

‘Fifty Years in Five’ and What’s in It for Us? Development Promotion, Populism, Industrial Workers and *Carestia* in 1950s Brazil

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Abstract. In the mid-twentieth century, the Brazilian federal government embarked upon an ambitious plan of fast-paced industrialisation aimed at responding to the growing needs of the country’s ever more urbanised population. While the plan achieved rapid economic growth, rising levels of discontent defined much of the political behaviour of urban labour in the period. By critically examining some of the main events affecting industrial unions during the so-called ‘developmental decade’ of the 1950s, this article argues that amidst pervasive top-down economic transformations Brazilian workers consistently advanced an alternative position on national development. By investigating how metalworkers in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro understood and responded to the main developmental trends and difficulties of the period, the paper reveals some of the creative strategies articulated by urban workers to promote a more socially inclusive path for the country. By becoming actively involved in ever more assertive cross-professional mobilisations, particularly those aimed at curbing the rising cost of living (a problem known as *carestia*), industrial workers not only protected their own economic interests but also significantly challenged the very bases of the populist political arrangements that defined post-war Brazilian society.

Keywords: Brazil, *carestia*, industrial workers, Kubitschek, labour politics, national development, populism, price controls

Introduction: Workers and National Development

In May 1956, a few days after the first Labour Day ceremony of Juscelino Kubitschek’s presidency, *A Voz do Metalúrgico* published a cover-page article chiding him for his disappointing speech at the country’s most important

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annual event for workers.¹ Written by Eurypedes Ayres de Castro, president of the Federação dos Metalúrgicos do Rio de Janeiro (Metalworkers' Federation of Rio de Janeiro), the piece highlighted the frustration that workers felt towards Kubitschek's cold response to the demands presented by the Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Indústria (National Confederation of Industrial Workers, CNTI).² In particular, Castro claimed:

The President's speech did not address any of our basic demands nor did it provide a single thread of hope for the poor. As the real producers of our nation's wealth, we expected a serious plan of action, not a candidate's platform . . . The sharks are always ready to oppress the poor by upholding the current state of *carestia*, and unless your government is ready to stand by our side, they will destroy our hopes and create uncontrollable and desperate actions on the part of the working people. Mr. President, beware!³

'Carestia' was an expression articulated in most labour pronouncements of the 1950s to refer to the rising cost of living and the consequent decrease in the living standards of workers, particularly in the large urban centres. In this sense, rather than being simply an idiosyncratic assessment of the federal administration by a union leader, this quotation accurately describes the broad socio-political landscape of a society witnessing profound economic transformations. Elected in October 1955, Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira (commonly known by the initials JK, or by his family name, Kubitschek) came to power early in 1956 ready to implement an ambitious agenda of accelerated growth and fast-paced, top-down industrialisation. Largely building upon the institutional achievements of the second Vargas administration (1951–4), JK promised to achieve 'Fifty Years in Five' – 50 years of progress in the five years of his presidential term (1956–61), a period which is commonly referred to as the 'JK years'.⁴ The pursuit of rapid industrial growth guided the entire

¹ *A Voz do Metalúrgico* was a monthly newspaper published by the Metalworkers' Union of Rio de Janeiro in the 1950s, as will be discussed below.

² Since the mid-1930s labour representation in Brazil has been structured on a corporatist basis, under which each sector is organised into one local union. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour, unions in every state were to form a federation and, at the national level, a confederation. Created in 1946, the CNTI is the official representative body of all industrial workers in Brazil. Throughout the 1950s, however, it would rapidly lose ground among workers due to events such as those discussed below.

³ 'Ecos do Primeiro de Maio', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, May 1956, cover page and p. 3, Arquivo de Memória Operária do Rio de Janeiro (AMORJ), Rio de Janeiro. 'Shark' (*tubarão* in Portuguese) was a popular expression of the time used to describe the wealthy, especially businessmen whose interests were regarded as being in opposition to those of the workers. All translations are my own.

⁴ Between 1951 and 1953, the Joint Brazil–USA Economic Development Commission produced a detailed diagnosis of the Brazilian economy. This listed a series of infrastructural bottlenecks that should receive priority investments in order to improve the nation's economic output. Many of these targeted areas were to receive US funding on the basis of projects selected by the Banco Nacional do Desenvolvimento Econômico (National

Kubitschek administration and inspired a close association between the state and private, domestic and international sources of capital. JK selected areas of the economy that would receive preferential treatment from the federal government as a means of achieving his goals. These sectors would later be referred to as targets, and the list itself became known as the Plano de Metas (Targets Plan). While the plan covered areas as diverse as higher education and agriculture, the majority of the developmental efforts concentrated on the promotion of industry and improvements in infrastructure.⁵

Workers' alternative visions about what national development should look like helped to shape the JK years. Most notably, the developmental outlook of urban labour emphasised the notion that effective development had to include the workers and that achieving such a goal required the federal government to play an assertive role in the national economic realm. To bring these different conceptions of development to light, this article begins by analysing the existing literature on industrial workers during the so-called populist period in Brazil (1945–64). This section also provides a general description of the social context of metalworkers in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the country's most important urban and industrial centres, so that a detailed examination of their political positions and behaviour can be explored. The remainder of the paper analyses in depth the main publications that metalworkers produced during the period. This allows us to uncover the ways in which Brazilian industrial workers conceived of and responded in concrete actions to the fast-paced industrialisation that Brazil experienced during some of its most transformative years in the second half of the 1950s.

Assessing Industrial Labour in the Populist Era

The politics of mid-twentieth-century Brazil have traditionally been portrayed as being defined by an overarching political logic structured along a populist type of compromise established to cater to the needs of the country's most

Economic Development Bank, BNDE), which had been created in 1952. For further information, see Joint Brazil–USA Economic Development Commission, *The Development of Brazil: Report of the Joint Brazil–USA Economic Development Commission* (Washington, DC: Institute of Inter-American Affairs, 1954). On the campaign slogan 'Fifty Years in Five', see Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira, *Porque construí Brasília* (Rio de Janeiro: Bloch, 1975); and Edward A. Riedinger, *The Making of the President, Brazil, 1955: The Campaign of Juscelino Kubitschek* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁵ Details on the Plano de Metas are available in Clovis Faro and Salomão da Silva, 'A década de 50 e o Programa de Metas', in Angela M. de Castro Gomes (ed.), *O Brasil de JK* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da FGV, 1991), pp. 44–70; Celso Lafer, *JK e o Programa de Metas (1956–1960): processo de planejamento e sistema político no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da FGV, 2002); and Carlos Lessa, 'Fifteen Years of Economic Policy in Brazil', *Economic Bulletin for Latin America*, 9: 2 (1964), pp. 153–214.

influential socio-economic actors.⁶ With respect to the quintessentially developmental era of Kubitschek, such an institutional arrangement, as well as its ideological underpinnings, has been regarded as essential in gathering political support from a wide range of social segments that were assumed to be behind the projects pursued by the federal administration.⁷ In line with these assumptions, the traditional political literature on the Brazilian 'populist republic' has suggested that industrial workers were largely co-opted into a subordinate role due to the corporatist labour structure that the federal government controlled.⁸

Following a very similar frame of analysis, many of the traditional studies of industrial labour in Brazil written by social scientists – mostly produced in the aftermath of the military coup of March 1964, which brought an abrupt end to the populist, though democratic, political order of the preceding two decades – have argued that independent labour activism had mostly been forestalled during the populist period by the difficulties that union leaders faced when attempting to mobilise their particular constituencies. This scholarship has also claimed that organised labour had been unable to prevent the coup, given the conservative political views held by most industrial workers, who tended to be recently arrived rural migrants and who valued their geographical dislocation to the urban environment as an important means of upward social mobility, to be preserved at all costs.⁹ This critical interpretative framework also described the potential labour base into which

⁶ Francisco C. Weffort, *O populismo na política brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1980), p. 70.

⁷ The traditional literature on the period is extensive. A sample of these works includes Robert J. Alexander, *Juscelino Kubitschek and the Development of Brazil* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1991); Maria Victoria de Mesquita Benevides, *O governo Kubitschek: desenvolvimento econômico e estabilidade política, 1956–61* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1976); Miriam Limoeiro Cardoso, *Ideologia do desenvolvimento no Brasil: JK–JQ* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1978); Edgar Carone, *A República Liberal, 1945–1964* (São Paulo: DIFEL, 1985); Kathryn Sikkink, *Ideas and Institutions: Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Hélio Silva and Maria Carneiro, *Juscelino, o desenvolvimento: 1956–61* (São Paulo: Editora Três, 1983); and Thomas E. Skidmore, *Politics in Brazil, 1930–1964: An Experiment in Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁸ In addition to the references listed above, see Octavio Ianni, *Industrialização e desenvolvimento social no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1963); *O colapso do populismo no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1978); and *Estado e planejamento econômico no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1986); and Marly Rodrigues, *A década de 50: populismo e metas desenvolvimentistas no Brasil* (São Paulo: Atica, 1994).

⁹ Leôncio Martins Rodrigues, *Industrialização e atitudes operárias* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1970). See also Juarez Brandão Lopes, *Sociedade industrial no Brasil* (São Paulo: DIFEL, 1971); Michael Lowy and Sarah Chucid, 'Opiniões e atitudes de líderes sindicais metalúrgicos', *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Políticos*, 13 (1962), pp. 132–69; José Albertino Rodrigues, *Sindicato e desenvolvimento no Brasil* (São Paulo: DIFEL, 1968); Leôncio Martins Rodrigues, *Conflito industrial e sindicalismo no Brasil* (São Paulo: DIFEL, 1966); Azis Simão, *Sindicato e estado no Brasil* (São Paulo: Dominus, 1966); and Alain Touraine,

union leaders could tap as limited, due to the reluctance of most workers to engage in collective acts that might potentially challenge the populist regime. Moreover, such studies regard autonomous labour mobilisation as having been curtailed by an entire set of new corporatist legal arrangements which favoured and rewarded, through public employment and union contributions administered by the Ministry of Labour, obedient, state-authorised unions and activities.¹⁰

While this classic literature has provided a good overview of some of the most important political elements that shaped a period when the country witnessed high rates of economic growth, it nonetheless offers a stereotypical and mostly reductionist description of urban labour dynamics. In fact, as suggested by a second wave of works on the populist experience in Brazil, this transformative period in the history of the country was also characterised by a growing and ever more independent, active and assertive labour movement.¹¹ Moreover, as a more recent and prolific line of industry-based studies has indicated (on the basis of a new set of archival and oral history analyses conducted in the 1990s, mostly by Brazilian scholars), throughout these years growing numbers of Brazilian workers engaged in a series of ever more complex and autonomous labour negotiations in order to have their own specific developmental needs and demands taken into consideration by the national government.¹² In short, while traditional, concept-driven studies have

'Industrialisation et conscience ouvrière à São Paulo', *Sociologie du Travail*, 3: 4 (1961), pp. 77–95.

¹⁰ Francisco Weffort, 'Origens do sindicalismo populista no Brasil: a conjuntura do pós-guerra', *Estudos CEBRAP*, 4 (1973), pp. 27–43. The most important piece of legislation was the Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho (Consolidated Labour Laws, CLT) established by the authoritarian Estado Novo in 1942, which clearly stipulated the rights and obligations of organised labour.

¹¹ Jorge Ferreira (ed.), *O populismo e sua história* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2001); Jorge Ferreira, *O imaginário trabalhista: getulismo, PTB e cultura política popular, 1945–1964* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2005); John French, *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Angela de Castro Gomes, *Burguesia e trabalho: política e legislação social no Brasil, 1917–1937* (Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 1979); and *A invenção do trabalhismo* (Rio de Janeiro: FGV 1994); Timothy Harding, 'The Political History of Organized Labor in Brazil', PhD diss., Stanford University, 1973; Ricardo Maranhão, *Sindicatos e democratização: Brasil, 1945–1950* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1979); and Renato P. Colistete, *Labour Relations and Industrial Performance in Brazil: Greater São Paulo, 1945–1960* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

¹² Hélio da Costa, *Em busca da memória* (São Paulo: Scritta, 1995); Paulo Fontes, *Trabalhadores e cidadãos – NitroQuímica: a fábrica e as lutas operárias nos anos 50* (São Paulo: Annablume, 1997); Alexandre Fortes et al. (eds.), *Na luta por direitos: estudos recentes em história social do trabalho* (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 1999); Antonio L. Negro, *Linhas de montagem* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2004); Jose Ricardo Ramalho, *Estado patrão e luta operária: o caso FNM* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1989); Marco Aurélio Santana,

overemphasised the subordinate position of workers within the spheres of an existing populist political logic, a later and more empirically based literature has cogently shown that ‘workers’ ability to act independently of the state [in order to] resist capitalist domination and advance [alternative] ideals of democratic citizenship’ defined much of the populist experience in the country.¹³

Building upon this important body of work, in particular by developing an analysis of an entirely new set of materials which closely portray the workers’ own positions on the main events of the period, this article seeks to demonstrate that metalworkers, a labour segment that was highly favoured by the developmental efforts of the Kubitschek administration, mobilised consistently in order to advance their own, more socially inclusive views and proposals concerning the topic of national development. Indeed, far from being automatic supporters of the government and its developmental policies, metalworkers in the two most important industrial centres of the country, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, consistently engaged in new sanctioned and non-sanctioned collective activities aimed at influencing the course of the rapid economic and industrial growth that the government was pursuing. In this sense the centrality of the experiences of the metalworkers to the general labour dynamics of the period cannot be overstressed, given these workers’ close involvement in the main developmental policies implemented in the second half of the 1950s. Indeed, one of the areas of the Plano de Metas where the highest rates of completion were achieved was related to the goal of increasing industrial output in the metallurgical sector.¹⁴ Similarly, whereas the national economy grew at an average rate of 6.8 per cent a year in the period, annual growth in the industrial sector was close to 12 per cent, and in metalworking this figure was close to 15 per cent annual growth.¹⁵

Homens partidos: comunistas e sindicatos no Brasil (Rio de Janeiro: Boitempo, 2001); Fernando Teixeira da Silva, *A carga e a culpa: os operários das Docas de Santos – direitos e cultura de solidariedade, 1937–1968* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1995); Joel Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men: São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil’s Working Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

¹³ Oliver J. Dinius, *Brazil’s Steel City: Developmentalism, Strategic Power, and Industrial Relations in Volta Redonda, 1941–1964* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 7.

¹⁴ Faro and da Silva, ‘A década de 50’, p. 61; Thomas M. Jordan, ‘Contesting the Terms of Incorporation: Labour and the State in Rio de Janeiro, 1930–1964’, unpubl. PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2000, p. 193. For detailed figures on the remarkable rise of Brazil’s metalworking industry in the 1950s, see Werner Baer, *Industrialization and Economic Development of Brazil* (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1965), p. 75.

¹⁵ Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), *Estatísticas históricas do Brasil: séries socio-econômicas, demográficas e sociais, 1950–1988* (Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 1990). For an analysis of these figures and the historical trend of industrialisation in Brazil, see Maria da Conceição Tavares, *Da substituição de importações ao capitalismo financeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1972).

The metalworkers' historical significance also derives from the fact that they were one of the most active labour segments at a time when the country was deepening the process of import substitution industrialisation. In fact, they were highly critical of the main developmental policies pursued by the federal administration, and mobilised persistently, along with other categories of industrial and professional workers, to advance their own developmental agenda and demands. In particular, metalworkers conducted a wide range of activities aimed at addressing what they saw as one of the most pressing issues affecting their lives: the rising costs of living for the urban poor, amidst accelerated economic growth. These important historical events notwithstanding, and despite their role in helping industrial labour to challenge the political order of the time, metalworkers have traditionally been portrayed as more willing to engage in direct wage negotiations with their employers, which were non-political by their very nature, than to participate in broad-based political engagements.¹⁶ In light of the new data available on the topic, however, this interpretation is no longer warranted, as will be further demonstrated below. Moreover, bearing in mind their growing importance during some of the most promising years of the populist experiment in Brazil, studying the experiences of metalworkers offers a fruitful yet incompletely explored approach to understanding how some of the most politically active and better organised Brazilian industrial workers interpreted and responded to the fast-paced, top-down transformations that were reshaping the country.

The metalworkers' organisation

It is important to point out some general aspects of the metalworkers' organisational structure and the sources that are used here. To begin with, it should be noted that the metalworkers' union legally served as the representative body of industrial workers of various different fields, gathered under the official label of the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias Metalúrgica, Mecânica e de Material Elétrico do Rio de Janeiro (Union of Workers in the Metal, Mechanical, and Electrical Material Industries, STIMMERJ). For the sake of brevity, the generic label of 'metalworkers',

¹⁶ Robert J. Alexander, *A History of Organized Labour in Brazil* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003); Kenneth Paul Erickson, *The Brazilian Corporative State and Working-Class Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970); John Humphrey, *Capitalist Control and Workers' Struggle in the Brazilian Auto Industry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); Francisco Weffort, 'Democracia e movimento operário: algumas questões para a história do período 1945–1964', *Revista de Cultura Contemporânea*, 1 (1978), pp. 3–11.

used at the time by the workers themselves, will be used here to make reference to the entire group.¹⁷

The oldest metalworking union in the country, the Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do Rio de Janeiro (Metalworkers' Union of Rio de Janeiro), was founded in 1917. By the mid-1950s there were close to 14,000 workers formally affiliated with the organisation out of an estimated cohort of around 50,000 workers in the metropolitan area of the city. The *carioca* (Rio-based) union was headed in the second half of the 1950s by Benedito Cerqueira, supported by a historical alliance established between *trabalhistas* (supporters of the Brazilian Workers Party, detailed below) and Communists in 1955.¹⁸ The Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos de São Paulo (Metalworkers' Union of São Paulo) was officially established in 1932 and in the mid-1950s the union estimated the existence of about 120,000 potential members in the city and its close surroundings, out of whom about 45,000 were formally registered as members. The *paulista* (São Paulo-based) union was headed by three presidents in the second half of the decade: Fortunato Martinelly, Remo Forli and Aldo Lombardi. The latter also acted as an influential columnist for the union's official publication, *O Metalúrgico* (*The Metalworker*), which was distributed at no cost to union members.¹⁹

The Metalworkers' Union of Rio de Janeiro also published a periodical called *A Voz do Metalúrgico* (*The Voice of the Metalworker*), which was edited by union members. The two most important editors were Izaltino Pereira and Heraclides Santos; the latter was a former member of the Communist Party who also served as a secretary-general of the union during Cerqueira's long

¹⁷ While other works, especially by Brazilian authors, have referred to the union by its legal acronym, I have decided to use the generic label 'metalworker' in this piece for ease of reading. See Carmen Lúcia E. Lopes, 'A organização sindical dos metalúrgicos de São Paulo', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidade de São Paulo, 1992; Marco Aurélio Santana, 'Partido e militância sindical: a atuação comunista no Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do Rio de Janeiro: STIMMERJ, 1947–1964', unpubl. MA thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 1992; Lisa Stuart, 'A atuação dos conselhos sindicais na indústria metalúrgica do Rio de Janeiro, de 1953 a 1964', unpubl. MA thesis, Universidade Federal Fluminense, 1992; and Jordan, 'Contesting the Terms of Incorporation'.

¹⁸ For details on the election of Cerqueira, see 'Minutes of Meetings of the Metalworkers Union of Rio de Janeiro' for the years 1947 and 1961, available at Núcleo de Estudos Trabalho e Sociedade (Centre for Studies on Work and Society) at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. For the historical importance of Cerqueira, including the close relationship that he had with Vice-President João Goulart, see Marco Aurélio Santana, 'Trabalhadores e militância sindical: a relação partido/sindicato/classe no Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do Rio de Janeiro (1947–1964)', in José Ricardo Ramalho and Marco Aurélio Santana (orgs.), *Trabalho e tradição sindical no Rio de Janeiro: a trajetória dos metalúrgicos* (Rio de Janeiro: DP&A and FAPERJ, 2001), p. 189.

¹⁹ See 'Minutes of the Meetings of the Metalworkers Union of São Paulo' for the years 1955 to 1960 and the newspaper collection of *O Metalúrgico*, available at the archive of the Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos de São Paulo.

tenure in office (1955–63). Under Pereira and Santos' stewardship the periodical informally served as the main venue for expressing the views and demands of urban labour in general, given that it circulated broadly in the nation's capital; in fact, *A Voz do Metalúrgico* regularly published articles commenting on union delegations from the entire country which had come to Rio to present their demands to agents of the federal bureaucracy, particularly at the powerful Labour Ministry.²⁰ Thus serving as an informal harbinger of the national labour agenda, the articles published in *A Voz do Metalúrgico* were often reproduced and commented upon in the mainstream commercial printed press of the capital city.²¹ Finally, although both periodicals were primarily targeted at their respective memberships, it was very common to find that workers from other unions were also among their readership.²²

Both papers were monthly publications and most issues contained an average of 12 pages, with occasional supplements on regional and national conferences or other important announcements and reports.²³ Articles and editorial columns commenting on the national political context, where the topic of the rising cost of living (*carestia*) was routinely mentioned, were central components of both periodicals. It was also common to find reports commenting on internal recreational activities, as well as news on forthcoming social events (such as the union's annual ball), mailed-in poetry produced by union members, and announcements of the birthdays, christenings of family members and deaths of union members.²⁴

Expanding on this general description, the following section examines the content of both periodicals as a way to uncover how metalworkers understood the increasingly relevant topic of national development. While the main goal of the study is to uncover workers' views, it is clear that this analysis is contingent upon the ways in which union leaders, and in particular the editors

²⁰ See the newspaper collection of *A Voz do Metalúrgico* at AMORJ.

²¹ This can be seen when reviewing the newspapers published in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950s, in which frequent mentions of the Rio metalworkers' publication can be found. Detailed information is available in the newspaper collection of the Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Fundo DPS, Série Dossiês #30070.

²² Both periodicals frequently published notes on other labour sectors such as textile operatives, railway workers and carpenters. Detailed information can be found in Fundo Roberto Morena, ASMOB Collection, at the Centro de Documentação e Memória (CEDEM) of the Universidade Estadual Paulista.

²³ While Jordan studied both the labour publications examined here, his work traces the internal organisation of both unions, whereas the analysis here concentrates on uncovering metalworkers' views on national development. For more on this earlier use of the newspapers, see Jordan, 'Contesting the Terms of Incorporation', p. 171.

²⁴ Jordan points out the importance of the recreational activities of the Metalworkers' Union of Rio de Janeiro in supporting the publication of the union paper: see Thomas M. Jordan, 'Redefinindo o sindicalismo corporativo nos anos 1950: o caso do Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do Rio de Janeiro', *Cadernos AEL: Populismo e Trabalhismo*, 11: 20/21 (2004), p. 143.

of the union journals, depicted the historic events taking place at the time. However, the articles examined here were directly targeted at the unions' own constituencies, and the official union positions that they expressed will be contrasted with workers' actual behaviour. The articles thus provide a promising though necessarily limited way of assessing how urban labour perceived, and was shaped by, the broad socio-economic dynamics of mid-twentieth-century Brazil. Furthermore, taking into account the fact that both periodicals gained a readership among workers in general, it seems appropriate to assume that the materials examined here not only served to voice the official position of the unions but also consistently played an instrumental role in channelling the feelings of the rank and file. Finally, as the events examined below seem to indicate, much of the mobilisation of metalworkers during these years, as well as that of industrial workers in general, was inspired, if not directly motivated, by perceptions and propositions advanced in the labour documents examined here.²⁵

The Metalworkers of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro and the Problem of Carestia

The topic of carestia was significant in shaping the tone of the labour demands advanced in Brazil in the 1950s. In fact, in much the same way as occurred during the Kubitschek administration, the mobilisation of industrial workers during the second Vargas presidency was very much influenced by the constantly rising prices of basic food staples in the large urban centres.²⁶ The behaviour of labour during these years was also shaped by the activities of the two most influential parties supporting the regime, the Partido Social Democrático (Social Democratic Party, PSD) and the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (Brazilian Workers' Party, PTB), which, along with the conservative União Democrática Nacional (National Democratic Union, UDN), determined many of the electoral results and broad political debates of the time. Similarly, union mobilisation was closely influenced by the actions of

²⁵ A similar claim has been advanced by Murilo Leal Pereira Neto in 'A reinvenção do trabalhismo no "vulcão do inferno": um estudo sobre metalúrgicos e têxteis em São Paulo. A fábrica, o bairro, o sindicato, a política (1950–1964)', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidade de São Paulo, 2006.

²⁶ Further information on the growing importance of the 'problem of carestia' can be found in Harding, 'The Political History of Organized Labor in Brazil', pp. 306–18; Colistete, *Labour Relations and Industrial Performance in Brazil*, pp. 53–61; and Salvador Sandoval, *Social Change and Labor Unrest in Brazil Since 1945* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), pp. 32–64. Detailed figures on inflation rates vis-à-vis wages during these years are available in *Boletim do DIEESE*, 1: 7 (1960), pp. 1–6. Details on the growing income disparity of the period can be found in Renato P. Colistete, 'Productivity, Wages, and Labor Politics in Brazil, 1945–62', *Journal of Economic History*, 67: 1 (2007), pp. 93–127; and José Albertino Rodrigues, 'A situação econômica da classe trabalhadora', *Revista de Estudos Socio-Econômicos*, 1: 1 (1961), p. 25.

trabalhista union leaders tied to the PTB, who competed with former members of the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party, PCB, outlawed in 1947) for the support of workers throughout the decade. Headed by João Goulart, the vice-president of Brazil during Kubitschek's tenure in office and the former labour minister and protégé of Vargas, the PTB consistently tried to channel workers' demands through the structures of the Labour Ministry (which was under the strict control of trabalhistas) with varying but ultimately decreasing degrees of success.²⁷

While legally restricting the unions' independent organisation, the corporatist logic that defined much of the so-called populist republic in Brazil nonetheless offered rising levels of enfranchisement to the growing urban masses. Indeed, as the developmental trends of the 1950s unfolded, unions expressed increasing levels of freedom vis-à-vis the legal tutelage of the federal state.²⁸ Likewise, despite having been barred from participating in the electoral process, Communists represented one of the most active political influences among industrial workers, and many former PCB militants focused their grassroots activities on union organising from the late 1940s and through the 1950s.²⁹ Given their growing importance, metalworkers received a great deal of attention from Communist union organisers, especially in the city of Rio, where former PCB members, along with PTB members and sympathisers, helped to formulate the programme of demands that these workers pursued.³⁰ This included demands for a more assertive role for the national government in controlling the rising cost of living, and policies that favoured a path of industrialisation grounded on domestic rather than foreign ownership. Of special relevance, this latter call went in direct opposition to some of the main projects carried out by the JK administration; this was particularly true in the

²⁷ Benevides, *O governo Kubitschek*, pp. 92–5. An alternative view suggesting that the PTB consistently tried to push the limits of the political pact that kept Kubitschek in power can be found in Maria Celina d'Araujo, *Sindicatos, carisma e poder: o PTB de 1945–65* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da FGV, 1996).

²⁸ John French, 'Industrial Workers and the Birth of the Populist Republic in Brazil, 1934–1946', *Latin American Perspectives*, 16: 4 (1989), pp. 5–27.

²⁹ See Maranhão, *Sindicatos e democratização*, p. 45; and Santana, *Homens partidos*, p. 30.

³⁰ Cerqueira became the president of STIMMERJ in 1955, thanks to an alliance between his own supporters, whose political affiliations were aligned with the PTB, and former Communist leaders. For detailed information on this important agreement between the two most influential political groups in the organisation, which strengthened the union, see Santana, 'Trabalhadores e militância sindical', p. 185; and Jordan, 'Contesting the Terms of Incorporation', p. 151. When they recalled their experiences, several members of the clandestine central committee of the PCB supported this move as consistent with the so-called revisionist position in support of a national alliance with the domestic bourgeoisie, which the party would promote, starting in 1956 and increasingly after 1958: further information can be found in Edgar Carone, *O PCB, 1943–1964* (São Paulo: DIFEL, 1982); Jover Telles, *O movimento sindical no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Vitoria, 1962); and Moises Vinhas, *O Partidão: a luta por um partido de massas, 1922–1974* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1982).

automobile sector, where foreign companies were gradually becoming the dominant forces.³¹

Nationalist positions were at the forefront of the industrial workers' agenda and mobilisation in the second half of the 1950s, and even though quantitative studies of metalworkers at the end of the decade suggested the existence of a gap in the ideological orientation of union leaders and members (where the former tended to hold positions aligned with those of the PCB), the political platform of the PTB would progressively converge with that of the Communists as the 1950s unfolded.³² In fact, despite the political proximity between Cerqueira and Goulart, as the demands of metalworkers increasingly came closer to those of the *trabalhistas* and Communists within the union, the vice-president's ability to control the behaviour of the workers in the final years of the decade would be challenged significantly, as demonstrated in the events leading to the massive strike of 1957 in São Paulo and the successive 'marches against carestia' that took place in the following years, which are detailed below. Furthermore, while the leadership of the industrial workers tended to espouse progressive political positions, such as the promotion of a national programme of land reform, these views would become increasingly aligned with those of the rank and file. Both the periodicals examined here regularly published pieces written by union members, whose views were closely in tune with those of union leaders.

A good indication of the growing convergence of positions between the leadership and the rank and file can be found in the June 1955 issue of *O Metalúrgico*. The periodical included a poem, written by a union member, Alcebiades Silva, and appropriately entitled 'A carestia'. Despite its melodic tone, this poem conveyed in acute detail the dire situation that industrial workers faced on a daily basis as they desperately tried to make ends meet amidst a reality of constantly rising prices.³³ In much the same way, in March 1956, *A Voz do Metalúrgico* in Rio published a cover story examining this same set of circumstances that affected the lives of most union members. The article complained bitterly that the price of a single loaf of bread had doubled in the previous six months, a trend said to represent 'an aggression against the popular economy caused by those who control the means of production and distribution of basic goods and who did not act as real patriots'.³⁴ A related example of the growing frustration among industrial workers about the 'situation of carestia' can be found in an editorial article in the same issue of *A Voz do Metalúrgico*. This demanded that wage increases should become an

³¹ Ramiz Gattas, *A indústria automobilística e a segunda revolução industrial no Brasil: origens e perspectivas* (São Paulo: Prelo, 1981).

³² Lowy and Chucid, 'Opiniões e atitudes de líderes sindicais metalúrgicos', p. 153.

³³ Alcebiades Silva, 'A carestia', *O Metalúrgico*, June 1955, p. 7.

³⁴ 'O preço do pão', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, March 1956, cover page.

annual event, and that a broad-based, cross-sectional movement of workers (in other words, a grouping of workers from different professional categories and union structures, which was prohibited by the corporatist labour laws of the time) should be created in order to achieve an effective *congelamento* (freeze) in the prices charged for items of popular consumption.³⁵ To support his position, the newspaper's editor reiterated an argument frequently seen in many labour publications of the period, which stated that unless prices were *congelados* (frozen) and placed under the strict surveillance of the government, 'the sharks would simply continue to transfer the new wage gains of workers to items they produce, distribute, and control'.³⁶

The rising cost of living was also debated extensively among workers at the national level, as shown in the call for the first National Conference of Metalworkers, published in *A Voz do Metalúrgico* in December 1955, which stated that:

No one can deny the fact that our country needs and deserves a more assertive policy of industrialisation. As the new administration gets ready to take office, it is important that we, the workers of Brazil, clearly state that as our nation becomes ever more industrialised, those who contribute more to the nation are seeing their share in the national economy and rights as citizens becoming a dead letter . . . To put an end to this desperate situation, we summon all metalworkers to a national conference where we will consolidate a unified position in support of our rights.³⁷

Paulista workers were equally affected by what they repeatedly defined as the 'desperate situation of carestia'. As reported in the September 1955 issue of *O Metalúrgico*, an inter-union round table that included representatives of the textile and chemical industries, in addition to metalworkers, had been held earlier in the month to discuss the reality of rising prices for items of popular consumption in the city. Examining these events, union leader and *O Metalúrgico* editor Remo Forli vividly described the 'unbearable situation our families face as our children go to school hungry and we are forced to go to

³⁵ Izaltino Pereira, writing in *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, March 1956. It is important to note that attempts to create a cross-sectional alliance among workers of different sectors had occurred a decade earlier under the auspices of what would be known as the Movimento Unificador dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Unifying Movement, MUT). The role of metalworkers in this mobilisation was much less important than in the labour activities that occurred in the second half of the 1950s. More on these important events in the late 1940s can be found in Maranhão, *Sindicatos e democratização*; Jordan, 'Contesting the Terms of Incorporation'; and Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men*. Wolfe demonstrates cogently that the demands for price controls defined much of the mobilisation of paulista workers in the major strike that shut down the city of São Paulo in March 1953; see *ibid.*, p. 179.

³⁶ Izaltino Pereira, *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, March 1956.

³⁷ 'Manifesto de Convocação da Conferência Nacional dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias Metalúrgicas, Mecânicas e de Material Elétrico', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Dec. 1955.

work day after day having had beans as our only meal'.³⁸ Despite this pessimistic diagnosis, and suggestive of the initial hope that industrial workers directed toward the JK administration, in the editorial column of the December 1955 issue Forli stated that in spite of the difficulties that workers continued to face, union members were ready to offer a tentative vote of confidence to the incoming president. Attempting, therefore, to convey a restrained but clear degree of support, the editor nonetheless urged the new national leader to 'remember us, the humble workers, who sacrifice every day to fulfil our commitments to support the national development of our country'.³⁹

As the developmental policies of the Kubitschek administration unfolded, industrial workers voiced an increasingly critical tone. This was particularly evident in the editorials published in both union papers, which regularly assessed the projects of the new government in light of the workers' needs. These pieces consistently pointed out the difficult situation faced by most workers in the country's urban centres and repeatedly demonstrated labour discontent with the persistent and, in the workers' view, mostly ignored 'problem of carestia'. A good example of this recurrent criticism on the part of metalworkers can be found in an editorial column, written by Heraclides Santos, in the March 1957 issue of *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, which stated that 'given the numerous promises made during the presidential campaign, workers had initially supported the projects proposed by the current administration. Unfortunately, a year later, we do not see any reason to celebrate, considering that unions continue to be harassed by the police and the cost of living has risen to unprecedented levels'.⁴⁰

In addition to pointing out the deteriorating living conditions shared by workers, these articles repeatedly listed the measures that, in their view, should be taken to address or at least minimise the workers' plight. The proposed solutions included short-term actions such as the institution of automatic (legal) wage increases to make up for inflation and a more effective mechanism for controlling prices, as well as more structural political and economic reforms aimed at promoting a more dynamic and autonomous economy (in other words, one that was less dependent on foreign influences). These latter measures were often related to the need to implement an extensive programme of land reform in order to increase food production, and to bring food distribution networks, which were traditionally in the hands of foreign corporations, under national control.⁴¹

³⁸ 'Mesa Redonda dos Sindicatos Paulistas', *O Metalúrgico*, Sep. 1955, p. 3.

³⁹ 'Apelo ao Novo Governo', *O Metalúrgico*, Dec. 1955, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Heraclides dos Santos, 'Atentado às liberdades democráticas', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, March 1957, p. 3.

⁴¹ Heraclides dos Santos, 'O congelamento do preços de JK', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Feb. 1958, p. 3.

The call for higher levels of governmental regulation and ownership in the national economy, so that the needs of workers and the general poor could be better addressed, was a constant theme in the labour documentation of the period and represented a central element of the developmental view that industrial workers espoused during these years. Certainly, an editorial published in *A Voz do Metalúrgico* in April 1959 strongly criticised the Conselho do Desenvolvimento (Council of Development), the main governmental agency in charge of implementing the Plano de Metas, for its role in deepening the 'transfer of ownership of our national industry to exploitative foreign agents'.⁴² Related claims were expressed in very bold terms in many of these publications – in the October 1959 issue of the same newspaper, for example, a cover-page article argued that despite their role in increasing the numbers of new industrial positions available to workers, foreign investors were not essential for the promotion of true national development given that the country was 'becoming industrialised notwithstanding the presence of foreign capital, not because of it'.⁴³

Another example of the growing importance of the demand for government to be more responsive to the plight of the workers during these years can be found in the documents produced at the Second National Conference of Labour Unions held in São Paulo in November 1959. Workers at the gathering criticised the Kubitschek government strongly. If one is to assume that the final report produced at the event represents their views, by the end of the decade Brazilian workers believed that the much-praised goal of national development would only produce tangible results for workers, and thus become meaningful to the majority of the country's population, 'if the national government started acting [as the main economic agent capable of] defend[ing] the real interests of the majority of our people'.⁴⁴ Also at the national level, the *Tribuna Sindical*, the official publication of the CNTI, regularly published articles on the topic of carestia. In these pages, however, the tone tended to be less critical of the federal administration, and one 1956 article even stated that 'no one can deny the sincere interest of the administration in meeting the just demands of our working sectors who should be careful, therefore, not to fall into the siren song of striking against a supportive and attentive government'.⁴⁵

As noted below, it would take a major work stoppage in São Paulo in 1957 for the *Tribuna Sindical* to stand in opposition against the JK administration.

⁴² 'Desnacionalização da indústria automobilística', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, April 1959, p. 6.

⁴³ 'Não são fundamentais as empresas estrangeiras para o Brasil', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Oct. 1959, cover page.

⁴⁴ 'Relatos da Segunda Conferência Sindical Nacional', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Dec. 1959, cover page.

⁴⁵ 'A situação da carestia', *Tribuna Sindical*, Aug. 1956, cover page.

The so-called '400,000-worker strike' proved to be a landmark experience for industrial workers, who would become mobilised behind an even more critical attitude towards the government in the final years of the JK era. Moreover, it was only then, after the strike, that this pro-regime publication began urging the federal administration to 'pay closer attention to the fact that the important wage increases generously granted to industrial workers are being rapidly depleted by the rising prices of basic consumption items in the large urban centres'.⁴⁶ In direct contrast to this conservative stance, metalworkers attempted unwaveringly to highlight their continued social exclusion amidst high rates of economic growth, claiming adamantly and consistently that the 'fight against carestia' required concrete measures from the administration. These included the need to intervene on behalf of workers in foreign-owned meat-packing and distribution companies, to establish open markets run by farmers and workers in large urban areas, to arrest food distributors who did not respect price freezes imposed by the national government, and to enlarge the number of 'legitimate' (union-chosen) representatives of labour in the existing official bodies in charge of regulating food distribution in the country's major cities.⁴⁷

It should be noted that, starting in 1951, the Comissão Federal de Abastecimento e Preços (Federal Commission on Food Supply and Prices, COFAP), an agency of the Ministry of Labour that operated through state and municipal offices, had overseen the distribution of food staples in the main urban centres in order to prevent food shortages and price hikes.⁴⁸ These government-run offices set out to control the growing difficulties related to the rising cost of living, although, as prices continued to rise sharply both in 1957 and again in 1959, city workers would become increasingly vocal in demanding that the federal government play a more assertive role in controlling prices and providing alternative forms of food distribution to the urban masses. A direct connection between price hikes and a more accentuated process of labour activism in the late 1950s seems indeed to be apparent. In fact, it was during the years when inflation rates were higher, and the purchasing power of wage workers therefore more depressed, that more radical, creative and autonomous acts of non-sanctioned, cross-sectional labour mobilisation, and sharper criticisms in the workers' publications, would be witnessed, particularly in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The figures for annual rates of inflation and the corresponding changes in the purchasing power of metalworkers, taking into account rises in the minimum wage, underscore the link that existed between the worsening of the 'situation

⁴⁶ 'Grande movimento grevista dos trabalhadores paulistas', *Tribuna Sindical*, Oct. 1957, cover page.

⁴⁷ *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Dec. 1959, pp. 3–5.

⁴⁸ Presidential Decree no. 1.522 of 26 Dec. 1951, AMORJ.

of carestia' and a more active labour movement, which articulated ever more vocally the demand for interventionist policies from the federal government, especially in 1957 and 1959. In 1956, the rate of inflation was close to 21 per cent while the reduction in the purchasing power of metalworkers was about 2 per cent – the following year, however, when the largest strike in the city of São Paulo to date took place, the national rate of inflation peaked at 16 per cent and purchasing power was reduced by 10 per cent. In 1958, a quieter year for labour activism, the rate of inflation peaked at 14 per cent, but metalworkers saw a similar (14 per cent) increase in their purchasing power, due to salary increases. In 1959, inflation peaked at 39 per cent, leading to a decline of nearly 13 per cent in workers' ability to consume. And in 1960 inflation continued at a high level, reaching 29 per cent by year's end, but the purchasing power of metalworkers rose 19 per cent due to a larger increase in the minimum wage.⁴⁹

Given all these historical events, the transformative years of the Kubitschek government were clearly defined by the presence of an increasingly active and assertive urban labour movement that did everything in its power to have its demands and views taken into consideration by the federal government. In most cases these actions included massive inter-union strikes and large public gatherings, including neighbourhood and student associations, so that the 'fight against carestia' could be won.⁵⁰ In pursuing such a course of continued and intense engagement, workers demonstrated not only a rising sense of confidence but also a growing degree of organisational creativity and effectiveness. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in the establishment of the union-funded Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies, DIEESE) in São Paulo in December 1955. This new entity was established by member unions so that additional information on the rates of inflation in the city could be made available to workers, given that until then all figures used to calculate salary losses had been exclusively provided either by the Ministry of Labour or city officials.⁵¹

A founding member of DIEESE, the Metalworkers' Union of São Paulo considered the creation of the agency a major achievement for workers and, in

⁴⁹ IBGE, *Estatísticas históricas do Brasil*. The negative way in which JK's industrial policies affected industrial labour by devaluing the purchasing power of urban workers is analysed in Harding, 'The Political History of Organized Labor', pp. 315–7. The growing gap between wage and productivity increases in the 1950s, especially in the second half of the decade, is examined in depth in Colistete, 'Productivity, Wages, and Labor Politics in Brazil', pp. 97–8.

⁵⁰ Paulo Fontes, *Um Nordeste em São Paulo: trabalhadores migrantes em São Miguel Paulista (1945–66)* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da FGV, 2008), p. 278.

⁵¹ For more on these developments, see Colistete, *Labour Relations and Industrial Performance*, p. 61; Harding, 'The Political History of Organized Labor', p. 311; and Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men*, p. 187.

its first issue of 1956, *O Metalúrgico* published a one-page article on it. This article argued that the new agency would place unions on an equal standing for all forthcoming wage negotiations, since it represented an end to the uncomfortable situation of going to a negotiating table where data was provided only by one side, that of the employers.⁵² In tandem with the new momentum that had been achieved by establishing higher levels of inter-union collaboration, commencing with the creation of DIEESE, in June 1956 24 unions in São Paulo voiced their commitment to act together in all future wage negotiations and in the ‘fight against carestia’. Harkening back to the momentous year of 1953, when a major strike had shut down industrial sectors of the city and several unions had created the Pacto de Unidade Intersindical (Inter-Union Unity Pact, PUI), this revived inter-union alliance articulated the need for better credit for small farmers and improved transportation networks to deliver food to urban centres, as well as government oversight of food distribution, which, the unions argued, currently lay in the hands of ‘the enemies of the popular will’.⁵³

Emboldened by these regained skills of collective organisation, paulista metalworkers would become one of the most politically active segments of industrial labour during the second half of the 1950s. Since no significant measures to curb the rising costs of living were forthcoming throughout the year, in October 1957, as already mentioned, a major strike involving more than 400,000 industrial workers from several different labour sectors brought much of the industrial production of the city of São Paulo to a halt for most of the month. The strike was led by the restructured PUI, in which metalworkers played a central and decisive role, and by a new local organisation called the Aliança Intersindical por Aumentos de Salários e contra a Carestia (Inter-Union Alliance for Salary Increases and against Carestia). Strikers initially insisted on a 25 per cent wage increase for all participating labour groupings, and their impressive walkout was successful in forcing employers to accept their demands. Unfortunately, having succeeded in bringing workers back to the assembly lines, the industrial associations appealed to the Tribunal Superior do Trabalho (Superior Labour Court), which eventually reduced the wage increase to 18 per cent.⁵⁴

Commenting on these groundbreaking events, *O Metalúrgico* stressed that workers should be proud of their unprecedented level of mobilisation and that the strike represented a new moment in the unity of industrial workers in the city. Similarly, perhaps attempting to present a justification for the strike to

⁵² ‘Criado o Departamento Inter-Sindical de Estatística’, *O Metalúrgico*, Feb. 1956, p. 5.

⁵³ ‘Refundado o Pacto de Unidade Inter-Sindical’, *O Metalúrgico*, July 1956, cover page.

⁵⁴ Paulo Fontes, ‘Centenas de estopins acesos ao mesmo tempo – a greve dos 400 mil, piquetes e a organização dos trabalhadores em São Paulo (1957)’, in Fortes et al. (eds.), *Na luta por direitos*, p. 158.

the larger reading public of the commercial press, where their actions had been portrayed as too radical, the paper's editor emphasised that workers had been forced to resort to such extreme measures because of the intransigent position held by employers, who had pushed 'moderate and responsible' workers into a 'situation of despair'.⁵⁵ Similar dynamics that also demonstrate how industrial workers were becoming increasingly assertive during the JK years included the first National Congress of Metalworkers, held in Porto Alegre in November 1957. The gathering was pioneering in its enunciation of a bold list of nationalist demands to be included in all future salary negotiations undertaken by member unions. These included a call for larger numbers of labour representatives to be placed on the executive boards of all branches of the COFAP structure, as well as the imposition of legal restrictions on government-subsidised credit offered to foreign-controlled companies, and the execution of a wider programme of land reform aimed at increasing food production and reducing the cost of living in the cities.⁵⁶ Equally important in showing how the ever more mobilised metalworkers were acting not only for the purpose of obtaining better wages but also to advance a political agenda of reforms for the entire country, the Second National Congress of Metalworkers, held in Itanhaém early in 1959, added two points to the workers' already ambitious list of demands: first, the elimination of foreign agents from the process of food distribution, and second, the expansion of government support to national groups involved in the rapidly expanding automobile industry, so that they could compete on a more equal basis with powerful foreign-owned companies.⁵⁷

As these events seem to indicate, the demands and proposals that industrial workers made during the period were inspired by a strong sense of political nationalism which favoured a state-centred approach to the social problems for which unions were so obstinately interested in finding solutions. Of special importance is the fact that almost all the labour publications examined for this research consistently made the case that the persistent 'problem of carestia' required not only immediate actions on the part of the federal government but also structural reforms to the national economy. In fact, alongside the recurrently voiced demand for price controls, carioca and paulista metalworkers repeatedly argued that food production and distribution should be placed under more strict public supervision by enhancing the role of state officials and

⁵⁵ 'Vitória da Unidade dos Trabalhadores', *O Metalúrgico*, Nov./Dec. 1957, pp. 1–5.

⁵⁶ 'Resoluções do Primeiro Congresso Nacional dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias Metalúrgicas, Mecânicas e de Material Elétrico do Brasil', *O Metalúrgico*, Jan. 1958, pp. 4–6.

⁵⁷ 'Resoluções do Segundo Congresso Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Indústrias, Metalúrgicas, Mecânicas e de Material Elétrico do Brasil', *O Metalúrgico*, May 1959, pp. 4–5. See also 'Publicações do Segundo Congresso Nacional dos Metalúrgicos', in Fundo Roberto Morena, Arquivo Storico del Movimento Operario Brasileiro, CEDEM, São Paulo, 1959.

reducing, if not totally eliminating, the presence of foreign agents, so that the will of the majority of the country's population (in their words, the 'national interest') could be protected. Moreover, as advanced consistently in several labour periodicals and documents of the period, Brazilian workers believed that 'unless an effective programme of land reform which includes subsidised credit to small landholders and bans foreign investors from the production of food staples is implemented, the developmental policies of Mr Kubitschek will be nothing more than a giant with feet of clay'.⁵⁸

Industrial workers utilised a related criticism to assess the industrial programme pursued during the populist period. Indeed, despite the role that foreign firms played in creating jobs for their own members, almost all the metalworkers' documents scrutinised in this research repeatedly criticised foreign investors. In this sense, at least in the eyes of union leaders, the nation's interests would be better protected if the state or, at a minimum, domestic business groups controlled the most important industrial plants in the country, and 'foreign investors operated on the basis of strict legislation that defended the real interests of the nation'.⁵⁹ Furthermore, in addition to revealing a high degree of political awareness, the mobilisation of industrial workers during these years reflects an acute sense of solidarity for their fellow working brethren, particularly in the case of the demand for land reform, which was seen as a structural reform that would not only address the problem of food shortages but also improve the living conditions of the rural working poor. This sense of solidarity across professional sectors was also evident in all cross-sectional strikes and subsequent wage negotiations, as well as in all the 'marches against carestia' conducted throughout the decade.

It is also important to note that, as the JK years were coming to a close, critical commentary on the administration was progressively being directed at the president himself. In fact, by the end of the decade Kubitschek was increasingly perceived as someone who could do more to alleviate the predicament faced by workers were he truly concerned about the suffering of the working poor.⁶⁰ Amidst this growing sense of frustration derived from the lack of an effective resolution to their plight, industrial workers organised a new wave of inter-union meetings to plan the course of action needed to redress the problem of price hikes that marked much of 1959. These gatherings were aimed at better organisation of the so-called fight against carestia, and were regularly held at the headquarters of the Metalworkers' Union of São Paulo.

⁵⁸ 'As próximas eleições', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Feb. 1960, editorial page.

⁵⁹ 'Salve o III Congresso Sindical Nacional dos Trabalhadores', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Aug. 1960, p. 12.

⁶⁰ 'Todos poderes contra o Presidente', *O Metalúrgico*, Jan./Feb. 1959.

Representing a new and more radical approach that targeted Kubitschek himself, the idea of conducting a massive 'march on Catete' (the presidential palace in Rio), in order to convey to the president the miserable conditions faced by workers, was debated at a meeting held between union leaders from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro early in March the same year. The plan occupied trade unionists in both cities for most of the following month, until Fernando Nóbrega, the minister of labour, decided to open negotiations with a committee of workers led by Benedito Cerqueira and Aldo Lombardi. By mid-April, the month when the rally was planned to take place, Nóbrega had told union leaders that the march would not be allowed to happen and that all possible measures to forestall it would be pursued.⁶¹ Given the president's final refusal to meet in the public eye, unionists decided to send a small negotiating committee to meet with him and hand him a letter describing the 'desperate situation of carestia' that workers faced, and demanding more efficient measures to control the problem of price increases.⁶²

Union leaders also decided to follow a multi-targeted approach and began organising local 'demonstrations against carestia' and conducting a massive mail campaign of 'manifestos against carestia' directed at the local media, state legislatures and the national congress in Rio de Janeiro.⁶³ Several large 'acts against carestia' occurred during the months that followed, including a three-day vigil at Praça da Sé, in the heart of downtown São Paulo.⁶⁴ The event had been organised by Jornada contra Carestia (Journey against Carestia), a broad-based movement that included an expanded version of the PUI. By that time the PUI included more than 118 unions in the city, several student associations from different local universities, and various neighbourhood-based associations which were also becoming increasingly assertive in demanding better living conditions in the final years of the JK era.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the response of the federal government to this series of events was too slow, a trend that further alienated labour from the important developmental experiences and projects that defined this historic period.

⁶¹ *O Metalúrgico*, March, April and May 1959.

⁶² The general press of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro also published several articles on the negotiations between unionists and representatives of the Ministry of Labour as a way to preempt the political costs that these public gatherings would entail for the administration: for a selection of these pieces, see *A Notícia*, 4 April 1959; *O Dia*, 5 April 1959; *Diário de Notícias*, 25 March 1959; and *Última Hora*, 24 March 1959.

⁶³ See *Diário de Notícias*, 15 March 1959; *O Dia*, 17 March 1959; and *Gazeta de Notícias*, 20 March 1959.

⁶⁴ See *Última Hora*, 26 Aug. and 2 Sep. 1959; *O Dia*, 2 Sep. 1959; and *Jornal do Brasil*, 9 Sep. 1959.

⁶⁵ 'Protesto geral dos trabalhadores de São Paulo', *O Metalúrgico*, Sep. 1959, cover page. See also 'Manifesto ao Povo de São Paulo', Dossiê DEOPS, Cod. OS-0145, Arquivo Público do Estado de São Paulo.

Conclusions

As Brazil deepened its process of import substitution industrialisation in the second half of the 1950s, industrial workers consistently challenged the developmental course of the country by engaging creatively in ever more autonomous acts of mobilisation that advanced their views and demands. In fact, although they formed one of the labour sectors most favoured by the developmental policies carried out in the period, metalworkers, far from being automatic supporters of the fast-paced economic growth that the state pursued, acted steadfastly to defend their most immediate interests and to articulate an alternative programme of reforms which was more socially inclusive and responsive to the needs of the working poor. The progressive political activism of industrial labour, and of metalworkers in particular, is indeed one of the most important aspects of a period when Brazilian society was undergoing a significant path of transformation, yet it is still a poorly developed topic in scholarly research.

Focused on defending their own needs, metalworkers organised in local, regional and national meetings, published articles to disseminate their positions and demands, and took to the streets to call for higher wages and better enforcement of price controls on basic consumer items. More importantly, however, as all of these events ensued, this growing and progressively influential labour segment would become increasingly aware that solutions to the continued 'problem of carestia', which they persistently tried to address, required more structural reforms, which were fundamentally political in nature and thus beyond the scope of periodic wage increases. By becoming ever more assertive in advancing their own agenda for salary increases and price controls, metalworkers in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro also helped to harness the sentiments of Brazilian industrial workers in general. In the same way, and of particular importance in expanding our current knowledge of the populist era in Brazil, it should be noted that by helping to revive and lead assertive inter-union alliances among workers of different professional sectors, metalworkers directly challenged the populist arrangements that defined the legal and political framework of the time.

Moreover, as the periodicals and additional publications examined here demonstrate, Brazilian industrial workers in general, and metalworkers in particular, during what could be seen as some of the most transformative years the country had ever experienced, developed an understanding that the developmental path being pursued at the time did not correspond to their own views on national development. In fact, in addition to rapid economic growth, workers believed and advocated that effective development required the improvement of living conditions for the majority of the country's population,

and that only a government guided by a true understanding of the national needs could deliver on such a goal.

These bold political ideas defined much of the logic expressed in the labour documentation produced in the period, quintessentially expressed in the February 1960 issue of *O Metalúrgico*. Just two months before the inauguration of the new capital city of Brasília, one of Kubitschek's greatest promises, the paper contained a full-page editorial assessing the achievements of the JK administration. The article conveyed the hope that the next national administration, scheduled to take office in January 1961, would do more to defend the interests of labour, since 'despite the high economic growth we have seen in the last few years, workers continue to live in abject poverty'.⁶⁶ Moreover, in order that there would be no doubt as to how industrial workers felt about national development at the time, the paper's editor claimed that 'while the union movement has vehemently supported the goal of development, we have consistently argued that such a goal has to be achieved on autonomous grounds and in ways that benefit our entire population, not to the exclusivity of foreign investors'.⁶⁷

In the final analysis, it was this growing political awareness of the challenges facing their country that motivated industrial workers to act in an ever more assertive fashion. Along these lines, with their consistent efforts to have their voices heard and their views taken into serious consideration, metalworkers influenced growing sectors of industrial labour with demands and propositions that would progressively find resonance among different sectors of the Brazilian population. As the 1960s were dawning upon the country, a path of increased labour mobilisation was increasingly noticeable alongside the heightened political polarisation that spanned most segments of Brazilian society as a whole. This historical trend would eventually culminate in the collapse of the populist administration and the coming to power of a military regime whose historical roots, as suggested in these pages, are to be sought in the developmental experiences of the JK years.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. A mediados del siglo XX el gobierno federal brasileño se lanzó a desarrollar un ambicioso plan de industrialización rápida con el fin de responder a las crecientes necesidades de su población cada vez más urbanizada. Aunque se logró un rápido crecimiento económico, los crecientes niveles de descontento social definieron mucho del comportamiento político de los trabajadores urbanos del momento. Al examinar críticamente algunos de los principales eventos que afectaron a los sindicatos industriales durante la así llamada 'década del desarrollo' de los años 1950s, este artículo señala que al interior de las profundas transformaciones económicas

⁶⁶ 'As próximas eleições', *A Voz do Metalúrgico*, Feb. 1960, editorial page.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

implementadas desde arriba, los trabajadores brasileños impulsaron consistentemente una posición alternativa al desarrollo nacional. Por medio de analizar cómo los trabajadores metalúrgicos de São Paulo y Rio de Janeiro entendieron y respondieron a las principales tendencias y dificultades del desarrollo de ese periodo, el artículo revela algunas de las estrategias creativas articuladas por los trabajadores urbanos para promover un sendero socialmente más incluyente para el país. Al irse involucrando activamente en una movilización de distintos tipos de profesionales, particularmente aquellas que buscaban limitar incrementos en el costo de vida (*carestia*), los trabajadores industriales no sólo protegieron sus propios intereses económicos, sino que significativamente desafiaron las meras bases de los diseños políticos populistas que definieron a la sociedad brasileña de la posguerra.

Spanish keywords: Brasil, *carestia*, costo de vida, trabajadores industriales, Kubitschek, políticas laborales, desarrollo nacional, populismo, control de precios

Portuguese abstract. Em meados do século XX o governo federal brasileiro embarcou em um plano ambicioso de aceleração da industrialização visando responder à demanda crescente de sua população urbana em expansão. Apesar do rápido crescimento econômico, um aumento na insatisfação definiu muitos dos comportamentos políticos dos trabalhadores urbanos no período. Através de um exame crítico de alguns dos principais eventos que afetaram sindicatos da indústria durante a chamada 'década desenvolvimentista' de 1950, este artigo argumenta que entre transformações abrangentes de cima para baixo, os trabalhadores brasileiros consistentemente avançaram uma posição alternativa para o desenvolvimento nacional. Ao investigar como metalúrgicos em São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro entenderam e responderam às principais tendências e dificuldades desenvolvimentistas do período, o artigo revela algumas das criativas estratégias articuladas por trabalhadores urbanos para promover um caminho de maior inclusão social para o país. Ao tornarem-se cada vez mais envolvidos em firmes mobilizações entre diversas categorias profissionais, particularmente aquelas que ambicionavam combater a *carestia*), os trabalhadores da indústria não apenas protegeram seus próprios interesses econômicos, mas também desafiaram de maneira significativa as bases centrais dos arranjos da política populista que definiram a sociedade brasileira do pós-guerra.

Portuguese keywords: Brasil, *carestia*, custo de vida, trabalhadores da indústria, Kubitschek, políticas trabalhistas, desenvolvimento nacional, populismo, controle de preços