

A photograph of a sugarcane harvester working in a field. The harvester is wearing a blue cap and dark clothing, and is positioned in the center-left of the frame, facing right. The field is filled with tall, dry sugarcane stalks that are being cut and piled up. The background shows more of the field and some greenery in the distance.

GLOCON

Global Change - Local Conflicts

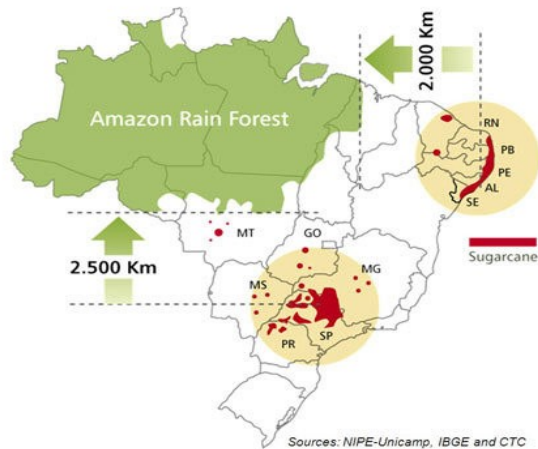
The bargaining power of workers and unions in the sugarcane sector in São Paulo

**Berlin 2.12.2016
Jan Brunner**

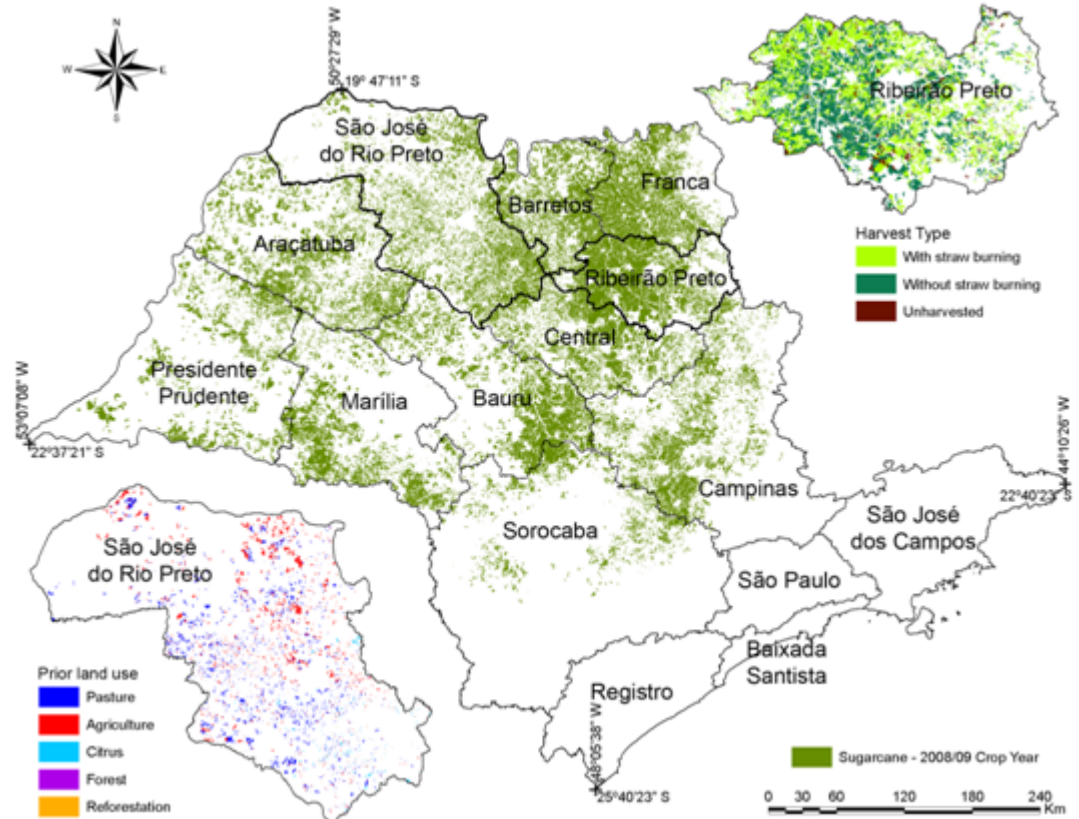
Sugarcane Expansion in São Paulo State



Sugarcane producing regions in Brazil



Sources: NIPE-Unicamp, IBGE and CTC

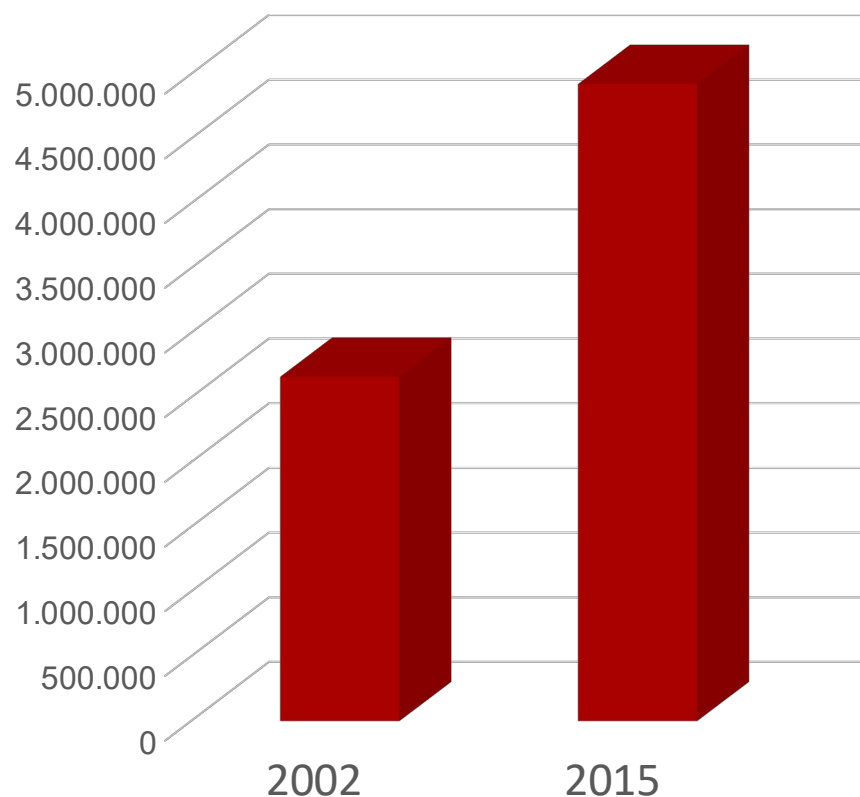


Source: Ecodebate Online (2010)

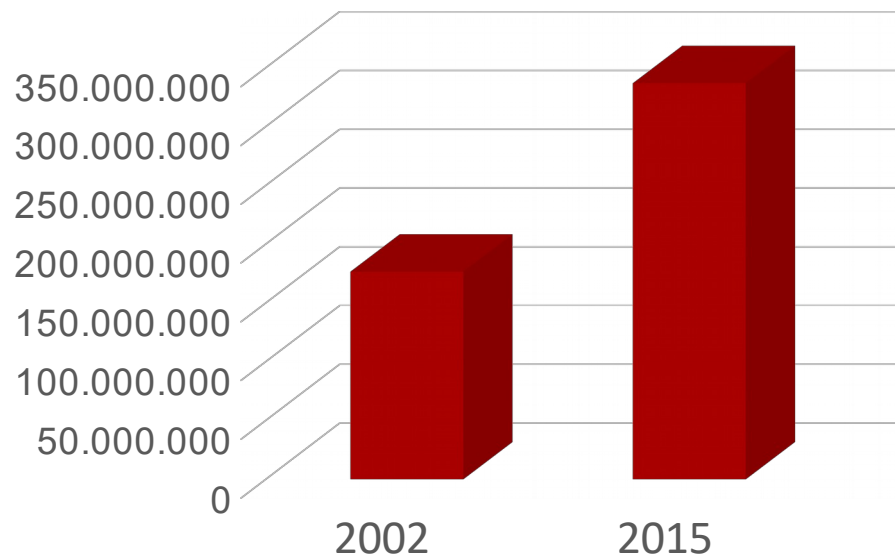
GLOCON
Global Change - Local Conflicts

Sugarcane Production in São Paulo State

Area of sugarcane production (ha)



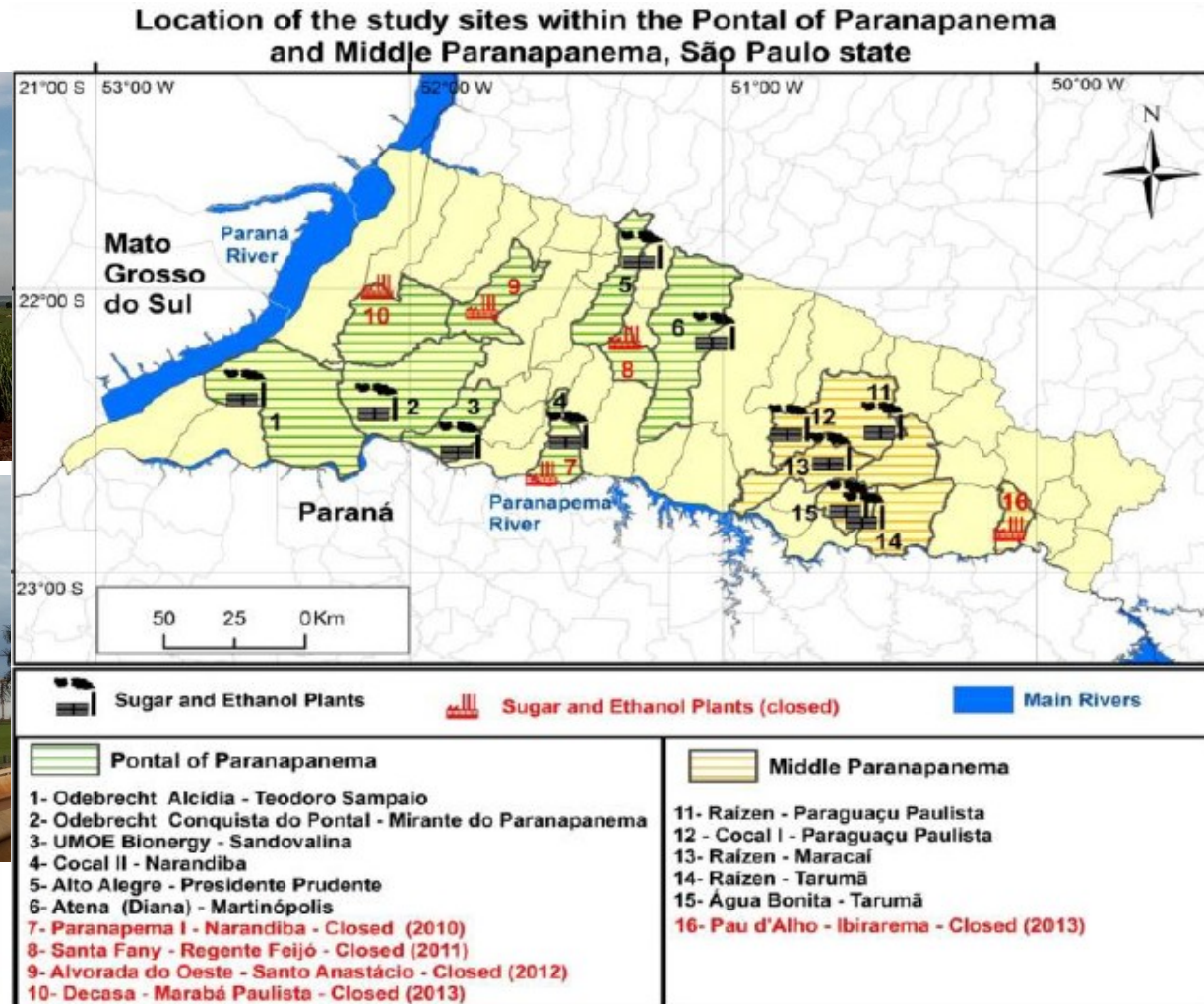
Production of sugarcane (t)



Source: UNICA

GLOCON
Global Change - Local Conflicts

Concentration and Internationalisation process



Global Change - Local Conflicts

Situation of Unions and Workers

- Observations during field work in São Paulo:
 - Unions, representing sugarcane workers facing big difficulties in collective bargaining.
 - No strike or protest, when the salary for harvest machine operators was cut 10 %
 - Less strikes in recent years in the sugarcane sector
 - In recent times more defensive strikes to protect labour rights than offensive strikes to improve labour rights
- Weakness and less strikes
- Reason: Mechanization Process of Harvest

Hypothesis

„Changes in the organisation of production and the social relations might mix up parts of the workers class, even make them to ‘extinctive species’ [...]. But new mediums and places of conflict arise with new claims and forms of struggle“ (Silver 2005: 38)

The reduction of bargaining power of workers due to production process changes can just be explained, if we understand historical-institutional arrangements of workers and unions and the capability of worker organizations to adapt to new situations.

Jenaer Power Resources Approach

- Analyzing power resources of workers and unions
- Younger approach - find new power resources
- Structural power: position of certain group of workers within economic system
 - Marketplace bargaining power: negotiation power arising from situation in labor market
 - Workplace bargaining power: results from a strategic position in production process or value chain
- Associational power: power arising from workers' organization as collective actors
- Institutional Power: institutionalized rights
- Societal Power: cooperation with other actors and discourses

GLOCON

Global Change - Local Conflicts

Sources: Wright 2000, Silver 2003, Schmalz/Dörre 2013, 2014

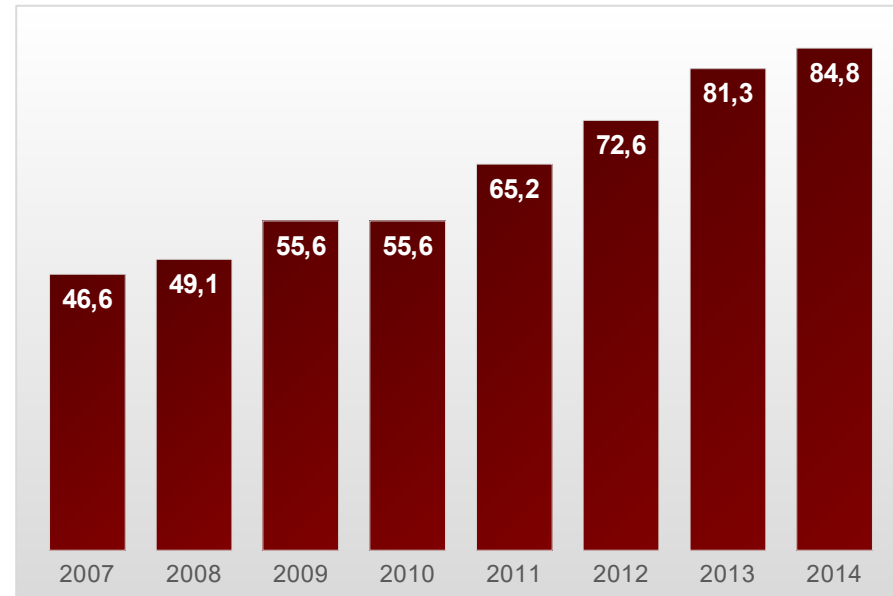
The mechanization process in São Paulo

Political decisions to mechanize the sugarcane harvest



Sources: IEA, Canasat; Photo: Jan Brunner

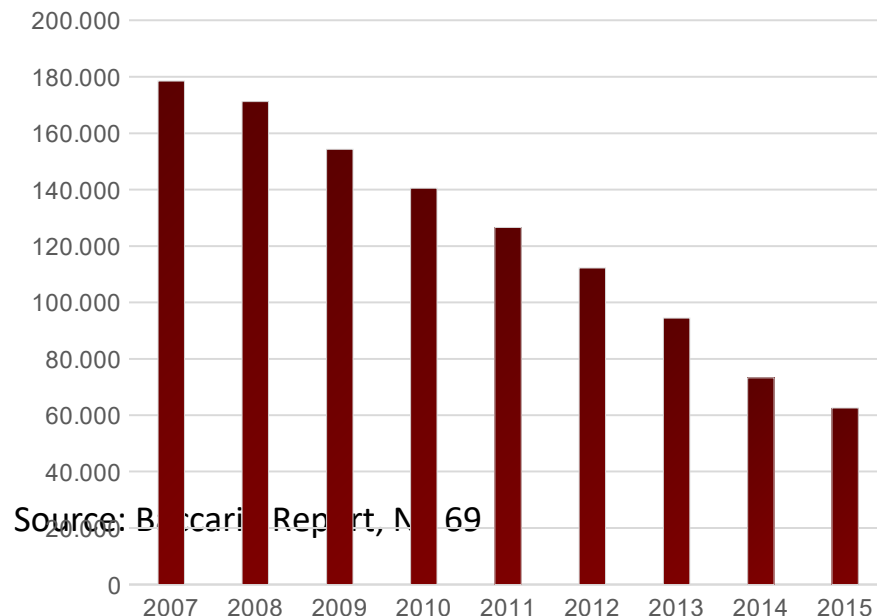
Mechanization of sugarcane harvest (%)



GLOCON
Global Change - Local Conflicts

Associational power of sugarcane workers

Manual rural workers in sugarcane sector 2007-2015



- Members of rural unions diminish strongly
- Infrastructural Resources diminish strongly (less payments)
- Members participation diminishes
 - strong fear of workers to lose their jobs
- Effect of reserve army (Marx)

Structural power of sugarcane workers

Market power

- Workers with low level of education
 - Risk of unemployment higher
 - Qualification of rural workers higher after mechanization
- Unemployment rate:
 - Brazil: unemployment rate 2007: 8,1 % -> 2014: 6,8%
 - E.g. shrinking unemployment rate in Ribeirão Preto

Production Power

- Solid strategic position
- Higher disruption potential

Some characteristics of unions in Brazil

- State-corporatistic unions: high influence of state
 - Historically: No union movement; low interest in members; „pelegismo“
- „Novo sindicalismo“
- Diverse spectrum of unions today
- Each union represents a sector (e.g. rural unions represent rural workers)
 - Decision by Ministry of Labour
- Forced unity of unions: 1 municipality, 1 sector, 1 union
- Paradoxon of 19.000 unions and 8 union centrals

Sources: Welch/Sauer 2015, Krüger 1981, Thomaz Junior 2010

Unions in sugarcane sector - regulation

- Unions within sugarcane mills: rural unions, transport unions, alimentation unions and chemical unions
- Rural unions
 - Municipal unions: SER and STR
 - Federations: FERAESP, FETAESP, FETRAGRO
- 8 Union centrals
- High diversity of ideology and behaviour of unions

Associational Power II: effects of mechanization

- **Problem I:** due to the fragmented union system: rural unions are endangered species
- **Problem II:** juridical processes for the representation of the harvest machine operators, tractor drivers, (rural) truck drivers
 - Decision of state institution: who represents which category
 - Changing decisions – uncertainty for workers
- **Problem III:** Inner solidarity between different unions and associational power diminishes further

Capacity to react on changes in the production process

- „Pelegismo“
 - Missing interest in workers
 - Corruption
 - Missing autonomy of state
- Organisation flexibility and learning capacity
 - Old / long-term leaders: lack of motivation and innovation
 - Resources bound with internal fights
- Ability to learn: find new power resources
 - New organizing concepts; revitalization of alliances, new strategies of struggles?
- Conflict ability: high experiences in „dangerous“ environment

Institutional Power

- Collective bargaining + dialogue
 - Scale of negotiation of collective agreement: Sugarcane Mill
 - Each union has its own collective agreement
 - Change of behaviour of a few (international) companies
- NR 31 + Ministry of Labour + Public Prosecutors of Labour
 - Complaints (slave labour, working hours, illegal outsourcing, late salary payments, etc.)
 - Inspections and sanctions
 - Problems: understaffed, weak sanctions (MTE), long periods of trials, enforcements of court decisions
 - MPT has stronger sanction possibilities

Institutional Power: mechanization

- Problem: due to the lack of institutional power, unions used a lot the instrument of mobilization of workers (associational power)
 - before mechanization, it was their most important power resource
- Now: Emphasis on collective bargaining and dialogue
 - Power of unions in this collective bargainings without strikes?
 - Power on the scale of mills is diminishing due to concentration process of capital
- Emphasis on complaints at Ministry of Labour

Conclusions

- Mechanization process reduces the bargaining power of rural workers
- The strength of this loss of bargaining power by production changes can just be understood, if we understand
 - historical-institutional arrangements
 - the capability of unions to adapt
- Explanation even more complex
 - Power and strategies of capital
 - Societal power of unions
 - Crisis of the sector
- Not everything is negative: some power resources rise
- Search for alternatives and new struggles: union renewal, revitalization of alliances and land occupations?

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

Freie Universität



Berlin

GLOCON

Global Change - Local Conflicts

Thank you for your attention!