

WORKING WOMEN, WORKING MEN



**São Paulo and
the Rise of Brazil's
Industrial Working
Class, 1900–1955**

Joel Wolfe

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JOEL WOLFE

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For Traci

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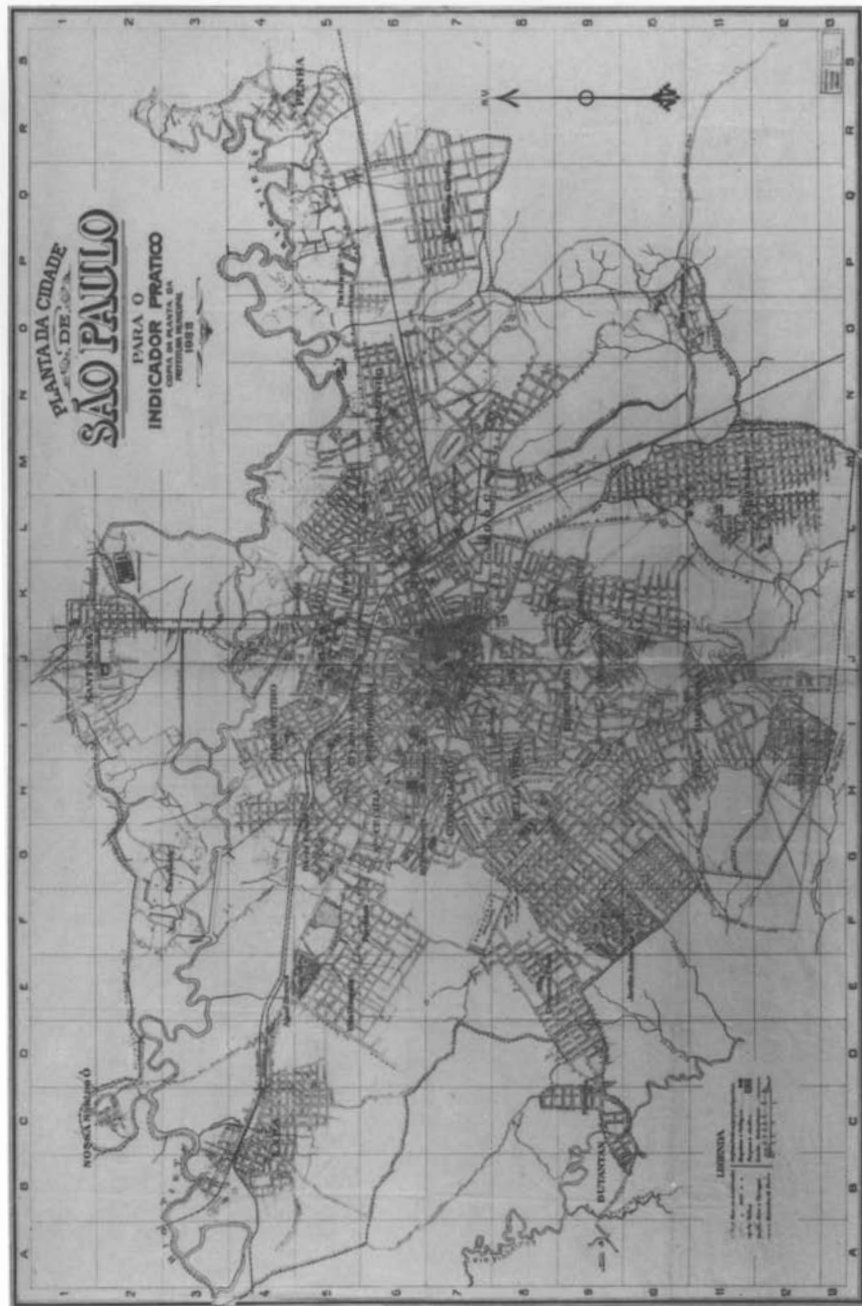
Acronyms

ANL	Aliança Nacional Libertadora (National Liberation Alliance)
CETEX	Comissão Executiva Têxtil (Executive Textile Commission)
CIFTSP	Centro dos Industriais de Fiação e Tecelagem de São Paulo (Center for Spinning and Weaving of São Paulo)
CLT	Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho (Consolidated Labor Laws)
COB	Confederação Operária Brasileira (Brazilian Labor Confederation)
CRT	Conselho Regional do Trabalho (Regional Labor Board)
CGTB	Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores do Brasil (General Workers' Confederation of Brazil)
DIEESE	Departamento Intersindical de Estatísticas e Estudos Sócio-Econômicos (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies)
DOPS	Departamento de Ordem Política Social (Political Police)
ECLA	Economic Commission for Latin America
FEB	Força Expedicionária Brasileira (Brazilian Expeditionary Force)
FIESP	Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo (São Paulo State Federation of Industries)
FOSP	Federação Operária de São Paulo (Workers' Federation of São Paulo)
IAPI	Instituto de Aposentadores e Pensões dos Industriários (Industrial Workers' Retirement Pension Institute)
IBOPE	Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística (Brazilian Public Opinion and Statistics Institute)
IDORT	Instituto de Organização Racional do Trabalho (Institute for the Rational Organization of Work)
MUT	Movimento Unificador dos Trabalhadores (United Workers' Movement)
PCB	Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Communist Party of Brazil)
PSD	Partido Social Democrático (Social Democratic Party)

ACRONYMS

PSP	Partido Social Progressista (Social Progressive Party)
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party)
PTB	Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (Brazilian Labor Party)
PUI	Pacto de Unidade Intersindical (Inter-Union Unity Pact)
SENAI	Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial (National Industrial Apprenticeship Service)
SESI	Serviço Social de Indústria (Industrial Social Service)
SPSAIC	São Paulo Secretaria da Agricultura, Indústria, e Comércio
UDN	União Democrática Nacional (National Democratic Union)
TRT	Tribunal Regional do Trabalho (Regional Labor Tribunal)

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São Paulo, Brazil circa 1922. (Courtesy Harvard College Library)

Introduction

Speaker after speaker came forward on the stage to denounce the *pelegos* (government unionists) who controlled the state-sanctioned *sindicatos* in the city. They demanded an end to the onerous *imposto sindical* (union tax), called for the abolition of state intervention in industrial relations, and blasted the cozy relationship between the *pelegos* and the industrialists. Factory commission activists from metalworking establishments throughout the *município* of São Paulo and its suburbs of Osasco, Garulhos, Santo André, São Bernardo, São Caetano, and Diadema packed the rented hall in the Liberdade section of São Paulo. These insurgents from grass-roots factory commissions staged their rally far from union headquarters to energize rank-and-file metalworkers in São Paulo for the upcoming election of a new union directorate. Speaker after speaker called on those gathered to throw out the entrenched *pelegos* and bring the open politics of their factory commissions to the closed state-sanctioned unions.

What impressed me most about this May 1987 rally was how much its rhetoric mirrored that of the struggles for union democracy São Paulo's metallurgical and textile workers had waged in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The 1987 calls for union democracy were near-perfect representations of the language of rank-and-file insurgency expressed in similar meetings held throughout the mid-1940s and early 1950s.¹ Along with the language of union democracy, these workers in 1987 continued to rely on a system of factory commissions as their own form of independent organizing. These factory-based groups of anywhere from five to fifty workers first played a role in grass-roots protests in the 1910s. At times, the commissions were workers' only institutions for negotiating wage increases and changes in work conditions. At other times, the commissions made up the grass roots of the city's unions. In the late 1970s, workers from insurgent factory commissions succeeded in breaking the power of the state-sanctioned *sindicatos* and created an alternative structure known as the "New Unionism," which workers later institutionalized as the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).² These calls for a grass-roots insurgency to oust *pelegos* and to take con-

trol of the unions—which have been part of a nationwide PT platform since its founding—reveal the importance of working-class historical memory and the development of a syndicalist tradition among São Paulo's industrial workers that stretches back to the first decades of the twentieth century.

This book is about the rise of Brazil's industrial working class to a position of political prominence in the first half of the twentieth century. It is the story of how workers experienced Brazil's industrialization and how they struggled to gain control over their lives within a highly authoritarian political system. It is also the story of how workers' struggles shaped that political system. By studying those struggles, this book details the historical origins of the New Unionism. But this is not just an exercise in locating origins. Rather, this book places industrial workers firmly within twentieth-century Brazilian history by revealing the important connections among people and ideas from different historical epochs.

This book focuses closely on the experiences of two divergent groups of industrial laborers—textile and metallurgical workers—over a long and formative period in Brazilian history in order to describe the formation and various transformations of São Paulo's industrial working class. Class formation is not an inevitable result of structural circumstances; instead, it is the “making” of a social class by those individuals whose common experiences—in the labor market, neighborhoods, and marketplaces, and in relation to their employers and the state—encourage them to band together to act in their perceived common interests. Further, the process of class formation is an ongoing one, and the composition of the working class, as well as its worldview and goals, changes accordingly.³ Thus, the story of the formation of São Paulo's industrial working class is not the story of the “masses” lumped together indiscriminately, but of individual workers or groups of workers separated by sex, skill, industry, and ethnicity.⁴

The development of São Paulo's industrial bourgeoisie was closely tied to the rise of the city's working class. The engine of class struggle shaped the formation of both classes, and neither can be understood without reference to the other.⁵ This double focus also reveals important aspects of the roots of Brazil's modern bureaucratic-authoritarian state.⁶ As both the state and federal governments grappled with the issue of “social control,” they created institutions in an effort to manipulate workers and their independent organizations. The bureaucratic-

authoritarian state, then, was not the result of a unique post-1945 political conjuncture; rather, it was the product of nearly a century of class struggle between Brazil's working people and their rulers.⁷

This book analyzes how both male and female industrial workers in São Paulo overcame many obstacles to form—during certain key periods—a powerful workers' movement, and by the mid-1950s a representative and vibrant union movement.⁸ It examines workers' ongoing struggles within their factories and neighborhoods, and describes how their own informal organizations related to unions, industrialists, and the state. A basic theme is that neither the formation of the working class nor its operation in Brazilian society can be understood without a close analysis of the interaction of four sets of actors: the industrial working class, union and Left organization leaders, industrialists, and state policymakers.

In considering the interaction of these four sets of actors, it is particularly important to make a distinction between the rank and file and leaders of formal Left and labor groups. Compared with some other Latin American countries (e.g., Argentina, Chile, and Mexico), Brazil has not sustained a large-scale, politically active *formal* labor movement. Brazilian labor leaders' and state makers' failures to speak to the rank and file's needs or to deliver real social gains hindered the development of a powerful labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century.⁹ Brazilian workers have, however, created and maintained their own local, independent organizations that survive state intervention and violence because of their strong roots among the rank and file, and because their informal levels of organization have made them elusive targets for industrialist and state repression. These very features have also made this type of worker organization and mobilization difficult for historians to locate.¹⁰

Workers most often organized themselves into factory commissions and avoided participation in formal unions. This fact helps explain two aspects of São Paulo's labor history. First, it reveals the tension workers experienced between their need to maintain their own independent social movement—a working-class movement based in the commissions—and the opportunities and costs associated with tying their commissions to institutions (anarchist and later state-run unions) that they, as the rank and file, had played little or no role in creating.¹¹ Second, workers' reliance on an informal factory commission structure provided them opportunities and social spaces to articulate and spread

their ideas about their bosses, unions, the state, and other issues. By studying workers' factory commissions, this book uncovers workers' "hidden transcripts" of independent rank-and-file activism.¹²

Analyzing these developments over the *longue durée* explains the durability of the working-class movement even when the formal labor movement had been weakened by state intervention. Moreover, the focus on these hidden transcripts challenges the tendency to characterize strikes and other working-class organizing and protest activities as "spontaneous." Instead, this book details how such activities were most often products of an ongoing, informal, popular social movement organized around factory commissions.

Social movements are not abstractions; they are groups of people who organize together to push for common goals. Because this book focuses on Brazil's industrial working people the analysis concentrates on the lives—in their factories, neighborhoods, unions, and other organizations—of two groups of factory workers in the country's leading industrial city, São Paulo.¹³ The first group is textile workers. As in most countries, Brazil's first experience with industrialization was with textiles. Textile production took place in large, highly mechanized factories with "semiskilled" labor.¹⁴ Further, women workers tended to dominate this field. The second group of workers studied are those in São Paulo's metallurgical industries. As the city's industrial base expanded, craftsmen opened small machine shops to meet the increasing demand for spare parts and agricultural tools. These shops employed "skilled" workers who retained a large measure of control over the labor process.¹⁵ And the majority of the city's metalworkers were men.

I concentrate on these two groups of workers for several reasons. First, they represent two extremes of factory laborers. Textile workers were considered semiskilled, and metalworkers skilled. Textile factories were large industrial establishments (often employing more than five hundred workers), while metalworking shops tended to be small (generally employing fewer than thirty). These two industries utilized contrasting labor processes with different types of workers. Moreover, these two industries offer the opportunity to compare and contrast the work, living, organizational, and protest experiences of female and male industrial laborers. Finally, the textile and metallurgical sectors employed more factory workers than any other two industrial sectors in Brazil, and they eventually produced two of São Paulo's, and therefore Brazil's, leading industrial unions.¹⁶

The development of these two leading unions was not a linear or

smooth process. Unions, like social classes, are made by workers and individuals who assume leadership roles, and through their relations with industrialists and state policymakers. Moreover, conflicts among various rank-and-file groups—especially between women workers and male unionists—often defined the organization and politics of these unions. Workers' continued reliance on their own factory commissions also contributed to the making of small, unrepresentative formal unions in São Paulo. State intervention in the 1930s and 1940s solidified this process of rank-and-file alienation from the union structure.

Both the factory commissions and the unions that developed out of these processes articulated—often through public pronouncements and always through praxis—highly gendered notions of working-class politics. Because *gender* is defined as a socially constructed set of definitions of appropriate behavior for each sex, it often changes over time. Thus, this book traces not only the role gender ideologies played in shaping working-class organizing and protest activities but also how those activities and the reactions they brought in turn shaped gender ideologies.

The complex issues associated with the concepts of consciousness and hegemony often muddle labor histories. In this book, consciousness is analyzed as the totality of the impressions, thoughts, and feelings that constitute an individual's or group's worldview. And because consciousness is shaped by social experiences, it often changes. Accordingly, I reject the notion that there is one appropriate political class consciousness, especially one that is introduced by intellectuals, a party, or some other non-working-class group.¹⁷ Instead, I argue that people are drawn to ideologies that speak to important aspects of their lives, and they often shape and reformulate those ideologies to address the specifics of their condition. In this way, individuals and groups of both sexes and various ethnicities and classes socially construct ideologies. By uncovering both working-class ideologies and their making, this book reveals the role historical memory has played in helping São Paulo's industrial workers articulate and maintain ideologies of opposition and resistance to both employers and the state. Accordingly, my analysis demonstrates how workers have avoided being duped by so-called hegemonic ideologies.¹⁸ Tracing the development of this working-class historical memory that values local, independent forms of organizing also helps us connect the rhetoric and praxis of São Paulo's New Unionism with the legacy of workers' struggles against their bosses and the state, and for representative and open unions in the first half of the twentieth century.

Industrialization and the Birth of São Paulo's

Working-Class Movement, 1900–1924

Large-scale industry is the factor that most efficiently contributes to social tranquility, for the well-being of the people and for the wealth of the public.

—Antônio Francisco Bandeira Junior
A Indústria no Estado de São Paulo em 1901

Strikes will become more general, more and more frequent, responding to the ever-increasing oppression of capitalism.

—Report of the Second Brazilian Socialist Congress,
cited in Dulles, *Anarchists and Communists in Brazil*

The industrialization Antônio Francisco Bandeira Junior praised and the fledgling Socialist party decried had barely begun in the São Paulo of 1900. Neighborhoods such as Brás and Mooca, where large textile factories and small metalworking and other shops would soon dominate, were still swampy lowlands with only a handful of industrial establishments and few inhabitants. Beyond the downtown business triangle, a few elite residential areas, and the immigrant slums of Bexiga, São Paulo still had the look of an agrarian hamlet. Small farms with their fruit trees, cattle, and rustic houses operated in Consolação, Higienópolis, Vila Buarque, Pinheiros, and other neighborhoods of the city. Foreign visitors and local commentators alike praised the beauty of this bucolic town at the turn of the century.¹

The steady expansion of the state's coffee economy, along with planters' and merchants' desire to diversify their holdings, fostered the development of industry throughout the state of São Paulo, especially in its capital.² Industrialization, though, was not the panacea Bandeira Junior and other elites believed it would be;³ nor was it a linear process that stripped workers of their humanity or agency. Although the growth of industry had a profound impact on the population of São Paulo, that same population, most of whom would become the industrial working class, shaped the process of industrialization. Those same

individuals, many of whom were immigrants or first-generation Brazilians, began to form small, independent groups to confront bosses and city leaders about the conditions they faced at work and in their neighborhoods, and they came into contact with the small group of leftist activists who were attempting to build a union movement in São Paulo. The conflicts and compromises among these groups brought changes to São Paulo that neither the proponents nor the critics of the city's early industrialization could have predicted at the turn of the century.

The Development of Industry

New tariffs and the steady demand for the state's coffee exports were circumstances that favored São Paulo's transition from an overgrown agricultural hamlet to the Third World's leading industrial center.⁴ The new factories produced light consumer goods, especially textiles, using semiskilled labor. This manufacturing sector at first precluded the rise of a unified industrial bourgeoisie. Some mill owners maintained their primary interest in the coffee trade while others concentrated their investments in industrial production.⁵ The expansion of the city's industrial base, along with external economic shocks, led to the creation of a new area of industrial production: São Paulo's capital goods sector. This development in turn increased demand for skilled metalworkers in and around the city. The clothing, shoe, and processed food industries also expanded dramatically (on average, 8 percent per year from 1900 to 1920) in response to the overall growth of the state's economy and population.⁶ Ultimately, however, in the early twentieth century São Paulo experienced its first round of industrialization as an ancillary economic activity. The actions of neither mill owners nor their workers were of primary concern to the ruling class of this overwhelmingly agrarian state.

Migrants from São Paulo's coffee *fazendas* filled the city's industrial labor market at this time. The migration of young Italians (especially women) from *colono* (tenant farmer) households to the city meshed with racist ideologies that sought to limit blacks' access to factory labor and created an industrial labor force dominated by women. That is, while men monopolized construction, printing, metalworking, and other trades, women made up the majority of industrial (especially

Table 1.1 Workers by Sex and Age in Thirty-one Textile Mills
in the State of São Paulo, 1912

	Under 12	12-16	17-22	Over 22	Total
Female	244	1,885	2,966	1,706	6,801
Male	127	696	1,825 ^a	—	2,648

Source: "Condições do Trabalho na Indústria Têxtil no Estado de São Paulo," *BDET* 1:1-2 (1st Trimester, 1912), 38.

Note: Of the 31 mills studied, 29 were in the city of São Paulo, 1 was in São Bernardo, and 1 was in Santos.

^aThe categories for male employees end with "older than 16 years."

textile) workers (table 1.1).⁷ As we shall see, the prevalence of women in textiles profoundly affected the development of São Paulo's labor movement.

World War I first interrupted, then intensified this process of industrialization. After a brief suspension of coffee and rubber exports, the Brazilian economy quickly recovered. By late 1915, Brazil was again exporting primary products, but its trade axis had shifted from Europe to the United States. The federal government stimulated this rise in exports by devaluing the milréis. Such an exchange rate policy along with shortages of manufactured goods on the international market combined to protect Brazil's nascent industrial sector. Although scholars dispute the exact impact of the war years on São Paulo's industry, all agree that the 1914-18 period witnessed significant increases in industrial output.⁸ Expansion of the textile sector grew out of both the increased capacity installed before the war and the intensified use of labor in the factories.

To meet increased demand, industrialists extended work hours, especially the night shifts. Mill owners continued to employ mostly women and children, and foremen did not hesitate to punish them for not meeting production quotas or for falling asleep at their machines. Accordingly, the number of accidents in São Paulo's factories rose steadily during the war.⁹ The city's press increasingly reported such accidents. A reporter for *O Estado de São Paulo* noted in 1917 that many of the children exiting a textile mill appeared to have been not only injured by machinery but also abused by foremen: "Yesterday we watched 60 children entering the factory at Mooca at 7:00 P.M. They would leave only at 6:00 A.M. That meant that they worked 11 hours

straight on the night shift, with only a 20-minute rest break at midnight! Worse is that they complain that they are beaten by the foremen of the spinning rooms. Many of them showed us the black-and-blue marks on their arms and backs. . . . The ears of one are injured from their having been pulled so violently and so often. These are 12-, 13-, and 14-year-old children."¹⁰

Although exact figures are not available, both foreign observers and Brazilian government officials noted that São Paulo's mill owners reaped substantial profits during the war years.¹¹ Even the president of the state of São Paulo publicly declared that industrialists were unfairly profiting from workers' labor. He wrote, "It is clear that industrialists and merchants are reaping profits in the current situation, profits never before seen and that demonstrate that the prices of goods that are indispensable for subsistence exceed what is needed to satisfactorily remunerate capital and the activity of workers."¹²

Industrial expansion had a dramatic impact on life in São Paulo. With the city's population and number of buildings more than doubling from 1900 (239,820 people and 22,407 buildings) to 1918 (504,278 and 55,356), residents experienced the many problems and frustrations of living in a metropolis.¹³ Along with this expansion São Paulo witnessed the clear demarcation of neighborhoods by social class. The growth of luxury housing and of the city's commercial center forced an increasing number of workers to move into *cortiços* in the factory districts of Brás, Mooca, Belemzinho, and Cambuci.¹⁴ Before and during the war years, the São Paulo city government carried out an extensive urban planning campaign to manage this growth. Residences and small shops on Avenida São João were demolished to create the sort of boulevard considered appropriate for the downtown. The city also moved to improve transportation and sewage lines.¹⁵ In 1915 and 1916, Mayor Washington Luís Pereira de Sousa encouraged further high-rise construction downtown and attempted to renovate Brás and other working-class neighborhoods. Washington Luís sought not only to spur further growth but also "to purify [the city] morally and physically."¹⁶ Paulistano elites wanted to cleanse the working-class neighborhoods of their "vicious mixture of scum of all nationalities, all ages, all of them dangerous."¹⁷ São Paulo's workers felt the full effects of Washington Luís's reforms. In addition to the changes in the downtown area, the city modified the food distribution system by closing the central market in Anhangabaú and instituted a system of neighborhood

Table 1.2 Index of Wholesale Prices for Foodstuffs
in São Paulo, 1912–1917 (1912 = 100)

	Rice	Beans	Sugar	Mandioca	Chicken
1912	100	100	100	100	100
1913	112	128	85	85	133
1914	106	136	73	67	89
1915	125	92	103	78	75
1916	104	85	125	96	82
1917	98	136	128	96	100

Source: BDET 24 (1917), chart between pp. 580 and 581.

markets known as *feiras livres*. This helped women workers because it freed them from having to travel to the central market for a large selection of food items, but the decentralization of food distribution also created a system in which the goods sold in the working-class *feiras* were of the lowest quality and highest price in the city.¹⁸

This system of markets intensified the impact of the wartime inflation for São Paulo's working people in general and women workers in particular. Speculation and increased exports of foodstuffs from the state to Europe forced up the prices for rice, beans, and other working-class staples. Hoarding, speculation, and exports brought wild swings in prices from month to month (table 1.2).¹⁹ During the war workers faced not only higher prices for foodstuffs but extremely unstable supplies as accepted practices and prices for food were discarded.²⁰ The export of inexpensive foods forced Brazil to increase its imports of Argentine wheat for the bread sold in markets in the city's elite neighborhoods.²¹ Then, when Argentina imposed an embargo on wheat exports in early 1917, the São Paulo city government introduced *pão paulista*, bread baked with corn and some wheat flour, for the Italian immigrants in working-class neighborhoods. Bakers were supposed to mark this product clearly and to sell it at half the price of bread made completely from wheat flour, but few retailers obeyed this regulation.²² All these changes meant that women industrial workers—especially those in the mills—bore the brunt of São Paulo's wartime industrial expansion. Not only did they confront intensified work regimes in the factories, they also faced increasingly difficult conditions in their other jobs as the individuals most responsible for the maintenance of their families' lives.²³

The Development of the Early Labor Movement

São Paulo's struggling women workers could not hope for much help from the city's anarchist activists, for the ideological, social, ethnic, and gender differences between the leaders of the anarchist movement and São Paulo's working people limited the development of a coherent and effective labor movement.²⁴ Indeed, Brazil's early anarchist movement owed more to the antistate politics of disaffected Republicans than it did to working-class organizing. Brazilians such as Benjamin Mota, Manuel Curvello de Mendonça, Avelino Foscolo, Fábio Luz, and Lima Barreto rejected the government of the Old Republic as a corrupt and failed experiment. They considered themselves exponents of logic and morality and called for a return to so-called primitive communitarianism.²⁵ These anarchist activists concentrated their energies on education programs and cultural events such as the Workers' Theater.²⁶ Further, anarchists attacked, implicitly and explicitly, the Catholic church. While anticlericalism was a fundamental part of anarchist ideology and was expressed often in plays, songs, and study groups, it created a gulf between activists and the majority of São Paulo's working people. When the Italian socialist Enrico Ferri spoke out against the church during a street rally in November 1911, for example, a crowd rioted and attacked the "freethinkers."²⁷ Whatever their level of religious commitment or attachment to formal or informal churches, most of São Paulo's working people were troubled by the anarchists' anticlericalism.

In 1906 and 1907, São Paulo's anarchists began to focus on organizing the steadily growing number of workers in the city.²⁸ Even this commitment to working-class politics—as opposed to the previous emphasis on culture and education—failed to produce a large-scale workers' movement. The leaders of the new anarchist movement were primarily artisans from the printing, stonecutting, carpentry, shoemaking, and other trades. As a group, they were better paid and more highly educated than most of the city's industrial workers.²⁹ The anarchists themselves recognized that they had few ties to most of São Paulo's workers.³⁰

The gulf between the rank and file and the anarchist leadership became obvious during the widespread textile strike of May 1907. After the Mariangela mill's workers struck against the brutal treatment they suffered at the hands of foremen who directed them for twelve-hour

shifts, six and sometimes seven days a week, textile workers throughout the city organized strike committees to demand improved working conditions. Thinking the workers' discontent could lead to a revolutionary upheaval, the anarchists attempted to take over direction of the strikes from the workers. While the centralized organizing and support for the eight-hour day by the anarchists' Workers' Federation of São Paulo (Federação Operária de São Paulo, FOSP) helped the overall movement, the individual workers' committees rejected a revolutionary platform. Instead they sought reforms designed simply to improve work conditions and pay.³¹

The 1907 strike illustrates why São Paulo's industrial workers had few reasons to embrace the anarchists' revolutionary political platform. These immigrant workers did not place their demands within a framework critical of industry or capitalism as such, and as a group they still identified with their fellow Italians, Portuguese, and Spaniards—including many of their bosses. They had had little or no contact with radical ideologies before arriving in São Paulo, and they did not yet view themselves as part of a subordinate class united against employers; they were in the city to better their social and economic position. Workers were often proud of the achievements of immigrant industrialists like Francisco Matarazzo, the owner of the Mariangela mill, who employed them.³²

Further, São Paulo's anarchists demonstrated little interest in organizing the city's women workers. Like their elite opponents, the anarchists believed women were weak and required men's protection. Belém Sárrage de Ferrero wrote in 1911, for example, "Let us make of women what they should be: the priestesses of the home, the priestesses of morality."³³ In addition to wanting to expel women from the labor market in order to protect them, anarchist men were often hostile to women's presence in the factories as low-paid workers. A 1914 meeting of Rio de Janeiro's tailors thus concluded that "the woman of our class . . . we are sorry to say, is our most dangerous competition, and this contributes a good deal to her own as well as to our impoverishment."³⁴ At times, anarchists' frustrations with working women became outright misogyny, as expressed in a 1900 article in the anarchist *Il Diritto*: "We are not well enough aware of how at present women are a danger, an enemy of the social movement. We could not precisely count the number of militants who have deserted the struggle and abandoned forever the revolutionary ideas they once so avidly espoused so as not to displease their women and to have tranquility on the domestic

scene."³⁵ Some anarchists, though certainly not all, even considered feminism a threat to working-class consciousness and thought all feminists were lesbians (whom they viewed unfavorably).³⁶

Anarchist discourse at this time developed a dichotomy between male and female worlds. Men worked outside the home, participated in politics through study and labor groups; women were to work in the home, raising children and caring for their men.³⁷ Men's opposition to women's factory work was not only based in their belief that women's presence devalued work and so lowered wages for all workers; it also reflected men's desire to protect women. Many men (anarchists, conservatives, etc.) viewed factories as dangerous locations for women and children; not only was the work difficult and at times perilous, but factories were also areas where women were at once independent of their fathers' and husbands' control and potentially threatened by the power of male bosses (foremen). Not surprisingly, anarchist discourse concerning women's work highlighted their need for "protection" and conflated the situations of adult women with those of children. In the final analysis, this discourse not only devalued women's factory work, it also envisioned organizing and protest activities as essentially male.³⁸

Such views of women's roles in society certainly limited the success of anarchist organizing among São Paulo's thousands of textile and other female factory workers. In fact, the city's women workers consistently avoided participation in male-dominated unions and chose instead to organize their own formal and informal associations, such as factory commissions comprised solely of women. Women gained employment in the textile mills through family and extended kinship ties—for the Italians often through *paisani*. The work force in a given factory was thus made up of people who had strong bonds among themselves, and those ties were often the bases of informal groups such as those that became factory commissions. In other words, these groups of friends and relatives who worked together in a given section, on a given shift, transformed their social grouping into a loose factory commission structure to bargain with their bosses. Sometimes they chose one of the older women (i.e., someone in her late twenties) or the most articulate as their leader or spokeswoman.³⁹ Thus, just as the segmenting of the industrial labor market was influenced by immigrants' and Brazilian elites' gender ideologies, those same gender ideologies shaped the organizing and protest activities of twentieth-century São Paulo's labor movement.⁴⁰ Anarchist organizers did have some limited success bringing men into their unions, but they could not overcome

ethnic rivalries and immigrants' initial disinterest in joining unions and study groups; thus they did not direct a large-scale labor movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁴¹

Although anarchist leaders and striking workers briefly came together in 1907, the labor movement continued as a small group of craftsmen who had little contact with most of the city's industrial laborers. Anarchist-oriented trade unions representing São Paulo's craftsmen (e.g., printers, hatters, shoemakers, and stonemasons) operated under an umbrella organization, the Brazilian Labor Confederation (*Confederação Operária Brasileira*, COB), but textile and other industrial workers did not have active unions in São Paulo in 1914. Anarchist activists concentrated on various cultural activities and education through their Modern Schools and so ignored shop-floor organizing of industrial workers. The COB in Rio called on textile workers throughout Brazil to form new unions, but Paulistano anarchists did little actual organizing.⁴² In April 1914, the national anarchist newspaper, *A Voz do Trabalhador*, noted that "the workers' organizations in [São Paulo], once so successful, continue unfortunately in a state of complete paralysis. The labor movement is limited exclusively to the following organizations: the Union of Stonemasons, the Union of Printers, the Syndicate of Workers in Diverse Shops, and the Union of Hatters."⁴³ The socialist newspaper *Avanti!* commented, "What most impresses the socialists who arrive here in São Paulo . . . is the lack of working-class organization."⁴⁴

The Left in São Paulo lacked coherence and a strong base in the industrial working class throughout most of the first two decades of the twentieth century because the anarchists and socialists concentrated on national and international politics at the expense of shop-floor union organizing. Then, as already difficult conditions for Paulistano factory workers became worse in 1914, the city's anarchist, socialist, and other leftist political organizations rallied to protest the war in Europe. With São Paulo racked by food shortages, price speculation, and large-scale industrial unemployment, groups such as the *Comissão Internacional contra a Guerra*, *Centro Socialista Internacional*, *Centro Libertário*, *Círculo de Estudos Sociais* Francisco Ferrer, and *Grupo Anarquista "Os Sem Pátria"* met in the Largo da Sé (now Praça da Sé) on 2 August 1914 to denounce the European "hemorrhage of blood promoted by capitalism." The gulf between these activists and their audience was so great that workers in the crowd stood up and demanded that the speakers address *their* problems. They wanted to know what anarchist and social-



Men and women debate labor politics during May Day rally 1915. (Courtesy Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth, State University of São Paulo, Campinas [UNICAMP])

ist leaders were willing to do about the shortages of goods in the markets. How did these leaders plan to combat the decreasing number of jobs, increasing work loads in the factories for those still employed, and low wages earned?⁴⁵ On May Day 1915, socialist and anarchist study groups and the unions representing stonemasons and hatters formed yet another International Commission Against the War. Its manifesto proclaimed the group's "repulsion and absolute condemnation of the war, with which capitalism, always insatiable for gold and human lives, seeks to deter the growing progress of international socialism."⁴⁶

The tensions exposed by these meetings had existed since the 1907 textile strike. Leftist activists continued to embrace a political agenda that failed to speak to the concerns of the city's workers. The formal labor movement existed only among a minority of skilled workers (e.g., printers, shoemakers, furniture makers, etc.). Neither the anarchists' focus on direct action to spur the revolutionary moment nor the socialists' belief in using the political system to usher in evolutionary change appealed to the city's industrial workers.⁴⁷ The war years highlighted this gulf between the rank and file and leftist activists, for the

rapid expansion of São Paulo's industrial sector most profoundly affected the city's women workers—the individuals most alienated from the unions and anarchist study groups.

Popular Mobilization for "Reason and Justice"

With anarchists concentrating on antiwar politics, São Paulo's women textile workers—as they had in 1907—had to organize themselves to push for improved conditions and higher wages in the factories. In May 1917, as prices for foodstuffs fluctuated widely and conditions in the mills became ever more dangerous, women weavers at *Cotonifício Crespi* in the Mooca neighborhood created factory commissions to bargain with their employers.⁴⁸ According to the *Diário Popular* and *O Estado de São Paulo*, the commissions submitted a list of demands to management in late May. They sought a 20 percent increase in pay (to meet rapidly increasing food prices), an end to all fines (e.g., those that foremen imposed to deduct several hours of pay for minor irregularities in cloth), and an end to unhealthy and dangerous work conditions. They also demanded that supervisors and foremen treat the women and children workers with "more respect." The women concluded by demanding that "in everything there should be reason and justice."⁴⁹ Explicitly they called for respect; implicitly they demanded an end to foremen's abuses, for these women workers were protesting sexual harassment in the factories as well as dangerous machinery.⁵⁰

When management refused to meet their demands, women workers initiated a strike at Crespi that would soon affect industry throughout the city. After two thousand strikers shut down the mill, men and women from Crespi demonstrated in the city's center to expose industrialists' unwillingness to improve conditions in the factories. Women, men, and children marched, and several women spoke at large rallies about inhumane work conditions in the mills. The strikers also declared that their movement was completely independent of São Paulo's anarchists and socialists. City officials responded by calling for negotiating teams to settle the walkout, and women from the factory commissions agreed to meet with employers. Interestingly, however, a group of men with no ties to the factory commissions arrived at police headquarters to negotiate on behalf of the strikers.⁵¹

Details of the first days of the strike are sketchy, but reports in the *Diário Popular* and *O Estado de São Paulo*, as well as the recollections of

male anarchist leaders, seem to indicate that women took the leading role by formulating the first set of demands, initiating the walkout, and spreading the strike through their speeches and other public demonstrations. Edgard Leuenroth, the anarchist activist and editor of *A Plebe*, noted in a memoir about the strike that it began without the knowledge or help of the anarchist movement. "The 1917 General Strike was a spontaneous workers' movement without the interference, direct or indirect, of any known individuals. It was an explosive protest that came out of a long period of tormenting difficulties that burdened the working class."⁵² Leuenroth went on to explain that the shortage and high cost of food were central among the causes of the strike. The anarchist Everardo Dias similarly noted in his memoir: "You couldn't say the General Strike of 1917 was a planned strike or a strike organized in the traditional way by the leaders of unions tied to the [anarchist] Workers' Federation. It was a strike that burst out of São Paulo's workers' rage at their starvation wages and exhausting work."⁵³ Dias then listed the increases in food prices São Paulo's workers faced in May and June 1917.

Leuenroth's and Dias's belief in the spontaneity of the strike reveals the distance between the rank and file and the anarchist leadership, for no social movement is truly spontaneous. Strikes are planned, and the workers at Crespi created their own factory commissions to formulate demands and then to organize their strike after management refused to negotiate. For the participants, then, there was nothing spontaneous about the strike.⁵⁴ Moreover, the workers' demands—for better conditions at both the point of production (the factory) and the point of consumption (their neighborhood markets)—could only have come from women textile workers, for they experienced both the harsh intensification of factory regimes and the wartime inflation and changes in the food distribution system. In June 1917, therefore, women textile workers—because of their unique position within the industrial labor market and the sexual division of labor in working-class households—took over as the *de facto* leaders of São Paulo's labor movement.

Crespi's women weavers set off a wave of strikes in other mills. First, on 22 June, workers at Tecidos Labor in Mooca struck; those at Estamparia Ipiranga followed. Within days, male and female workers at the medium and smaller textile firms struck. They sought 20 percent increases in base pay and 25 percent increases in the wages of those on the night shifts. The strikers also demanded prompt payment of their earnings, for some factories were three to five weeks late in paying

workers. More than a thousand strikers rallied outside the gates of the Estamparia Ipiranga pressing for wage hikes. They then added to their demands a call for the city's authorities to increase the regulation of public markets, for they were often forced to purchase adulterated food at inflated prices; some bakers, for example, were selling pão paulista as regular bread at high prices. After about 1,200 striking Ipiranga workers marched to their factory's gate, the management of that mill offered increases of 15 percent, and 17 percent for night work. The strikers refused to return until all their demands were met. They even rallied to protest the jailing of one of their *companheiros* who had been seized while picketing outside the factory. Their march forced his release from prison. In this first week of July, as a steadily increasing number of workers struck the city's large textile mills, the localized protests of women and men weavers inspired other workers to strike and take direct actions. Workers at São Paulo's largest beverage concern, the Companhia Antártica, struck on 7 July. That same day, a crowd of strikers in Brás sacked a truck carrying wheat from the miller, and two more workers were jailed.⁵⁵

By this time many men workers had entered the growing strike movement. And as the number of strikes increased, the level of violence grew. Roving groups of strikers encountered and fought with mounted police and some military troops in Brás and Mooca. Before these clashes in the second week of July, all the workers' protests had been peaceful. The violence no doubt came out of the increasing frustration of the strikers and the provocation that the stationing of troops represented. It also resulted from the increasing number of men among the thousands of strikers, for the police were more likely to use violence against men than against women. Indeed, the men at Antártica had violent clashes with the police during the first day of their strike.⁵⁶

As the strike spread and violence against workers increased, some textile mills settled with their workers, and the state Department of Labor sought authority to increase its inspections of factories in order to promote safer working conditions. A general settlement seemed possible, but the city's police continued to increase the number of guards around textile mills and troops throughout the industrial *bairros* (neighborhoods). Workers responded by seizing streetcars and closing sections of the city to the troops. In one clash on 9 July the police in Brás shot and killed a young shoemaker, Antônio Ineguez Martinez. Strike leaders and anarchists who had taken an interest in the growing popular movement called for a public protest march from the Martinez