,’ (Robamldi, 2007, p. 78) which results in the formation of new leaders within the union itself and not on the shop floor.

These shifts in the conditions of labor and the struggles to mobilize workers shaped the context in which Sintratel, São Paulo’s new telemarketing labor union, emerged in the 1990s with fresh ideas of how to mobilize telemarketing workers. What exactly is Sintratel doing differently? What attracts telemarketing workers to a new, nameless, and much smaller labor union? First, Sintratel did not have the luxury of securing labor contracts with multinational companies when the telecommunications industry was privatized in 1998; therefore, they take a much more aggressive and radical approach in dealing with labor disputes, wages, and working conditions. Second, and more importantly, Sintratel itself developed organically from a group of young and diverse telemarketing workers who deal directly with contentious social issues that are important to telemarketers and are typically avoided by more traditional labor unions. We define Sintratel’s unique logics of collective action as Brazilian social movement unionism. We do not intend for Brazilian social movement unionism to be a prescriptive guide, but rather a revealing example that we use to capture the challenges and creativity of a successful labor movement.
Putting the ‘Movement’ Back into São Paulo’s Labor Movement: An Ethnography of Sintratel and Brazilian Social Movement Unionism

Less is known about the day-to-day dynamics of today’s social movement unionism model in Brazil, which had been labeled in the 1980s as new trade unionism. Given the major shifts in Brazil’s political, economic, and social conditions within the past twenty years, labor movements have taken on a new look. Thus, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork at Sintratel to provide a snapshot of how new labor unions represent the contemporary working class in Brazil. The following ethnographic accounts capture the replacement of mass meetings and plenary sessions in the industrial workplace, which spontaneously drew large crowds of workers, with the sponsoring of social events throughout the city and the alignment of the union with social movements dealing with contentious issues beyond class, such as race, gender, and sexuality, which are important to Brazil’s telemarketing workers.

We are in the center of the metropolis, more precisely, along Avenida Paulista, South America’s “Wall Street” and the heart of São Paulo. It is Sunday afternoon, June 14, 2009, and an estimated 3.1 million people align Avenida Paulista in anticipation of the thirteenth annual gay pride parade. Thousands of young people are dancing to loud music blaring from the more than twenty parade floats that are ready to make their way down the avenue filled with colorful balloons, rainbow flags, and signs that read ‘More Citizenship without Homophobia.’ Sintratel sponsors the float representing its umbrella labor union, Central dos Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras do Brasil (CTB). From the top of the Sintratel float, we observe couples with small children, people waving rainbow flags out of building windows, and gay couples dancing and joking, while small groups of transvestites parade and dance with people along the sidewalk. The hugs and kisses of same-sex partners that are constrained and repressed due to homophobia during a ‘typical’ day in São Paulo, emerge here in a celebration of sexual diversity.

Two large rainbow flags along with a Sintratel banner drape the side of our float, while a DJ spins records under a rainbow-colored balloon arch. On the front stage of the Sintratel float,
two shirtless male dancers with white stretch pants and three drag queens who are telemarketing workers and stewards within the union dance to the music. While the DJ plays hip hop, samba, pagode, rap, and techno music, young telemarketing workers wave to the crowd expressing the motto ‘You hear my voice, but you don’t know who I am.’ Sintratel’s leadership and rank-and-file is comprised of victims from varied groups that face discrimination, oppression, and prejudice: women, blacks, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and transsexuals. Hence, Sintratel is situated on the forefront of the most contentious social issues and debates that affect telemarketers, and more broadly, human rights for the entire new working class developing along the fringes of the peripheral global capitalist economy (see Braga, 2006).

This new, young working class of telemarketers is employed in companies throughout metropolitan São Paulo, and although the work is highly stressful, racial blacks and openly gay men and women are drawn to telemarketing due to the anonymity of worker-public interaction. As one of our interviewees described:

Telemarketing makes you crazy, it leaves you trembling with anger, it makes you even think of suicide [laughter], it leaves you wanting to not only destroy the phone line, but also tear out the keyboard, monitor, and everything! But you know why I enjoy this field? What I enjoy the most about this field? Because you do not have to be pretty, nor thin, nor have a certain religion, nor have a certain sexual preference, I like working in the call center because of this: what is important is your voice.

Telemarketing workers are adapting to a working world that has been deeply altered. As mentioned earlier, that alteration is characterized by a dismantling of the old symbolic and political references that once built feelings of solidarity and permanence within the industrial working class. In terms of labor organizing, Sintratel is borne of the battle against neoliberal policies and shifts in the global economy, and has developed a new creative organizing strategy that we broadly categorized as Brazilian social movement...
unionism. Traditional strategies of union action face a crisis that demands innovative responses. Such innovative strategies require a major effort on the part of the labor unions to understand, organize and empower new service sector proletariat workers.

The intense rhythms, the strict control of management, and the institution of quotas all contribute toward a strong spirit of competition and individualism in the workplace. As if that were not enough, the relative youth and inexperience of telemarketing workers leaves them susceptible to an intense level of exploitation. As an epoch of solidarity and attachment to militant industrial working class traditions fades, young workers feel lost and turn to a culture of business, competition, and individualism. As one telemarketing worker stated during our interview: “a meta quem faz é você” (the goal toward success is you). A culture of neoliberalism is absorbed and fuels the dreams of young working class people who are driven to believe in a ‘free-market’ consumer economy. As one telemarketing worker described:

They [call centers] develop competitions: ‘look, you have a certain product that you have to offer, so if you sell X number of products today, you will win a free lunch, a free lunch at Submarino,’ understand? It’s a gift from the company. Those are the types of competitions that exist for us. But it’s not forced on us, that: ‘you have to do it, you have to follow through,’ no. It’s a bonus, not an obligation… I’m going to give you an example: I am required to offer an anti-virus. I offer the anti-virus, if the client accepts, I have a bonus, I receive a commission in addition to my salary, understand? So, it’s a bonus, it’s an exchange for benefits.

Company quotas that privilege the individual worker, rather than collective productivity favor competitiveness between workers and make it extremely difficult to build solidarity, particularly around the issue of class. Therefore, the question becomes: what logics of collective action are new labor unions using to create solidarity under these conditions? The answer lies in the creativity of Sintratel.
Sintratel: A New and Young Labor Union

The administrative offices of Sintratel are bright, clean, and well organized, but what is most striking is the presence and energy of the young people who manage the union. On the computer screens and in the cubicles of the administrative offices, small signs of contemporary youth culture are everywhere: Orkut, the Brazilian version of Facebook and various instant messenger programs are open, while pictures with friends, small ornaments, and symbols of soccer are posted on the wall. The environment is energetic. There are union supervisors and workers making phone calls, conversing amongst themselves, laughing, and frequently walking through the building to visit each other. They take coffee breaks, exchange messages, view MSN, or update their Orkut pages. There is even a “Telemarketers Internet Café” provided on the first floor of the building. At the same time, clear symbols of traditional unionism and militancy are also present. A photograph of Rosa Luxemburg hangs on the waiting room wall. In the reception area is the photograph of a seamstress working in a São Paulo factory at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Sintratel continues to build upon traditional Brazilian militant unionism, it is also expanding its vision of how to create an innovative union. As Sintratel’s Judicial Director describes:

What we plan to create is a labor union that handles more specific issues such as wages and working conditions, which is the role of unions since their origin, but that also includes a vision that is political and theoretical, in order to create a movement that is broader. Because our sector is young, which naturally, for being young, we question, we’re restless, so we can channel that energy into broader and even greater movements.

Accessing working youth, despite huge imposed barriers, is not impossible, as Sintratel’s leadership itself consists of young telemarketing workers from diverse racial, gender, and sexual groups. By cultivating a contemporary youthful identity, while at the same time being leaders in struggles that include gender, race, and sexuality, Sintratel’s leadership constructs a youthful working solidarity.
In addition, this youthful, yet still militant identity extends beyond *Sintratel*’s headquarters into the surrounding community.

*Sintratel* is located in the neighborhood of Santa Cecília, nestled in São Paulo’s completely urbanized and chaotic downtown district. An elevated expressway tears the neighborhood in half, adding to the downtown frenzy. Underneath the expressway bridge, a group of homeless men, women, and children live and wander in a setting of social misery. The muddled city noises of traffic, construction, sirens, yelling and screaming remind us that we are in one of the world’s largest metropolises. Buses, cars, motorcycles, and pedestrians hurrying to work add to the urban spectacle. Yet, it is in this environment that *Sintratel* organizes an annual art fair that is one of the union’s most important outreach events. The street in front of *Sintratel* is blocked off to provide space for art booths, a live stage, and food stands. A large *Sintratel* banner waves over the art fair, which is filled with diverse attractions and products such as food, live bands, activities for children, arts and crafts, altars (to Lampião, for example, a hero from the northeast of Brazil), youth hip hop, *capoeira*, and belly dancing performances.

The art fair brings color to the dreary and gray neighborhood, humanizing it, and providing a real sense of community. In the words of *Sintratel*’s President:

> The well-being of the community, mainly of the city’s downtown region, is one of *Sintratel*’s major concerns. The union organizes cultural activities and projects that beyond improving the aesthetics of the downtown region also contribute to its improvement and the quality of life of the community.

Over the course of four days, graffiti artists from all over São Paulo display their work at the art fair and provide the community with a new look. Through graffiti art, gray concrete building walls are transformed into lively and colorful drawings, while Brazilian rap groups provide entertainment. The fundamental objective of the art fair is to revitalize the downtown region and build a sense of solidarity among community members fragmented by urbaniza-
 Connecting the union to a world beyond the traditional rank-and-file is a natural and continuous process for Sintratel and is important to telemarketing workers. As one telemarketing worker described:

The organizers at Sintratel are very interesting because they manage to hold leadership positions in popular movements. Look at our Vice-President Fabiana, she’s a leader in the black movement, and in the women’s movement at UBM (União Brasileira de Mulheres), and Marcilio directs the youth collective at CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores), and so on.

Building solidarity with the community and other social movements beyond the labor union itself deals directly with three very delicate issues in Brazil that are typically avoided by traditional labor unions, but which are fundamental to the development of Sintratel: 1) unequal treatment of women, 2) racial discrimination against blacks, and 3) homophobia regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender communities.

Sintratel sponsors active engagements with contentious social issues because of their impact on the everyday lived experiences of their rank-and-file. For example, Sintratel actively sponsors and participates in events celebrating International Women’s Day, the gay Pride parade in São Paulo every June, and in the Black Consciousness March on the 20th of November, which was declared a municipal holiday in remembrance of the Black resistance leader, Zumbi dos Palmares. Many companies in São Paulo refuse to recognize Black Consciousness Day on November 20th as a municipal holiday, so Sintratel sponsors debates on that day with activists from the black movement UNEGRO (União de Negros pela Igualdade) and from the umbrella labor federation CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores), to discuss the contemporary situation of black woman, black youth, and the effect of neoliberalism on black people. The most recent debates also provided a forum for art expositions, afro-dance presentations, the launching of a documentary by CUT titled "500 years of Popular, Native, and
Black resistance" as well as the release of the book "Dead End – I Lived in Carandiru" by Neninho Obaluayê. As one telemarketing worker described Sintratel's sponsorship of social issues:

Sintratel organizes union fights that are more aggressive, through a manner in which to win not only material battles for workers, but they want a little more, they want to create mechanisms so we are able organize and also improve the quality of our political vision, and our vision of the world, and extend the critical sense of this mass of young workers.

Sintratel directors are activists in a number of social movements, which combines their labor organizing experiences with broader social issues. There is no break between the subjects of the community and the labor union; instead there is a continuous ebb and flow between the union, its workers, and marginalized communities.

The President of Sintratel is Marco de Oliveira, thirty-two years old, and founder of a hip hop and rap music cultural center located in Jardim Ângelica, which in 1996 was declared by the United Nations as the most violent neighborhood in the world. According to Marco, “to speak of capitalist domination without discussing constraints caused by racial, gender and sexual prejudice, fails to recognize the increasingly diverse composition of the working class represented by Sintratel.” Therefore, social struggles beyond labor are internal to the union organization and evolve into one continuous form of social movement unionism. Events such as the art fair, gay Pride parade, Black Consciousness March, and a host of other events move beyond traditional activities such as the meetings, hearings, and plenary sessions more typical of business unionism organizing strategies. As one telemarketing worker explained the difference between Sintetel and Sintratel:

They [Sintetel] believe that the company must grow, not the worker. The company grows, not you. Sintetel values the company while Sintratel values the worker. Of course, I think that we need the company, the worker needs the
company. But if there are no workers there is no company. If the company grows it’s because of the worker. But not at Sintetel: if the company grows, it’s because of the company and the worker comes in second, third, or even fourth place.

Sintratel carefully cultivates the solidarity of its rank-and-file via cultural activities that attract young people, such as large samba and rave parties, churrascos (Brazilian barbeque), and soccer tournaments, which serve as avenues through which the union platforms issues over wages, working conditions, prejudice, and discrimination. It is also very symbolic of Sintratel that its Vice-Presidential position is occupied by Fabiana Generoso, a twenty-six year old, black, working class woman, and leader within UNEGRO. With her long hair and African-style braids, Fabiana modifies the traditional white, male, middle-class image of union leadership. In addition to her leadership in Sintratel and UNEGRO, Fabiana is also an active participant in the women’s movement, which possess significant power within the union and the implementation of its actions. This is important because black women are highly represented in the telemarketing industry, as well as in Sintratel’s other executive management and steward positions.

**Sintratel’s Struggle for International Working Class Mobilization**

Brazil’s neoliberal period, ushered in during the 1990s, arguably came to a close in 2006 under the administration of President Lula and the Workers’ Party (PT). The anti-neoliberalist and socialist leaning platform that Lula and the PT used to critique previous administrations and, ultimately, win the Presidency provided increased leverage for labor. However, whether President Lula and the PT brought about any real tangible benefits for labor remains an issue of contentious debate in Brazil, and new policies that benefit workers, while at the same time leaving privatization untouched, have been labeled “social-liberalist” rather than socialist (Bianchi & Braga, 2005). Nonetheless, labor must continue to move forward in this post-privatization period, despite the damage
to working-class solidarity under anti-union neoliberal policies. And, at the same time, labor unions must meet the needs of a diverse working class that increasingly includes young people, women, LGBT, and blacks. We use Sintratel as a model of Brazilian social movement unionism because of their success in building a cohesive labor movement that directly engages the problems, yearnings, struggles, and everyday needs of a new generation of workers.

The prominence of São Paulo’s largest telemarketing company, Atento, in Latin America and Europe and their increase of private investments in Brazil and throughout Latin America has pressured Sintratel to develop international working relationships with telemarketing labor unions in countries such as Mexico, Argentina, and Spain. Building solidarity around wages and working conditions within a human rights framework has pushed Sintratel onto the international stage. Sintratel works to build international solidarity through both the conditions of telemarketing labor and global human rights for marginalized and excluded groups. The shift in Brazilian labor emphasizing youth, race, gender, and sexuality marks a significant change from the new trade unionism of the 1980s, whereby labor acted as a democratic movement against authoritarianism.

The World Social Forum (WSF) is a key avenue in which Sintratel now participates and through which it works to develop transnational solidarity around labor and human rights. In addition to typical discussions over wages and working conditions, Sintratel unites telemarketing labor union organizers with representatives from the International Labor Organization (ILO) in several sessions at the WSF to discuss the following four issues: 1) work and health issues for young people since the implementation of neoliberalism (Sintratel has also established itself as the lynchpin between young workers and the Brazilian Department of Labor and Department of Health); 2) women’s working conditions and women’s human rights, especially the struggle against sexual harassment and the campaign for international women’s solidarity; 3) the struggle for human rights among racial Blacks – for example, at the WSF, Sintratel partners with the school Zumbie dos Palmares, which trains activists in Brazil’s Black movement and designs po-
political campaigns toward denouncing racism in the workplace; and finally, and most innovatively, 4) the need to bridge the labor and LGBT movement, as demonstrated in Sintratel’s prominent role in São Paulo’s gay Pride parade, one of the largest such parades in the world.

At Sintratel, there is continuity between union action and social issues that are important to the new working class. Sintratel’s social movement unionism can be seen as having two dimensions: one that is external and another that is internal to the union. In the former, Sintratel moves beyond the borders of the labor union to support social movements that compose its rank-and-file. This leads Sintratel to develop itself as a symbolic reference that struggles against more general forms of prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation affecting the working class as a whole. For example, Sintratel’s engagement with other social movements range from being a leader in the movement (sponsoring debates over the question of race on 20 November) to being a participant in the movement (sponsoring a float in the gay Pride parade), and continuously moving beyond their geographical boundaries to break with traditional forms of unionization. Internally, Sintratel leaders and staff are members of the same social struggles as their rank-and-file. Hence, each union leader carries a double or sometimes triple commitment with labor and other social movements.

Conclusion

In this article, we have described several examples that extend the debate about the new configurations of unionism along with human rights issues that have emerged with neoliberalism. Contrary to the argument that unions have lost their bearings, the case of Sintratel suggests that unions are still very alive and active. There is, in fact, a reemergence of union action and we argue that Sintratel, in particular, provides a model for the reimagining and rebuilding of the labor movement in a neoliberal world. Labor unions in Brazil, similar to other parts of the world, have experienced significant decline in overall union density as a result of neoliberalization and the movement of capital. Shifts in the de-
mographics of workers, as well as the eagerness of young workers to participate in the global market economy, add to the difficulty of creating a more highly unified and unionized labor force. Hence, mobilizing telemarketing workers for collective action remains extremely challenging. Nonetheless, innovative logics of collective action that are developed by young people who belong to marginalized racial, gender, and sexual groups may provide precisely the necessary avenue for labor unions to organize their respective rank-and-file to combat the effects of neoliberalist policies and build a more robust labor movement.

Industrialized countries once looked to the global south as a source of inspiration to find new ways for labor to mobilize workers in the service sector. New trade unionism in India, South Africa, and Brazil merged labor and human rights against authoritarian governments for the right to citizenship. We argue that the global south, and Brazil in particular, has once again taken the lead in developing innovative logics of collective action. Examining the shift in labor organizing strategies that has coincided with the changing political, economic, and social conditions in Brazil within the past twenty years provides an opportunity to reexamine labor movements in Brazil, and possibly shed light on future labor organizing strategies throughout the globe.

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Endnotes
1. Sao Paulo’s industrial periphery is known as ABC because it includes the municipalities of Santo Andres, Sao Bernardo, and Sao Caetano do Sul.
2. Telecomunicacoes Brasileiras, or Telebras is a state-owned company that had monopoly control over Brazilian telecommunications and Brazil’s overseas telecommunications up until the 1990s.
5. Sintinel owns labor contracts with two of Sao Paolo’s largest telemarketing companies Atento and Contax which combined employ over 10,000 workers. Each employee is required to pay 1% of their salary for union dues.
6. Private for-profit vocational colleges have a very high turnover rate and attract a large number of working-class students due to their minimal acceptance requirements. Wealthier students often gain acceptance into the more competitive free public universities that require high entrance exam scores and have very stringent acceptance requirements.
8. Carandiru was a notorious prison in Sao Paolo, Brazil that housed over 8,000 inmates, and, in 1992, was the site of a major uprising that led to the Carandiru massacre by state police.

David Flores is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Michigan. His work expands the fields of political sociology, social movements, labor, and peace, war, and social conflict. His research in Brazil was sponsored by the Sociologists Without Borders (SSF) Brazil Summer Fellowship.

Fábio P. M. Silva completed undergraduate training in Rio de Janeiro, and graduate training at the University of São Paulo (USP). His research examines the intersection between working conditions and labor relations in Brazil’s telemarketing industry. He currently teaches sociology in São Paulo.

Vitor C. Vaneti is completing undergraduate studies in social sciences at the University of São Paulo (USP). His areas of study explore the fields of theory and labor with an emphasis on the contemporary working class. He has co-authored articles in Brazil on labor projects and research methods.
Ruy Braga is Professor of Sociology at the University of São Paulo (USP). His articles appear in *Social Forces*, *Work and Occupations*, *Sociedade e Estado*, and *Proteo* (Rome), among others. He is the co-author of the books *Por uma sociologia pública* (with Michael Burawoy) and *Infoproletários* (with Ricardo Antunes).