

Fruits of Global Capital: The Citrus Industry and the Transformation of Farmworker Resistance  
in São Paulo, 1970-2010

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**RESEARCH ABSTRACT.** In 2009, agricultural workers organized by the labor union Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (MST) occupied land in Borebi, a small, rural town in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. The land was claimed by both the MST and by the agribusiness giant Cutrale, who planted it with acres of citrus groves. MST members rejected the encroachment of multinational capital with tractors and handsaws. They tore down hundreds of trees and defiantly spelled out union agitprop in lines of picked oranges, visible from the air. The protests made headline news. Though they were the most visible of recent protests of citrus workers in Brazil, they were far from the first. This decisive act of resistance rested on a longer history, stretching back to the 1970s, of conflict between global agribusiness and rural workers, which has reshaped the landscape of rural São Paulo. The questions guiding my research concern the relationship between rural labor and global agribusiness in Brazil's citrus industry—how has the introduction of industrial-scale citriculture influenced the texture of life, class formation, and the possibilities of resistance in rural São Paulo? And how have workers' local acts of resistance and attempts at organization altered global business practices?

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world's oranges were grown in Florida. But when the workers in Florida's largest citrus groves organized in the 1970s, their increased wage demands cut into profit rates, and created an opportunity for competitors. Four Brazilian firms stepped into that role and gained a foothold in the international market due to lower labor and land costs. To compete, Florida growers replaced unionized black workers with undocumented Mexican immigrants and lobbied for tariffs and trade regulations to close off markets. Brazil's citrus lobby responded by drawing on statist and neoliberal economic policies in equal measure, from subsidies to international lawsuits against US protectionism. But underlying the high finance and international business deals were workers across São Paulo state: smallholders, family farmers,

landless wage-laborers, and migrant workers. While agribusiness owned the processing plants, workers existed in a complicated gradation of classes, elided by historians and government officials under the term “rural workers.” This international, bipolar competitive structure and unusually gradated class formation made citrus unique in Brazil’s agricultural landscape.

**BACKGROUND.** The Tinker Grant will fund preliminary research for my dissertation: a transnational history of labor in the citrus industry of Florida and São Paulo since the 1970s. I argue that the shared history of these regions—a history of neoliberal trade restructuring, peasant immiserating, and radical demographic change—was at the forefront of the larger shift in the distribution of labor, commodities, and capital that has drawn South America and the American South inextricably together. My research intervenes into two vital new areas of historical research: studies of peasant resistance to neoliberal economics, and studies of globalized commodities produced within the framework of the “new history of capitalism.” While labor historians have produced rich cultural histories of rural workers’ lives and resistance on coffee and sugar plantations, they have done so within a parochial framework, neglecting the larger international changes in trade, financial policy, and commodity production that has undergirded those local changes (Rogers, Welch). On the other hand, historians of global agricultural commodities have roundly ignored the local stories that often radically alter the business practices and investment patterns of global industries (Beckert, Rappaport).

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.** This preliminary research trip will focus on archival research and on establishing contacts in the cities of Campinas and São Paulo. In Campinas, the State University of Campinas (Unicamp) was the focal point of the emergence of labor history in Brazil in the 1990s, and historians working in that tradition, Fernando Teixeira da Silva and Cláudio Henrique de Moraes Batalha, will be crucial to furthering my studies in Brazil. Unicamp

also holds the Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth, the largest archive of labor and radical materials in the country, whose collections include two dozen relevant labor law cases from the 1960s to the 1980s as well as oral histories with rural organizers. Also in Campinas is the library of the Instituto Agrônômico, which holds the business journal *Informativo Coopercitrus*, one of the most important for the citrus industry. In the city of São Paulo, I will meet with Henrique Carneiro and his students in the Laboratório de Estudos Históricos das Drogas e da Alimentação, the premier research group on the history of food as a commodity. In São Paulo I plan to visit the Tribunal Regional do Trabalho, which includes labor-related court cases (that I have identified using newspaper sources) since the 1980s.

This preliminary will be essential for my intended goal of applying for long-term external research grants in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of my PhD. Using those grants, I will expand my research objectives considerably to include the archives of regional labor unions and oral histories with workers, organizers, and family farmers. Beyond disciplinary boundaries, my ultimate goal is to understand how the problems of a global economy must be investigated and addressed not just at the level of individual consumption, but at the point of production.

### **BUDGET.**

#### **A. Airfare.**

1. Roundtrip Orlando International Airport in Orlando, FL, US to Virocopos International Airpot in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil = **\$856** (from Expedia, accessed March 5, 2019).

#### **B. Lodging (12 days, May 13 to May 24).**

1. Lodging in Barão Geraldo, Campinas, SP. \$30 per night, for 7 nights, **\$210** (from AirBnB, accessed March 5, 2019).
2. Lodging in Barra Funda, SP. \$50 per night, for 4 nights, **\$200**.

#### **C. Meals and incidental expenses.**

1. Based on State Department per diem rates for São Paulo = **\$288**.

#### **D. Daily travel.**

1. Within cities, \$15 per day, based on prices on Uber for travel in São Paulo: **\$180**. Bus to and from VCL: **\$30**.

**Total: \$1,574.00.**