

Are major sports events opportunities for innovative trade union action? The example of Brazil

Campaigns for decent work during mega sporting events in Brazil: innovative trade union strategies in the construction sector, their successes and continuation

A Case Study by Maurício Rombaldi

The hosting of both the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil forced the country's trade unions to seek new methods of organisation and cooperation.

Brazil has been involved in the organisation of two major sporting events over the last ten years: the FIFA World Cup in 2014 and the Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympics in 2016.

From the awarding of these events by their organising committees to the competitions themselves, a major portion of the national economy dealt with the resulting investments and employment generated, but also with meeting the standards and deadlines set by FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

The construction sector benefited most from this external economic stimulus. Thousands of workers laboured for several years to construct not just stadiums but ports, airports and other transport infrastructure such as roads and subway, tram and bus lines.

The run-up to a mega sporting event is a moment of exceptional structural power for trade unions. Governments, organising committees and construction companies need the full cooperation of workers in order to ensure the timely completion of such prestigious international projects. With so much at stake, any form of industrial action not only has the potential to cause major delays; it could also cause serious reputational damage. As a result, mega sports events provide trade unions with fertile ground for successful campaigns that can yield lasting improvements for workers, such as better pay and better safety standards.

But these conditions also presented Brazil's trade unions with unfamiliar challenges, forcing them to seek – with the support and experience of other trade unions from around the world – new methods of organisation and cooperation.

Sociologist Maurício Rombaldi, professor at the Federal University of Paraíba, discusses how these events affected working conditions in his study of union strategies during the *Decent Work Towards and Beyond World Cup 2014* campaign, launched by the Building and Wood Worker's International (BWI).

Although new to Brazil, similar campaigns had been organised in London for the 2012 Olympic Games and in South Africa for the organisation of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Local unions were supported by various international organisations, such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which also launched a campaign called Play Fair, which was aimed at protecting another workforce: that employed to manufacture – in Brazil and around the world – sporting goods and accessories related to the event.

The goal of such campaigns is to ensure respect for the Decent Work Agenda on the basis of the principles of the International Labour Organization, in particular by promoting the exchange and development of innovative strategies among the country's various local unions, as well as improved international integration.

One of the challenges trade union leaders faced was having to negotiate with unfamiliar parties, in this case FIFA and IOC organising committees.

Workers on the World Cup and Olympic Games projects were most likely to be awarded public contracts by traditional construction companies such as Odebrecht, OAS, Camargo Corrêa and Andrade Gutierrez. Standards and deadlines, however, were set by FIFA and the IOC.

As Rombaldi notes, although these are officially non-profit organisations, financial interests (particularly those of sponsors and partners) nevertheless affected working conditions. The question of deadlines, which were extremely strict, increased the pressure experienced by workers – although time constraints also acted as a lever for trade unions and forced parties to negotiate more quickly.

The study demonstrates that Brazilian trade unions have generally operated separately from one another, and were therefore unaccustomed to conducting joint negotiations. The main job in implementing the Decent Work Campaign was therefore to unite trade union organisations usually segregated by both geography and sector.

Brazilian unions hoping to join the campaign had first to agree to align themselves with an international agenda focused on major sporting events. "The mediation of a foreign organisation thus established, by consensus, an unprecedented national agreement among Brazilian trade unions, which affected negotiations undertaken locally," writes Rombaldi, who highlights concessions, especially on wages, which unions would not likely have won without the capacity for joint action.

Other results included several strategic agreements and the drafting of a manifesto, the first joint statement of demands by Brazilian construction-sector workers. This served as the basis for a unified national programme for better working and living conditions for workers, which was subsequently presented to the government. This rapprochement also resulted in a strengthening of links between Brazilian construction unions and the BWI; between 2010 and 2012, the number of unions affiliated with the BWI increased from 5 to 25.

Trade unions nevertheless faced certain difficulties.

First, the author shows that Brazilian trade unions have sometimes been unable to oversee or control workers' actions. He points to several 'wildcat strikes' on construction sites that forced union leaders to adapt to situations workers initiated without prior consultation.

Second, the internationalisation process was neither homogeneous nor linear. This is due in particular to the diversity among the various trade union centres, both in terms of their historical and political affiliations and the sectors concerned. "Beyond the internal divisions observed between unions from different places, there was also a notable disarticulation between unions and confederations. Prior to 2011, there was no significant experience of national negotiation on issues such as a unified wage agreement among the Brazilian states, despite recurrent demand," says Rombaldi.

The Decent Work Campaign followed the same strategies for the 2016 Olympic Games as it had for the World Cup, but worked along different axes. Joint union negotiations focused more on development of a safety protocol for construction sites than on wages, for example. Rombaldi observes, however, that political differences between unions have not disappeared, while some union structures haven't survived.

In concluding his study on trade union experiences in dealing with major sporting events, the author stresses that "the specifics of national trade unionism significantly influence the strategies to be adopted by as well as results to be expected from an international trade union strategy."

International trade union organisations now face the major challenges of World Cup competitions in Russia and Qatar. The BWI and the ITUC have already launched a campaign entitled *No World Cup in 2022 Without Migrant Workers' Rights*.

They have already met with FIFA leaders, who have recognised "a share of responsibility".

Mathilde Dorcadie

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