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From “pipes” to operators: a new social existence in the factory under workers’ management

De “cachimbos” a operadores: uma nova existência social na fábrica sob gestão operária

Abstract

Introduction: this essay deals with the changes in the subjective sphere of a segment of the working class, in their experience of self-management at Flaskô, the longest-running factory under workers’ control in Brazil. **Objective:** to analyze the perspective of workers’ subjectivity as protagonists and arrangers of a real utopia of work transformation. **Methods:** the essay approach is based in oral history methodology, focused on the social construction of the memory of its actors, based on the testimonies and life stories of four workers. **Results:** a new way of producing, made possible by the democratization of the social relations of production, has led to an increment in the professional genre and an increase in workers’ power to act, as the main factor in human self-realization, preservation of the quality of work, and workers’ health. **Conclusion:** the Flaskô experience was a powerful articulation of anti-capitalist strategies, within the order, which, by aiming to maintain jobs through the nationalization of the factory under workers’ management, transformed the destructive elements of capitalist management modes that kill and sicken workers, enabling a new form of social existence for its workers, through the democratization of the social relations of production.

Keywords: Companies Recovered by Workers; Clinic of Activity; Self-management; Organizational Change; Industry; Occupational Health.

Resumo

Introdução: este ensaio trata das alterações no âmbito subjetivo de uma parcela da classe operária, em sua experiência de autogestão na Flaskô, fábrica mais longa sob controle dos trabalhadores no Brasil. **Objetivo:** analisar a perspectiva da subjetividade dos trabalhadores como protagonistas e arranжadores de uma utopia real de transformação do trabalho. **Métodos:** ensaio circunstanciado tendo como metodologia a história oral, não amostral, voltada para a construção social da memória de seus atores, baseada nos testemunhos e nas histórias de vida de quatro trabalhadores. **Resultados:** a partir de um novo modo de produzir, possibilitado pela democratização das relações sociais de produção, houve um incremento do gênero profissional e aumento do poder de agir dos trabalhadores, como principal fator de autorrealização humana, preservação da qualidade do trabalho e da saúde dos trabalhadores. **Conclusão:** a experiência da Flaskô foi uma poderosa articulação de estratégias anticapitalistas, por dentro da ordem, que, ao visar a manutenção dos empregos pela estatização da fábrica sob gestão operária, transformou os elementos destrutivos dos modos de gestão capitalista que matam e adoecem os trabalhadores, possibilitando uma nova forma de existência social aos seus trabalhadores, por meio da democratização das relações sociais de produção.

Palavras-chave: Empresas Recuperadas por Trabalhadores; Clínica da Atividade; Autogestão; Mudança Organizacional; Indústria; Saúde do Trabalhador.

Introduction

Faced with factory closures, mass layoffs, and other neoliberal attacks on the working class¹, in defense of jobs and industrial activity, the *Movimento das Fábricas Ocupadas* (MFO – Occupied Factories Movement) demands management by the workers, through nationalization under workers' control. The motto of the social movements "occupy, produce, resist" is put into practice, with profound impacts on the dynamics of labor relations in the factory and equally profound changes in the subjectivity of the workers, based on the new objective and material conditions of self-management. Thus, the workers' struggle in the occupied factories is recognized as a contemporary anti-capital struggle, with effective possibilities for new and emancipated social relations of work²⁻⁵.

In Brazil, the MFO emerged in 2002, with the experiences of the Cipla and Interfibra factories in Joinville-SC, and Flaskô in 2003 in Sumaré-SP, belonging to the HB group (Corporação *Holding* Brasil), a spin-off from the Tigre group, which once had 47 companies in the country. Due to mismanagement and tax evasion, there was liquidation of assets, mass layoffs, plant closures, and only these three factories resisted, thanks to the action of the workers.

With overdue wages, withheld rights and taxes, the liquidation of machinery, power cuts, and the closure of production lines, the 1,100 workers at Cipla, Interfibra, and Flaskô organized themselves and didn't accept the punishment of unemployment, questioning the simplistic discourse that "*factories close*" and that the only way out is to "*fight in court for their rights*".

The striking workers won the support of the community, unions, social movements and parliamentarians, pressure that resulted in a collective bargaining agreement and the granting of a court order to the factory committee, elected by the workers, to assess the real economic situation of these companies.

Despite the large debts owed, it was found to be viable to maintain industrial activity. With the power of attorney extended indefinitely, the factory committee proposed nationalizing the companies as tax compensation, making the assets public.

However, in the 15 years it has been in operation, Flaskô has suffered several legal attacks from the owners to seize the machines and auction them off. This was stopped by the organized struggle of the workers, who prevented the assets from being sold off and the bankruptcy from being declared, maintaining jobs and workers' rights in an experiment in democratic management, with significant achievements for the working environment.

Henriques⁵ (p. 287-99) systematized the elements of rupture with the hegemonic pattern of capitalist organization of work, which materialized in new social relations of production at Flaskô during workers' management:

1. *Layout adaptations*: bringing the administrative sector (previously isolated on the 2nd floor) closer to the production area, with free movement of workers around the factory, breaking the traditional separation between workers and management.
2. *Relationships between workers*: the presence of cooperation between workers, even in situations of collective decision-making where tempers flared. In the bosses' organization, those in charge encouraged competition, generating relationship problems. In the workers' management, without the threat of losing their jobs, lasting bonds of friendship between workers were identified.
3. *Democratization of social relations*: the workers' representatives on the Factory Council decided on the company's strategies, layoffs, equipment purchases, and wages. The Factory Council was made up of the 13 most voted workers, elected annually in a simple election. More complex decisions were voted on in monthly assemblies.
4. *Changes in the division of labor*: access to information and free movement brought more knowledge of the production process to everyone, meaning a de-alienation of labor, greater capacity to intervene

in planning activities, and greater ability to challenge a work order. The foremen took on the role of technical coordination rather than control.

5. *Hierarchization of salaries*: increased salaries for workers who earned less but lower salaries for those who earned more. The salary criterion was the complexity of the work: better pay for positions with higher qualifications but with salaries above the market. The salary cap was set at the highest production salary - that of the toolmaker - and represents three times more than the lowest salary.
6. *Changes in work organization*: reduction in working hours, initially from 44 to 40 and then to 30 hours a week. Each worker operated a machine, resulting in an increase in breaks, a slower pace in activities and an increase in downtime.

Based on this systematization, this essay aims to show that the practical results of the new way of producing, made possible by the democratization of social relations of production, have had a positive impact on the subjectivity and increased power of workers to act, enshrined as the main factor of human self-realization, preservation of the quality of work⁶, and preservation of workers' health⁷.

Subjectivity is understood here as an inseparability between the individual and the collective in which he or she is inserted, where emotion and cognition are intrinsically involved, since the worker is not a mere executor of tasks. Depending on the meaning that the worker gives to their work, how they understand the emotional pressure of the demands of their activity, this psychological circle can be virtuous or unhealthy⁷.

In this way, the meaning of work is the real regulator of workers' emotions and cognitions, sometimes for and sometimes against it. When the activity is "plastered" by management controls, the subject/worker can become incapable of using their emotional and cognitive resources in the performance of their work because they are under the domination of another.

The longest-lasting occupied factory experience in Brazil had the workers as the protagonists and arrangers of a real utopia for the transformation of work, constituting a shared construction of a group of workers and supporters who, through some socialist elements of work production, produced cracks in the principles of capitalist domination that resulted in autonomy and well-being at work.

The same experience was reported as a counterpoint to the causal relationship between the modes of production and work organization under capitalism and the high incidence of work-related accidents and illnesses. With the development of new social relations of production, alternative anti-capitalist ways of living and producing, there were positive impacts on workers' health and safety, so that production went on for fifteen years without the occurrence of accidents and work-related illnesses, a phenomenon that has not been seen in capitalist companies in Brazil⁸.

The emphasis of this essay, however, is on the Latin American social phenomenon of "decolonization"^{9,10} present in the MFO, in the break with capitalist hegemonic power, from within the capitalist order itself, and therefore interspersed with obstacles, political disputes, but also gains in workers' subjectivity.

Methods

The material comes from the subjective memories of four workers from the occupied factory, two production operators and two from the administration - the coordinator of the legal department and the coordinator of the Factory Council. This is a qualitative, non-sampling study, using oral history as its methodology, focused on the social construction of the memory of its actors, whose centrality lies in the testimonies, the life stories, inscribed in the historical dimension of past accounts¹¹.

The testimonies were collected on site in January 2020, among workers who remained in the already paralyzed factory, taking turns day and night, to avoid invasion and vandalism of the assets, since the auction of the

goods would represent the only possibility of receiving their labor rights arising from the period of the “factory with a boss”^c.

However, the research was interrupted due to the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the other workers scheduled for interviews did not have the digital means to conduct them virtually. With the improvement of the scenario, it was not possible to continue the interviews due to the increased social vulnerability of the workers who continue to take turns at the factory gate to preserve their assets, in the face of the slowness of the Judiciary in resolving the litigation, which would bring a bias in the analysis, compared to the context of the first interviews.

Even though the testimonies did not reach saturation, as befits qualitative research, the perception that there was a socio-political richness in the accounts of some of the actors who were protagonists in this admittedly innovative experience led to the understanding of the need to publish them in the form of a detailed essay. It defends the idea that a workers’ self-managed factory can develop alternative ways of producing and organizing work, with virtuous repercussions on the subjectivity of its participants.

The theoretical framework of the Clinic of Activity was used to analyze the testimonies, since its principles and conceptual tools explain the presence of a new worker subjectivity in the small group of workers who were given a voice in this research.

The first principle is the existence of a “*historical truth of the professional milieu*”, whose dismantling of the interpretative mold of work that confines workers (factory with a boss) makes other interpretations possible, bringing a new and differentiated history to work activities (factory without a boss). The second is the realization that in all institutionalized work there is a “*contradiction between what is real and what is done*”, an antagonism of forces that is the driving force behind the creation of a new, reorganized and modified real, in which work can become a source of satisfaction and an adaptation to human nature⁷ (p. 10).

Two other conceptual tools were used: the concept of *professional genre*, a collective instrument of individual action, built from common operative references, which allows each worker to “tune in” to his or her work situation; the concept of *power to act*, which can develop or atrophy in the “black box” of work activity, increasing or decreasing depending on the alternation between the meaning of the activity for the subject and its efficiency in action - the job well done - the one in which the worker recognizes himself individually and collectively, in a professional history in which each one feels responsible^{6,7}.

The factory was founded in 1977 as a subsidiary of *Companhia Hansen Industrial S.A.*, which owned *Tubos e Conexões Tigre*. In 1988, with the split-up of the Hansen Group, *Companhia Holding Brasil (CHB)* was created, now detached from the Tigre Group, which now includes five plastics companies: Cipla, Interfibra, Profiplast, Brakofix, located in Joinville, and Flaskô, in Sumaré.

Flaskô produces industrial packaging for large volumes, the so-called “bombonas” - large drums of 20, 30, and 200 liters, usually blue in color - destined mainly for the petrochemical industries - oil, pesticides, and fertilizers. In the 1980s, it had up to 600 employees.

From 1997 onwards, the company suffered numerous layoffs and spontaneous departures, so that in 2003 the workforce was down to 65. From January to May of that year, with the resignation of the administrative and production managers, the company was abandoned and paralyzed by a power cut due to non-payment. In June 2003, the workers decided in an assembly to resume production by forming a Factory Council and delivering a document to the owners, stating that they would take control of the company in order to defend their jobs.

^c A common way of referring to the period before the workers occupied the factory.

Results and discussion

The workers' management of the occupied Flaskô factory had to balance the day-to-day needs of production - buying raw materials, guaranteeing payments for electricity and wages - with the difficulties imposed by its objective conditions - scrapped machinery, a history of debts, a lack of working capital and investments. The challenge was to manage this experimental day-to-day life in structurally adverse conditions and, at the same time, argue that only a broad change in public policies could preserve experiences like those driven by the MFO, involving credits and better financial conditions, with legal and political resolutions in relation to the structural liabilities left by the former employer management. The speech by Flaskô's legal coordinator is emblematic of this confrontation:

If you ask me if the factory was efficient, I would say that it could have been if it had the same market conditions as other companies: if we paid 1% factoring to the banks and not 10% to a loan shark, if it had financing from the BNDES [Brazilian Development Bank] and an agreement for Petrobras to buy our products. The factory was viable, it was in demand due to the trend towards replacing metal with plastic. We wouldn't have the capacity to produce for the whole of Brazil, but we would have niche markets. Flaskô's products have always been of high quality and the zeal of the workers who occupied it has allowed them to continue to be so. Even today, with the factory at a standstill, the workers at the gate, protecting what remains of the machinery and facilities, receive calls for orders.

The changes that took place in the factory studied were not in the dimension of the productive forces^d, now owned by the workers, but in the ways in which the workforce was managed, whose equal participation in decision-making brought about the reigning perception of a logic of cooperation between workers, since competition was no longer encouraged, rewards for production were eliminated, and the perennial fear of dismissal, present in employers' companies, no longer threatened them. There was an understanding that strategic issues for the factory, when decided collectively, would bring benefits that would be enjoyed on a shared basis.

The story of a case discussed in assembly was presented by the operator as an example of respect for human differences:

There was a case of a worker, a machine operator, and the foreman wanted him to work on the smaller blowers where there were different types of parts and he had to remove burrs when the tooling had problems. He got nervous, didn't have the skills to do the burr removal and told the foreman he wasn't going to do it anymore. The case was taken to the board members, who took it to the assembly. There it was decided that he wouldn't be fired, either someone else would be put in to help with the deburring or he would go to another machine. He was put on another machine. It's a big difference, dismissal is no longer a daily threat.

This account, when taken in depth, shows a counterposition to the culture of performance as a model of productive efficiency, hegemonic in the corporate world, an imposition of financialized capitalism, in which the workspace is transformed into a competition without limits, provoking feelings of generalized harassment¹².

The main changes were immaterial, of an organizational nature, in the division of labor, in management relations and between workers:

We didn't make any major changes to the machines but rather to the way they were used. We eased the pace of work by finding a joint solution: training more workers to operate the machines and making it possible for operators and helpers to organize themselves and cover for each other to promote more breaks and rests, without interfering with production needs. It was decided that each operator would become responsible for one machine and not more machines, as was the case in the

^d The factory and its physical structure, the machinery and work tools, the energy that drives production, and the raw materials that will be transformed into goods.

employer's company. As the aim was not to make a profit, we increased downtime and slowed down work (Legal coordinator and member of the Factory Council).

With an increased range of action and volition and relief from work overload, the workers were able to experience their emotions and cognitions as development resources, cultivating their professional genre, living the same history of belonging to the full, which is beneficially structuring in a professional environment⁷ (p. 9).

For the author, workers' power to act can increase or decrease depending on the alternation between the meaning of work and efficiency. In the following operator's testimony, autonomy appears as a possibility of doing a job well, which strengthens the professional genre and has collaboration as its main anchor⁶:

I put it in the mixer where the material was ground and mixed to achieve homogeneity of color. The important thing was to ensure that each customer's batch had the same color. We could work in pairs, and we would talk a lot and decide together. My colleague would say: I put more of the greenish stuff than the "dark" purple stuff [granulated, recycled polyethylene, with many color differences]. So that's how I did it. When I said it, he did it too. We tried to work together. I worked more with my head than with the procedure. In preparation we sometimes made mistakes, but in the factory without a boss we were free to make mistakes, to reject the material that went back to the mill.

The freedom to make mistakes and redo their work in order to achieve the desired color standard, highlighted by the worker, suggests the presence of a dynamic of well-done work, as opposed to a degraded condition, which leads the worker to have an intersubjective evaluation of what he would have liked to have done, what he was forbidden to do, and what he ended up doing after all and concluding that his activity was not worth it⁶.

In the same direction, the next statement shows a break with the old patterns of work organization of the "factory with a boss", structured in rigid hierarchical systems, expressed in power relations that establish an abyssal separation between those who plan activities and those who carry them out:

The wear and tear on the machines and the effort people put in were the same as in a factory with a boss, except that before we always had to do things, whether we wanted to or not, the way the boss wanted. For example, to remove a stain from a drum, because the temperature was too high, you'd say something, but the foreman wouldn't listen, it had to be his way. Not now, everything was more dialogued, if we knew how to get the stain out, we could talk, everyone could talk, they were listened to, and we had the freedom and confidence to do it.

Training the workers was one of the main strategies to (de)intensify the work and make it more suited to the human needs of the workers. The coordinator of the Factory Council explains how this process, which didn't happen overnight, came about:

A much-discussed issue at the assembly was changing the pace of work. The initial proposal from the coordination of the Factory Council was: if the machine produces one piece per minute, we can change it to one piece every three minutes because we believed that the work could be eased. The workers said no, if they had to stand still waiting for the machine, they said they would feel more tired and wouldn't be able to fulfill the work objective. The solution was found jointly: train more workers to operate the machines so that all the operators could organize themselves and cover for each other, and promote more breaks and rests without interfering with production needs.

Investment in technical training as a strategy for adapting the work to the workers has been successful, not only in terms of preventing work-related problems⁸, but also in terms of the subjective recognition of the worker, as shown by the testimony of a worker in the logistics sector:

I've worked in many temporary jobs, several factories with a boss. In my last job, I worked on the recyclable waste platform. Think of an invisible person, that was me in my job. Production is the same, with or without a boss, you can't earn your wages if you don't work. But in the busy factory

it's something else! You can fulfill your desire to learn. I became a logistics operator, taking care of bringing raw materials into the factory and distributing the finished drums.

In the Clinic of Activity approach¹³, the issue of recognition at work, commonly focused on hierarchy or peers, has been shifted to the impossibility that many workers find themselves in today of recognizing themselves in what they do, i.e. feeling that their job is being mistreated⁷.

Considering that, in today's workplace, the risk of gender degradation has increased, and companies compromise the professional history of the work collective through competitive forms of management, such as pressure for targets, production bonuses, attitudes of moral harassment, mass layoffs, voluntary dismissal programs (PDV) and outsourcing of activities means and ends¹⁴, a process that Clot⁷ (p. 9) calls "*amputation of collective history*", the Flaskô Factory experience was based on anti-capitalist ways of managing the workforce, a gradual process of learning genuine collective participation in all of the factory's decision-making processes:

The assistants, who used to be called "pipes" because they only took "smoke" from the leaders, became operators, as part of the proposal to increase the number of workers to relieve the daily fatigue. Investments were made in training, in electrical and mechanical courses for everyone. Everyone learned, the factory trained them. This brought benefits in terms of the workers' zeal, which was already high, for the quality of the products they made (Factory Council Coordinator).

The work collective helps people make decisions, creating a protective environment, since work is always a place with countless contradictions and uncertainties between what is real and what is done. When the opposite happens, the collective degenerates, incidents and accidents become more frequent, because it is in the workers as a whole that the reliability of activity systems resides¹³.

At Flaskô, the stability of jobs, the horizontalization of working relationships and the elimination of managerial forms of intensification and precariousness of work boosted the development of the professional genre and the increase in the workers' power to act. This has resulted in a collective and technical responsibility for action that has guaranteed everyone the ability to choose and innovate, the recognition of a job well done and new meanings for its realization, while at the same time acting as a protective factor against the variability and permanence of the risks and dangers of working in the plastics industry.

To conclude, here is the testimony of the legal coordinator, about his experience over almost two decades, in all its fullness, from the collective decision to occupy the factory to the current legal defense of the labor rights of extremely vulnerable workers, a testimony also full of professional and personal self-recognition:

There were many social achievements implemented by the workers' management, starting with workers' democracy, which took the form of monthly assemblies and the factory Council. A new working rhythm was built. Solidarity was the prevailing feeling in production, which resulted in no accidents at work. The workers are aware of the entire production process, avoiding the alienation of work. All this was only possible because there was no private appropriation of wealth. Workers' management meant that the priority was not profit, but production with a social purpose, prioritizing the well-being of workers and a fraternal environment in production. Even with all the obstacles, the example of Flaskô has endured and is included in the history of the Brazilian workers' movement.

Conclusion

According to Wright¹⁵, the erosion of capitalist precepts can occur through four different strategies, isolated or combined: resisting capitalism, fleeing capitalism, domesticating capitalism, or dismantling capitalism. Resisting capitalism and its attacks has always been the keynote of the unionized workers' movement or in everyday life on the factory floor, just as fleeing capitalism is at the heart of community activist movements, in solidarity economy arrangements and in a cooperative conception of the market economy. Both strategies do not involve actions against the state.

On the other hand, both domesticating and dismantling seek to change the rules of the game, which requires political action to gain power within the existing state structures and develop egalitarian public policies. This has been the practice of political parties that want to change the rules of the game in favor of social change for a fairer society. This dynamic also includes the identity movements of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, which share the same fundamental egalitarian values of an emancipatory anti-capitalism¹⁵ (p. 174).

Santos¹⁶ also offers a collection of articles by authors whose central theme are accounts of experiences of non-capitalist production in countries such as South Africa, Brazil, Colombia, India, Mozambique, and Portugal, areas where the counter-hegemony to capitalism is more evident, because they are regions of particularly intense conflicts and where initiatives and social movements have acquired a higher level of consolidation and organization.

It is from this conceptual paradigm that we can understand Flaskô's objective material difficulties over time, derived from the economic crisis in Brazil, resulting in the rising cost of raw materials and electricity. Given the lack of public policies for companies in a pre-bankruptcy situation, it is clear that Flaskô's management would be crushed within the conventional capitalist framework, which concentrates capital and whose competition is measured by production costs.

The option was to compensate for these difficulties with a new pattern of sociability in production relations, in which the subjectivity of the workers was given another level of respect and protagonism, which can be considered victorious for managing to maintain the resistance for more than 15 years.

Thus, the Flaskô experience was a powerful articulation of these intertwined anti-capitalist strategies, within the order, which, by aiming to maintain jobs through the nationalization of the factory under workers' management, transformed the destructive elements of capitalist management modes that kill and sicken workers.

Its results are part of the experience of a new social existence for that group of workers who accepted the challenges of producing a factory without bosses and achieved, despite the objective and material difficulties, as a result of their subjective freedom, and the protagonism directly driven by the democratic participation of workers' management, social relations of solidarity and cooperation that developed their professional genre and increased their power to act.

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