

**Mara Nogueira**  
Birbeck, University of London

## **“The PT sold the street vendors”: understanding the support for Bolsonaro among informal workers in Belo Horizonte, Brazil**

Suffering the effects of an enduring economic crisis, the choice of 57.5 million Brazilian citizens have surprised the world during the country’s 2018 national elections by bringing into power, Jair Bolsonaro. The election was a historical defeat for Brazil’s traditional left-wing Worker’s Party (PT), which was victorious for four consecutive times, holding the presidency from 2003 until Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016. Bolsonaro, who is a far-right conservative politician, is globally famous for his violent rhetoric and extreme views. Since he took office in January 2019, his government has received endless international criticism (Philips, 2020) and accumulated a variety of scandals (Philips, 2019). Nevertheless, an article published by the El Pais on 12 February 2020 showed that, if there were new elections for president in Brazil today, Bolsonaro would be leading the polls even if he was running against former president Lula, the popular leader of the Worker’s Party (PT) (Rossi, 2020). For the well-known Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle (2020), that demonstrates the lack of mobilization in the Brazilian left as well as the limits of the development model implemented under left-wing populism.<sup>1</sup> The PT has lost its credibility and there is no other political force emerging to take the space left by the party’s demise. In simple terms, for many, Bolsonaro has become the best option because there is no alternative option. In

this article, I explore how the “death of the Brazilian left” can be situated within the wider crisis of labour politics.

The decline in wage labour and the flexibilisation of labour relations are both leading to growing job precariousness, narrowing the gap between work experiences in the Global North and the Global South to the detriment of the former. Similarly, traditional forms of working-class political organisation are being dismantled, while new ones are emerging. The crisis of waged labour manifests itself differently in countries where formal employment was never the rule (Bremen and Linden, 2014; Ferguson and Li, 2018). In Brazil, the IBGE has estimated that 40.8 % (or 37.3 million people) of the total labour force was employed in the so-called “informal sector” in 2017. This trend is visible in the streets of the country, where many disadvantaged workers strive to make a living as street vendors, facing increasing competition as waged-employment opportunities decrease. Street vendors have been historically excluded from labour rights and neglected by the trade unions (Bremen and Linden, 2014; Chun and Agarwala, 2016). They are thus more exposed to the effects of economic crisis while constantly targeted by ‘hygienist policies’ (Garmany and Richmond, 2020) that pursue the “revitalisation” of urban areas and

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<sup>1</sup> André Singer (2009) has named “*Lulismo*” the economic model implemented under the PT government that allowed the

combination of growth and income distribution without structural change.

engender the displacement of marginalised “unwanted” populations.

In this context, the paper investigates the support for Bolsonaro - and the concomitant rejection of the PT - among street vendors in the Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte during the 2018 elections. I situate workers’ political discourses in the context of the displacement engendered by an urban policy implemented locally in 2017 that sought to “revitalize” the centre of Belo Horizonte, evicting street vendors from public spaces. I trace the connections between this intervention and a similar policy implemented in the early 2000s by the administration of then-mayor Fernando Pimentel, a politician of Brazil’s traditional Worker’s Party. I demonstrate how the collective memory of street vendors against the PT is triggered by the reenactment of the displacement. I thus show the connections between local and national politics articulated in the political discourses of the workers. By doing so, I foreground the urban repercussion of the labour crisis and its multiscale politics.

### **Urban “revitalisation” and displacement in Belo Horizonte**

In 2003, the local government of Belo Horizonte created a new municipal law for the regulation of urban spaces, described by then mayor Fernando Pimentel (PT) as an “urban life statute”, aimed at “regulating the coexistence” of different people within the city (Vilela, 2006). The Code of Placements was approved in 2003 and enacted in 2004 (Morais, 2013). According to the new law, the use of public space for commercial purposes, with no appropriate license, was prohibited. In the same year, the local government launched a program for the “revitalisation” of the city centre (*Centro Vivo*). The main goal of such policies was “cleaning” the streets from the “dirty” created by street vendors, while promoting their “formalisation” and transference to the newly constructed popular malls.

The *camelôs* working on the streets with licences were selected through a lottery process to occupy the new spots at the popular malls. Not all of them were given a place and the attitude towards those that remained on the streets was a policy of “zero tolerance”. In the new shopping malls, the “entrepreneurs” were expected to pay rent and utility bills. Many of them were unable to meet the financial commitments and went back to the streets, where they found a much more hostile environment. For many of the transferred workers, the main goal of the City Hall was to clear the streets, engendering a non-structured and disorganised transference process, with no technical support (Zambelli, 2006). Another critical point was that, after concluding the relocation, the local government abandoned the everyday management of the malls which became “privatised” spaces.

The situation was attenuated in the following years, in which the Brazilian economy benefited from favourable external conditions and entered a new cycle of growth. From 2003 onwards, the PT federal government implemented social policies that, combined with economic growth, generated decreasing unemployment, inequality and informality in the labour market (de Andrade Baltar et al., 2010). Brazil’s 2000s “success story” was, however, the result of a pragmatic strategy, only viable under a series of conditions (Loureiro and Saad-Filho, 2019). When the favourable landscape was altered, gains were rapidly lost, dissolving the support for the party, which was also entangled in several corruption scandals. Markedly after 2013, the effects of the economic crisis became once again visible in the streets of the country, where many disadvantaged workers strive to make a living as street vendors.

In this context, the “quiet [re]encroachment” (Bayat, 2007) of Belo Horizonte’s centre led to the resurgence of conflicts over the use of urban space and to

a new round of “urban revitalisation”. In 2017, an urban policy that sought to relocate street vendors operating on public spaces to popular shopping malls was sanctioned by a municipal law. The newly appointed mayor, Alexandre Kalil (Social Democratic Party - PSB), had been elected with a mandate to bring a solution for the situation of the “irregular” trade in the city centre. The policy was thus a priority and a large number of inspection agents were then hired to control the use of public spaces. In this context, those attempting to stay on the streets suffered increasing levels of harassment. The initiative was idealised and put into practice by the Secretary of Urban Policy, Maria Caldas, who occupied the same post during Pimentel’s (PT) mandate, echoing the early 2000s experience, when the streets were “cleaned” for the first time.

Described as an attempt to promote “the social and productive inclusion of street vendors”, the urban operation offered a small shop to those interested, providing a compensation for the shopping owner for offering the space.<sup>2</sup> Rents were then subsidised and set at BRL20 (GBP3.51) per month in the first three months, with periodical readjustments planned.<sup>3</sup> Many vendors targeted by the policy had been also affected by the previous intervention and were thus aware of its limitations. Moreover, the economic and political context of this intervention was much worse. In 2003, the economy was starting a new growth cycle, Lula had just started his first mandate and low-income Brazilians were experiencing social mobility that created a sense of hope in the future. Over a decade later, Brazil was facing a deep political and economic crisis and as argued

by Machado and Scalco (2020), hope had turned into hate.

While Lulismo brought about dramatic social improvements, it also systematically demobilized its base in order to sustain the political contradictions of its time in government. The PT paid a high price for this. Starting in 2014, the economy worsened, and the population has become increasingly indebted as unemployment grows and public goods and services are attacked. Under Temer’s cuts to the social safety net, quality of living has dramatically decreased. (ibid)

Street vendors in Belo Horizonte were thus experiencing the impacts of such economic and political crisis while also suffering the negative effects of an urban policy that failed to deliver its promise of inclusion. One year later, many vendors were operating shops at Shopping UAI (see Figure 1) but the lack of movement was discouraging and sales were not enough for workers to pay for the shopping fees and their own subsistence costs.

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<sup>2</sup> For each 1.00 m<sup>2</sup> provided to the policy, the company receives a 1.92 m<sup>2</sup> of additional constructive potential to be freely negotiated in the market.

<sup>3</sup> After the initial three-month period, rents were set at BRL36.00 (GBP6.32), increasing each year to

BRL56 (GBP9.83), BRL105 (GBP18.44) and BRL208 (GBP36.53). After five years, rents will no longer be subsidized by the government and become set at market levels.



Figure 1 – Shopping UAI  
Source: Author's own photograph

The 2018 national elections were then unfolding in this scenario. In the next section I explore the political discourses of these workers, which show the entanglement of local and national politics.

### **Street vendors in Belo Horizonte and the 2018 national election**

When the campaign for the Brazilian national elections started, I was not in Belo Horizonte anymore but I was following the political debates between street vendors through two group chats. It then surprised me that quite a few of the vendors held strong negative views of the PT while being very vocal about their support for Bolsonaro. Such a view is illustrated by the following message extract.

*“There is no point wishing for change coming from the PT government. If it has not worked out during all these years, it won't work out in the next four. That is my opinion. Even if Bolsonaro turns out to be bad, he will still bring some sort of change. (...) To elect the PT again will bring no change. It only means accepting the disaster.*

(...)

*The PT likes workers so much that it built us a little box to tell everyone that street vendors own shops. The PT sold the street vendors!” (Lucas 03/10/2018 – street vendor in Belo Horizonte)*

For Lucas, who is a street vendor relocated to the Shopping UAI in the context of Belo Horizonte's urban revitalisation policy, the PT government has brought little positive change to his life. His rejection of the party is clearly affected by the unsuccessful results of the local policy. Although the current intervention has been implemented by a different political party, he clearly associates it to the PT.

This view was repeated by different street vendors and even articulated by those who were not sympathetic to Bolsonaro. This was the case of China, a street vendor who became a “formalised” employee working as an advisor for the office of Isabella Gonçalves (Socialism and Liberty Party – PSOL), a councilwoman and social activist whose mandate is closely linked to the struggles of informal workers in Belo Horizonte.

*“When you talk about evicting street vendors from the street [in Belo Horizonte], the first name these workers remember is the one of the former mayor and governor, Fernando Pimentel.” (China, Street vendor and Councilwoman advisor – interview 25/06/2019)*

China thus talks about how the collective memory of street vendors associate the experience of displacement with the former PT mayor of Belo Horizonte, Fernando Pimentel, whose government promoted the criminalisation of street vending and the first round of displacement. For these workers, the “worker's party” has neglected their interests.

*“[Before becoming a social activist] I couldn't see how politics could do anything good for us [street vendors]. So much so that this process of evicting street vendors from the streets started with the Worker's Party. It was a huge deception for us knowing that those who were supposedly representing the workers were actually harming us severely.”*

*(China, Street vendor and advisor – interview 25/06/2019)*

His discourse raises an important point, emphasising the strong identification of street vendors with the “worker” category. One of the main arguments vendors repeat when complaining against the harassment of the authorities is that they are workers struggling to make a living and feed their families, who should thus be treated as such rather than chased as criminals (see Figure 2). Although street vendors are indeed workers who identify as such, their experience of labour bears little resemblance with the industrial waged worker, which as some have been pointing out, represents a product of a historical and geographical exception (Breman and Linden, 2014). Around the world, Fordism created the conditions for both the commodification of labour and the counter-movement that sought to impose limits to this process (Polanyi, 1944). The factory and the collective rhythm of mass-production capitalism were the fertile ground for the emergence of the working-class political subjectivity and the terrain for the rise of workers organised political struggle (Jenkins and Leicht, 1997). In different countries, trade unions and labour parties emerged then as key stake-holders during the Fordist-Keynesian phase of capitalism. In the periphery of capitalism, such processes must be understood in the context of late industrialisation that led to the implementation of incomplete welfare states.



Figure 2: “Street vendors are not bandits. We are workers”  
Source: Dignidade Ambulante

In Brazil, the formation of the urban working-class relates to the first industrialization efforts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, properly kicking-off after the 1930s revolution that inaugurated the populist phase of Brazil’s development state. Getúlio Vargas’s (1930-1945) first government was responsible for implementing the country’s inaugural Labour Law, which expanded access to rights for workers for the first time in history. Nevertheless, it only covered those with access to formal employment, effectively creating a regime of differentiated citizenship that has been historically reproduced (Holston, 2008). In this context, street vendors have never been “formally” recognised as workers and their interaction with the state has been based on punishment. Moreover, the Brazilian union movement that emerged from the crisis of the authoritarian developmental state in the late 1970s has been strongly associated with certain sectors of the formalized working-class, historically ignoring the demands of those labouring outside of waged employment with no access to labour rights.

The PT was born out of the new trade unionism and while the party was constituted by a heterogeneous support base, “[u]nions have long provided a major component of the PT’s membership, and leaders of Brazil’s ‘new unionism’ movement of the late 1970s not only formed the nucleus of the PT’s founding group but continued to play critical roles as the party evolved” (Samuels 2004, p. 1,006). Although an important progressive force in the 1980s, the syndicalist movement in Brazil was – and remains – restricted to a low portion of the working-class (Alves, 2000). Being the product of dependent capitalism in which formality was never the norm, the unions’ traditional focus on formal waged workers excluded a large population making a living outside of “formality”.

One can thus argue that street vendors' negative feelings towards the PT in Belo Horizonte - and the concomitant support for Bolsonaro - can be associated with historical and locally specific aspects of the party's trajectory. On the local level, street vendors associate the party with strict policies implemented against vendors' rights to occupy urban space. On the national level, workers feel neglected by the party, which has been historically connected with a certain portion of the organised and formalised working class.

### **Conclusion**

Around the world, labour parties struggle to mobilise voters around discourses framed by class while far-right populism is on the rise. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's victory was possible due to a puzzling cross-class alliance that brought together resentful members of the upper classes and poor non-white Brazilians targeted as "underserving" by those very same elites (Richmond, 2018). This puzzle has been approached by some (Machado and Scalco, 2020; Richmond, 2020) and there are multiple causes for the rise of the far-right in the country. In this paper, I sought to contribute to this debate by interrogating the relationship between Bolsonaro's victory and the current crisis of waged labour and labour politics.

Following Sharma and Gupta (2009, p. 4), I have focused on how "[t]he emergent transnational economic order is not only reshaping the global labour map, but also transforming the relationship between citizenship, national identity, and the state." I am interested in showing how the current labour crisis unfolds differently in Brazil, a country where the traditional left has been strongly connected with the new trade unionism. A working-class movement emerging in the context of the crisis of the peripheral model of dependent capitalism. The traditional industrial working-man imagined as the typical "worker" has never been the norm in Brazil, where informality has been a persistent feature. In this

context, Brazil's tradition left-wing "worker's party" struggles to mobilise those "workers" hustling outside of waged employment.

The destabilisation of welfare regimes are shaping working-class politics around the globe. In this paper, I have showed how this crisis is multiscalar, manifesting itself particularly in the urban scale. In cities across the globe, street vendors and other types of street hustlers are common presence, struggling to secure livelihoods that depend on their capacity to access urban space (Nogueira, 2019; Schindler, 2014). These workers have been historically neglected by the trade unions (Chun and Agarwala, 2016) while struggling against the constant threat of eviction (Itikawa, 2016). Their political subjectivities are thus shaped by such experiences and much connected with the urban, a shared space that becomes the objective of organised collective struggle. I argue that if we are to construct more socially just urban futures, we must thus recognise the centrality of the urban for working-class struggles emerging in the context of the crisis of waged labour.

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