UNIONISM AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN SÃO PAULO'S AGRICULTURE BETWEEN 1930-1989: NOTES FROM A COMMONSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper proposes a reinterpretation of the development of the rural labor movement in the State of São Paulo between 1930 and 1989, by adopting a qualitative historical-institutionalist methodology based on John Rogers Commons' approach to labor economics. The research question explores how the "expansion of markets" and the "industrialization of agriculture" conditioned the transition from traditional labor movements to modern wage-earner organizations. The scope is centered on São Paulo as the frontier of Brazilian agricultural capitalism, analyzing the shift from the internalized colonato regime to the externalized labor market of temporary wage workers (boias-frias). By applying Commonsian categories such as collective action and bargaining power, the study argues that the emergence of autonomous rural unions in the 1980s was a necessary institutional response to the proletarianization of the countryside, aiming to stabilize industrial conflict through negotiated compromises rather than revolutionary confrontation.

Keywords: John Rogers Commons; Original Institutional Economics; labor movement; rural unionism in Brazil.
JEL Code: B15; J51; N36 & Q15.

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma reinterpretação do desenvolvimento do movimento trabalhista rural no Estado de São Paulo entre 1930 e 1984, adotando uma metodologia qualitativa histórico-institucionalista baseada na economia do trabalho de John Rogers Commons. A pergunta de pesquisa explora como a "expansão dos mercados" e a "industrialização da agricultura" condicionaram a transição de movimentos trabalhistas tradicionais para organizações assalariadas modernas. O escopo centra-se em São Paulo como a fronteira do capitalismo agrário brasileiro, analisando a mudança do regime de colonato internalizado para o mercado de trabalho externalizado de trabalhadores assalariados temporários (boias-frias). Ao aplicar categorias commonsianas, como ação coletiva e poder de barganha, o estudo argumenta que o surgimento de sindicatos rurais autônomos na década de 1980 foi uma resposta institucional necessária à proletarização do campo, visando estabilizar o conflito industrial por meio de compromissos negociados em vez de confrontação revolucionária..

Palavras-chave: John Rogers Commons; Economia Institucional Original; Movimento Trabalhista; Sindicalismo Rural no Brasil.
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1 Introduction

The period between 1930 and 1989 encompasses a series of transformations in the economic organization and in the structures of labor relations in rural Brazil. These changes culminated in the constitution of a fully wage-earning agricultural working class – replacing the then-prevailing semi-waged *colonato* system – whose most widespread expression was temporary labor contracts (*boia-fria*). During this period of profound transformation, the characteristics and conflicts inherent in wage labor led rural workers to organize and pursue strategies to defend their interests through demands for collective representation, shaping the history of the agribusiness labor movement to this day.

By recognizing the lasting impact of the transition to waged labor in this sector, as well as the importance of workers' collective action in responding to the challenges posed by changing transactional relations with employers, this paper seeks to reassess this period in Brazilian labor historiography from a new theoretical perspective. It does so by interpreting developments in this sector through the analytical framework developed by the American institutionalist John R. Commons, emphasizing industry transformations related to market expansion, conflicts of interest, and shifts in economic power among stakeholders, rather than focusing on technological change.

In his approach, Commons sought to articulate market expansion (through demographic growth, improvements in transport and communication infrastructure, growth of exports, and urbanization) in terms of changes in the internal structure of productive units, particularly labor relations. As the market expands, it promotes modifications in the division of labor and cooperation among the actors engaged in productive activity. Social differentiation separates individuals and groups and sets them against each other in the search for participation in income and control over the labor process. From this perspective, technical progress is not always the restructuring element of labor relations, although it is decisive when wage labor fully develops.

This article is organized into three parts. The first engages directly with key elements of John R. Commons's institutionalist framework, presenting his historiography of labor movements and his approach to the role of labor unions. The second examines labor relations in rural São Paulo, Brazil, drawing on the periodization proposed by Graziano da Silva (1996), which distinguishes a phase of agricultural and livestock modernization (1930–1964) from a phase of agricultural and livestock industrialization (1955–1984). Building on

this broader periodization, the article identifies three analytical stages in the development of rural labor relations and collective action: 1930–1964, 1964–1980, and 1980–1989. The focus on the State of São Paulo is justified both by the analytical limits of addressing the full diversity of production relations in the Brazilian countryside within a single discussion and by São Paulo's status as the most advanced case of capitalist development in Brazilian agriculture, making it a representative setting for analyzing the formation and transformation of capitalist labor relations. Examining the trajectory of labor relations and workers' organizations in this context helps capture the main changes in rural labor movements. The third part of the article presents the concluding remarks.

2 The Labor Economics of John Rogers Commons

John Rogers Commons is considered one of the greatest labor economists in the United States, having seminal contributions both to the historiography of the North American labor movement and to the theory of unionism as an institution of collective action[1]. In the first case, three works written or coordinated by Commons are particularly influential: *A Documentary History of the American Industrial Society* (1910); *History of Labour in the United States*, a collection of texts he organized and published in 1918; and his essay *American Shoemakers, 1648–1895: A Sketch of Industrial Evolution* (Commons, 1909), which offers a particularly clear synthesis of his approach to institutional change. In the second case, Commons developed his theory of trade unions in *Labor and Administration* (1913), the two editions of *Trade Unionism and Labor Problems* (1905; 1921) and in a series of shorter writings, including "The Passing of Samuel Gompers," (Commons, 1925) in which, while delivering the funeral eulogy of the prominent American union leader, he articulated his conception of the role of unions and their leadership.

2.1 Commons' historiography of the American labor movement

In the introductory note to the History of Labor in the United States (1918), a collective work produced by the so-called "Wisconsin team", Commons treated the history of the working class in the United States as an integral part of the country's political and industrial history. As he explained, "It is the history of how, in the course of three centuries,

[1] Beyond being described as the worker's economist of Original Institutional Economics (Chasse, 2017), Commons was among the first individuals elected to the Labor Hall of Honor of the U.S. Department of Labor, which recognized his decisive influence on the development of progressive social and labor legislation in the United States throughout the twentieth century.

the wage-earner, as a distinct class, has been gradually, even violently, separating himself from the farmer, the Merchant, and the employer, and coming to feel that his standing and progress in society depend directly on wages and not directly on prices, rents, profits or interest" (Commons, 1918, pp. 3–4).

For Commons, the formation of the American working class and its unionism was shaped by a distinct set of conditions. Central among them was the existence of a "free frontier", which enabled the territorial mobility of the poor toward the West as an escape from labor relations based on command/obedience transactions. The availability of free and abundant land expanded employment opportunities and enhanced wage earners' bargaining power. It also influenced workers' social outlook, as struggles for access to land by a so-called "middle" or "productive" class overlapped with those of wage earners, fostering individualistic social philosophies rather than union- or labor-centered ones. Consequently, the earliest conflicts involving wage workers were directed not primarily towards employers, but against speculators and slaveholders seeking to monopolize access to and ownership of land.

A second factor was the early establishment of universal suffrage (for white adult males) by the second decade of the nineteenth century, which provided workers with relatively autonomous political instruments to pursue their interests and rights. A third and perhaps most decisive factor was the expansion of markets resulting from territorial unification and the development of transport infrastructure following Independence. This process not only created the practical necessity for bargaining but also fostered a distinct "bargaining mentality" among workers.

Commons then identified three stages in which market expansion shaped labor relations. The first, spanning the entire colonial period (1622–1776), was characterized by craft production, which took two basic forms. In the earliest form, the artisan journeyed to the client, carrying the means of production. As the division of labor deepened, a second form emerged in which the artisan became established in a fixed location, typically a village or town, and clients reached him at his site. During this stage, Commons notes that "the interest of the small Merchant, employer, and journeyman were identical, and, so far as they formed organizations to protect or strengthen their bargaining power, these organizations included, often in the same individual, all of the economic functions of wage-earning, price-fixing, and profit-making. Such was the typical organization of the guild, whose occasional

appearance is noted in our colonial period, and of the charitable and benevolent societies of the early decades of the nineteenth century" (Commons 1918, p. 7).

The Constitution of 1787 inaugurated the manufacturing stage by dismantling barriers that had separated the colonies, thereby expanding the market and intensifying social differentiation. In this context, labor relations became structured around bargaining over prices, involving, on the one hand, wage earners employed by manufacturers and, on the other, wholesale merchants financed by bankers. The manufacturer's income depended on the price obtained from the merchant, and efforts to increase profit margins, therefore, translated into downward pressure on wages. With the consolidation of a national market in the 1880s, these opposing interests became more clearly defined and were institutionalized through the organization of the two classes into firms and trade unions.

The administrative structure of the State was consolidated, albeit in a fragmented and conflictual manner across subnational entities. One branch of the State, however, played a particularly decisive role in shaping the North American labor and union movement: the judiciary. According to Commons, the courts largely served dominant interests by blocking or nullifying workers' legislative gains and by confining class struggle to an exclusive economic sphere. At the same time, this judicial intervention reinforced collective bargaining as the primary arena of labor conflict. As a result, the American labor movement advanced less through legislative support than through the direct exercise of bargaining power vis-à-vis capital (Commons 1918, p. 9).

Another important force shaping American unionism was immigration and the racial question, particularly the incorporation of Black workers after Abolition, which posed both organizational and strategic challenges for trade unions. The organizational challenge lay in assimilating a highly heterogeneous workforce into unions, whose effectiveness depends on workers overcoming mutual competition and embracing collective cooperation. The strategic challenge concerned unions' capacity to secure their members' interests through exclusionary practices, especially by limiting competition from non-union labor.

The following table (Table 1) synthesizes Commons' historiography of the labor movement in the United States, organizing historical stages according to structural conditions, dominant labor relations, and their implications for union formation.

Table 1- Stages of Market Expansion and Labor Relations in Commons

Stage/period	Structural conditions	Labor relations	Implications for unionism
Colonial / Craft Stage (1622–1776)	Limited markets; craft production; free frontier with abundant land	Overlapping roles of artisan, employer, and merchant; largely identical interests	Weak class differentiation; guilds and benevolent societies combining wage-earning, price-fixing, and profit-making
Early National / Manufacturing Stage (post-1787)	Removal of intercolonial barriers; market expansion; free frontier; early universal suffrage (white males)	Growing differentiation between wage earners and employers; bargaining over prices and wages	Individualistic social outlook persists; early conflicts directed against land speculators and slaveholders
National Market & Institutional Consolidation (late 19th–early 20th c.)	Territorial unification; transport infrastructure; immigration; racial incorporation; judicial dominance	Clear employer–worker antagonism; class struggle confined to economic bargaining	Unions and firms consolidated; collective bargaining central; legislative routes constrained

Source: Author's elaboration based on John R. Commons' historical-institutional analysis in Commons (1918)

In summary, Commons approached the history of industry and labor as a process of institutional change driven by shifts in the scope of markets and in the transactional relations among economic actors. His method consisted of tracing how the expansion and integration of markets reshape bargaining positions, redefine economic roles, and generate new forms of collective organization. Historical periods were thus distinguished by dominant types of transactions, such as overlapping craft relations, price bargaining between differentiated actors, and organized collective bargaining between classes, rather than by technical characteristics of production. From this perspective, unions would emerge as responses to changing configurations of power within markets, while legal and political institutions delimit the arenas in which transactions take place. This analytical focus allowed Commons to connect industrial history to broader processes of social organization and class formation.

2.2 The Commonsian approach to labor unions

As a labor economist, Commons was aware of the problems surrounding the world of labor in the United States, especially "[...] when unions were incessantly involved in the struggle to survive against employers, the State, and a prevailing intellectual climate that refused to recognize their importance" (Barbash, 1967, p. 161). For this reason, much of his theoretical work and practical action focused on labor relations in American capitalism in the early 1900s. In 1901, he worked on the American Industrial Commission, analyzing the problem of immigration and later publishing on it. Then, in 1902, he worked for the National Civic Federation, where he helped facilitate conciliation between capital and labor. As Richard Gonce (2002) called them, the years between 1899 and 1904, in which Commons was part of such experiments, would be his "five big years", shaping his approach to economics from that point forward.

As a result of the work with the Industrial Commission and the National Civic Federation, Commons accumulated extensive knowledge and practical experience in labor issues and labor institutions (Rutherford & Samuels, 1996, p. 6). Drawing on this expertise, Richard T. Ely invited his former assistant to join the University of Wisconsin, where he would teach labor economics and undertake a systematic study of the labor movement's history. Returning to academia in 1904, Commons immersed himself in historical research on labor, which ultimately resulted in the publication of the ten volumes of Documentary History of American Industrial Society and the four volumes of History of the Labor Movement in the United States.

His general position regarding labor problems can be summarized as treating it as a basic issue of his regulated capitalism, since, despite identifying the conflictual nature between capital and labor, he believed it to be possible to reach, not class harmony, but negotiated compromises in specific institutions capable of promoting the convergence of interests and organizing conflicts (Commons, 1934, p. 7). This meant recognizing the importance of a "constitutional government of industry," where voluntary conciliation of interests is preferred to arbitration by an external authority.

Furthermore, as Barbash (1967) observed, Commons's treatment of the labor problem was critical of both individualism, which placed responsibility for working conditions and remuneration on the isolated worker, and collectivism, which subordinated individual interests to those of the social class. Rejecting both positions, Commons argued

that workers occupy a structurally unequal position in the capital–labor relationship due to disparities in bargaining power. He defined bargaining power as the capacity to "withhold from others what belongs to self but is needed by others" (Commons, 1924, p. 32). This power operates within a field of opportunity in which neither party is bound by duties of performance or abstention with respect to the transaction itself, allowing negotiation to proceed through persuasion or coercion within legally permissible limits (Commons, 1924, p. 262).

While capitalists could negotiate from a position of unity, either through the firm itself or through coordinated agreements over labor, workers remained fragmented and therefore structurally weakened in collective bargaining. When a worker's income depends unilaterally on the employer, and the only alternative to agreement is the complete suspension of the transaction through unemployment, the worker possesses no effective withholding power. For this reason, Commons argued that "only through organized group action by workers can equality in withholding power be even approximated" (Commons & Andrews, 1916 [1936], p. 374).

Consequently, his approach sought to empower workers by strengthening unions and unionism, enabling collective action to enhance bargaining power and thereby equalize bargaining conditions. Commons's model of unionism, however, was not the revolutionary model associated with Marxism but the reformist one exemplified by American labor unionist Samuel Gompers (Commons, 1925). In his view, communism and revolutionary unionism were unlikely to take root in the United States because the working class was composed of heterogeneous individuals, divided by differences of race, beliefs, national origin, gender, and other social markers that tended to fragment class solidarity and collective identity.

As summarized by Jeronimo and Guedes (2023), in Commons's work, unions are thus a central going concern in the regulation of capitalism. They operate as collective agents that address the structural asymmetry of bargaining power between labor and capital by organizing workers' collective withholding power, transforming coercion into persuasion, and institutionalizing "reasonable" outcomes through collective bargaining. Their primary role is to shape and defend the working rules governing bargaining, managerial, and rationing transactions, thereby stabilizing expectations and embedding industrial conflict within democratic procedures. For Commons, unions are neither revolutionary instruments nor mere appendages of the state; rather, they should be legally protected yet autonomous,

operating within a framework of voluntary collective bargaining that promotes industrial democracy and integrates labor into the governance of economic life under capitalism.

Moreover, Commons always emphasized, based on his broad relationship with practical men and unionists who dealt with concrete men, the fact that workers desire fair working conditions and wages, as well as respect for the dignity of the worker. And this, for him, could be achieved within capitalism. As Barbash (1967, p. 167) observed: "The vital essence of Commons' intellectual style is for me in his belief that the humanity of man towards other men is not only good, but works. The humane treatment of the worker is not incompatible with profitability; on the contrary, as Commons used to say 'the intangible goodwill of labor can be as profitable as the scientific management of labor".

Finally, Commons's historiography of the American labor movement and his theory of unionism form a single analytical framework centered on market expansion, shifting transactional relations, and the problem of unequal bargaining power. His historical reconstruction of labor in the United States shows how successive enlargements and integrations of markets progressively differentiated economic roles and transformed overlapping craft relations into antagonistic relations between organized classes. Within this process, workers' vulnerability did not result from technology or production per se, but from their position in transactions in which employers held superior withholding power. Commons' theory of unions emerges directly from this historical diagnosis: unions are not external correctives to capitalism, but collective responses aimed at reorganizing workers' collective action and balancing bargaining power under conditions of expanding markets.

By examining the historical trajectory of Brazilian agricultural labor through the dual focus on market expansion and collective organization, the following section applies Commons's institutional framework to the case study of São Paulo, highlighting how changes in transactions, access to land, and labor contracts conditioned both the emergence and the limits of rural collective action. In doing so, it seeks to connect agriculture's history, labor conflict, and institutional change in a manner consistent with Commons's analytical method, while accounting for the specificities of Brazilian development.

3 Labor movement and labor organizations in rural Brazil

In this section, we will discuss a segment of the Brazilian labor movement that is generally overlooked in the relevant literature: the rural sector and, within that, the one in

São Paulo. We will distinguish two phases of this movement, which are connected to broader economic and political changes: the first, the rural workers' movement (*movimento dos trabalhadores rurais*), and the second, the rural labor movement (*movimento operário rural)*. The former was an old form of collective action of resistance and organization by peasant or semi-peasant workers, whose main struggle centered on access to and permanence on the land, as well as labor demands linked to colonato and housing contracts; the latter is more recent, beginning in 1984, when agricultural wage earners, for the first time, united as a class (a class in itself) to organize and sustain a strike in Guariba, São Paulo, demanding an exclusively wage-focused agenda of interests.

Before this, between 1930 and 1980, sporadic strikes and isolated unions existed, but a coherent rural worker movement was absent due to three main factors: (i) Rural workers were not fully "freed" from the means of production, retaining limited land rights while living predominantly on farms under *mandonismo* (bossism) labor relations; (ii) Labor claims were hybrid, mixing wage demands with land rights (agrarian reform, agricultural policy); and (iii) Union leadership often came from small farmers, not agricultural wage earners. Thus, the rural worker movement as a wage-focused collective action emerged only after the proletarianization of agricultural workers.

3.1 Early Rural Labor Relations in São Paulo (1930–1964)

The period between 1930 and 1964 saw a stage of modest technical change in agriculture, with a discreet increase in means of production (inputs and machines) of industrial origin. Because the use of technical progress was limited by the restricted nature of the larger process of Brazilian industrialization, agricultural modernization depended on the capacity to import, which was significantly limited (Graziano da Silva, 1996). In this period, therefore, the expansion of markets was the fundamental element in explaining labor relations in the field and its forms of organization, as suggested by Commonsian theory. Indeed, this short period saw urbanization advance (most notably with the inauguration of Brasília in 1960) and greater national integration through roads and railways, as well as the loss of relative importance of the agricultural sector despite demographic growth.

The predominant rural labor regime throughout this period was the *colonato,* found mainly in the south-east and north-east regions, in coffee and sugar cane crops. In the state of São Paulo, this labor regime was predominant since the end of the 19th century, when it became the agrarian elites' alternative to the labor problem resulting from the Abolition of

Slavery (1888). In this labor regime, employment relations were permanent, since the labor market was internalized on the farm where the rural worker and his family lived and worked. This contract involved the following arrangement: the farmer hired the worker and his family, providing housing and a small plot of land on which they could raise and cultivate crops on a small scale for subsistence and, in some cases, for the market, where they sold the surplus of domestic production. In return, the family's labor force was mobilized for various stages of the farm's commercial agricultural activity (coffee, cane, etc.), especially soil preparation, planting, and cultural treatments. In the crucial harvest phase, the farmer paid the family in cash, according to the amount harvested (Guimarães, 2005, p. 95).

The employers (farmers) produced mostly coffee, which wholesalers (coffee commissioners) exported to external markets. Every actor depended, in the last instance, on the price of coffee, which was formed in the commodity exchanges in external markets.

In this way, the price paid to the coffee farmer was a fraction of the total price, which should also remunerate the wholesalers and retailers who marketed it. As a price taker, his influence over international channels of commercialization was small, but as a producer his influence over the income he received from that price was significant because of the enormous power they held as a class to influence the exchange rate and, in this way, appropriate gains and socialize losses. Furthermore, as a producer, the farmer should organize the productive process through agents in general.

From the perspective of employers, the *colonato* effectively addressed the problems of an inelastic labor supply, resulting from the abolition of slavery and, later, rural–urban migration, since the internalization of employment guaranteed a continuous supply of labor without requiring farms to compete with one another for workers and thereby raise labor costs. Moreover, by making employment permanent and stable, it eliminated the transaction costs associated with hiring, training, and dismissing workers. The role this labor arrangement played in providing incentives for more efficient use of labor should also not be underestimated, particularly through monetary remuneration based on output. Furthermore, it substantially reduced uncertainty because, by internalizing part of the risk, when the prices or demand for commercial products declined, the labor force could revert to subsistence activities, allowing the farm to avoid the monetary costs of wages. Finally, it reduced the opportunities available to the *colono*/resident to negotiate better working and contractual conditions, as the limited possibility of easily abandoning the farm in search of alternative urban or rural employment constrained their bargaining power.

The contracts constituted a barrier to the voluntary initiative of the *colono* families; the veiled or open threat of violence by the farmer, as well as the incipient development of urban-industrial centers in the country, made the search for alternatives difficult for the rural worker. The reduction of opportunities for alternative employment for the labor force was an important condition, as we saw in Commons (1924), for collective bargaining to favor the employer.

From the worker's perspective, the *colonato* was an imperfect contract, which gave rise to its recurrent non-compliance by the employer. As it was a contract negotiated and established between individuals, i.e., formally equal natural persons (on one side the individual employee and on the other the individual employer), the correlation of forces favored the employer. Likewise, the distance between the farms and the urban centers was still significant enough to block the mobility of rural workers, reducing the opportunity for that possibility to strengthen their bargaining power. Perhaps more importantly, from the point of view of his objective conditions and consciousness, the rural worker of this period was not a pure wage earner, as he was linked to the land by the labor contract that kept him (and his family) living on the farm. Stuck in hybrid labor relations, "peasant" aspirations developed in his consciousness and forms of organization and struggle, fighting for the right to land, while at the same time defending his condition as a worker remunerated by the work of the harvest. This objective condition of work, in its duality, gave rise to the two main forms of organization and struggle among rural workers.

In this period, rural workers' organization and struggles took on particular forms. In terms of struggle, they centered on individual conflicts and complaints involving obedience to the *colono*/resident's employment contract, which the employer frequently disrespected. In terms of organization, they began timidly in the form of rural workers' unions – the first of them being created in 1932 (Medeiros, 1989) – which found a strong obstacle in Labor Legislation since this excluded rural workers' unions from its regulation until at least 1944. According to Coletti (1998), Decree-Law n. 1402 of 05/08/1939, determined the inapplicability of labor legislation to professional activities related to agriculture and livestock and referred to the authorization of unionization to special regulation, which would only be carried out in 1962. For Coletti (1998, p. 36), "The CLT in its article 7, letter 'b', also made it clear that its precepts would not apply to agricultural workers, except when there were, in each case, determinations to the contrary. In short, until 1943, the countryside was practically alien to the corporatist union structure built since Getúlio Vargas's rise to power in 1931".

Rural workers' unions gained formal recognition in 1944, through Decree-Law n. 7.038 of 10/11/1944, which linked them to the official union as stipulated in the CLT. As is known, through the CLT the Brazilian State instituted effective mechanisms to discipline and regulate labor conflicts, first through the granting of the union charter, which enabled the State to authorize/recognize or not any union unit; secondly, through union unity, which was the state grant of the monopoly of representation of the professional category in a certain territory to the official union and, finally, the attribution of rights to the union to collect union tax, fees and receive the contribution from its Confederations.

Benefiting from this legislation, the redemocratization of Brazil after the end of the Vargas government in 1945, and its legalization in 1946, the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) expanded its political action, organizing workers, preferably in unions with a political-ideological orientation. At the PCB's initiative, workers organized themselves in 1954 to create the Union of Brazilian Farmers and Agricultural Workers (ULTAB), an attempt to expand the collective action of rural workers across most of the national territory.

Another form of organization of the rural workers' struggle emerged in the same year, 1954, revealing the unfolding of the hybrid condition of the colono worker and, at the same time, the synchronous maturation of the rural workers' struggle in this period. These are the Peasant Leagues, a different movement, although they originated from the same social base: the *colono*/resident. The organizational option was the Civil Association with cooperative purposes, which bypassed the difficulties of creating unions (which depended on prior authorization to function) while remaining "autonomous" from the tutelage of the federal government, through the collective action of associated rural workers. Initially, they brought together rural workers in the defense of their interests stipulated in the contract, but evolved to add another demand, this one destabilizing from the perspective of the rural status quo: agrarian reform.

Both movements disputed how rural workers organized and oriented their collective action during this period. Another institutional actor, however, soon entered the dispute over hegemony in the organization and leadership of rural workers: the Catholic Church. Fearing losing its influence in the countryside, where it constituted together with the farmers the rural status quo, the Catholic Church promoted rural unionization through its wide network of parishes scattered throughout the interior of the country, the militancy of Catholic laypeople, such as those of the Workers' Circles, and the Catholic University Youth (Barros, 1987; Medeiros, 1989; Coletti, 1998).

The specialized literature recognizes the four-year period 1960-63 as the Golden Age of rural workers' unionism in Brazil. During this period, the progressive government of João Goulart encouraged the expansion of unions through three measures: Ordinances 209-A, of 06/25/1962, 355-A, of 11/20/1962, and the approval, by initiative of the Federal Legislature, of the Rural Worker Statute, on 03/02/1963. The first reduced the requirements for the formation of rural unions by authorizing the organization of unions with at least 50 members, in addition to allowing the conversion of Work Associations and Cooperatives into unions within 6 months of their founding, provided other legal requirements were met; the second redefined the professional categories that could join the unions, including among them independent producers. And the third extended to rural workers the labor rights (paid vacations, thirteenth salary, etc.) already granted to urban workers.

These legal changes boosted the organizational capacity of rural workers, who created, in 1963, the Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG), which initially brought together 14 federations and 475 rural workers' unions. Despite this, in the view of Barros (1987, p. 61) and Coletti (1998, p. 52), the objective of this legislation was to empty the Peasant Leagues, which organized, mobilized, and represented an immense social contingent of rural workers.

In contrast to the American labor movement analyzed by Commons, the Brazilian rural labor movement developed under the strong influence of political parties and ideological institutions that instrumentalized collective action to pursue their own political objectives. This hindered the emergence of an authentic and autonomous form of unionism organized "from below" and controlled by workers themselves. It also developed within a framework of state labor legislation that relied on judicial and executive powers for implementation, thereby limiting rural workers' development of the bargaining skills and mentality necessary to shape their collective action and effectively counterbalance employers.

3.2 Industrialization, Externalization of Employment, and the Rise of Wage Labor (1964–1980)

The peak of the labor movement and rural unionism occurred between 1962 and 1963 (Barros, 1987). In 1964, a civil-military coup introduced a dictatorial regime that lasted more than 20 years, from 1964 to 1985. The dictatorial government operated in the countryside by two logics: on the one hand, it revoked the union charter of the most combative unions linked to the PCB, arrested their leaders and harshly repressed the

manifestations of contestation in rural Brazil, taking care to also eliminate the Peasant Leagues; on the other hand, it promoted, through agricultural and credit policies, the modernization of the unproductive large estate.

In fact, between 1964 and 1980, the industrialization of Brazilian agriculture advanced significantly, with the creation of a department producing agricultural means of production, freeing the modernizing dynamic of the latter from the yoke of import capacity. Factories for tractors and agricultural machinery, fertilizer and pesticide industries, seed industries, etc., were installed in this period, deepening agriculture's dependence on inputs of industrial origin. That is, the introduction and dissemination of technical progress in agriculture became the fundamental axis for structuring labor relations in rural Brazil.

The industrialization of Brazilian agriculture, the emergence of agro-industrial complexes, and their welding with other productive segments were not a spontaneous work promoted by the market. On the contrary, in the post-64 regime, the dominant view of agrarian development present in the State promoted the employer sector through extensive and deep public intervention. The main instrument, widely emphasized in all the literature on the subject, was agricultural credit (both investment and funding). Available until 1980 in abundance and highly subsidized, it served as a means to boost the productive integration that materialized in the complexes. It financed the purchase of inputs and machines produced in the capital goods sector for agriculture, as well as the working capital needed to buy industrial inputs used in modern agriculture (Delgado, 1985; Muller, 1989; Graziano da Silva, 1996).

This model of agricultural development, with an emphasis on employer agriculture, accelerated the differentiation and decomposition of peasant agriculture, depriving many former rural producers of land suitable for the new technical requirements. Rural poverty, as a corollary, rose in the countryside (Palmeira, 1985). Small farmers did not accept it passively, having resisted, even under the severe repressive regime, this process of expropriation (Martins, 1990). Alongside this, wage production relations (permanent and temporary) expanded, giving rise to a non-negligible rural proletariat.

The genesis of the wage worker in São Paulo's agriculture was nothing more than the historical expression of the externalization of the farm labor market. As they modernized and articulated more fully with the markets for products, inputs, credit, and land, the farms promoted, generally through the expulsion of the resident, the dissolution of *colonato*-type relations. The expansion of markets and the deepening of the social division of labor in the

Brazilian countryside altered the internal organization of the farm's productive unit. In practice, they externalized employment relations, transferring their governance to the market.

The social sciences in Brazil have exhaustively investigated the process of externalization. The seminal works of Caio Prado Júnior and Ignácio Rangel in the early sixties of the 20th century are well known, and they analyzed it in the context of the profound structural transformations through which Brazilian agriculture was then passing: the process of modernization and industrialization of agriculture. The studies of D'incao (1976), Kageyama (1982), and Graziano da Silva (1982b) build on the tradition of the authors cited previously and constitute mandatory references for studying the constitution, role, and dynamics of the wage labor market in agriculture.

These works and others share common points of view regarding the origin of wage labor in São Paulo's agriculture, which can be summarized as follows: a) They treat it as the product of the expansion of mercantile production relations to the field, which expels *colonos* from the farm and forces family farmers to resort increasingly intensely to markets, including the labor market, and convert some of their members into pure wage earners; b) They state that seasonality is not natural and intrinsic to agricultural activity, but a product of the dissolution of past social relations, in which economic activity on the land combined a totality of which agriculture was one; c) They recognize that although it is not its first determinant, institutions (especially labor legislation) played an important role in the sense of accelerating the more general movement of capital and conditioning some aspects of the functioning of the agricultural labor market.

Table 2 shows the evolution of the structure of labor occupations in the State of São Paulo in the 1970s, highlighting the growth of wage labor relations in this unit of the Federation. In contrast, family farmers decreased in the composition of rural employment, while temporary wage workers grew sharply.

Table 2 – Percentage composition of agricultural employment (in people) and annual variation rates, according to categories of rural workers in the State of São Paulo, 1970, 1975 and 1980

Categories	1970 (%)	1975 (%)	1980 (%)	Annual rate (1970–1980)
Family labor	61.2	54.2	43.9	-2.84
Permanent wage earners	18.6	23.5	23.8	2.96
Temporary wage earners	20.2	22.3	32.3	5.32
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	NA

Source: Coletti (1998, p. 127).

From the standpoint of the organization of work and labor struggles, it is important to note that once the Military Regime dismantled unions' organizational and mobilizing capacities, it sought to remodel those that remained, primarily rural workers' unions led by Church agents or subordinated to government guidelines. Union action was redirected toward welfare activities and punctual, non-confrontational demands. This process was reinforced by Ordinance no. 71 of February 1965, issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, which revoked the existing union framework that allowed up to four rural workers' unions within the same territorial base, whether a municipality or region. In its place, a new structure was imposed whereby rural workers were represented by a single union per territory. As a result, small rural producers, including small landowners, tenants, sharecroppers, and rural wage earners, were incorporated into the same union. Moreover, because the vast majority of union leaders came from small-producer backgrounds, their class position significantly shaped the political orientation and management of these unions.

The literature on this issue has been divided. Some, like Ferrante (1980), state that this social heterogeneity is problematic because it introduces a contradiction in union management and representation; after all, some small producers employ, especially at harvest time, wage workers. How could the interests of wage earners be defended if the small producers themselves employed them? Coletti (1998) qualified this type of observation by noting in the empirical work he carried out in the São Paulo region of Ribeirão Preto that class position is less important than the posture and disposition of union leaders to break

with "peleguismo" (government-controlled unionism), bureaucratization, and the reduction of union action to welfare practices.

Be that as it may, the labor movement and rural unionism changed because of changes in the productive structure of Brazilian agriculture and livestock. The most important of these concerns the growth of wage labor participation in rural Brazil, especially in the State of São Paulo. According to Table 2, over a decade of industrialization in agriculture and livestock, wage labor accounted for more than 60% of agricultural employment, making the employment of small rural landowners less relevant. This change, however, was not immediately reflected in the union organization of rural workers, which remained united and largely directed by small producers, as mentioned previously.

One event, however, catalyzed and gave political form to an enormous set of dissatisfactions and discontent (low wages, degrading working conditions, disrespect regarding compliance with labor legislation, etc.) within the temporary rural wage earners of São Paulo: the Guariba strikes, happening in the city of Guariba, but soon spreading to other São Paulo sugarcane municipalities in the years 1984, 85 and 86. This strike movement, spontaneous and carried out by temporary wage workers, took both employers and rural workers' unions and their federations (Fetaesp) by surprise. They allowed the emergence of new union leaders, more combative and closer to the reality and needs of this segment of rural wage earners (Ferrante, 1989). They also gave rise to the questioning of union unity, initially disputing space in the union structure of Fetaesp, then creating parallel unions in the same territorial base (invariably suspended by the Labor Legislation in force), until finally constituting themselves in 1989 – after the Federal Constitution promulgated in 1988 eliminated the need for prior authorization from the Ministry of Labor for the creation of unions – into Employee Unions and the Federation of Rural Wage Employees of the State of São Paulo (FERAESP). At this moment, a *rural worker movement* begins in the state's countryside.

The case of rural labor in São Paulo between 1930 and 1989 illustrates how market expansion reshaped both the internal and external dynamics of the colonato system, fundamentally influencing workers' forms of struggle and organization. As agriculture industrialized and employment relations were externalized, the traditional structures of collective action proved inadequate to represent the emerging rural wage workers. By the 1980s, spontaneous strikes and stoppages revealed the limits of established unions (CONTAG, FERAESP) and prompted the creation of new unions that represented rural

wage laborers exclusively. This transition marked the consolidation of a wage-focused rural labor movement, inaugurating a distinct phase in the history of rural unionism in São Paulo and Brazil more broadly.

Overall, through the lens of John R. Commons's institutional framework, the case of agriculture in São Paulo can be presented in three distinct stages. In the period from 1930 to 1964, the predominance of the colonato corresponded to an internalized employment regime in which workers' dependence on land, limited occupational alternatives, and asymmetric bargaining power constrained the emergence of autonomous collective action, giving rise to conflicts that were largely individualized and hybrid, combining labor and land claims. Between 1964 and 1980, the industrialization of agriculture and the deepening of its articulation with markets for inputs, credit, and products promoted the externalization of employment and the expansion of wage labor, especially in its temporary form; however, authoritarian state intervention and the restructuring of rural unionism prevented these structural changes from being fully translated into effective collective bargaining power. Finally, from 1980 to 1989, the consolidation of a significant contingent of fully proletarianized rural wage workers and the intensification of competitive pressures in labor markets created the conditions for collective action centered exclusively on wages and working conditions, culminating in the Guariba strikes and the reorganization of rural unionism.

The following Table (Table 3) presents the evolution of rural labor and collective organization in São Paulo between 1930 and 1989, synthesizing the historiography of the rural labor movement by defining periods based on structural and economic conditions, dominant labor relations, and their implications for collective action.

Table 3 – Evolution of Rural Labor and Organization in São Paulo, Brazil (1930–1989)

Stage/period	Structural conditions	Labor relations	Organization / labor movement
1930–1964	Limited modernization; market expansion; early urbanization and national integration; colonato system	Colonato/housing: workers and families lived on farms; mixed remuneration (cash + subsistence); hybrid relations with ties to the land.	First associations: rural unions (1932), Peasant Leagues (1954), PCB initiatives; Catholic Church support

Stage/period	Structural conditions	Labor relations	Organization / labor movement
	predominant in SE and NE (coffee, sugarcane).		through unions and Workers' Circles.
1964–1980	Agricultural industrialization; emergence of agro-industrial complexes; expansion of credit; technical modernization.	Growth of wage labor; distinction between permanent workers (CLT-protected) and temporary workers (seasonal and volantes); dissolution of colonato.	Unions reshaped under the military regime; territorial union unification; leadership mostly smallholders; small farmers resisted expropriation.
1980–1989	Consolidation of mechanization and market integration; increased dependence on industrial inputs.	Growth of temporary wage labor; Guariba strikes (1984–1986) as a key moment for temporary workers' organization.	Emergence of new combative union leaders; challenges to union unity; creation of parallel unions; FERAESP formed in 1989.

Source: Created by the authors.

4 Conclusion

In John R. Commons' economic theory, unions emerged as a response to the social transformations inherent in the expansion of capitalism and the race-to-the-bottom pressures of competition. As markets expanded, the internal division of labor within productive units and cooperation between units changed, gradually stripping workers of control over the labor process and the determinants of their income. The worker thus became a seller of labor rather than a direct controller of production. Facing the impersonal and coercive power of capital, workers created unions to defend their collective interests. His work emphasized that unions transformed the individual bargain with the employer into a collective one, balancing the relative power between labor and capital. To fulfill this role effectively, unions needed to be autonomous from political parties, focused on their

members' economic interests, and vertically organized to centralize representation across an entire professional category.

Building on these principles, this article examined the evolution of labor relations and unionism among rural workers in São Paulo between 1930 and 1989. Market expansion in rural São Paulo reshaped both the internal and external dynamics of the colonato system, influencing rural workers' forms of struggle and organization. As agricultural industrialization intensified and the labor market was externalized, expelling colonos and residents, the established forms of unionism could not adequately represent the emerging rural wage worker. In the 1980s, strikes and stoppages revealed the limitations of the existing union structure and contributed to the creation of unions representing rural wage laborers exclusively. This marked the emergence of a fully wage-oriented rural labor movement in São Paulo, inaugurating a new phase in Brazil's rural labor history.

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