

**How trade unions engage in regional integration processes?
The case of CUT and Mercosur
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Introduction:

This article aims to describe how CUT Brazil (Central Única dos Trabalhadores/Unique Confederation of Workers) engages in the Mercosur (Mercado Comum do Sul/Common Market of the South). Firstly, I will explore the origins, both of CUT and Mercosur. Then I will describe some of the strategies of the regional labour movement regarding the integration process. Finally I will explore some of the different phases of actions of the labour movement in Mercosur. It is necessary to clarify that this article does not intend to cover all the aspects of CUT's engagement in the integration process of the South Cone.

Historic Background:

From 1964 to 1985, Brazil faced a military dictatorship. In the middle of the 70s, trade unions and social movements began to struggle against the government and this emerging labour movement was called as "new unionism". This new movement was struggling for more democracy and changes in the old structure that was authoritative and hindered the organization of workers and strikes.

In the late 70s there were many salaries campaigns and at this moment there was a huge participation of the mass fighting for their rights. In 1978 was when the first strikes in the industrial areas happened, as for example in the ABC, an industrial area in the State of São Paulo, where the metal workers' strike, known as "arms crossed", was extended to the whole country.

In 1983, during the II CONCLAT (Conferência Nacional da Classe Trabalhadora/National Conference of the Working Class), CUT was created as a consequence of this rising labour movement. During the 80s, CUT made alliances in the region with other national confederations and their main common interests were to drop the payment of the debt and also fight for democracy, as in that time Chile and Paraguay still had military dictatorships and other countries such as Brazil had just began a phase of re-democratization.

In 1986, CCSCS (Coordenadora de Centrais Sindicais do Cone Sul/ Coordination of Trade Unions of the South Cone) was founded in Buenos Aires with the support of ORIT (Organização Interamericana de Trabalhadores/ Inter-American Organization of Workers). CCSCS is an alliance among national confederation to coordinate actions in the region. Its main objective was to defend democracy and human rights against the authoritative governments that were in power and also organize a collective action against the foreign debt.

In 1990, some agreements between the governments of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay were taking place and CCSCS approved, as one of its priorities of work, the necessity of a protagonist role of the labour movement in the economic and social integration process of the South Cone.

In 1991 when the Assunción Treaty originated Mercosur, CCSCS had already begun to formulate proposals for the bloc, being involved since the beginning of the creation of the integration process.

Mercosur was created in 1991 among the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Its main goals were to build a customs union, to achieve a foreign common tariff, to coordinate macroeconomics and sectors politics (such as industrial, agricultural, foreign trade, etc) and also to harmonize the legislations to strengthen the integration process.

CUT and Mercosur:

A regional integration is a process where two or more countries promote cooperation among themselves, searching for goals that alone they would not be able to achieve. It is a complex reality, which is a result of a situation that leads a country to follow a strategy of integration.

CCSCS was not against Mercosur, but against the model of integration that was only considering commercial interests. With Mercosur in CCSCS's agenda, the labour movement had to deal with themes that they were not used to, such as industrial and agricultural policies and policies of foreign commerce, because these themes would not only be dealt with in national scope, but also in regional scope.

The main strategies of the labour movement of the region in that time was to act together through the national confederations of each country to have one voice, fight for institutional spaces in the integration process where the trade union movement could participate and bring social and labour issues to the Mercosur agenda.

From 1991 until 1994, the labour movements discussed a "Social Letter", which the aim was to build a system of social and labour laws to guarantee equal rights and good conditions of work for all workers across borders. From 1994 to 1998, the countries were in social and economic crises. There was a high unemployment rate as a result of neoliberal policies that the governments of the region implemented. As a consequence, the trade union movement was affected, because the negotiations among the countries almost stopped.

From 1999 to 2002, there was a continued crisis in the region and in 2001 the attention was focused on Argentina, as it faced one of the worst social and economic crisis of the region. From 2002 until now, progressive governments have been elected in the region and this scenario created a positive environment for the development of Mercosur.

Since 1991, the labour movement achieved some of its goals. They are participating in some of the institutional bodies of Mercosur, but still there are many challenges. Trade unions participate in some Sub Groups which are bodies that deal with specific themes, such as the Sub Group number 10 - SGT10 which deals with labour relations, jobs and social security (it was created in 1992).

Another body which the labour movement participate is the Economic and Social Committee Forum – FCES which has a consultative function. Other victories of the

labour movement were the creation, during 1998, of the Social and Labour Declaration - DSL and also the Social and Labour Committee – CSL, which was created to check if the DSL was being implemented properly. Also in 1998, the Labour Market Observatory – OMS was created.

In 2004, governments decided to create a commission to elaborate a Mercosur strategy for growth of employment in the region. This commission was integrated by the CSL, FCES and by the ministries of Economy, Production and Development.

This scenario, where trade unions conquered institutional spaces, demands also technical capacity to deal with these new issues and spaces. During the last years, Mercosur has more associated members and this also turns up as a new challenge for trade unions, as the process is being enlarged. It is important to mention that the actions of CUT in Mercosur are mainly driven through the CCSCS, but it also has dialogue with the Brazilian government.

Final comments:

It is clear that the labour movement achieved many advances in Mercosur such as creation and participation in institutional spaces and also the recognition as an actor in the process. As said above, trade unions were deeply influenced by the economic and social crisis of the countries and as the negotiations of the bloc stagnated, the labour movement was also affected. These pauses in the negotiations show the fragility of the integration process and also it demonstrates its difficulties to survive as a bloc in a model of open regionalism.

Additionally the social crisis in the countries members of Mercosur showed the necessity of a major role of the governments in the formulation of regional policies to continue the construction of the regional bloc.

Although in the national sphere some labour movements have alliances with other sectors of the society, such as social movements, in the regional scope, especially in Mercosur, there is a lack of political alliances with other organizations of the civil society.

The labour movement has a power that is the working class and its mobilization. It is using this strength combined with other strategies that it will be possible to transform a proposal of commercial bloc into a real social, economic and political integration. CCSCS organized some rallies among workers of Mercosur and also some regional First May celebrations in the last years. However, typical trade union activities and also educational programs were not used as much as they could be used. This interaction may create the necessary link of Mercosur topics in the workers life and also a better understanding of Mercosur dimensions.

There is still a long way to go and new struggles have to be built to achieve another type of integration, where the workers have their rights respected as the right to move across borders and also where a social dimension is not only approved but also implemented. Nevertheless it must be recognized that the labour movement of the region has constructed a pivotal role in the process and that it has been contributing and struggling actively for another form of integration.

