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Controlling precarious work through documents: The *carteira de trabalho* on the sugarcane plantations of Northeast Brazil

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Abstract

This article explores the Brazilian *carteira de trabalho* (work card) and its usage on the sugarcane plantations of Alagoas, Northeast Brazil. It draws on photography and interviews with rural workers to analyse how documents have been used to manage and reproduce precarious work. On the plantations, work cards function as a managerial tool allowing workforce surveillance and control. Moreover, sugar mills can control rural workers' mobility and shape the agricultural reserve army by retaining these documents, thereby immobilising wage workers. While the work card symbolises occupational citizenship and materialises the labour legislation, in practice, it becomes a disciplinary instrument supporting the agribusiness' strategies of identification, control, and deployment of precariously employed and exploited labour on the plantations. Finally, the article contributes with an innovative historical–biographical approach to the study of institutional mechanisms used to produce and reproduce precarious work in Brazil's sugarcane plantations.

Keywords

Brazil, *carteira de trabalho* (work cards), job formalisation, labour immobilisation, sugarcane workers, workforce documents

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Introduction

Made in the form of a booklet, 'work cards' are official personal documents that identify workers and record their employment relations with employers in time-space. The nation-states have introduced them to secure and control information and to 'rationalise' decision making around labour in the most varied political and socio-economic settings (Castel, 2003; Herbert, 1997; Holston, 2008; Torpey, 2000). While most work cards have been replaced by digitalised systems or were eliminated with the consolidation of liberal democracies, in countries like Brazil, these documents remain resilient tools for registering the national workforce. In fact, their usage became even more prevalent with the recent employment growth, reaching 38.5 million formal jobs with signed work cards in 2013 (IBGE, 2013).

In Brazil, work cards are generally regarded as a passport to work-based citizenship (Santos, 1979), granting workers access to labour rights, better wages and working conditions, collective bargaining, and a broad array of protections. Less attention is given to the fact that the work card is an institutional condition for the contractual buying and selling of labour–power at local labour markets. As such, it is not only a personal document securing rights and registering the national workforce; it is also an 'institutional materiality' (Steinberg, 2010) mediating struggles in the workplace and affecting hiring, firing and other labour-management decisions.

This article explores the ramifications of workforce documents in settings characteristically marked by a hierarchical labour organisation and extreme power imbalances, such as present-day sugar plantations. Here, I look at the case of job formalisation on sugarcane plantations of Alagoas, Northeast Brazil, as the recent compliance with the labour legislation led to an increased use of work cards. Using a historical–biographical perspective, this study delves into the rural workers' work cards and their experiences with them, analysing the uses and functions of these documents and how they turn into mechanisms of despotic labour control on the plantations.

First, this study briefly reviews the literature on work documents and the emergence of the Brazilian work card. Next, it focuses on the rise of work cards on the plantations and the consequences for working conditions. Drawing on photography and in-depth interviews, it explores the institutional materiality of labour control mediated by work cards. Specifically, it analyses illegal labour practices in which employers modify and retain workers' work cards to despotically enhance labour control while managing a precariously employed workforce. Furthermore, it highlights the workers' use of such documents and their struggles for labour and social rights. The article concludes by pointing out the paradox of job formalisation through documents on sugarcane plantations.

Labour control through documents

Scholarly work has paid much attention to the role documents play in identifying, categorising, legalising, and controlling people before the nation-state (Peirano, 1986; Scott, 1998; Torpey, 2000). For example, Scott (1998) has shown that birth certificates, passports and identity cards are state simplifications that make 'individual citizens officially

legible' and prone to discriminatory interventions, including manipulation, large-scale social engineering and surveillance. And Torpey (2000) has emphasised the ambiguities of documents that bear dominating effects: documents like the passport represent the modern states' monopoly over the legitimate means of movement while securing citizens' rights and benefits.

Other authors have aptly observed that states do not monopolise surveillance systems. (see Higgs, 2013) Instead, modern capitalist surveillance actively promotes tools and technologies to identify, monitor and track workers to uphold corporate interests (Fuchs, 2013; Lyon, 1994). Also, several historical examples show that workforce documents have been used to compel workers into relations of production by restricting their mobility while reproducing wage dependence (Boutang, 1998).

Examples of workforce documents aimed at controlling labour while limiting the workers' freedom include the French *livret d'ouvrier*, considered an instrument of employer paternalism to fixate the workforce and moralise exploitation (Castel, 2003); the German *Arbeitsbuch*, a document reintroduced by the Nazi regime to control the deployment of labour and curb unwanted job-switching (Herbert, 1997); the South African *dompas*, which was used to segregate the country's black workforce and curtail their rights during Apartheid (Rizzo, 2019); and the Russian *trudovye knizhki*, an autocratic tool of labour allocation in the Soviet Union (Garcelon, 2001). These historical examples point to the fact that the documentary surveillance of the working class is not only produced by nation-states for 'legibility' reasons (Scott, 1998), but it has been an enduring mechanism of labour control.

This study moves in this direction in analysing Brazil's work cards as a disciplinary instrument – one that asserts labour rights and protections but also involves the control, surveillance and immobilisation of labour. Drawing on Fuchs' (2013: p. 678) typology of economic surveillance, it explores the ways through which work cards function as tools of surveillance, including the surveillance of potential workers (*applicant surveillance*), the surveillance of the labour force at the workplace (*workplace surveillance*) and the surveillance of productivity (*workforce surveillance*) – all of which imply monitoring workers through documents to increase output, combined with other methods to restrict workers' mobility. In what follows, I look at the historical rise of the work cards through the eyes of the workers and the sugarcane agro-industry and provide an innovative approach to the study of such documents.

Brazil's work card

Brazil's blue booklet, known as *Carteira de Trabalho e Previdência Social* (hereafter, work card or *carteira*), was introduced in 1932 by Getúlio Vargas' authoritarian New State. The *carteira* registers the sale and purchase of labour-power in time, and simultaneously records the history of relations between workers, employers and the state. It identifies its holder through personal information, a photograph and fingerprints, and it is annotated with job records (admission and dismissal dates, contract type, wages), occupational, union and social security information.

The *carteira* became a mandatory personal document for workers in the formal economy. In theory, it grants access to a series of labour and social rights created by Vargas in

the 1943 *Consolidation of Labour Laws* (CLT). This has functioned as Brazil's labour legislation since then, and as such, it regulates capital-labour relations, including minimum wage, 8-hour working day, weekly rest, paid vacations, advance notice, severance provisions and protection against summary dismissal. In case of labour disputes, the carteira serves as a legal proof of contractual relationship and tenure. Moreover, it became indispensable to access work accident insurance and pension benefits.

As such, the work card became a symbol of formal work as well as a passport to occupational citizenship in Brazil (Guimarães, 2011; Santos, 1979). Its relevance is manifested by the fact that '*empregados com carteira assinada*' (employees with signed work card) became an official category in Brazil's labour statistics. Symbolically, it has shaped perceptions of justice, fairness and morality (Noronha, 2003), while embodying the working-class identity as developed by Vargas (Gomes, 2005). Santos (1979) coined the term 'regulated citizenship' to describe the link between citizenship and regulated occupations with signed work cards. For Santos (1979), the Brazilian state 'defined who was and who was not a citizen, by occupation' (p. 77), that is, only those workers in regulated occupations with signed cards could access the social and labour rights that constituted the benefits of citizenship in the country. Consequently, as Santos (1979) put it, the blue booklet inevitably became 'a certificate of civic birth' (p. 76).

For most of the 20th century, however, signed work cards were an exception, and informality and precarious work have been the norm in Brazil (Braga, 2019). Large portions of the Brazilian working class, including domestic and rural workers, remained 'undocumented': excluded from the work-based citizenship and forced, as subcitizens, to sell their labour without protection. In fact, the link between work and citizenship established within the evolving formal labour market depended on social struggles and power dynamics in specific settings and the state's effectiveness in response to those struggles (Lopes, 1996).

Rural workers and their families were incorporated as resident workers into the plantations of Northeast Brazil, and they became subjected to the personal domination of employers, who systematically violated labour legislation and refused to annotate work cards (De Andrade, 1980). Until the 1960s, the Peasant Leagues fought for the application of CLT rights and agrarian reform in Brazil, but they were dissolved after the 1964 military coup. Furthermore, the 1963 Rural Workers' Statute (RWS) and the new social security laws in the 1970s also extended rights such as minimum wage, severance payments, pension rights and a specific rural work card. The new legislations spurred plantations to cut costs by evicting tenants and shifting to a system of labour intermediation undergirded by informal wage workers (Sigaud, 2008), which ultimately reinforced rural workers' exclusion from labour rights. CLT's spatial–temporal uneven implementation created long-standing inequalities and work identities. *Fichados* and *clandestinos* are categories created by rural workers to characterise formal and informal workers – respectively, those in jobs with a signed work card and those excluded from the CLT's rights and guarantees (Sigaud, 2008: 90).

With the recent job formalisation trend of the 2000s, the proportion of workers holding a work card increased from 54% in 2001 to 64.5% in 2013 (IBGE, 2013). According to Cardoso (2013: 68–69), between 1992 and 2009, in addition to earning more than twice as much as informal workers, formal wage workers had 2–3 more years in school

than informal workers, and they stayed in their jobs for on average 36 (if female) or 22 (if male) more months than informal workers do. Generally, formal jobs offer better wages, working conditions, health and safety at the workplace, skill-building opportunities and job security (Cardoso, 2013). The rise in new, formal jobs with signed work cards was driven in large part by the trend of formalisation in the Brazilian sugarcane agro-industry, whose formal workforce rose from 642,848,000 in 2000 to 1,091,575 million workers in 2012 (Moraes et al., 2015).This meant that thousands of workers in Brazil, and particularly sugarcane workers, gained access for the first time to labour rights and benefits.

Like the other workforce documents, Brazil's works card is a paradox, insofar as it rationalises labour exploitation while ensuring workers' rights. The boundaries of both functions – whether it acts as a document securing rights or a coercive tool of labour control – is determined by the struggles between workers and employers around the compliance with or evasion of labour regulation, and their decisions regarding the use of the document. Whatever the case, the document is designed to allow employers control over workers and their *carteiras*. While they annotate these documents with labour contracts, they can simultaneously engage in illegal practices to exert power over workers, their rights, mobility and job opportunities. As this study shows, the recent job formalisation has also transformed the nature of labour control, which was enhanced through work cards. This is the context in which I conducted the fieldwork in Alagoas' sugarcane plantations.

Methods and fieldwork

This study focuses on the *carteiras de trabalho* and the job formalisation experiences of the sugarcane workers of Alagoas, Northeast Brazil. It is based on 11 months of fieldwork in the *Zona da Mata* region between 2012 and 2019. Alagoas is the leading producer and exporter of sugar and ethanol in Northeast Brazil since 1990. Its agro-industrial complex is currently composed of 15 sugar mills growing the sugarcane plantations across 52 municipalities, whose economically active population heavily relies upon the sector jobs. In 2019, 18,921 sugarcane workers[1] were formally employed to work at the labour-intensive harvest which runs from September to March, as well as the other agricultural activities taking place throughout the year. Nationwide, mechanised harvesting ranges from 72.8% to 90.8% in the Centre-South producing states, while Alagoas remains reliant mainly on the labour-intensive manual harvesting, with only 16.5% mechanised harvesting (Lima, 2019: 150). During the 2021–2022 harvest, Alagoas' sugar mills produced about 18 million tonnes of sugarcane (Sindaçúcar, 2022), most of which had been manually harvested by male cane cutters.

In order to approach a diversity of labour practices, work experiences and plantation areas, I selected research sites based on previous studies in the area (Queiroz and Vanderstraeten, 2018): four sugarcane-growing municipalities that were home to mills crushing over 1 million tonnes of sugarcane per year (C1, C2, C3 and C4). Their job formalisation experiences are typical of the general employment trend on the sugarcane plantations in Alagoas. C1 employs only local workers, C2 and C3 hire local and migrant workers seasonally drawn from the *Sertão* region and C4 works with migrants only.

After acquiring prior information about the neighbourhoods inhabited by rural workers, I used the method of door-knocking (Davies, 2011) and snowball sampling to contact potential respondents directly. Age, contractual status, and place of residence were the main selection criteria to overcome the shortcomings of those strategies and broaden the sample. I interviewed sugarcane workers, overseers, and union leaders using the oral history method (Thompson and Bornat, 2017), which allowed insight into the rising job formalisation through the work histories of plantation workers over the last three decades. Workers recounted their work histories in reply to probing questions like 'when did you begin to cut cane?' 'what was cane cutting like back then?' 'when did you obtain your first signed work card?' This allowed the collection of detailed information about the workers' incorporation into sugarcane work from childhood to adulthood, and their experiences with the shift from informal to formal jobs, including changes in working conditions, their relations with bosses and management, and their mobility across the *Zona da Mata*.

Understanding the process of job formalisation is impossible without an analysis of work cards. For this purpose, I have developed the innovative strategy of collecting visual data from the workers' work cards. This allowed me to create a visual understanding of job formalisation over time (see Strangleman, 2014) and to tackle some limitations of personal testimonies. Most interviewees consented to having their work cards photographed from cover to cover. As I photographed and perused the *carteiras*, I also enquired about their internal records, which indicated precarious employment patterns and labour practices through annotations.

Interviews took on average 2 hours, and they mainly occurred in the interviewees' households. In some cases, I conducted a second or third interview with the workers to update information about their work histories. For this article, interviewees have been anonymised, and pictures' details have been blurred to avoid identification. I have analysed 327 job records annotated in 48 work cards from 30 rural workers. Only plantation-related job records were selected for further analysis, totalling 312 records, most related to five sugar mills, including C1 to C4. Each record corresponds to one employment contract signed between a worker and a sugar mill. Altogether, they document the work histories of sugarcane workers in many other companies in that area since the 1990s.

Regarding content, the interviews and documents were analysed using thematic analysis. Next, I explored the functioning of the documents and their usage by human actors 'for purposeful ends' (Prior, 2008). Following Sigaud (2008), for whom 'laws do not do things in the social world' (p. 88), the function and uses of work cards were apprehended from the relations, conflicts and struggles between workers and sugar mills around labour regulation. I point to typical illegal labour practices involving work cards such as employer-made modifications, annotations and retention of documents used to enhance labour control, immobilise the workforce and reproduce precarity. I also emphasise the workers' struggles for social and labour rights. Based on this analysis, I explore the precarious formalisation through documents in Alagoas' sugarcane plantations.

Documented informality

The triangulation of workers' testimonies and documents support the understanding that most sugarcane workers in Alagoas did not hold signed work cards until the 1990s. In

contrast to Pernambuco, where the advent of the 1963 RWS-led sugar mills to sign the work cards of sugarcane workers, the labour legislation had little application on the plantations of Alagoas, 'where there was no vocabulary of "rights," nor actions demanding them in the day-to-day conflicts in the plantations, nor lawsuits, nor employer compliance with the norms of the RWS' (Sigaud, 2008: 87).

Still, nearly 50,000 rural work cards had been issued in Alagoas by 1970 (IBGE, 1971). However, most of these work cards remained unsigned in a kind of documented informality, which is displayed in the difference between the issuance date and the first annotation. In some analysed cards, this pattern of documented informality spanned more than 10 years, showing that rural workers continued to be excluded from rights and protections despite holding the *carteira*. This was the case of Expedito, 54 years, who got his first work card at the age of 18 in 1979 'to have the right and freedom to work' as prescribed by Varga's CLT – and as materialised by the *carteira*.

As for most rural workers of his generation, though, the only 'right' available to Expedito was the freedom to sell his labour-power informally to C3. For about 9 years, he was an unmarried tenant of C3, living in a shack with about 50 workers and facing threats of eviction used to enforce work discipline: 'if the manager told you to work and you didn't go, he would tell you to vacate the house . . . You had nowhere to go, so you were forced to work day and night'. Like Expedito, Firmino, 74 years, a former worker of C4, endured much intimidation from employers in the 1970s:

> There was no *ficha* [work card] with any boss. The mills didn't sign cards . . . the bosses discouraged us, saying: 'Don't do that, don't ask for a work card, because if you get one, there will be consequences'. In fact, the bosses knew about the rights, but we didn't. We thought the *ficha* was a bad thing, because the bosses tried to convince us that it was not worth it, and tried to dissuade us from fighting for our rights.

At any rate, the sugar mills faced no sanctions for evading the law. They often used outright coercion to reduce costs, and used in formal contracts combined with much ideological repression in their labour recruitment to cement their class domination.

In the late 1980s, when the first collective bargaining took place on Alagoas' plantations, workers' mobilising capacities improved, says Antônio Torres, 59 years, president of the Alagoas' Rural Workers Federation (FETAR/AL). At that time, he recalled that 'the mills still violated basic CLT rights, including the minimum wage, regulated working hours, paid vacations, and the annotation of work cards'. As a result of this documented informality, the rural workers' eligibility to collect social security benefits has been severely restricted.

Precarious formalisation and work intensification

The 1988 Constitution gave rural and urban workers equal rights, thus instituting the compulsory implementation of labour and social laws in rural Brazil. By 1991, the installation of Labour Justice in Maceió, the capital of Alagoas, provoked growing employer compliance with the CLT. Moreover, proximity with arbitration boards subsequently installed in the sugarcane area led rural workers to seek justice. The sugarcane

agro-industry responded with denylists against those bringing lawsuits, asserted Mr Torres: 'the lawyers representing the mills compiled lists of workers seeking legal action, and shared them with other mills, so that they wouldn't hire the workers'. In addition, employers swept away the traces of labour informality that could be used to prove decades of job links and consequently, compensation claims. Until 1995, it is estimated that 40,000 houses were demolished in the plantation-dominated *Zona da Mata* region; that is, an equal number of families have been gradually displaced to the outskirts of surrounding small towns or the capital. At the time, Jorge Toledo, 34 years, sugar mill owner and president of Alagoas' Sugar Industry Syndicate, who was awarded a political position as the Planning Secretary of the state of Alagoas, blamed the labour legislation for the eviction of resident workers: 'the destruction of houses is a madness, but it was the labour legislation that created this' (Cipola, 1995). The continuous formation of a dispossessed reserve army of agricultural labour through land concentration and proletarianisation, which has been an issue in Northeast Brazil since the 1960s (De Andrade, 1980), was in full swing throughout the 1990s.

Echoing the nationwide economic restructuring of the 1990s, Alagoas' sugar mills reorganised and downsized labour using new production and disciplinary techniques (Padrão, 1997), insourced overseers to sharpen direct supervision and formalised rural work using precarious contracts (seasonal, part-time and probationary). Changes in the labour process allowed employers to increase output from already intensive activities such as cane cutting using more strict piece wages. 'With the annotation of work cards', Cosme, 43 years, a cane cutter at C2 who worked informally from his adolescence until the age of 22, recalled, 'the mill started to demand much more work, especially the *media* [production quota], not to be absent, and many things they required'. Workers' daily effort rose progressively from 1 and 2 tonnes to 7 tonnes of cane cut per day. Marcos, 30 years, a cutter at C1, reiterated,

> In the time of the *clandestino* there was no quota. You could cut 1, 2 tonnes and leave . . . When my work card was signed for the first time, I was 18, and we had to cut 3.5 tonnes to make a wage . . . then in the next year it increased to 3.7. Then from 3.7 it rose to 3.8. Next, it reached 4.1 tonnes and now it is 4.2 tonnes . . . Nowadays we cut way more than before – there was one day this season that I produced 17 tonnes of cut cane.

The intensified exploitation of fewer manual workers, who often cut above the expected quota, offset the growing costs with work cards. The few pre-1990s job records consisted mainly of long, full-time contracts and hourly wages. In the following decade, work cards recorded a surge in precarious contracts and piece wages, affording the mills considerable leverage over workers. Given the precarious formalisation through successive but unstable short-term, seasonal and probationary contracts, these workers accumulated many work cards that record their working lives alternating between formal and informal work in appalling working conditions on the plantations (see Figure 1).

Sugarcane cutters are exposed to extreme cardiovascular loads (de Verçoza, 2018), accidents and illnesses such as the generalised cramp known as *canguru* (kangaroo) that affects them during work and can be fatal (Plancherel et al., 2011). The sugarcane agro-industry accounted for 44% of all work accidents in Alagoas between 2012 and

Figure 1. Mr Gomes da Silva and his three work cards recording 20 years of successive seasonal contracts as a cane cutter.

2018, with over 13,000 occurrences (AEAT, 2018; Leão, 2019). From my fieldwork, I found that most of my interviewees had scars from using sharp machetes, particularly on their hands, legs and feet.

Workers quickly perceived that job formalisation would demand more than above-average work effort, and moreover, would endanger their wellbeing as well. The work discipline required by precarious work with signed work cards actualised the old mechanisms of social control on the plantations. The threat of eviction in the time of *clandestinos* was replaced by the threat of dismissal and being denied a contractual renovation in the next harvest in the time of *fichados*.

Economic surveillance through work cards

Regarding the uses of work cards, the analysis emphasises how work cards are engaged within the relations between hiring staff and workers, where they function as apparatus of production that supports the applicant, workforce, and workplace surveillance (see Fuchs, 2013). Upon the annual hiring, employers vet sugarcane workers through their work cards, paying attention to discriminatory hiring criteria – young, male, productive, with low levels of absenteeism and a few inclinations to strike – used by the sugar agro-industry as a whole to impose the production quotas and undermine workers' attempts to organise themselves. Raimundo, 56 years, an overseer who has worked in C2 for 35 years and supervises 50 cutters each harvest, describes the hiring process:

> I pick up the *carteiras* at their houses, or those who know me come and bring them here. Then I take them to the mill, and there they [HR staff] do the process on the computer. They check if the worker had the *correct quota* the previous year. If he didn't, his work card is rejected. These are the arsonists, Plantation workers have been using arson to protest against exploitative, deceptive and coercive employer practices. According to Raimundo, some workers respond to the rejection of their work cards with setting sugarcane plantations on fire. He also added that 'when the sugar mill catches an arsonist, it kills him, it kills him on the spot right? And the one that attained the quota, he gets his work card signed. If the quota matches, he's hired. Then they ask for other personal documents . . . and police clearance, to find out if they've had any . . . if they've committed any crimes, if they're running away from the police . . . Also, if he has any *problems* in the Labour Justice, his *carteira* is denied.

Employers can crosscheck information from work cards because these documents are used to monitor specific information about workers, including production quotas and their involvement with law enforcement, beyond the mandatory contractual information. In the many work cards analysed, I could observe that management from the four sugar mills (C1, C2, C3 and C4) altered the *carteiras* with custom-made cards, stamps, barcodes and unlawful annotations. By making those specific attributes more legible, these modifications serve as an informal workforce data system facilitating labour control and hiring decisions (Figure 2).

Every harvest, the latest annotated contract is either scribbled on the pages or numbered on the cover of the work cards using labels and barcodes. Other numbered labels refer to the management staff, thus linking documents to overseers to enhance surveillance (see Figure 2). Employers verify the workers' productivity from previous harvests using these numbers. Conversely, overseers like Raimundo feed this system throughout the harvest by tracking worker attendance and productivity on mobile devices. A combination of paper and digital surveillance inform hiring and firing strategies: who gets the work card signed or denied, who is fired for not attaining the quota, and which employment contract is signed with each worker.

Human resource (HR) staff also made illegal annotations (dismissal reasons and sick notes), unusual handwritten remarks (Figure 3) and stapled information cards to documents (Figure 4(a)). These cards allow workplace surveillance insofar as they display employee information such as name, ID, taxpayer registry, job title, boot size (a mandatory personal protective equipment for cane cutters), unemployment insurance eligibility, the overseer's name and plantation locality. Employers are particularly interested in monitoring workers' eligibility for unemployment insurance, as this information allows them to predict who will remain 'immobilised' in the plantation area, enjoying dismissal benefits until the subsequent harvest. Having a predictable workforce is key for the plantations that hire thousands of workers on precarious contracts and dispute the local labour force with the plantations in the Southeast and the Center-West of the country, depending upon the Northeastern migrant labour (see Novaes and Alves, 2007).

Employers may also use work cards to monitor workers' health, so that they can obtain information about the productive body and discipline it to hazardous working conditions (see Foucault, 1995). C2 stamped work cards to prove that workers were immunised against tetanus (Figure 4(b)), but hardly addressed the causes of work-related

Figure 2. Sugar mills modify work cards with staples, adhesives notes, and barcodes containing labour-management information.

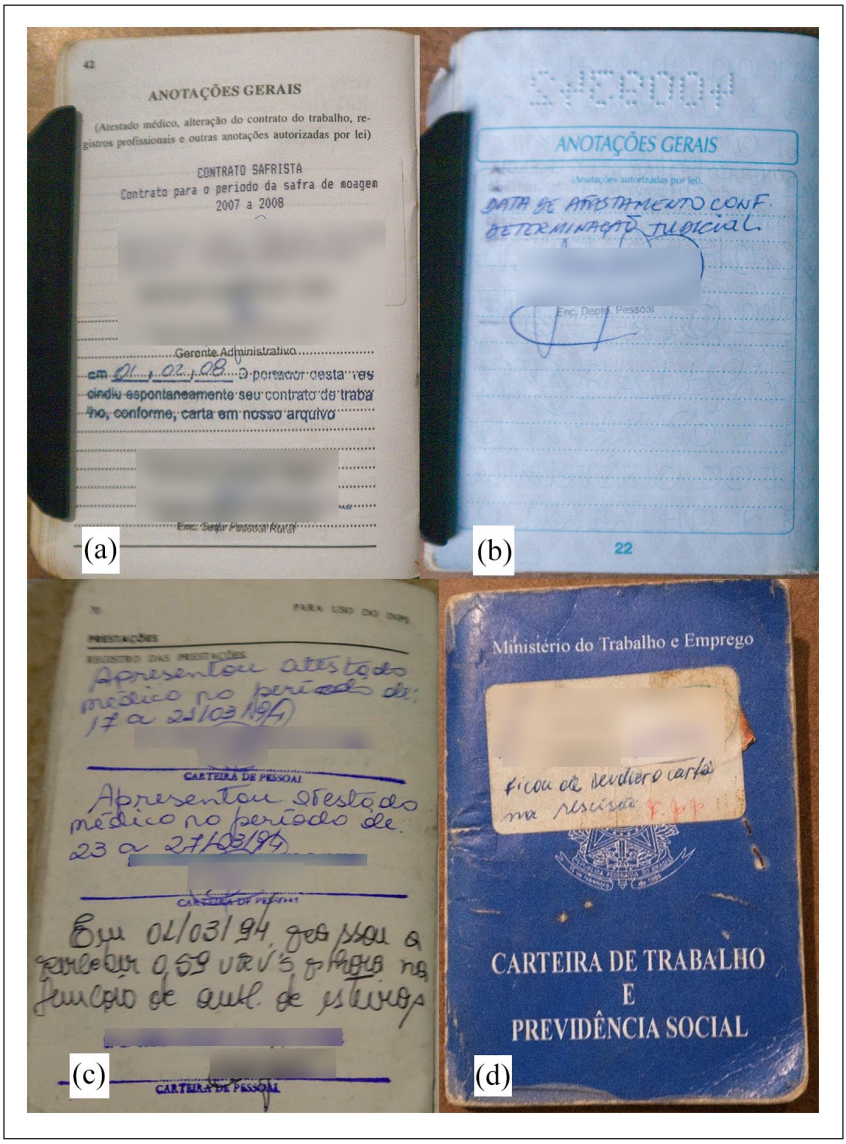

Figure 3. Annotations of dismissal reasons, sick notes and HR remarks.

accidents and illnesses. Moreover, C4 had annotated several work cards with sick notes following work accidents (Figure 3(d)), thereby breaching article 29 of the CLT that sanctions *detrimental annotations*, including sick notes, dismissal reasons, suspension, penalties and warnings. It is an illegal practice that, according to the Superior Labour Court, can hinder not only future job opportunities, but make securing a contract altogether impossible for the labourer.

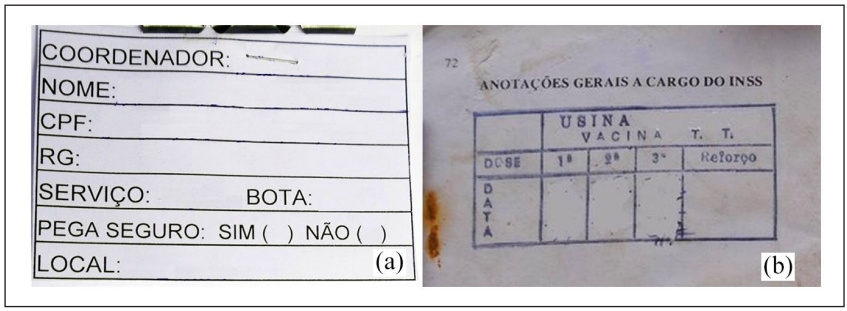

Figure 4. Custom-made information cards with labour management information and stamped vaccine controls.

When workers contest unfair practices (fraudulent production measurements, unexpected demotion to lesser paid activities or delayed payments), threats involving work cards are also used to moralise precarious working conditions. Renato, 31 years, a cutter who accumulated 15 temporary work contracts at C1 within two cards, elaborated,

> Workers who claim their rights and the fair weight of the cane he cuts . . . They get upset and block him . . . As I told you, they put it in the system: 'forbidden to readmit worker', so that whenever he searches work in that mill, his card is denied, the company does not hire him. *They dirty the worker's work card, they smear it.* This is something they are not allowed to do, to dirty the work card. When he goes to another mill, his card is dirty, and this [*other*] mill already knows about him and won't give him a job. This is a very wrong business . . . They register it in the employer's system, as well as on the work card. When he [the employer] verifies the work card, he sees the note and says 'No, this worker here is a problematic one', and does not give the worker a job.

The threat of having one's work card refused ('dirtied') in a subsequent harvest, as experienced by Renato, suggests that in the hidden abode of sugarcane production (to quote Marx), work cards become disciplinary instruments to compel workers' commitment to highly productive work by threats of (possibly permanent) unemployment. Such modifications are not only violent, for they cause lasting impacts on the documents' physical condition, but also constitute markers of despotic practices in which these personal documents that are intended to be used to assert labour rights have, ironically, become tools of despotic labour control.

Retention of work cards and labour immobilisation

Work cards are also used in the labour immobilisation strategies of sugar mills, which illegally retain documents, resulting in constraints on workers' freedom and reproducing their dependence on plantation jobs. According to CLT rules, employers can only keep these documents for 48 hours,[2] after which they must return the documents to their owners. In practice, however, workers must sometimes wait more than 1 month before they can retrieve their documents, which might then come back unannotated, that is, without

any employment contract. When asked clarification about the retention of work cards, Raimundo plainly stated,

> [The retention] happens every year . . . [this year] we collected the work cards to sign within 15 days, but the mill had no money there yet, and it took another 30 days, and some even took two or three months. The mill withheld the work cards, assuming workers had nowhere to go and would wait. The intention of the mill is to make sure that the worker does not go to another place, so that the company does not lose him, but when it does not have money, it retains the documents, you know? Later the work cards were returned without any contract. Some workers went to court. This caused many losses, as many workers brought lawsuits and they won the cases. Eventually, I had workers whose work cards were retained for two months and were never signed. They even had admission check-ups but were never hired.

During the interview, Raimundo also disclosed that he retained three workers' work cards to whom he had promised jobs. Meanwhile, Diogo, 32 years, a cane cutter with 13 years of contracts on his work cards, experienced the retention of his work card that year by C2 and recalled,

> I was going to get hired by C2. Then I handed in my work card and one month passed. I was waiting for the job and they didn't call me. When they called me, my work card was returned [but] with no contract. My colleagues sued the company. I couldn't do that because I needed the job . . . How do they take your document, hold it for such a long time, keep you waiting for a job – and nothing happens? . . . They said my job was guaranteed. So, I kept waiting . . . Meanwhile, other companies tried to recruit me, but my work card was stuck [with C2] . . . So, I lost some opportunities . . .

The confiscation of Diogo's work card also meant a violation of his freedom to work elsewhere. In that harvest, C2 retained 200 work cards, and refused to sign contracts with their holders. Meanwhile, other cutters were hired on short-term contracts and tested under intense productive demands. As the cutters and overseers explained, those who do not attain the productive quotas were fired within the first 3 months of the harvest and replaced by those whose freedom of movement had been restricted.

The retention of work cards by employers is not uncommon in Brazil; it became a crime against the organisation of work in 1998 and a criminal offence against individual freedom in 2003, the latter characterising modern-day slavery in the country. Still, Alagoas' plantations coercively retained the *carteiras* to exercise arbitrary control over the workforce and shape its predictability, upholding Boutang's (1998) argument that capitalists rely on institutional mechanisms to create dependent work and restrict the workers' geographical, professional, social and political mobility.

Between precarious formalisation and documented informality

Work cards are a prime example of the ambiguity attributed to documents for combining the protection of the labour legislation with the monitoring and control that employers can exert. On one hand, they became a tool of control, surveillance and immobilisation of the

workforce. On the other hand, they materialise workers' labour and social rights and have been used to support workers' grievances and recognise their entitlements in labour courts.

When I interviewed Diogo in January 2015, half-way through the harvesting season, he was already cutting cane without a signed work card for a supplier of C2. This mill had not only retained his document and denied him a job but later outsourced his labour through intermediaries to cut costs. As pointed out by Antônio, this return to informality after formal jobs is becoming increasingly common, particularly with the 2017 Labour Reform. As an informal worker, Diogo was bereft of the protection of any labour rights, social security and workplace occupational health. Furthermore, to seek justice might be out of the question for workers dependent upon plantation jobs. As mentioned earlier, Diogo feared retaliation, so he decided not to protest the retention and non-annotation of his work card by C2. For his part, Tales, 43 years, sought reparation after realising that C3 had unlawfully pocketed pension contributions and labour dues during the 5 years, he was employed under a permanent contract. Nevertheless, he admitted, 'pursuing the labour dispute to the end was not possible, so I agreed to a settlement'. He added,

> Had I moved on with the case, I could have received 35,000 BRL, given the lack of annotation and social security payments in those five years and six months of work. But I agreed to a settlement because I found it a better option. If I hadn't done that . . . Well, the mill will start crushing soon, so I can bring my work card here and try to get a job again . . .

Tales feared being blacklisted, which is historically what happens to rural workers filing claims against sugar mills; he thus experienced what John French (2004) dubbed 'justice at a discount' (p. 45), or the bias towards conciliation that makes Brazilian workers settle for considerably less than what they are entitled to based upon the employers' wrongdoings. As a result, those years of skirted pension contributions remain unpaid, which creates many insecurities for any rural worker procuring retirement: when workers seek these provisions in the future, they discover they have amassed next to no retirement funds. Upon dismissal, the mill annotated Tales' work card with the entry: 'date of dismissal according to legal decision' (Figure 3(a)), which is strictly prohibited. Since 2000, the Brazilian Penal Code also sanctions the pocketing of pension contributions, yet just like the unlawful modifications and retention of work cards, the theft of workers' pensions continues in practice.

Workers who can no longer work on the plantation due to illness are discarded by the sugar mills and must simply wait for the retirement age to access their pension. Given the economic constraints upon these elderly workers, however, they see no option but to work, even though they might be unable to do so due to the physical and psychological consequences of many laborious years on the plantations. They end up hiring themselves out to sugarcane suppliers as informal workers to make ends meet. In 2019, the pension reform introduced by the Bolsonaro government attempted to increase the retirement age for rural workers, but societal pressure prevented the change: the rural retirement rule remains 55 for women and 60 for men – if they can prove 15 years of rural activity. The situation is even more critical for women: Úrsula, 52 years, has been working on plantations since the age of 7 but accumulated only six job records from C1 in her only work card as of 2008. Having worked informally most of her life, she is not entitled to a regular rural pension. Women have been expelled from cane cutting due to the production requirements as of the 1990s, but their current plantation jobs such as weeding, stone picking, sowing and fertilising the

fields are no less 'backbreaking jobs', as Úrsula asserted. Both in C1 and C3, for example, women are discriminated against in terms of rights and they are denied the unemployment insurance, that is, women experience more strongly the precarity of work and rights. Given their work cards' contribution gaps, rural workers are more than likely to experience socio-economic insecurity in their 50s and retire later than expected.

Even those with four contract-filled work cards spanning 22 years of formal jobs, like Expedito, 54 years, acknowledged that the combination of seasonal contracts with periods of informality impacted one's potential retirement benefits:

> I've got lots of contracts but few contributions, don't I? . . . I am trying to retire now, but my contribution is low, I've lost too much time . . . I started working when I was 17 at C3, where I spent nine years. If those nine years had been registered, I could now have some benefits, a pension. But I was *clandestino*, so there wasn't any contribution . . .

Expedito accumulates a series of contribution gaps from the past and the present, including a period of 6 months between 2013 and 2014 during which he cut cane informally again for C3. He filled a labour suit against the mill for not signing his work card and firing him without any severance payments and benefits. Feeling outraged, he is now waiting for a local labour court to assert his rights. Yet, proudly showing me his many work cards that document a worker's life on the plantations, he asked me to read the court's decision out loud: 'that C3 was liable to recognise the employment relationship with him, annotate his work card, and pay severance benefits, CLT-related fines, and compensation for moral damages'.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Brazilian *carteira de trabalho* is not only a personal document that guarantees access to rights and protections in the formal economy. Beyond functioning as an apparatus of state surveillance over capital-labour relations, the work card was turned into a mechanism of labour control on the plantations of Alagoas, Northeast Brazil.

The expansion of formal employment in recent decades and, as a result, the annotation of work cards, has advanced labour and social rights for rural workers who were excluded from such rights for most of the 20th century. Consequently, the work card has been expected and desired by most Brazilian workers, particularly low-paid workers situated at the bottom of the country's social structure who usually depend on welfare provisions to complement their income.

However, our findings suggest that the work card is an ambiguous instrument that perpetuates expectations of work-based citizenship while functioning as a tool for the economic surveillance and reproduction of precariously employed workers.

The analysis of work cards focused on their content and functioning, and I have shown how these documents display years of documented informality and precarious formalisation. With these transformations, job formalisation became associated with work intensification and illnesses at the workplace. There is clear evidence that the job formalisation goes hand in hand with an increased work effort that amplifies health risks and reinforces work precarity on the sugarcane plantations of Northeast Brazil.

Moving into the work cards' functioning, these documents became embedded in the managerial strategies of labour control, surveillance and immobilisation that render rural workers dependent on the plantation jobs. These strategies involve unofficial modifications, annotations and retention of work cards, suggesting that these documents can be used as disciplinary instruments. First, work cards are modified to function as tools of workplace and workforce surveillance that monitor many workers' attributes, including their output, and to support hiring and firing decisions. They are also annotated with detrimental annotations to punish workers and stifle future job opportunities. Moreover, employers retain work cards to immobilise labour and shape the workforce's availability for the plantations. In doing so, they also confiscate the rural workers' freedom, thus using outright coercion to control labour. Together with the legal affordances to deal out precarious contracts, work cards are part of a whole set of mechanisms used by sugarcane plantations to control workers and reproduce their dependence on wage labour in the plantation domain.

Although the work cards grant workforce predictability for employers, the same cannot be said about the continued access to income and social security for workers. In the case of sugarcane workers, to have accumulated many contract-filled work cards does not mean protection from precarity or uncertainties, nor does it guarantee a future pension. In fact, the numerous work cards are exemplary indicators of employment precarity that characterise a working life on the plantations. Moreover, rights and entitlements all too often have to be awarded through courtroom processes because of employers' underhanded and illegal methods of dealing with these documents.

Ultimately, this study demonstrated that the *carteira de trabalho* represents an essential source of knowledge about the Brazilian working class and deserves further research. As I conclude this article, the Bolsonaro Government (2019–2022) is implementing an overhaul of work cards through downwards regulation and digitalisation, which is likely to jeopardise rural wage workers' labour and social rights.

Such shifts call for more research to understand how the transformation of the system of workforce documentation will impact workers, their strategies while using work cards, their difficulties in accessing rights and their fall back into informal labour, particularly in rural Brazil.

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Notes

1. Retrieved from the General Register of Employed and Unemployed people (CAGED database), Ministry of Labour, Brazil, by cross-tabulating the occupation 'sugarcane workers' with sector 'Sugar Manufacturing and Refining' as employed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) on 16 February 2022.
2. In 2019, Law 13.874 extended this period to 5 days and scrapped the fine for retention of documents from the CLT, thus stimulating illegal labour practices.

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Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse à la *carteira de trabalho* (carte de travail brésilienne) et à son utilisation dans les plantations de canne à sucre d'Alagoas, dans le nord-est du Brésil. Il s'appuie sur des photographies et des entretiens avec des travailleurs agricoles pour analyser comment ces documents sont utilisés pour gérer et reproduire le travail précaire. Dans les plantations, les cartes de travail fonctionnent comme un outil de gestion permettant de surveiller et de contrôler la main-d'œuvre. Les raffineries de sucre peuvent par ailleurs contrôler la mobilité des travailleurs agricoles et former leur armée de réserve agricole en retenant ces documents, immobilisant ainsi les travailleurs salariés. Si la carte de travail symbolise la citoyenneté du travail et matérialise la législation du travail, dans la pratique, elle devient un instrument disciplinaire au service des stratégies du secteur agro-industriel d'identification, de contrôle et de déploiement d'une main-d'œuvre employée dans des conditions précaires et exploitée dans les plantations. Enfin, l'article contribue par une approche historico-biographique innovante à l'étude des mécanismes institutionnels utilisés pour produire et reproduire le travail précaire dans les plantations de canne à sucre au Brésil.

Mots-clés

Brésil, *carteira de trabalho* (carte de travail), documents des travailleurs, formalisation de l'emploi, immobilisation des travailleurs, travailleurs de la canne à sucre

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la *carteira de trabalho* brasileña (tarjeta de trabajo) y su uso en las plantaciones de caña de azúcar de Alagoas, en el nordeste de Brasil. Se basa en fotografías y entrevistas con trabajadores rurales para analizar cómo se usan estos documentos para gestionar y reproducir el trabajo precario. En las plantaciones, las tarjetas de trabajo funcionan como una herramienta de gestión que permite la vigilancia y el control de la mano de obra. Además, los ingenios azucareros pueden controlar la movilidad de los trabajadores rurales y formar su ejército de reserva agrícola reteniendo estos documentos, e inmovilizando así a los trabajadores asalariados. Si bien la tarjeta de trabajo simboliza la ciudadanía ocupacional y materializa la legislación laboral, en la práctica se convierte en un instrumento disciplinario al servicio de las estrategias de la agroindustria para la identificación, el control y el despliegue de mano de obra precarizada y explotada en las plantaciones. Finalmente, el artículo contribuye con un enfoque histórico-biográfico innovador al estudio de los mecanismos institucionales que se utilizan para producir y reproducir el trabajo precario en las plantaciones de caña de azúcar de Brasil.

Palabras clave

Brasil, *carteira de trabalho* (tarjeta de trabajo), documentos de los trabajadores, formalización laboral, inmovilización de los trabajadores, trabajadores de la caña de azúcar