

## Sources for Latin American Research At the International Institute of Social History

### The Brazilian Labour Court Digital Collection

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In 1938, José Maria Serafim, a Portuguese migrant weaver, started work at the *Indústrias Reunidas Ranieri* in São Paulo. After ten years of work for the same company, he was considered a stable employee, accordingly to the law of stability provided by the Brazilian labour law code *Consolidação das Leis Trabalhistas (CLT)*, created in 1943.<sup>1</sup> In 1956, the factory filed for bankruptcy and dismissed all its employees without paying the compensation required according to labour legislation. Serafim was among a group of thirty textile and metalworkers from Brazil, Portugal and Lithuania who decided to sue the company at the Brazilian Labour Court to claim their rights. In addition to salary compensation, the workers demanded the payment of the *aviso prévio*, unemployment benefits paid by the employer after dismissal.<sup>2</sup>

The case opened in September 1956. In that same year, the company was acquired by the *Indústria Reunidas Paulista*, but the new management declined to pay the labour debts generated by the former employer. Rio Branco Paranhos, a well-known militant Communist trade union lawyer, defended the workers at the Labour Court.

The workers' main concern was to ensure the payment of their compensation through retention of the company's assets. Their objective was to prevent the sale of the machines considered the most important assets of the company. They believed that the machines would ensure the payment of their compensations. Then, in order to secure the company's assets, the workers mobilized the people living close to the factory to check that



Workers on strike in the city of São Paulo, 1957, Vladimir Sacchetta's collection.

machinery did not leave the building. The lawsuit of this case and thousands of others are now preserved and available for research at the *Tribunal Regional do Trabalho* (TRT) of the São Paulo Archive.

In 2007, the TRT began the organization of the labour records produced between the 1940s and 1970s. It conducted the digitization of the labour claims in cooperation with the Centre of Research on Social History of Culture (CECULT) and the Edgard Leuenroth Archive (AEL), both located at the University of Campinas. The project was funded by the State of São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), one of the main funding agencies for scientific and technological research in the country.<sup>3</sup> In total, the São Paulo labour grievances digital collection contains 8,000 collective and individual cases, which is equivalent to 788,784 documents.

As a result of the cooperation between the AEL and the International Institute of Social History (IISH), the Brazilian archive donated a digital copy of the Brazilian Labour Court documents collection to the Latin American Desk in 2012, thus making it available for scholars at the IISH.



Shelves of cases from the *Tribunal Regional do Trabalho* (TRT) of the São Paulo Archive, courtesy of the author.



Cover of a 1965 lawsuit from the TRT Archive, courtesy of the author.

The TRT sources can be also researched through an online database created by the CECULT/Unicamp. This research instrument provides tools that facilitate searching for information through cross referencing topics in different fields, chronologically, thematically, onomastically, and geographically. Fascinating details about social conflicts, workplace conditions and a great deal of other information about the world of labour are revealed here.

Among many other qualitative and quantitative aspects, the Brazilian Labour Court digital collection provides data on different types of claims, as well as the results of judicial decisions.<sup>4</sup> This labour law archive is not the only example of the preservation of the labour claims in Brazil. Other projects are conducted by universities, regional labour courts and public institutions concerned about the preservation of endangered labour court records.<sup>5</sup> At the end 2013, the labour grievances archived by the Regional Labour Court of Rio Grande do Sul, located in the southern region of Brazil, was recognized by the ‘Memory of the World’ UNESCO Programme as part of the documentary heritage of humanity.<sup>6</sup>

After so many years of neglect and even destruction, records of labour grievances have finally been recognized as one of the most important sources of twentieth-century Brazilian social history. Reading labour court records contributes to our understanding of various topics relating to the worlds of workers, among them: 1) various issues referred by employers and employees to the courts; 2) industrial relations on the shop floor;

3) aspects of the industrialization process; and 4) demands for the creation of new labour rights.

Studying labour grievances enables a comparative analysis on the role of judges and lawyers in labour courts, as well as cases of collective and individual demands from workers. Furthermore, these juridical sources can shed light on new aspects of labour relations in rural areas and inspire new studies toward transnational and comparative perspectives on the implementation and role of labour legislation in Latin America.

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More about the cooperation between CEDLA and IISH can be found at: <http://socialhistory.org/en/region-desks/latin-america-and-caribbean-desk>.

An overview of the Latin American Collections of the International Institute of Social History can be found at: <http://socialhistory.org/en/collections/latin-america-collection-guide>.

## Notes

1. The law of labour stability was removed by the military government after the coup in 1964.
2. TRT-SP 2269-56.
3. For more information on the CECULT, see <http://www.cecult.ifch.unicamp.br>.
4. See the online database at: <http://www.ifch.unicamp.br/cecult/dissidios>. Access to the database is incomplete because work on it is still in progress.
5. Thomas D. Rogers and Christine Rufino Dabat, 'A Peculiarity of Labor in this Region – Workers' Voice in the Labour Court Archive at the Federal University of Pernambuco', *Latin American Research Review*, 2012 Special Issue, Vol. 47, pp. 163-178.
6. One section of the labour grievances are available at the IISH. In 2012, the Latin America and Caribbean Desk received digital copies of about 300 labour grievances settled in the Labour Courts of São Jerônimo and Pelotas, both cities are located in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The documents are recorded on two CD-ROMs organized by the Memorial da Justiça do Trabalho no Rio Grande do Sul. See: <http://socialhistory.org/en/region-desks/latin-america-desk-acquisitions-2012-2013>.