

# THE NEW WORKING CLASS AND TRADE UNIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This essay aims to introduce an interpretation and discussion - proposed by the author Marilena Chaui, about the emergence of new working class due to the expansion of social rights and the increased share of population taking part of mass consumption. For the author, there is confusion, based in an ideological nuance, regarding the assertion that it is a new middle class. The conceptualization of these individuals as belonging to the new middle class inserts them in the perverse logic lived and defended by the middle class that values competition, individualism and entrepreneurship. Considering them, instead, as belonging to the working class leads these individuals to the core of class conflict and highlights the whole political struggle involving achievement and maintenance of rights in the capitalist mode of production, a conflict which both middle and ruling class want to hide. Trade unions, as representatives of counter-hegemonic civil society, are invited to join this discussion and take for themselves the role of making aware workers on so dear topics to build participatory democracy and extended citizenship and the importance of participation and defense of rights.

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According to Marilena Chauí (2013), there is a methodological error in considering a growth of Brazilian middle class. She states that market research and sociology institutes such as IPEA - The Institute for Applied Economic Research - a federal foundation, is organizing society as a pyramid of groups classified in "social classes": A, B, C, D and E. The criteria to establish this status hierarchy is: income, movable and immovable properties, educational level, and occupation or profession. I write social class between quotation marks because authors as Stavenhagen (1969) defend them are not social classes, but social strata, making the social stratification. According to him, social segmentation in strata, as per pre-established criteria, is a much more economic than sociological proposal of analyzing this question.

According to Stavenhagen (1969), particularly in American sociology, the social class concept was confused with the social stratification one. Stratification establishes a series of criteria, as previously presented, and creates a hierarchy between them. In the case of social strata, often confused with class, there is a classification of individuals according to its *status*. They are, as the author states, "statistical categories, or groupings of persons characterized by same conduct, common attitudes or opinions"<sup>1</sup>.

According to Stavenhagen (1969) and Chauí (2013), this proposal to organize the society by stratifying it is individualizing, since considers each individual in its specificity and defines social positions based in defined criteria and indexes. The individuals are gathered and segmented from a few characteristics, chosen by the research. A core concept in this discussion is the concept of mobility, stating that each individual has the chance to climb up social ladder, and this depends exclusively in his/her attitudes and motivation. However this concept, when making individuals responsible for their personal success, carries with it a notoriously political content, granting a privilege to the interests of dominant classes. This because when defending equality for social climbing opportunities – and from it depend motivation and attitudes of individuals, the conflict of class is denied.

Therefore stratification plays a conservative role in society, keeping the *status quo*, because this leads to believe that social change depends from individual performances. So stratification, according to Stavenhagen, is "a social phenomenon whose function is to integrate society and consolidate a certain socio-economical structure"<sup>2</sup>.

But according to Chauí (2013) there is another way of analyzing this question, that she understands as being the emergence of a new working class. This perspective takes into consideration social class division and uses as criteria of analysis the private property of means of production, the Marxist substratum theory. To understand this discussion we must consider insertion of these classes in capitalist mode of production, where dominant class own

1. Stavenhagen (1969, p. 122).

2. Stavenhagen (1969, p. 145).

means of social production (productive and financial capital) and working class, excluded of these means of production, is there included as productive force, since just owns the working force, to be sold and bought as wages. The social classes covered by this proposal cannot be taken as a fixed data. They are complementary and become a reality in its inter-relations and in the political clash. Belongings of each one of classes show political positioning, interests at stake and a *praxis*: the dominant class holds political power and also holds social means of production, while the working class holds social power of demand and transformation. Social opposition and class conflicts arising from social insertion of classes in the way of production are a phenomenon that establishes a certain dynamic to social relations and social organization.

In this context, the middle class is defined as petty bourgeoisie, socially and ideologically closer to bourgeoisie (dominant class). It is composed by a liberal State and entrepreneurial bureaucracy (managing and management), by small scale farmers and small traders. It is worth stressing that to be considered a middle class member, individuals cannot have employment relation and not be, in any way, linked to international capitals and big networks of transnational oligopolies. After a review of social groups and subjects that could currently be included in previous definition of middle class, Chauí (2013) concludes that the class that grew in Brazil in last year's was not the middle class, but on the contrary the working class, becoming larger and more complex. This increase in volume of workers during last year's is due to an easier access of population to social rights and a more active participation to mass consumption.

One of factors leading to, according to Chauí (2013), is an "error" of classification, and the fact is that the Brazilian society, conservative and authoritarian, usually divides society between privilege and shortage, associating workers to poverty, malnutrition and social vulnerability. The rise of individuals holding rights in Brazil, and being able to participate in mass consumption was responsible of this huge confusion.

At the same time the author thinks there is an ideological nuance explaining such confusion: it is to consider these groups – emerging as rightholders and consumers – as middle class representatives. The working class is historically associated to social prominence and political clash in search of social rights and more social justice and equality. Considering that this class acquired more representatives and with that a higher political potential to make its demands being heard and democratize relations is something scaring for those holding the power, privileges and domination and intends to keep *status quo*.

The middle class is fragmented in diverse interests and its representatives are trapped by competitive individualism. Its aim is expanding to the highest number of people the idea that keeping social organization as currently is, will guarantee order and safety, and that this is the best social organization model. Therefore middle class is conservative and reactionary, since at any price wants to approach dominant class, strengthening ideological hegemony of this class, in an attempt to benefit from it. This class is interested in the achievement and

maintenance of its privileges, without intending them to become rights, or to be universalized, because in that case, they would cease being privileges.

Regarding Brazilian society and its relation with the State, at the end of the 20th century, in the context so far presented, Nogueira (2004) adds its perspective stating that in current conjuncture, social groups were encouraged to not expect anything from the State and the fight for social rights social, which should have to be granted by the State. Individuals and social groups tried to:

(... ) make viable through themselves, in the market and community dynamic, in a context of struggle for life, personal effort and volunteerism. They were invited to imagine a world with small regulation and little protection, where opportunities would appear “in a natural way” and that would be structured by particular interests, competition, uncertainty, social mobility, in a position where the ‘best’, or the most determined and entrepreneurs, would have all the chances to progress. The State would stay on the sidelines, fulfilling limited functions and protecting, if anything, the most excluded social segments, the destitute and absolute poverty focus<sup>3</sup>.

Due to difficulties seen in politics and market failure of the State, and inefficiency in the expansion of social rights, neoliberal speech began reigning in society, supported and advocate by middle and dominant classes.

So we have that attempt to change this reality and construction of a democratic and politicized society, able to propose and consolidate social changes, privileging social rights, justice and social equity can only happen through working class *praxis*. Otherwise, it will prevail dominant class speech and its secondary, the middle class, where individualism, competition and social uncertainty are inherent to current *modus vivendi*, and including, something desired.

To have a democratization of relations and broadening citizenship development it is necessary working class to find among difficulties imposed by capitalist mode of production, and in spite of traps imposed by dominant classes to co-opt workers to accept the neoliberal model and current social conjuncture, new ways of social organization, and create efficient modes of fighting and expressing its demands.

## The role of Trade unions in current social conjuncture

To begin discussion regarding role of Trade unions in current social conjuncture, we must situate Trade unions within the context of civil society. Trade unions represent workers perspective, within social and political clash. Characteristics of civil society, according to Wanderley (2009) are to maintain bonds with the State, the market and other social groups and to be a space of search of consensus, including conflicts, negotiation and dialogue.

3. Nogueira (2004, p. 47)

The civil society is trapped in a conflict related to social organization approach, and intends to bring into the society, the context of the State and public policies, demands of certain social groups. Part of civil society - a hegemonic civil society, in terms of Wanderley (2009) – wants to establish a basic consensus regarding inevitability of capitalist production mode, neoliberal model, its efficiency and effectiveness. The hegemonic civil society holds power and tries to take full advantage of it, preventing civil society from being the arena of conflict and political struggle. Due to that reason, civil society tries to place social groups as autonomous instances and civil society as an understanding space for individualities, hindered by neutrality of class. Then, what prevails is competitiveness, or entrepreneurship or individuality over the political clash, the social conflict and dissention, because in this way there is no need of negotiations of reality and introduction of new demands and rights in social organization model, thus particularly favoring dominant groups and holding power.

According to Nogueira (2003), in this bias, civil society is reduced in its width to the sphere of private and corporate interests, as an autonomous sphere, without conflicts, removed from political practice. Then, speech and practices of hegemonic civil society prevail. According to this perspective, when disputes arise, they are private. Therefore public questions are not part of them. Social groups, including these to which would compete the introduction of new demands and reintroduction of politics, are paralyzed, stagnated, tied up to interests of individuals or groups, and lost its struggling capacity for social demands of wider scope and universalizing.

In counterpart there is another part of civil society – a counter-hegemonic civil society as Wanderley (2009) states - trying to introduce perverse results of this model, such as increase of poverty, social inequalities, do sub employment and unemployment, injustices, and reintroduce conflict and possibility of dissension in the system. In this sense, the counter-hegemonic civil society may contribute to promote enlarged democracy, neutralizing attempts of denying the conflict and pasteurization of relations, caused by typical competitiveness of neoliberal societies. According to Nogueira, that parcel of civil society is stagnated, drowsy. But other authors such as Dagnino (2002) affirm that she is acting and that we see it mobilized through a series of movements such as the Participative Budget and Managing Councils.

However Dagnino (2002) considers that this participation doesn't come easily. This because relations established between State and civil society and at the very heart of own social organizations making part of civil society, are always permeated by conflict. Then we have to start from the recognition of how complex these relations are, of processes of starting and maturation of participative democracy and diversity of contexts related to multiplicity of relations among political forces where conflict is established, to make a more productive evaluation of the execution and possibilities of intervention of counter-hegemonic civil society.

Starting from these previous verifications, we will try to analyze the performance of trade unions within the counter-hegemonic civil society movement, its dilemmas and possibilities.

## The dilemmas

As already observed, the trade unions have historically adopted a position of instance to the counter-hegemonic civil society. Its perspective is – and must be – to establish the participative democracy, conflicts and propose social rights, since it was born from conflict of workers with dominant power, in search of joining forces for the support of working class and as a way of making viable its demands.

However in the last years we have seen an increasing abandon of trade unions organic bonds regarding the category they represent, and because of this, an independence of union policies, creating a peculiar situation, where these organizations are responsible to the State and its diverse bodies. As an example we can mention SRTE - the Regional Superintendence of Labor and Employment. But they do not report to the category, nevertheless saying are its representatives and bearers of its interests. In spite of how well intentioned trade union's performance could be, its main objective is to attend the desire of its Managing teams.

As result of implemented neoliberal model, labor rights are being eliminated in name of free negotiation between employers and employees, besides flexibilization of working relations, eliminating rights, chances of negotiation and workers demands. The social rights, granted by the Brazilian Constitution, are being rejected under the logic they are an obstacle to adequate functioning of the market, since neoliberal speech considers they restrict development and modernization. A main criticism to trade unions is that in spite of this new conjuncture, implying in perverse and disastrous consequences for workers and the society, trade unions will no longer see their role as promoters and supporters of an active and extended citizenship plus its role of instigators of conflicts and defense of rights, and will begin to deal increasingly with specific and bureaucratic tasks (wage negotiations, etc.). Therefore trade unions and its performance will lose its global appeal, due to informalization and precarization of working relations, including large population sectors.

All above mentioned makes trade unions lose legitimacy and support from workers. This may be seen in the low level of participation of the category in trade union events and by low turnout of trade union memberships of those belonging to the category. Besides, trade union stance is merely responsive, only attending demands of these getting in touch with the trade union to exercise his/her rights, therefore being scarcely proactive.

Moreover, many trade unions reproduce neoliberal speech and implement actions and projects individualizing workers and stimulating competitiveness. This is done for example through training courses helping workers to

get jobs. Trade union's actions replicate speech of entrepreneurs saying that difficulties faced in labor market by workers are exclusively due to their poor professional training, then justifying low wages and degrading conditions many workers suffer at their workplaces.

## Enhanced democracy

Trade unions must be one more time enhanced democracy and active citizenship promoters. This will make them pick up essential role of counter-hegemonic civil society representatives to exercise its social function of granting working class civil and social rights of the working class and develop its class conscience and fight for its demands.

According to Dagnino,

to help create a more egalitarian society granting promotion and expansion of social rights we must recover emphasis and features of public policies. This implies to recognize dimension of conflict is inherent to this process, as they are own democracy and spaces of formulation of policies supported by civil society, not merely marked by conflict, but also representing a democratic advance since they make this become public issues and provide procedures and space to be treated legitimately. Lack of that kind of spaces makes easier decision taking and formulation of policies through an exercise of authoritarian power, where dominant class ignores and delegitimizes conflict<sup>4</sup>.

Our extended citizenship proposal to be assumed implies a redefinition of idea of rights, having as starting point the concept of the right to have rights. This concept is not limited to legal provisions to access the effective implementation of previously defined rights. This includes the creation of new rights, arising from specific struggles of social groups and concrete practices of social intervention. In this sense, according to Dagnino, "the own determination of meaning of 'right' and assertion of some value or ideal as being a right are in itself, objects of this policy"<sup>5</sup>. Then it would compete to trade unions invest more in the proposal of consolidation of participative democracy, where representatives and represented jointly search to be listened and have its demands attended by the State and entrepreneurs.

Then trade unions would become extended citizenship promoters of its represented, since it requires constituting active social subjects, able to define and propose what they consider their rights are and fight to be recognized.

According to Dagnino (2002) what is at stake in extended citizenship is the right to participate to define system to choose a society where they want

4. Evelina Dagnino (2002, p. 300).

5. Evelina Dagnino (2004: 104).



to be part of. This project of constructing citizenship means for Dagnino a moral and intellectual reform. It is a process of social learning, of construction of new types of social relations, obviously implying in the constitution of citizens as active and participant social subjects. This model has also consequences for the entire society, since demands living in different terms with these emerging citizens refusing to stay in social and culturally places defined for them - mass consumers and competing in labor market.

Trade unions should have to assume role of making viable this active democracy, promoting growth of social and political conscience of the working class – including support of new representatives of this working class – introducing to its represented the political role they have to play, fighting against individualization and competitiveness that dominant classes want to instill at any cost. Trade unions should have to be main disseminators of extended citizenship, that as Nogueira (2004) states, “is an essentially political condition: its main actors see the world as an environment of rights and reciprocal responsibilities and in it perform actions collectively constructed”<sup>6</sup>.

## To conclude, what we expect from Trade unions

Trade unions as bodies promoting extended citizenship should create mechanisms to stimulate the political education of its represented to consolidate conscience of classes among workers and should have to act as legitimate instances for forwarding demands and the struggle for rights. They could also be active supervisors of the society, aimed at encouraging promotion on one side and inhibit – on the other side – disrespect to workers rights, such as: health and safety at work, social equality and equity.

To promote participative democracy, trade unions must work in favor of awareness of workers regarding importance and need of political and active participation in defense and expansion of social rights, with the objective of gathering around common demands, to improve its professional insertion and working conditions, always in a collective sense.

Give up fight against social clash and defend or practice actions ratifying both dominant and middle classes’ speech, enhancing competitiveness, individuality and entrepreneurship, is to vote against its own assumptions, its social function of defense and promotion of social rights and reduce even more its social legitimacy. It must be understood that policies, whatever they be – from parties or trade unions – implies a disposition (ethical, intellectual and personal) from individuals and groups, to get out, to leave behind individuality and think in the others: think of interests as a whole, correlation of forces, the State, relations of domination, needs of groups involved and possibilities of making viable different social demands.

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6. Nogueira (2004, p. 62).



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