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Uberization: informalization and the just-in-time worker

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The current transformation of the Brazilian Consolidation of Labor Laws (*Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho – CLT*), promoted by the Labor Reform, puts us facing something that, in the analyses and horizons of Brazilian development, was commonly recognized as an exception, but now presents itself as the rule: informality. As Francisco de Oliveira (2003) already pointed out, in the specificity of labor exploitation and capitalist accumulation in the periphery, informality is central but was recurrently associated with backwardness, such as that which resided on the margins of development. This perspective was focused on something that was never fully constituted: on the perspective of the universalization of rights, on a capitalist social integration promoted by the consolidation of a wage-earning society, more specifically by means of formal labor. From this point of view, therefore, informality was understood as an exception to be overcome.

In one of his first speeches after the election, the current president of the Republic of Brazil vehemently stated that the perspective for the new regulations of formal labor is informality. In this sense, today we are not in a post-CLT world; what is at stake is more complex. New regulations that eliminate earned rights and guarantees, promote and legalize the transfer of risks and costs to workers have been established; this is a process of informalization within formal labor (Krein, Santos and Maracci, 2018).

Today, we are experiencing a new type of ‘informalization’ of work, which we can define as uberization. It presents itself as a rule and trend that permeates the world of work from top to bottom. We can understand it as a new form of control, management

EDITORIAL

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and organization (Abílio, 2020) that pressures the world of work as a reality or possible future, turning all workers in potentially uberizable. This trend is now promoted by the Brazilian State itself, and is on the backbone of the Labor Reform.

Uberization does not start with Uber nor is it exclusively associated with digital platforms. It refers more broadly to the consolidation of a worker deprived of rights and guarantees, who is subordinated, centrally controlled, and available for work. Their condition is that of an on-demand worker, a just-in-time worker.

Despite its novelty, uberization remits to the conflict in permanent movement that is at the core of the relationship between capital and labor. It is about the tension between, on one hand, the search for the use of the labor force in the most intense way, for the longest time, for the least socially possible value and, on the other hand, the search for the recognition of the worker as a human being and not as a pure labor force, which involves the social determinations about the workload, salary, limits of labor exploitation, rights and guarantees of the worker. The figure of the just-in-time worker consolidates the reduction of the worker to pure labor force. There are no more guarantees or limits on the duration or distribution of their working hours, not even on the remuneration per working day. The worker is available, but is used as a production factor, according to the determinations and interests of the companies. In this condition, they become solitarily responsible for their own social reproduction, which will depend on the success of their survival strategies; these, however, are subsumed to the companies' determinations made through work management. Looking at the Labor Reform, we can recognize intermittent work contract as the establishment of the condition of the worker on demand within the formal employment. In other words, it is possible to be a worker under the CLT who, despite being employed and available for work, is no longer guaranteed how much you work per day or earn at the end of the month.

Uberization also refers to the technical-political means for the consolidation of the just-in-time worker, in what we can define as algorithmic management. In this way, the process of informalization relies on technical-political means, which appear as neutral, but are politically determined and enable the rationalized management of a multitude of workers in time and space. Such rationalization is made in the relationship with the monopolization and oligopolization that the app-based companies seek. It is about, at the same time, informalizing the work and centralizing the control. The daily strategies of workers are incorporated as an element of management, transformed into data (for example, if when it rains the driver goes home; if the bike rider is willing to put his/ her safety at greater risk by riding at night). Uberization is related to surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2018), which is based on the transformation of daily life into administered data, which are extracted and used in an obscure, unawakened way and in permanent movement. In the field of labor, this means mapping the dynamics of a multitude of workers and at the same time mapping the dynamics of demand. However, more than this, the company not only maps but also organizes and holds the power over the rules of the game between supply and demand: operating themselves as a kind of invisible hand of the market, they hold the power to determine the value of work and its variation, the distribution of work in time and space; they define the size of the contingent of available workers, they do not fire (because they do not hire), but they register, unsubscribe and block workers. In this working relationship, a – asymmetrical – movement of feedback is established in which daily decisions and strategies are incorporated as elements of management, in indiscernible and unregulated ways. From the fallacy of entrepreneurship, we can move on to the definition of subordinate selfmanagement (Abílio, 2019). What is observed are workers who bear risks and costs and manage themselves subordinately. There is no prescription, there is a loss of definition – which gives a broader and more profound meaning to informality – of the rules of work. The forms of penalty, ranking and bonus that will operate in the distribution and pricing of individual and collective work are unclear and ubiquitous. There is no pre-established workload, not even a workplace, but workers' decisions are entirely subordinated to determinations that will

ultimately define their working time, the risks and costs they will assume, as well as informal strategies aimed at intensifying work and greater gains.

The workers define goals for themselves, which in reality concern how much work is needed to survive until the end of the month. They remain available and waiting for work, subjecting themselves to the risks and bearing the costs that the need to achieve this goal imposes. They become managers of themselves, who are subordinate, but nothing else is guaranteed. To be an on-demand worker is to be a worker who receives strictly for what you produce. All non-production time within the workday – the pores of the work – is transferred to the worker. In the details of the Labor Reform we also see the search for the equalization of working hours with effective production time, within the formal labor. The time that the workers use to move from the entrance of the establishment to their workstation, as well as the time to change uniforms already inside the workplace, are now transferred to them, as they no longer constitute effective production time.

Informalization as a rule leads us to a new understanding of informality, of the centrality of historically invisible workers, as well as to see that elements structurally associated with the periphery are becoming widespread in labor relations. However, in the midst of so many defeats, in the middle of a pandemic, we have seen uberized workers – the app delivery workers -- organizing themselves collectively and recognizing themselves politically as a crowd. They have provided visibility and materiality to the streets as the space of conflict between capital and labor, demanding a break in exploitation. The developments are not yet clear, but it is evident that new forms of resistance are being formed.

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