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ARTICLE

Tensions between combative unionism and virtual anti-unionism: lessons from the Brazilian Federal Education strike

Tensiones entre sindicalismo combativo y antisindicalismo virtual: lecciones de la huelga de la Educación Federal Brasileira

Tensões entre sindicalismo combativo e antissindicalismo virtual: lições da greve da educação federal brasileira

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Abstract

The article reflects on the federal education strike of 2024 in Brazil, based on two union conceptions: on the one hand, combative unionism, which carried out the most significant federal education strike in the history of Brazil; on the other, negotiating unionism, which has been transformed into a virtual anti-unionism, opposing the strike and the face-to-face assemblies of teachers to a policy of increasing use of digital information and communication technologies (TDICs). The first part presents the objective and subjective conditions of the strike mobilisation, with the persistence of the precariousness of work and life under the Lula government. The second part of the article assesses the concrete evidence of attacks on the rights of collective organisation and the rights of affiliates, primarily through the expanded and only apparently progressive use of online transmissions of spaces for collective organisation and mobilisation, with a particular impact on women, older people, the LGBTI+ collective and foreign teachers. A documentary survey, secondary data analysis, and bibliographic discussion were carried out to conduct the study.

Keywords:
federal education strike; economic and political struggles; virtual anti-unionism; combative unionism

Resumen

El artículo reflexiona sobre la huelga federal de educación de 2024 en Brasil, a partir de dos concepciones sindicales: por un lado, el sindicalismo combativo, que realizó la mayor huelga federal de educación de la historia de Brasil; por otro, el sindicalismo negociador, que se ha transformado en un *antisindicalismo* virtual, oponiendo la huelga y las asambleas presenciales de profesores a una política de uso creciente de las tecnologías digitales de la información y la comunicación (TDICs). En la primera parte se presentan las condiciones objetivas y subjetivas de la movilización huelguística, con la persistencia de la precariedad del trabajo y de la vida bajo el gobierno de Lula. En la segunda parte del artículo, se evalúan las evidencias concretas de ataques a los derechos de organización colectiva y a los derechos de los afiliados, especialmente a través del uso ampliado y solo aparentemente progresivo de las *transmisiones on line* de los espacios de organización y movilización colectiva, con especial impacto en las mujeres, las personas mayores, el colectivo LGBTI+ y los profesores extranjeros. Para realizar el análisis, fue hecho un levantamiento documental, análisis de datos secundarios y discusión bibliográfica.

Palabras Clave:
huelga federal de educación; luchas económicas y políticas; antisindicalismo virtual; sindicalismo combativo



Introduction

This article is written by striking teachers and students from the federal public education system who have been accompanying the mobilisations of their strike committees and collectively reflecting on the problems that arise in the heat of the moment, in assemblies and strike committee meetings or public debate activities. The Trabalho Vivo group has carried out the systematisation and discussion of these issues, linked to the Labour Transformations, Democracy and Social Protection group of the Law Faculty of the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), in regular meetings and strike activities.

In this article, we problematise one of the main arguments anti-strike teachers and students put forward, namely that the social struggle and the strike strengthen the right. A recurrent theme in Brazilian social movements since the rise of the struggles registered in the mobilisations that preceded the June Days of 2013, the existence of progressive sectors opposed to popular mobilisation or that make a peculiar transposition between social struggles and the right, is discussed in the context of the federal education strike in two moments.

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The first part presents the objective and subjective conditions that sustain the strike mobilisation, with the continuation of the precariousness of work and life under the Lula government, to explain the meanings of mobilisation in economic and political struggles, such as the fundamental dispute over the public fund and its repercussions on the public budget in the context of the advance of the use of digital information and communication technologies (TDICs) in the world of work. In the second part of the article, concrete indications of the strengthening of the right by this anti-strike policy are shown, primarily through the expanded and only apparently progressive use of online transmissions of spaces for collective organisation and mobilisation, based on a documentary study and its examination.

As will be discussed, two union conceptions are in dispute: on the one hand, combative unionism, which organised the most significant federal education strike in Brazil's history; on the other, negotiating unionism, which has been transformed into virtual anti-unionism, opposing the strike and face-to-face teacher assemblies to a policy of increasing use of ICTs.



“The situation is serious; the solution is a strike² “: militant trade unionism and education struggles

Almost half of the federal public administration is concentrated in Education (Laurino, 2024) and was on strike in Brazil in 2024. There were 64 federal education institutions on strike, along with more than 500 campuses of federal institutes (FIs), technical schools, and military colleges, with technicians and teachers.³

Collapsing buildings with increasing water leaks in their structures, a reduced and overworked staff of outsourced workers, teachers and administrative technicians with salaries eroded by 40% due to inflation and more than a year at the negotiation table without an adequate response from the federal government: Brazilian federal education workers and students have every reason to fight and demand readjustment, budget restructuring, career restructuring and the repeal of the anti-democratic measures of recent governments (Sindicato Nacional dos Docentes das Instituições de Ensino Superior, Andes-SN, 2024; Druck and Filgueiras, 2024a).

As the education strike unified the technical and administrative sectors in Andes-SN, Sinasefe and Fasubra, the federal government somewhat improved its initial proposal. From the point of view of salaries, from the initial proposal of 9% in 2026, it went on to propose 9% in 2025 and 3.5% in 2026, which was an advance that demonstrated the strength of the mobilisation (Andes-SN, 2024). It would be inappropriate, however, to consider the strike as a movement only for salaries and civil service careers.

The absence of funds to restore the budget of the federal universities is a fallacy, as the Andes-SN strike report denounced. In Brazil, public funds are in dispute, not crisis or deficit. For its benefit, the National Congress has decided to allocate a record amount to parliamentary amendments, strengthening the discretionary use of the public budget, through which senators and deputies can allocate resources to their electoral bases: in 2022, the amount allocated to parliamentary amendments was R\$28.9 billion; in 2023, R\$37.3 billion; in 2024, it reached R\$53 billion (Andes-SN, 2024).

² Translator's note: Huelga, in Portuguese, is “greve”; therefore, the title plays with the sonority of the words “grave” and “greve” which, in Spanish, cannot be appreciated.

³ The educational strike began on 20 March, with the constitution of the National Strike Command by the administrative technicians (Federação de Sindicatos de Trabalhadores Técnico-administrativos em Instituições de Ensino Superior Públicas do Brasil - FASUBRA, 2024); the technicians and teachers represented by Sindicato Nacional dos Servidores Federais da Educação Básica Profissional, Sinasefe (2024) joined on 3 April; teachers represented by Andes-SN went on strike on 15 April. In some universities, students joined the striking workers, such as at the Federal University of Bahia, UFBA, where the student assembly convened by the Association of Graduate Students decided to go on strike on 8 May (Full name, APG UFBA, 2024).

The deterioration of the study and work structures of federal higher education institutions is directly related to a policy of disinvestment in Brazilian universities, which has been going on for a decade and is maintained in the Annual Budget Law of 2024 (Lei nº 14.822, 2024). The disinvestment accumulated losses of 2.5 billion reais between 2016 and 2024, considering nominal values, i.e. without considering the 50.7% inflation accumulated in eight years. If inflation is considered, the losses amount to R\$2.5 billion.

8.3 billion reais. Comparing the budget planning for the four years (2016-2019) with the multi-annual plan for 2020 to 2023, the allocation of public funds to higher education drops from 5% to 3% of the budget, with an annual deficit of approximately R\$5.8 billion (Coletivo Democracia e Luta, 2024).

In the case of the Federal University of Bahia, the budget accumulates losses of 87% in investment and capital funds, as exposed by the opposition collective of the teachers' union, based on a study by Diego Marques (Coletivo Democracia e Luta, 2024). This combines the underfunding of public universities, the high amounts earmarked for the private education sector and the increasing public education funding through parliamentary amendments. The amounts set aside for the private sector between 2024 and 2027 amounted to R\$11.6 billion, while the budget allocation for the public sector in the same period was R\$45.2 billion. The substitution of public sector spending by subsidising the private sector is a quarter of the amount foreseen in the Multiannual Plan (Rech, 2024).

Looking at discretionary spending on higher education in the Annual Budget Law, for expenses such as electricity, outsourced labour, etc., and investments such as building maintenance works, Rech (2024) notes a drop from R\$ 19.3 billion in 2016 to R\$ 13.1 billion in 2024, resulting in a loss of 32% in nominal values. When analysing the composition of these values, the share of parliamentary amendments increases from 5% in 2016 to 28% of total investments from 2022 onwards.

By contesting the public budget, the federal education strike allows for a rapprochement of economic and political struggles. It is no coincidence that the federal government rejected until the last minute the idea that the education strike had anything to do with the public budget and presented a denialist stance about the budget problems. As President Lula said in a statement on the strike, which was coming to an end: "It shows that the universities lack money and that the government has to find resources. A strike cannot be allowed to end by inaction" (Lula, 2024 in Tonet and Truffi, 2024).

Contrary to these assertions, it is possible to postulate a link between mobilisations for better working conditions, traditionally called economic strikes, and broader mobilisations for social reforms, i.e. the possible political implication of immediate strikes or the complementarity between economic and political strikes. Along these lines, Rosa Luxemburg (2010, p.286) deduces general points from the experiences, among which she emphasises: “(...) the economic struggle presents a continuity, it is the thread that unites the different political knots; the political struggle is a periodic fertilisation that prepares the ground for the economic struggles. Cause and effect follow one another, alternating incessantly (...)”.

The non-corporate strike mode finds particular relevance in growing strikes opposing the state and its bureaucratic mediations. Since the 2008 crisis, unprecedented strikes have occurred in Europe, demonstrating opposition to austerity agendas. These are often symbolic strikes, limited to one or two days, but with issues affecting the public sector and the regulation of collective bargaining (Nowak and Gallas, 2014, p.306).

In the case of the federal education strike, the expressions of this historical moment are revealed not only in the agenda of demands but also in the size of the mobilisation and the strength of union opposition to the policies of the Federação de Sindicatos de Professores e Professoras de Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior e de Ensino Básico Técnico e Tecnológico - Proifes/Federação⁴ in the Brazilian teachers' movement. A look at the Andes-SN data on the number of Federal Higher Education Institutions on strike in the last strikes helps us to size up the teachers' mobilisation in 2024: in 2001, 51 Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior- IFES; in 2005, 40 IFES; in 2008, 39 IFES; in 2012, 60 IFES; in 2015, 39 IFES; in 2016, 44 IFES (Andes-SN, 2022). In 2024, 64 IFES were on strike.

The year 2024, therefore, is the biggest in the Andes-SN historical series in terms of the number of IFES, comparable to the big strike of 2012 on the eve of June 2013. As in that period, the movement had a strong grassroots and oppositional trade union role. A common feature between 2012 and 2024 was the rejection by the Proifes grassroots unions of the agreements reached between the federal government and Proifes, with a significant dispute between the ruling sectors and the grassroots oppositions of the universities that have unions affiliated with Proifes.

Regarding union opposition, the education strike at the base of the Associação dos Professores Universitários da Bahia - Apub/Sindicato, then affiliated to Proifes/

⁴ For an analysis of the trade union concept of Proifes/Federação, its composition of phantom unions and its role as a support organisation for the federal government, see Mello and Dutra (2024a; 2024b).

Federação, deserves attention, in which the union leadership was defeated by the union opposition in all the assemblies teachers held during the strike. The actions of the leadership revealed a distorted conception of the union, as the notion of freedom of association claimed by the organisation is reduced to the politicisation of rules in a statute, in which certain rituals, such as board elections, are fulfilled for the board to acquire central political power. In a statement during an assembly of Apub teachers with more than 500 people with voting rights, a member of the Proifes board said that “no assembly in the country will decide what a legally constituted federation will do [in collective negotiations with the federal government, discussed by the assemblies]” (Castro Ramos, 2024), a repeated practice that reveals the prevalence of notarial power over the sovereign will of the category expressed in the assembly.

The rejection of face-to-face assemblies and the political practice of demonising, boycotting and stigmatising the debates and collective mobilisations engendered in this space reveal more than they claim. This is not just a policy against face-to-face assemblies but an attempt to put in their place something more “modern” and formally democratic from a “citizen’s” point of view.

In a symbolic text (Apub Sindicato, 2024c), the Apub leadership criticises the assembly because there was too much political violence, such as “shouting and booing” against those who affirm, in the assembly, that the position of the assembly has no legal or political value for the decisions of the federation. Instead of attributing violence to the autocratic and notarial exercise of union power detached from the will of the teachers’ assemblies, it is the assemblies themselves that are violent for criticising those who ignore collective decisions.

According to the political note, the teachers’ assembly of more than 500 people confronted the decision of the “majority” who voted, in a virtual poll, in a different direction from the one decided by the assembly. The people who voted in the survey reportedly did not attend the assembly because it was a “hostile” and “disrespectful” space without “basic conditions for deliberation”:

In summary, the deliberations of today’s assembly were alien to the opinion expressed by colleagues in the survey published yesterday, which seems to indicate that many do not feel comfortable attending the assembly, which

unfortunately presents itself as a hostile space, with several moments of disrespect, making impossible the primary conditions of deliberation with a democratic parameter. (Associação dos Professores Universitários da Bahia, n.d., 2024c)

The theme recovers and updates the momentum for the expansion of the use of ICTs at work, particularly strong during the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by the advance of e-learning in higher education and the expansion of teleworking, including in the civil service. According to Antunes (2023), this severe health crisis and inestimable socio-economic impacts have favoured the development of “new laboratories of capital experimentation” in different activities.

Other spaces of sociability and collective mobilisation have also been affected. The pandemic represented a catalyst for the challenges of establishing collective resistance in the trade union movement, especially for labour organisations. Examples of these changes are the holding of the unified May Day in a face-to-face format in 2020 (Ferreira, 2020) and the virtual assemblies of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores-CUT with more than 120,000 participants (Nuzzi, 2020).

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During the pandemic, especially in light of Provisional Measure No. 963, item II, article 17 (BRAZIL, 2020a) and the regulation of the Ministry of Economy, with Circular No. 1919/2020 (BRAZIL, 2020b), the authorisation to hold virtual assemblies was extended to trade unions. The virtualisation of spaces for trade union deliberation can be observed in the speeches of trade union representatives, such as that of the president of the National Confederation of Financial Workers (Contraf-CUT). According to her, pandemic social isolation has given way to a new culture, with new paths for trade union organisations, given that “telework is here to stay” (CUT, 2020). For Graça Costa (2021), Secretary for Trade Union Organisation and Policy of the CUT National Executive, assemblies and congresses must be “dynamic”, using virtual tools, as was experienced during the pandemic.

However, what does this “dynamism” consist of? Observing the policy of virtualisation of trade union life during the pandemic, in the CUT’s affiliated entities in the health, education and banking sectors, there was a limitation of the rights of participation and mutual recognition of members or, in the words of Campos (2020), there was a limitation in the contacts between the leadership and the rank and file without interaction and debate, by positioning those represented only as recipients of information, to the



detriment of the space for discussion, discredited alongside asynchronous voting (Campos, 2020).

Virtualisation has become law and, not by chance, supported by the Brazilian right wing. Law 14.309 (2022), the result of a bill by Senator Soraya Thronicke (former Social Liberal Party) and sanctioned by then President Jair Bolsonaro, was replicated by employers' unions (Federação das Indústrias do Estado de Minas Gerais - FIEMG, 2022; Sindicato das Indústrias Metalúrgicas, Mecânicas e de Material Elétrico e Eletrônico de São Leopoldo - SINDIMETAL-RS, 2022) as a legal framework authorising civil society organisations to hold virtual assemblies. However, in a notice published in 2023, a union in the banking sector affiliated with the CUT justifies holding a remote/virtual assembly under the terms of the legislation above (Redação Sindicato dos Bancários de São Paulo, 2023).

Among the services available to members of FIESP, Brazil's most prominent industrial organisation, is an agreement with two companies that offer platforms for virtual meetings and voting (Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo, 2024a; 2024b). In other words, employers' organisations are investing in technology to introduce new communication tools for their members.

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Presentiality poses dangers for capital, and the distance between those living in the same living and working conditions undoubtedly makes collective action more difficult. The employers who encourage this policy are responding appropriately to their class interests. Combative class organisations, such as the CUT unions, can only adhere to this policy within the transformation of combative trade unionism into a negotiating and citizen's trade unionism. This is a new moment that emphasises aspects summarised by Ricardo Antunes and Jair Silva (2015, p.525):

(...) the last decades seem to have pushed the new trade unionism towards a strange combination, a synthesis of at least three movements: the old peleguist practice,⁵ the strong statist heritage and the strong influence of the neo-liberal (or social-liberal) ideology, also driven by the cult of negotiation and the defence of the citizen.

Even if the trade union leadership analysed in this text limits the strike to a corporate process and restricts mobilisation and discussion activities to responses at the negotiating tables (Apud Sindicato, 2024b), the strong educational strike demonstrates the social

⁵ Pelegos has no translation; it is a term that refers to that type of union (or union leaders) who claim to represent the interests of the rank and file, but, in reality, respond to the interests of the bosses.



robustness of the political opposition to this conception of the movement and also the critique of an increasingly autocratic capitalist state, which submits to inhuman rules and codes stipulated by capital. In Harvey's (2016) interpretation, the advance of the contradictions of flexible accumulation is also the explosion, the contagion, and the growing pressure of the "necessary growth" of finance capital.

Within this framework of hot social analysis, the combined relationship between the attacks on public universities and education workers in the spaces of union mobilisation is worth addressing concretely. Suppose the social struggle in education makes it possible to connect economic demands, such as the search for wage increases, with political struggles, such as the dispute over public funds. In that case, it is also true that the growing use of TDICs is fraught with contradictions. The following is a study of the strengthening of rights during the social struggle of the education strike, with a look at the broadcast of the assembly to launch the strike at the UFBA.

Broadcast strike mobilisation and virtual anti-unionism: a case study from UFBA

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The discussion on strengthening the right by the anti-strike policy is the order of the day. It can be exemplified by the existence of editorials in prominent circulation newspapers against the strike by union leaders (Goulart, 2024) and by teachers' petitions against the power of the assembly to decide on the decision to go on strike, asserting the power of an online consultation (Bahia Notícias, 2024), as if the vote replaced the space for debate and collective conviction.

In this section, we have chosen to carry out this reflection based on a documentary study situated in the field of the analysis of the use of ICTs in trade union media, such as the online transmission of meetings and assemblies, as well as digital voting. Our study focuses on the effects of online transmissions of spaces for collective organisation and mobilisation of the teaching profession to discuss the hypothesis that this growing use of TDICs reinforces the discourse of the extreme right against the right to strike, the public university and education workers, mobilised in the context of the growing transformation of combative grassroots unionism towards negotiating unionism, as is the case of the leading political sector of the Apub- Sindicato, affiliated to the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT). In the situation analysed, it is possible



to evaluate the use of anti-union policies⁶ by sectors that are attacked by the new right in a broader political context, which denotes expressions of trade unionism's conformity to neoliberalism or anti-union policies.

The live broadcast of the UFBA teachers' assembly of 25 April 2024, which decided to initiate a strike in the institution, is taken as a singular source for our analysis, in which latencies or potentialities of the contradictions derived from the growing use of TDICs in the union's digital environment flourish and gain density. It combines a rejection of the class character of digital platforms and the instrument of strike action to result in a policy that undermines trade unions, teachers, the intelligentsia and discriminated sectors such as women, migrants, LGBTI+ and older people.

The selected video (Apub Sindicato, 2024a) has 15,000 views and more than 5,000 comments collected using the *Export Comments extraction tool*. The virtual chat of the video was kept open, with no restrictions for anonymous accounts or subscribers to the syndicate channel and no comments removed by moderation. The first step in selecting and filtering this universe was to choose descriptors such as "strike" and "vote". There were 934 mentions of the word "*strike*" among the comments and 147 mentions of "vote". The comments on "voting" express the centrality of the discussion of the issue and the pressure to speed up the teachers' right to speak to carry out the rite..

After reading the comments and identifying the messages with offensive content, we segmented the main themes identified, following the categorisation stage of the content analysis method, using semantic classification criteria (Richardson, 2011). In this way, we classified the types of offence in the comments into the following categories: a) disparagement of trade union organisation and collective discussion; b) attacks on intellectuals and the university; c) attacks on teachers.

As for the messages of derogatory content directed at union organisation and collective discussion, several comments focus on the conduct and methodology of the teachers' assembly, disparaging the decision-making process and the spaces for debate among the members of the category, among which we highlight: "*One form [Google form]*

⁶ Anti-union policies are understood to be those that jeopardise the exercise of trade union functions by members, such as the right to decide matters in face-to-face meetings, with the right to speak and vote, and not only those anti-union policies that jeopardise the right to join or form a trade union. In the specific case under analysis, the anti-union acts or practices of Apub/Sindicato fit the definition of the Uruguayan jurist Oscar Ermida Uriarte (1989, p.9 et seq.), according to which anti-union conduct can be defined as that which "unduly harms a trade union right holder in the exercise of trade union activity or provokes it, or by which he is unjustifiably denied the facilities or prerogatives necessary for the normal development of collective action". In Luciano Martínez's definition, anti-unionism is also observed not only against trade unions, but also against trade unionists, hindering the exercise of individual or collective, positive or negative, organisational or national freedom of association rights (Martínez, 2013, p. 411).

and everything was already decided". Dozens of comments refer to the replacement of debate by voting. The social struggle is seen as a waste of time in this scenario. It is reduced to individual expressions by teachers as to whether or not they are interested in launching a strike, which, in this opinion, should only be determined by voting on digital tools.

Thus, the offensive comments collected reveal the perception of those unwilling to collectively build alternatives and forms of resistance, so the overvaluation of the virtual environment is presented as an opportunity to empty the political process of face-to-face mobilisation.

Hostile demonstrations are also marked by incitement to violence and arbitrary measures, albeit ironically. Comments encourage using physical force as a deliberative method and call for judicial intervention to obstruct the organisational process of the teaching profession. In this vein, some messages suggest the persecution and reprisal of teachers who took a stand in favour of the strike movement: *"It would be convenient to vomit on those who voted in favour"*. The space for decision is reduced to the possible damage resulting from their deliberation in a political analysis in which exercising the right to strike in education is understood as "detrimental" to students, who should mobilise, "swell"⁷, against the decision. Lula's government expressed the same position in a statement on the strike:

In this case of education, if you look at the whole picture, you will realise that there are not many reasons for this strike to last as long as it lasts. It is not Lula who is losing; it is not the rector who is losing; it is Brazil and the Brazilian students who are losing (Lula, 2024, in Mazui, 2024).

Capital sectors note the relationship between the increasing use of TDICs and the increased exposure of those involved in such activities. Pastore and Apostólico (2020) argue that the virtualisation of assemblies requires more significant preparation on the part of the leadership due to the rigorous monitoring of the grassroots and the public.

For the assembly public, political decisions would have to be taken lightly and without debate as a mere expression of the sum of individual wills since both the face-to-face meeting in assembly and the political instrument of the strike would be "outdated" or dysfunctional. The political and organisational methods accumulated by the Brazilian working class are attacked, with a particular aversion to face-to-face assemblies. This

⁶ Translator's note: the original concept is "torcida", which refers to the supporters of football clubs.

streamlining of the decision-making process aligns with neoliberal logic, which sees TDICs as a fundamental instrument for compressing the space-time of social relations (Harvey, 2011).

The analysis of the comments also reveals an anti-intellectual and anti-university orientation. Attacks on the teaching activity and the pro-strike position stand out, associating striking teachers with different negative personal and professional characteristics, such as laziness and carelessness, through messages such as “*nobody wants to get up early to work*”, “*laziness*” [derogatory term for a person with no occupation], “*the strike is a thing for cuckolds*”, “*no to the strike, you lazy bunch*”; lack of professional qualifications, when it is mentioned that “*teachers with less than two neurons can go on strike*”, “*I wonder if there are any exact sciences teachers there*”, “*you can’t believe these people are teachers*”; or even the use of psychoactive substances and mental disorders, for example, “*The CAPS [Psychosocial Care Centre] was released*”, “*Crack users in favour of the strike*”, “*So oh, this noinha [pejorative term for a drug user] is going to be in favour*”, “*She could only be a noia [pejorative term for a drug user] from history*”.

It can be seen that these comments seek to delegitimise the strike movement by disqualifying professors and the activities they carry out in favour of the university, refuting the relevance of the struggle for better working conditions. The offensive against the civil service, implicit in these discourses, identifies civil servants as inefficient and opportunistic, who take advantage of the state as parasites, particularly in line with the ideology behind the Bolsonaro government’s administrative counter-reform proposal, when the Minister of Economy labelled civil servants as “enemies”, “privileged” and “inefficient” (Druck, 2021).

Aligned with the discourse of the extreme right and neoliberal measures, it is possible to verify other records calling for the privatisation of public universities and solid demands for private initiatives, such as “we have to privatise soon” and “those who have a PhD and think that 9k [a salary of 9,000 reais] is not enough, let them go to the private initiative”. Comments defending political figures representative of neo-conservatism, questioning universal emancipatory education and discrediting scientific knowledge were also published through comments such as Bolsonaro’s constant claim to be the only one capable of solving problems. The comments shed light on open disputes, especially with neoliberalism, over privatising public education, vindicating the extreme right and its public service policy.

In terms of attacks on teachers who made use of their right to speak at the assembly, there was a particular incidence of LGTBiphobic, sexist, ageist and xenophobic offences. The apparent anonymity of virtual interactions favours the emergence of offences directed at marginalised groups. Several comments were disparaging neutral language, which aims to address cis heterosexism and provide inclusive language for transgender and non-binary people. As if this segment of the population did not exist and did not deserve respect, the comments read: “*Teacher saying ‘Todes’?*”, “*Good afternoon to all, today, todos, plus, delusion, deals, lg, lgbt, love*”, “*alumnus*”.

In the same vein, there were LGTBiphobic insults against teachers during their speeches, such as “*let your hair down*”, “*the UFBA has active, passive and versatile*”, and “*where are the males against the strike*”. Just as the employment contract does not exclude the subjective elements of the worker, their participation in grassroots mobilisations is marked by the effects of LGTBphobia. Below is a list of the main LGTBiphobic comments about teachers taken from the live broadcast:

Table 1 - LGTBiphobic comments

<p>Is the professor talking all? hahahahahahahahahahahah Todes meus oves [informal term for testicles, as well as neutral language]. Todes minha roles [informal term for penis, as well as neutral language]. A teacher who speaks a neutral language is an animal. Let your hair down [pejorative term for behaviour described as effeminate]. The UFBA has active, passive and versatile people. Querides hahahahaha Students hahahahahahaha Pabllo Vittar is in favour of the strike! Where are the anti-strike males? There are only doughnut burners [pejorative term for anal sex practitioners]?</p>
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Source: own elaboration.

The comments show that just as the workplace is sexualised and generally heterosexual (Borrillo and Formond, 2007, p.57), workers active in their union base are more exposed to ongoing abuse, contrary to their dignity and physical or psychological integrity. There is an intertwining between neoliberal practices of union action, such

as the transmission of sensitive discussions *online*, and neoconservatism expressed in derogatory comments, which expose LGBTI teachers more to situations of harassment.

In sexist comments against women teachers, physical aspects are questioned, such as age and tone of voice: “*crazy old woman*”, “*what a strange voice this woman has*”, and “*cut off this woman’s microphone*”. And registers that escalate to speeches of harassment with sexual connotations, such as “*old woman with bad food, vote fast*”. There is a firm distinction of gender discrimination, with hostility to the public participation of women professors in the university space and political debate. The main comments with sexist connotations are listed below:

Table 2 - Sexist comments

<p>This woman is about to have a heart attack. What a strange voice this woman has Bad old food, vote fast! The clown rolling What’s that rude girl doing twirling around with her arm raised? The woman is spinning; is she OK? Why is this woman shouting? The aunt is crazy Is he crying? Analysis congratulations on your vagrancy, Auntie Mia vieja loka [pejorative term for an old person].</p>
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Source: own elaboration.

There were many derogatory comments at the assembly about the age of retired teachers. The comments referred to physical aspects of former teachers, pointing to an alleged age-related weakness: “*This one has his foot in the grave*”, “*the old man can’t even stand up*”, and “*If he raises his arm, God will take him away*”. Below is a table of the primary ageist attacks:



Table 3 - Ageist comments

He is retired, but he wants more money. Let him!
 Madam, retire!!!!
 The older woman stammers more than anything else.
 crazy old woman
 the coming wants to increase pensions
 Older people have priority kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk
 This one has his foot in the grave.
 The older man can't even stand up.
 Come on, man, back off.
 Is that the retired teacher?
 Who let this man out of the house?
 Retire, my uncle
 Almost with one foot in the grave
 That's not good
 Retire, Auntie
 The dead are excluded.
 Deathphobia
 Let the living raise their hands.
 Call SAMU [reference to Mobile Emergency Assistance Service medical rescue].
 Retired, my aunt, go home.
 You've done so much already; now enjoy your retirement, woman.
 If he lifts his arm, God takes him away.

Fuente: elaboración propia.

When it was the turn of the foreign teachers, a series of xenophobic comments were observed, questioning the possibility of enrolling in the debate: *"I'm not being xenophobic, I'm just curious. Does a foreigner have a turn to speak?"*, *"the rule is clear: if you don't speak Portuguese, you can't have a right to speak"*. There were comments about the physical features of the teachers, comparing them to actors of Asian origin: *"Hispanic Jack Chan"*. Here are the main xenophobic comments:



Box 4 - Xenophobic comments

What happened to the Peruvian?

I am Peruvian!

La Cucaracha (referring to Latin American music)

Aloz with chicken [pejorative way of imitating the Asian accent, changing the “r” for an “l”].

Speak Portuguese!

Hispanic Jack Chan

The strike has already reached other countries.

el hermano quiere huelga [brother, name to refer to Argentines].

The rule is clear: if you don’t speak Portuguese, you don’t have the right to a voice.

Where are the subtitles?

Calm down Peruvian

Source: own elaboration.

The transmission of assembly spaces represents the spectacularisation of discussions, exposing participants to harassing discourses, mostly from students living in the same university environment. The possibility of relative anonymity favours the appearance of offences against marginalised groups, making their bodies, political conceptions and discourses more exposed.

In the case of the UFBA, Druck and Filgueiras (2024b) point out that the opposition movement, contrary to the strike, by advocating a virtual consultation as a broader and more democratic instance than the assembly, is breaking the ties and solidarity between teachers, weakening the process of struggle and the organisation of the category. These are the effects on the unions of three interconnected phenomena: the restructuring of production, the globalisation-financing of capital and the political-ideological rise of neoliberalism.

The anti-strike union leadership unreservedly defends adopting digital tools to increase participation, efficiency, agility and innovation without considering that such practices violate the rights and guarantees of teachers who participate in the mobilisation in person. The sample of comments analysed has a solid conservative and individualistic connotation, elements that are not unrelated to neoliberalism.

The virtualisation of trade union assemblies should be discussed from the perspective of the interaction between neoliberalism, public space and transformations in the meaning of collective organisation for trade union sectors. Virtualisation does not represent

a non-place but creates an environment of interaction and controlled social tension. Changes in the virtual spatial field of trade union assemblies modify the possibilities of intervention and the forms of political contestation of workers: “(...) those who dominate space can always control the politics of place” (Harvey, 2017, p.214).

The justification for the exposure of organisational spaces is based on the ideology that digital media can enhance social engagement and democratic action; such a justification clashes with concrete evidence revealing the proliferation of attacks on public universities, on the figure of the teaching worker, especially women, LGBTI+ people, older people and on working-class organisational spaces.

Final considerations

A major political struggle among Brazilian education workers has brought the dispute over public funding into the debate. Neoliberal policies have drastically reduced the budget allocated to education and have taken the issue out of collective discussions, regardless of the political group at the head of the federal government. Not by chance, and even though the teachers' movement placed the budget struggle at the forefront of its demands, the strike agreement drawn up by the federal government made no mention of the budget victories won by the movement.

While it is true that the Workers' Party is one of the main targets of the extreme right in Brazil, it is also true that Lula da Silva's federal government maintains and expands the fiscal policy that defunds federal educational institutions and makes the working conditions of teachers, administrative technicians and subcontracted workers more precarious. At the same time, the public budget is autocratically removed from political debate, immunising Brazilian democracy against the possibility of a dispute over public funds.

Neoliberalism advances in the federal government and its trade union arms. The dispute between combative unionism and virtual anti-unionism marked the 2024 federal strike in Brazilian education. The concrete study on the growing use of TDICs shows the advance of the transformism of sectors of the trade union movement. Neoliberalism attacks unions not only through repression but also persuasion: the actions of Proifes/Federação and the Apub/Sindicato board, studied in this text, reveal how anti-union politics is not only carried out by governments and employers but also by workers who do not believe in social struggle as a way to advance in politics.

In the UFBA's digital archives of strike activities, there was a proliferation of attacks on the public university, on the figure of the teaching worker, especially against women, LGBTI+ people, older people and the organisation of the working class. The sample of comments analysed has a solid conservative and individualistic connotation, elements symptomatic of the use of TDICs in the trade union sphere and the links between virtual anti-unionism and extreme right-wing politics in the country.

Opponents of the strike and the teachers they claim to represent, these sectors of the teachers' movement unreservedly defend the increasing use of digital tools under the logic of increasing participation, efficiency, agility and innovation without considering that such practices result in a violation of the rights and guarantees of teachers who participate in person in the mobilisation for the vindication of the rights of their category.

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