

Collections of editorial cartoons by the trade union press: visual sources for a history against the grain

Abstract

The history of Brazil may be presented or interpreted with the aid of various historical sources. Among these sources, communicative production has generally gained increasing importance to the historiography making. Thus, we highlight the editorial cartoons in the context of the Brazilian trade union press, which, in our studies, occupy a central position as a communication product and historical source. Since the late 1970s, with the resurgence of the trade union movement under the aegis of a 'new trade unionism,' the editorial cartoon has been used as a significant communication strategy that reveals the broadest and most notorious political processes. Compiling sets of editorial cartoons into collections has helped providing a rich research material, promoting the availability of alternative historical sources for historiography making. This article aims to identify and analyze collections of editorial cartoons produced in the context of trade union press, characterizing them as historical sources to produce an analysis of history against the grain.

Keywords: Editorial Cartoon; Trade Union Press; Historical Source; Visual Source; Communication Strategy.

How to cite this article:

MIANI, Rozinaldo Antonio. Collections of editorial cartoons by the trade union press: visual sources for a history against the grain. *Revista Tempo e Argumento*, Florianópolis, v. 8, n. 18, p. 575 - 593. maio/ago. 2016. Original title: Coletâneas de charges da imprensa sindical: fontes visuais para uma história a contrapelo.

DOI: 10.5965/2175180308182016249
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5965/2175180308182016249>

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Coletâneas de charges da imprensa sindical: fontes visuais para uma história a contrapelo

Resumo

A história do Brasil pode ser apresentada ou interpretada com o auxílio de diversas fontes históricas. Dentre essas fontes, em geral, a produção comunicativa tem ganhado cada vez mais relevância na produção historiográfica. Nesse sentido, destacamos as charges no contexto da imprensa sindical brasileira, que, em nossos estudos, ocupam posição central como produto comunicativo e fonte histórica. Desde o final da década de 1970, com o ressurgimento do movimento sindical sob a égide de um “novo sindicalismo”, a charge tem sido utilizada como importante estratégia comunicativa reveladora dos mais amplos e notórios processos políticos. A compilação de conjuntos de charges em coletâneas tem contribuído para oferecer um rico material de pesquisa, promovendo a disponibilização de fontes históricas alternativas para a produção historiográfica. Este artigo tem por objetivo identificar e analisar as coletâneas de charges produzidas no contexto da imprensa sindical, caracterizando-as como fontes históricas para a produção de uma análise da história a contrapelo.

Palavras-chave: Charge; Imprensa Sindical; Fonte Histórica; Fonte Visual; Estratégia Comunicativa.

Introduction

Historiography making that, for a long time, excluded the visual sources as historical sources and also imposes a suspicion to iconography when it comes to using such sources in the study of certain historical themes, surrenders to the relevance of editorial cartoons to study the recent Brazilian political history.

Since the emergence of the alternative press, herein defined as the press produced within the period of the civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985), which served as a space of resistance and denunciation against the drawbacks produced by dictatorial governments - on the conceptual and analytical bases developed by Bernardo Kucinski (1991) -, the editorial cartoon gained momentum in the context of alternative printed communication and counter-hegemonic works¹.

Recognized as one of the main communication strategies of newspapers such as *O Pasquim*, *Movimento*, and others, the editorial cartoon was key to consolidate a brand and a culture for the alternative press that added criticality, creativity, and humor, besides casting a generation of cartoonists and caricaturists who established a new scene of graphic humor in Brazil in the last quarter of the 20th century.

As an influence - or even assets - of the alternative press, the culture of using the editorial cartoons as a communication strategy has gradually been merged into the (re)emerging Brazilian trade union press, under the aegis of a 'new unionism.' Also, some cartoonists who worked in publications of the alternative press started illustrating for trade unions, among them Henfil and Laerte. In turn, other cartoonists started or gave greater momentum to their careers by illustrating for trade unions.

The fact is that the editorial cartoon became a part of the political culture of the trade union press and, more than that, it has become a communication strategy - marked by critical and persuasive forcefulness, as well as playfulness and good humor - to record and interpret the smallest and also the most complex political procedures and events

¹ This does not mean claiming the originality of editorial cartoons in a context of counter-hegemonic press only through the alternative press. The anarchist press in the first half of the 20th century and the communist press, mainly since the 1940s, used in a significant way this communication strategy.

arising from the class struggle context triggered by the class-driven and combative trade union movement.

The impact of using editorial cartoons in the trade union press has brought further developments, among which the possibility of producing collections of editorial cartoons, either to offer them as a gift to members of the respective trade unions because of unique celebration circumstances or to organize the memory of the trade union press or the entity itself. Not necessarily unpretentiously, what has been built with this practice was effectively the ability to offer rich material for historical research and historiography making.

In this way, the aim of this article is identifying the collections of editorial cartoons of the trade union press, produced over the last decades in Brazil, demonstrating the relevance of this historical source for historiography making with regard to the current Brazilian political history, as well as characterizing such collections as sociopolitical works capable of constructing a history against the grain (BENJAMIN, 1994).

To do this, we provide a brief reflection on the main features of the editorial cartoon - such as its dissertation, critical, and humorous nature - arguing about its historical source condition. Then, we present and comment on the various collections of editorial cartoons by the union press found in our survey. Finally, we analyze the socio-political nature of these collections as historical sources in order to build a history against the grain.

Editorial cartoon as a communication product and historical source

Among the several communication products having a visual nature, we attribute a major role in our studies to the editorial cartoon. By editorial cartoon we mean

[...] a humorous representation of an eminently political nature that ironizes a specific fact or individual; it is the revelation and defense of an idea, so it has a dissertation nature, translated through the illustration resources and techniques. [...] The editorial cartoon should be recognized as a kind of 'graphic editorial' (MIANI, 2005, p. 25).

This condition of ‘graphic editorial’ is defined due to the fact that the editorial cartoon, as a journalistic genre, is a work with an opinion-driven nature, therefore dissertative, providing the reader with a certain perspective of critical analysis about a fact of the current sociopolitical reality through visual resources. The productive conditions of an editorial cartoon invariably take into account the political and editorial line of the medium where this image will be conveyed along with the worldview of the cartoonist her/himself.

Another relevant feature of the editorial cartoon, also regarded as a communication expression, is its transience. The editorial cartoon is associated with a specific fact, therefore inserted in a certain time and space. We recognize that “the editorial cartoon keeps its effectiveness and efficiency only within a short period of time while the event referred to remains in the immediate individual and social memory; after that it becomes obsolete as a communication product” (MIANI, 2005, p. 33).

Humor is another attribute that we regard as inherent to every editorial cartoon. However, this does not mean thinking of humor exclusively as the triggering element of laughter; more than that, the kind of humor observed in the editorial cartoon is ultimately characterized by its property of ‘undermining the law,’ promoting a transgression in terms of appropriating the elements that make up the context depicted by a certain editorial cartoon. As already stated by Umberto Eco (1989, p. 19, our translation) - when addressing humor in its relation with carnival -, humor warns us about “the presence of a law that people has no reason to observe anymore.” When getting closer to such an understanding of humor to think of the humorous nature of the editorial cartoon, we claim that:

It is through humor that an editorial cartoon takes the shape of transgression by establishing a contradiction between the character and the actual situation that is portrayed, because the illustration shows a(n) (im)possibility of the fact (using intertextual elements or belonging to the receiver’s universe to enable an understanding) and it never sets up as a mere reproduction of the circumstances of the incident; thus, humor works as a fairly consistent social criticism (MIANI, 2005, p. 30).

In a reflection on the links between History and languages, the historian Marcos Antonio da Silva (1985/1986, p. 57) presented an excellent summary of the characterization of ‘humor drawing,’ which provided a decisive contribution to build our certainty previously expressed:

Humor drawing operates by placing values and meanings in crisis, making slips to structure such values and meanings in order to bring some of its hidden dimensions to light. It is produced through a rationale of pleasure that both excites and domesticates bodies, on a variable scale according to the artistic, cultural, political, and other projects supported by various authors.

In addition to the features briefly presented, namely the dissertation nature, criticality, transience, and the presence of humor, we must also consider that the editorial cartoon participates in a communication context that is broader, because the editorial cartoons are published in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, or other printed works, which contain texts of different journalistic genres and also other visual resources, such as photos and infographics. All these elements constitute an environment marked by intertextuality and it is precisely in this context that we should observe and analyze the presence of editorial cartoons.

All this reflection is based on the condition of the editorial cartoon as a communication product. Since the editorial cartoon, and every printed publication (newspaper, magazine, newsletter), moves away from its very communicative function (roughly speaking, to provide information and interpretation to support the everyday knowledge of facts in a society), it begins to incisively play its historical source role.

Without the prejudices that have already appeared regarding visual sources and especially without the epistemological constraints imposed by a positivist tradition that hegemonizes the field of history for several decades, we claim the recognition of the editorial cartoon as a legitimate source to produce historical analysis and all kinds of historiography making.

Collections of editorial cartoons by the trade union press: visual sources available to historians

The editorial cartoon is a communicative production observed in the Brazilian press as a whole. Since the mid-1840s, when it began to be published on a regular basis by the magazine *Lanterna Mágica* (1844-1845) - giving rise to what became known as illustrated press -, the editorial cartoon found in the press fertile ground for dissemination.

Significant magazines in the late 19th century - highlighting *A Revista Ilustrada* (1876-1898) - and newspapers and magazines, mainly since the early 20th century, promoted a major revolution in the political culture of the Brazilian press by consolidating editorial cartoons in the context of printed publications. As the technologies for producing the press have developed, the editorial cartoon has gained more space and relevance, both in the bourgeois press and the working press.

In the context of the working press, we highlight the excessive use of this visual communication resource by the anarchist press - which had the newspaper *A Plebe* (1917-1951) as one of its main experiences - and later by the communist press - especially the newspaper *A Classe Operária* (1925-) and the newspaper *Voz Operária* (1949-1979). More recently, several initiatives known as the alternative press - and, in this case, we cannot fail to mention the newspaper *O Pasquim* (1969-1991) and the newspaper *Movimento* (1975-1981) - were also marked by the use of editorial cartoons as a communication strategy, particularly in order to fool the censorship imposed by the civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985) and lead humor and criticism, through such visual products, to play a key role in the political and editorial purposes.

In a subsequent phase in the history of the Brazilian working press, Maria Nazareth Ferreira (1988) approaches the trade union press. The process of political reconnection of left-wing organizations and popular movements in the fight against the dictatorship brought about a new idea within the trade union movement that has been named as 'new trade unionism.' Contemporary to the 'new trade unionism' there came a 'new trade union press,' which, according to Valdeci Verdelho (1986), had very specific

characteristics in relation to what was produced back then. Among these peculiarities, the author highlights a change in the style and language adopted by the trade union press. Because of this, the author states that the trade union press began to “often resort to images in order to convey an idea and open a wide space for visuals, such as illustrations, editorial cartoons, cartoons, photos, and schematic paintings” (VERDELHO, 1986, p. 97).

It was in this context that the trade union press by workers began to use editorial cartoons as a communication strategy in a consistent and decisive manner. The main trade unions, and even the trade union opposition, aligned with the ‘new trade unionism,’ not infrequently published editorial cartoons in their daily, weekly, or even fortnightly newsletters. Given this, the publication of editorial cartoons had already become a part of the political culture in the trade union press.

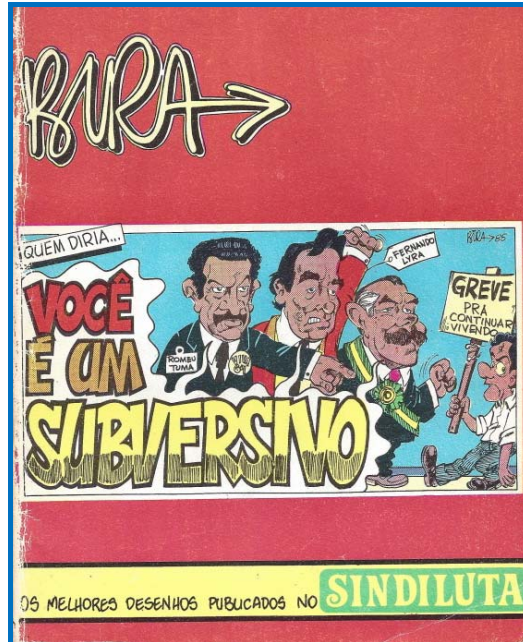
This practice only intensified over the following decades when, in the turn of this century, because of advances in the electronic publishing technologies, the editorial cartoon began to lose ground to photographs and other visuals. Today we still find trade unions that keep the editorial cartoon culture in the context of trade union press, but we can no longer think that the editorial cartoon has a permanent place in printed publications by the trade unions. Its presence became residual.

Nevertheless, over the decades of massive presence of the editorial cartoon in the context of the trade union press, in addition to fulfilling its communicative function, some trade unions or the cartoonists themselves produced collections of editorial cartoons that would serve as material for the trade union memory or historical record of the communicative production of the respective trade unions. In some cases, the pretext for organizing the collection was a commemorative event; in others, it was the very awakening of the need to build a trade union memory. The fact is that, with this, historians were given a very rich material to contribute to the historiography making work through visual sources.

We begin to identify and comment on the collections of editorial cartoons by the trade union press that we know and access. First, there is the collection produced by the

São Paulo Chemical and Pharmaceutical Workers Union, entitled *Os melhores desenhos publicados no Sindiluta* (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Químicos e Farmacêuticos de São Paulo (1985).

The collection was organized by the press department of the trade union mentioned above and released in August 1985. All the editorial cartoons were produced by the cartoonist Bira and published in the newsletter *Sindiluta*² between 1983 and 1985. The material was organized to be sold; all the money from the sale would be for the trade union's Strike Fund. This 48-page collection seems to have been the first one produced exclusively with editorial cartoons published by the trade union press.

Just over a year later, in October 1986, the collection *Ilustração sindical do Laerte* (Figure 2) was launched. As the title itself reveals, it provides trade union illustrations - among them, many editorial cartoons - produced by the cartoonist Laerte and originally published in newspapers, newsletters, and magazines by Brazilian trade unions between 1977 and 1986.

² The newsletter *Sindiluta* was created by the São Paulo Chemical and Pharmaceutical Workers Union in August 1983 to be the official newsletter of the union - on a daily basis -, after the victory of the trade union opposition in the 1982 trade union elections. It is worth highlighting that this trade union participated in the creation of the Unified Workers' Central (CUT).

The editorial coordination of this collection was in charge of Sérgio Gomes, coordinator of the Oboré, an entity providing advice and support to the trade union movement. It was launched in 1986 with the purpose, according to Laerte himself in the material presentation, of ‘helping trade unions and other popular organizations in their efforts to build the entity and lead the struggle in search of a better and fairer life for all.’

Figure 2



Source: OBORÉ (1986).

The main feature of this collection, besides gathering various types of drawings (editorial cartoons, cartoons, generic illustrations, vignettes), in a total of more than 170 pages, was the fact that it was a work in the ‘public domain,’ i.e. all drawings were freely available to be used with no copyright payment.

If, on one hand, such an attitude was regarded as “having an invaluable importance for democratizing information and, by extension, for constructing democracy in our country,” according to Gabriel Romeiro, president of the São Paulo State Professional Journalists’ Union at the time, in a text presenting the collection itself, on the other hand, it was regarded as a disaster for the category of cartoonists. Éton (Edson Dias), who worked as a cartoonist for the trade union press at the time of publication of the collection *Ilustração Sindical do Laerte*, made the following statement in an interview with the cartoonist Bira Dantas:

[...] there are some trade union members that become rich, they steal, but they do not let us work. They do not hire an illustrator in order to save money, but on the other hand they transfer large sums from trade unions to their accounts. This means that they will use Laerte's primer and get richer! [...] There are bad people, indeed, in all categories. Just like Laerte, who only thought of him when he prepared this primer (DIAS, 2007).

Going beyond this controversy - but without ever neglecting the tension involved in the production and sale of this material - the collection *Ilustração Sindical do Laerte* is another set of visuals available to be used in the historiography making process.

More than a decade later, Márcio Baraldi, one of the best-known cartoonists in the trade union press universe, published two collections with editorial cartoons exclusively produced and published by the trade union press. The first one was the collection *ConstruRindo o Sindicato* (Figure 3), launched in April 1997.

Figure 3



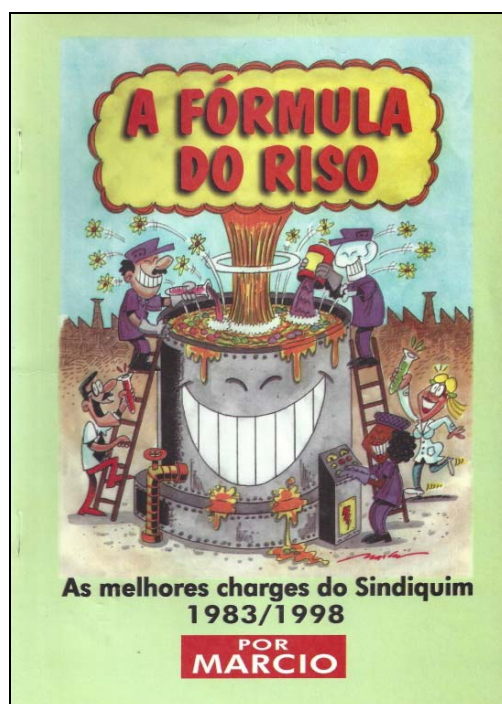
Source: Sindicato dos Bancários do ABC (1997).

Active in the trade union press since 1983, Baraldi produced editorial cartoons for many trade unions. He started in the Chemical Workers' Union of the São Paulo ABC Region, but his editorial cartoons produced for the Bank Workers' Union of the São Paulo

ABC Region were those that, in 1997, deserved a specific publication, with the main goal of delimiting the pathway of the 1994-1997 administration of that union's board of directors. The 68-page collection brings together editorial cartoons and short stories that were published between 1994 and 1997 in the newspaper *Notícias Bancárias*.

Perhaps inspired by the example of the Bank Workers' Union of the São Paulo ABC Region, another trade union in the region - where Márcio Baraldi worked since the beginning of his career as a cartoonist - the Chemical Workers' Union of the São Paulo ABC took the celebration of 60 years of the entity's foundation to encourage the organization a collection of editorial cartoons by Baraldi, which was entitled *A fórmula do riso* (Figure 4). There are 90 pages of editorial cartoons, strips, or short stories published between 1983 and 1998 in the newspaper *Sindiquim*, selected by the cartoonist himself³.

Figure 4



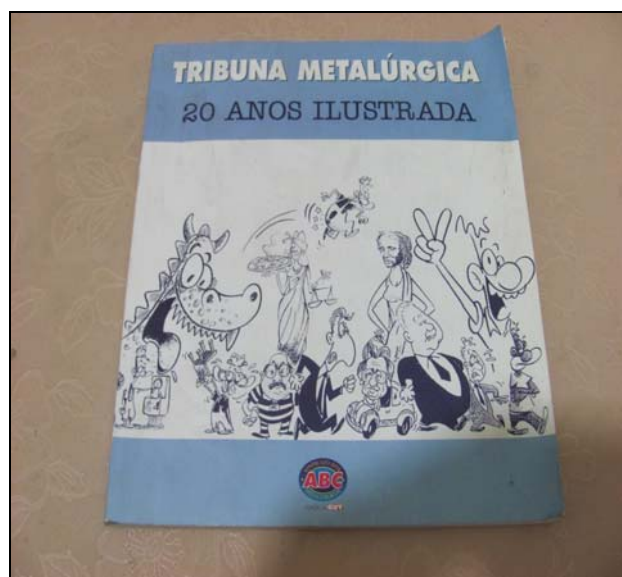
Source: Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Químicos do ABC (1998).

³ Márcio Baraldi organized several other collections of editorial cartoons, such as *Cidadania, eu quero uma pra viver* (October 2001), *Moro num país tropicaos* (2002), *Todas as cores do humor* (2002). However, these collections do not have just editorial cartoons published in the trade union press; they gather editorial cartoons in several other publications for which the cartoonist has illustrated, so we chose not to present them. Baraldi also created many characters and produced many comic books. All this can be seen on his website: <http://www.marciobaraldi.com.br>.

When referring to the trade union movement, generally, and the trade union press, particularly, is almost impossible not to refer to the Metalworkers' Union of the São Paulo ABC Region, due to the political impact of its presence in the Brazilian reality, since the days of fighting against the civil-military dictatorship, and the historical importance in the consolidation of new milestones in the conception and practice of the Brazilian trade unionism.

In this way, this union could not have failed to also participate in this effort of organizing the trade union memory. Recognizing the significance of the trade union press and particularly the *Tribuna Metalúrgica*, the trade union published the collection of editorial cartoons entitled *Tribuna Metalúrgica: 20 anos ilustrada* (Figure 5), organized by the cartoonist Pecê, containing 150 pages of illustrations published between 1978 and 1998.

Figure 5



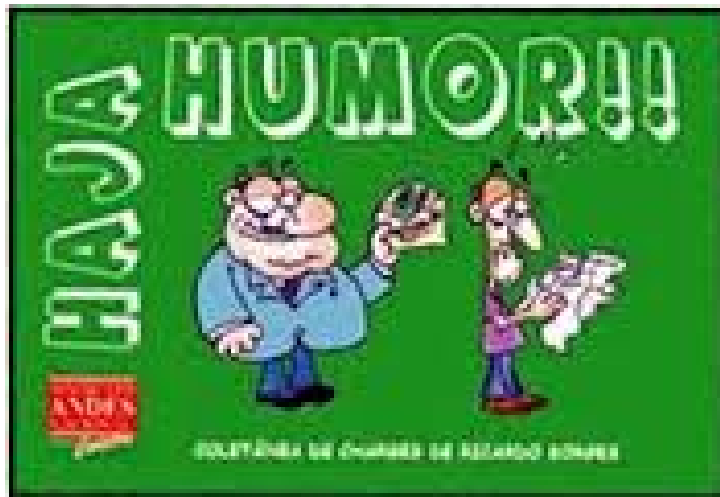
Source: Sindicato dos Metalúrgicos do ABC (1998).

In the presentation of this collection of editorial cartoons, the board of the Metalworkers' Union of the São Paulo ABC Region claims the relevance of the newspaper *Tribuna Metalúrgica* in the history of the trade union press and it also explains the reasons for producing this book:

The *Tribuna Metalúrgica* has a prominent place in the trade union press. It was the first daily trade union newspaper and one of the few that managed to cross these 20 years providing coverage of the workers' struggles. 'Tribuna Metalúrgica, 20 anos, Ilustrada' is a book that has a commemorative and historical value. It celebrates 20 years of struggle for democracy and, at the same time, organizes the works by artists and illustrators that, within these two decades, gave a 'helping hand' in the resistance to the military dictatorship. Henfil, Élio Vargas Jr., Laerte, Pecê, Gilmar, and many others helped the category to draw the hope for a better country. With satire, irony, and often humor inserted criticism and boldness in the workers' minds. In this book, organized by Pecê, there is a part of this story, which everyone should know (SINDICATO DOS METALÚRGICOS DO ABC, 1998, p. 4).

Since the publication of two collections in 1998, it took nearly 10 years until another collection of editorial cartoons by the trade union press got published. This was an initiative of the Brazilian National Union of Professors from Higher Education Institutions (ANDES-SN), which contributed with the book *Haja humor!!* (Figure 6). This collection was launched at the 27th National Congress of the ANDES-SN in Goiânia, Goiás, Brazil, in January 2008, and it has editorial cartoons produced by Ricardo Borges between 2000 and 2007.

Figure 6



Source: ANDES-SN (2008).

The editorial cartoons were published in newspapers, brochures, pamphlets, printed and electronic bulletins by the Brazilian National Union and trade union sections across the country. There are 90 pages where “the cartoonist provides a severe, but

good-natured, criticism to the indifference of politicians in relation to the claims of the Brazilian working class, especially Higher Education professors, who are fighting in defense of education and public university” (ASSOCIAÇÃO BRASILEIRA DE IMPRENSA, 2008).

In the same year, in August 2008, another collection of editorial cartoons by the trade union press was also released. This was the book *Falando Nilson* (Figure 7), organized by the cartoonist Nilson with his editorial cartoons produced for the Intermunicipal Workers’ Union in the Power Industry of Minas Gerais (SINDIELETRO-MG).

Figure 7



Source: SINDIELETRO-MG (2008).

Having been organized to celebrate the cartoonist’s 60th birthday, this 80-page collection included some editorial cartoons and stories produced by Nilson outside the trade union context; however, as the publication was a kind of gift and tribute from the trade union itself to the cartoonist, we think that it may be predominantly regarded as a collection of editorial cartoons by the trade union press.

Finally, there is a collection of editorial cartoons that, despite already organized, has not been published, yet. It is the book *Traço operário* (Figure 8), by the cartoonist Arievaldo Viana, who produced editorial cartoons for many trade unions in the state of Ceará, Brazil. He selected some of his editorial cartoons published in the Ceará state trade union press between 1999 and 2009, but he did not get sponsorship for printing.

Figure 8



Source: VIANA, Inédito.

In an interview with David Tomás, a researcher of comics, Arievaldo Viana (2013) commented on the situation:

‘TRAÇO OPERÁRIO’ remains unpublished due to lack of an editor. Trade unions should fund the publication, indeed, after all, it tells their history. I have not had time to get into the field to ‘sell’ this idea, because I am doing other tasks.

These are the collections of editorial cartoons by the trade union press that we know. They comprise a set of visuals of great value to the historiography making, both concerning the specific history of the trade union movement and its press and the Brazilian reality as a whole, seen and interpreted through the lens of trade union and popular organizations. And it is precisely in this regard that we propose some considerations to conclude this small contribution.

A history against the grain through the editorial cartoons by the trade union press

The determination and, therefore, the use of historical sources for historiography making is not detached from the rationale of society itself. Although we recognize the advances made in the field of History concerning the expansion of the concept of

historical source, as well as the acceptance of ‘new objects’ to study History (LE GOFF; NORA, 1988), it is needed to be aware that there are still challenges to be faced and battles to be fought.

Culture and tradition, from which the legitimacy of historical sources derive, are permanently subject to the ‘danger’ of “turning into an instrument of the ruling class” (BENJAMIN, 1994, p. 224). This occurs, according to Michael Löwy (2005, p. 79), because “the ruling elite appropriates - by conquest, or resorting to other barbarian means - the previous culture and includes this in its system for social and ideological domination.”

Against such a determination, Walter Benjamin (1994, p. 225) points out in the thesis VII of his essay “On the Concept of History” that there is a need “to brush history against the grain.” Commenting on Benjamin’s theses, and more specifically this premise, Löwy (2005, p. 74) states:

As always, according to Benjamin, the imperative ‘to brush history against the grain’ has a double meaning: a) historical: this means going against the current official version of history by opposing it to the tradition of oppressed people. From this viewpoint, the historical continuity of the ruling classes is seen as a single and huge triumphal procession, occasionally interrupted by the uprising of the lower classes; b) political (current): redemption/revolution will not happen thanks to the natural course of events, the ‘sense of history,’ the inevitable progress. There will be a need to fight the current. Depending on its own devices, or caressed in the direction the hair grows, history will only bring new wars, new disasters, new forms of barbarism and oppression.

Considering the task trumpeted by Benjamin, i.e. production, and, more than that, the use of historical sources derived from the very context of the ‘tradition of the oppressed ones’ for constructing the knowledge of History and historiography presents itself as an effective contribution.

The collections of editorial cartoons by the trade union press, turned into historical sources, show the fingerprints of the subaltern classes and, accordingly, they provide the researcher with more than a (new) object to historiography making. They offer a set of legitimate evidence that is relevant to the purpose of conducting an analysis of history against the grain.

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Received on 07/15/2016
Approved on 09/06/2016

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Revista Tempo e Argumento
Volume 08 - Número 18 - Ano 2016
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