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Race, Work, and Social Inequality
Reconfiguring Precarity in the Brazilian Labor Market

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Abstract This article examines the racialized structure of the Brazilian labor market and its role in reproducing durable social inequalities. Drawing on recent data from the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE), it shows how racial hierarchies remain embedded in occupational segregation, income disparities, and unequal access to opportunities. The analysis focuses on call centers and app-based delivery services – highly precarious sectors disproportionately staffed by racialized workers – highlighting four mechanisms of durable inequality: exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation, and adaptation. Mobilizing the concept of the precariat, the article characterizes workers facing chronic insecurity, unstable employment, low wages, weak social protection, and indebtedness. Despite periods of economic stability, racial inequalities in income and mobility persist. The cases also reveal emerging forms of collective action and identity formation at the intersection of class, race, and gender, underscoring the need for sustained, multidimensional policies to confront structural racism and socioeconomic exclusion.

Keywords Brazil. Race. Work. Labor Market. Social Inequality.

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1 Introduction

Over the past three decades, the Brazilian labor market has undergone profound transformations that reflect changes in the economy, in productive organization, and in labor relations. One of the most significant shifts has been the declining relative weight of the manufacturing sector – historically responsible for absorbing a large share of the urban labor force – and the consequent expansion of the service sector, particularly in commerce, logistics, telecommunications, education, health, and information technology. This transition has altered not only the occupational composition of the workforce but also the nature of labor relations, privileging subordinate and lower-skilled functions, which are frequently precarious and marked by limited formal protection (Antunes 2020).

At the same time, the process of productive restructuring and labor flexibilization – materialized mainly through business outsourcing strategies and the hiring of workers via labor intermediation firms – has redefined the centrality of unions, weakening traditional instruments of collective bargaining. This dynamic has contributed to the fragmentation of workers' collective identities, further dispersing and individualizing their class experiences (Braga 2016; Antunes 2009). Meanwhile, new forms of employment, such as platform labor, temporary and intermittent contracts, and informal jobs, have expanded the heterogeneity of occupational trajectories, reinforcing the reproduction of historical inequalities related to gender, race, and social class (Guimarães, Hirata 2024).

Such transformations have also reshaped workers' strategies of mobilization and resistance. While the consolidation of a fragmented yet oversized service sector and the flexibilization of labor have reduced the incidence of the massive strikes once typical of the industrial sector, new – often informal – spaces of organization have emerged, articulating forms of community-based solidarity and new collective identities (Braga 2017). Thus, the contemporary Brazilian labor market is marked by a growing tension between the precarization of workers' reproductive conditions, the fragmentation of labor relations, the weakening of unions, and the emergence of embryonic forms of collective resistance that operate largely outside traditional labor organizing strategies.

Furthermore, among the most significant transformations in the Brazilian labor market in recent decades is the contrast between two interlinked processes: on the one hand, the massive incorporation of racialized workers – particularly young Black women – during the 2000s; on the other, the intensification of informalization and precarization following the unemployment crisis of the mid-2010s (Guimarães, Hirata 2024). In the early twenty-first century, economic growth and the adoption of social and educational inclusion policies,

such as Bolsa Família and ProUni, expanded access for Black Brazilians both to higher education and to the formal labor market. This period was marked by a relative reduction in income concentration among those who depend on earnings from labor, allowing many previously excluded workers to enter formal employment (Braga 2012).

However, the economic crisis of 2015-16 interrupted this brief cycle of inclusive expansion, reversing many of the gains achieved in the previous decade. The recession – combined with the adoption of austerity policies and the 2017 labor reforms – led to a rapid expansion of informality (Antunes 2020). According to data from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNADC), produced by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the informality rate in Brazil rose from 38.7% in 2016 to 44.3% in 2019, highlighting the deterioration of labor conditions. This process disproportionately affected racialized workers. In this sense, the recent cycle of the Brazilian labor market reaffirmed the centrality of racial and gender hierarchies in the reproduction of social inequalities and in defining the boundaries between protected and precarious work (Guimarães, Hirata 2024).

Moreover, in November 2017, the dismantling of Brazil's protective labor framework entered a new phase. The labor reform (Law 13.467) was enacted under the claim that flexibilizing labor relations would promote formal job creation. However, two years after its implementation, the unemployment rate remained virtually unchanged, indicating that the promised effects failed to materialize (Braga 2016). Beyond this, the reform introduced new employment modalities – such as intermittent work – that heightened the precariousness of labor relations, particularly for racialized workers who already faced substandard conditions of social reproduction (Antunes 2020). As a result, the expectations held by racialized workers regarding a potential strengthening of labor protections through formal employment dissipated amid a labor market increasingly characterized by informality, expanding precarious work arrangements, and persistent structural inequalities of gender and race (Guimarães, Hirata 2024).

The objective of this article is to analyze how these processes unfold through the experiences of workers in two segments of the service sector, namely call centers and app-based delivery services. We understand that these two cases exemplify, in a paradigmatic manner, the patterns of exploitation, subordination, and precarization that have historically shaped the incorporation of racialized workers into the Brazilian labor market. At the same time, they also illustrate possibilities for resistance, as demonstrated in the forms of organization and mobilization developed by these segments of the working class.

2 Clóvis Moura and the Formation of the Brazilian Labor Market

Over the long period described above, it has become increasingly evident that mechanisms of exploitation and segregation adapt to the transformations of Brazilian capitalism, continually updating and reproducing racially rooted forms of oppression within the labor market (Moura 1988; 1994). Transformations in the Brazilian economy – especially those stemming from financialization, deindustrialization, and the widespread adoption of outsourcing – have intensified the vulnerability of the Black population, which remains disproportionately concentrated in informal, low-wage, and poorly protected occupations. This persistence reveals the historical continuity of a racialized pattern of labor insertion in which skin color remains a fundamental marker of inequality and exclusion (Moura 2019).

This contemporary reading of racial and class inequalities resonates with broader interpretations of Brazilian social formation that identify the legacy of slavery as a determining axis in the organization of work. Among the most influential interpreters of this historical trajectory is the sociologist Clóvis Moura. One of the foremost representatives of Black Marxism in Brazil, Moura became known for analyzing the intersection of race, class, and labor, contributing to an understanding of Brazilian capitalism as a structure intrinsically linked to the exploitation of the Black population – initially enslaved and later rendered surplus within the labor market (Moura 1988). He also emphasized the centrality of Black political agency – from the quilombos to contemporary forms of cultural resistance – interpreting these expressions as political confrontations against the plantation regime and its historical afterlives (Moura 1994; 2019).

According to Moura (1988), the formation of Brazil's racialized labor market has deep roots in the history of colonial slavery and the plantation regime developed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Brazil received approximately 46 percent of all Africans transported to the Americas, totaling nearly five million enslaved workers. Through their coerced labor, they sustained the production of sugar, minerals, coffee, and other export commodities, enabling the reproduction of expanded capital accumulation in the colonial context and establishing a structural pattern of exploitation grounded in political violence and racial oppression.

For Moura, the colonial state developed systematic mechanisms of repression to control the enslaved population and prevent revolts, creating what amounted to a permanent state of civil war. Legal ordinances, patrols, militias, public executions, and corporal punishment reinforced the disciplining of Black labor

while ensuring the maximization of plantation profits. Thus, class struggle – shaped by enslaved people's resistance – must be the starting point for understanding Brazilian society, standing in contrast to interpretations that naturalize Black subordination or celebrate a supposed racial harmony.

Black resistance manifested itself both individually – through escapes, suicides, and acts of sabotage – and collectively, through rebellions, strikes by freedpeople, and the formation of quilombos, with Palmares representing the most emblematic expression of organized resistance. Moura interpreted the quilombo experience not as a mere African survival but as a process of "becoming Black", through which the enslaved adapted customs, languages, and cultural practices to the new colonial reality, creating alternative social and political structures more efficient than the plantation regime itself. These spaces constituted models of autonomy, self-sustaining economies, and collective political power that directly challenged the colonial order.

The transition from slave to free labor in the nineteenth century did not dissolve these racial relations; rather, the plantation elite articulated a project of "whitening" Brazilian society. Laws such as the Land Law (1850) and the Eusébio de Queirós Law (1850) restricted access to property, simultaneously ending the transatlantic slave trade and promoting European immigration. Black freedpeople were pushed into precarious and informal occupations – day laborers, street vendors, domestic workers, peddlers, and rural workers without contracts – forming a surplus population. This mass of racialized workers became a central instrument for depressing wages and disciplining the free labor market, while European immigrants were incorporated under far more favorable conditions.

Moura argues that the ideology of "racial democracy", promoted by intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre, served to mask these mechanisms of oppression. By presenting racial mixture as synonymous with equality, elites obscured the persistence of racial hierarchy and naturalized the marginalization of the Black population. Unlike in countries where segregation was explicitly institutionalized, Brazilian racism consolidated itself in an "opaque", invisible, yet highly effective form, sustaining economic exploitation and reproducing inequality.

In this context, Black resistance assumed innovative and politically significant forms. Cultural, recreational, sports, and religious associations – including terreiros of Candomblé – created practices that affirmed Afro-Brazilian identity and resisted marginalization. Moura emphasized that these organizations did not simply preserve African traditions; they adapted them to local conditions of oppression, producing a critical culture of resistance that combined symbolic, social, and political elements. By symbolically subverting racial

hierarchies and valuing Black ancestry, these groups operated as instruments of collective empowerment and as expressions of Black political agency, mediating the relationship between race and class.

3 2000s: The Racialized "Precariat" in the Call Center Sector

In sum, Clóvis Moura's analysis reveals that the racialized labor market in Brazil is the result of a long historical trajectory marked by slavery, political violence, and the construction of mechanisms of social and racial exclusion. The transition to free labor, far from signifying economic democratization, reorganized the labor market so as to maintain the Black population in subordinate positions while incorporating European workers into the most privileged occupations. Thus, racial oppression and class inequality mutually reinforce one another, sustaining a system of exploitation that conceals itself beneath the myth of racial equality and mestiçagem.

This legacy is continuously updated through the metamorphoses of labor in the country. That is, the reproduction of class and racial inequalities shapes not only the structure of the Brazilian labor market but also the collective experiences and expectations of the working class. Even during periods of economic expansion or social-inclusion policies, such as in the early decades of the twenty-first century, the barriers imposed by racialization persist, limiting possibilities for upward mobility and reconfiguring occupational hierarchies.

In the 2000s, for instance, the call center sector emerged as one of the main entry points into formal employment in Brazil, absorbing a mass of young women – mostly Black or brown – from the urban peripheries of major metropolitan regions. In cities like São Paulo, Salvador, Recife, and Belo Horizonte, call centers consolidated themselves as major employers of the working-class youth (Braga 2012). These women, often the daughters or granddaughters of domestic workers, carry the historical marks of racial and social exclusion that have shaped the formation of the Brazilian working class, expressing in the present the continuity of the structures of subordination that Moura had identified in his analysis of Brazilian racial capitalism.

The growth of this type of employment cannot be understood outside the neoliberal restructuring that redefined the labor market in the final decades of the twentieth century. The formalization of precarious employment identified by Braga (2012) expressed the central contradiction of recent Brazilian capitalism: the expansion of jobs with formal contracts coexisting with the deepening of exploitation and insecurity, especially for racialized workers. The trajectory of these workers therefore embodies the historical continuity between

subordinate labor, domestic work, and contemporary forms of precarious employment, in which formalization does not signify emancipation but rather the reconfiguration of subordination under new languages and technologies of control (Antunes 2018).

Although employment in call centers was formally regulated – ensuring basic labor rights such as an employment contract, paid leave, and year-end bonuses – it rested on a regime of intensive exploitation, despotic control, and systematic surveillance. The physical layout of call centers, filled with uniform cubicles, reflected the industrial logic of productivity and repetition, while digital monitoring systems reinforced control over each gesture and word of the operators. Thus, contractual formalization did not eliminate precarity; it merely displaced it into a domain where the time, voice, and emotional labor of racialized women became directly commodified.

This form of labor management exemplifies what Antunes (2009, 2013, 2020) has called the "new service proletariat", marked by intensified exploitation under the guise of modernization. In this sense, the call center emerged as an "immaterial assembly line", combining Taylorist logic with the affective capture demanded by informational capitalism (Antunes, Braga 2010). At the same time, it updated the colonial and patriarchal legacy that has long treated Black women's bodies as instruments of labor, subordinated and controlled through racialized dispositifs of power (Gonzalez 1988; Braga 2012).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the creation and expansion of the call center industry were closely tied to the process of privatization and neoliberal restructuring of the Brazilian economy in the 1990s. The dismantling of state-owned enterprises and the diffusion of outsourcing opened space for a new type of intermediary service, focused on customer management and digital mediation. During the Lula administrations, this industry became a symbol of the "new formal job", which increased the number of work contracts but left intact the core of the super-exploitation of racialized labor.

Indeed, Black women predominantly occupied the sector's lower-tier positions – those involving direct interaction with customers, under the most intense conditions of monitoring and pressure – while supervisory and managerial roles, with higher wages and less exposure, were largely filled by white men. This divide reproduced the historically blocked patterns of racial mobility that have structured the Brazilian labor market since the post-abolition period.

Daily work in call centers combined formal employment, a subjective experience of precarity, and despotic surveillance. Operators had their time meticulously counted, their breaks monitored, and even their tone of voice controlled. Software recorded every second between calls, and any deviation from the expected pattern could result in a warning or dismissal. This control is, in

essence, racialized, imposed upon bodies historically constructed as docile, resilient, and servile. The "Black female voice" becomes both a commodity and a target of discipline. It is expected to display empathy and patience – traits racially coded – while being denied decent wages and opportunities for advancement.

This is a contemporary form of emotional and corporeal exploitation that requires workers to transform their affectivity into productivity. As Braga (2012) noted, despite the precarity and the physical and mental strain, call center employment was perceived by many of these women as a form of upward mobility compared to domestic work. The uniform, the ID badge, and the air-conditioned office symbolized an entry into the world of the "real job", even if wages remained low and control suffocating.

This perception of mobility – more symbolic than material – reveals the ambivalence of Brazilian racial capitalism: a sense of achievement within a structure of subordination that remains largely unchanged. Within the broader context of Lulist hegemony, such ambivalence was politically mobilized, transforming formalization and access to credit into signs of inclusion, even at the cost of intensified super-exploitation.

In the 2010s, this apparent stability began to be questioned. Increasing union mobilization among call-center operators, especially in the capitals of the Southeast and Northeast, brought visibility to the contradictions of the model. Brazilian unionism faced, in that period, the challenge of incorporating precarious and racialized workers who expressed new sensibilities and repertoires of collective action (Braga 2017). Strikes and stoppages began to denounce not only the exhausting pace and low wages but also everyday humiliations, moral harassment, and the lack of career prospects.

This was precisely the reality we observed when analyzing the relationship between call-center workers and the labor movement in the second half of the 2000s. Despite their limited political experience, these workers sought support from unions to advance their labor demands. And how could it be otherwise in a sector marked by low wages, high turnover, widespread illness, and moral harassment?

The deepening of workers' experience with the despotic labor regime of the call center industry fostered not only increasingly critical attitudes toward companies but also embryonic forms of class consciousness, which were developed by unions. In São Paulo, unions undertook a remarkable effort to approach the sector's workforce. By mapping workers' characteristics – gender, race, age, and sexual orientation – they reconfigured their agenda, diversifying it and innovating on several fronts. The main unions in the telemarketing sector decided to participate in the organization of São Paulo's LGBT Pride Parade, mobilizing one of the event's most traditional blocs (Braga et al. 2011).

In addition to participating for many years in the Pride Parade through their organizing and unionization campaigns, Sintratel developed initiatives with the Secretariat for Human Rights of the Presidency of the Republic and the Public Prosecutor's Office to curb sexual harassment in companies and combat racial discrimination. The union also took part in the World Social Forum, where it began organizing international solidarity campaigns in countries where Atento – the largest call-center company in the world – operates.

The success of these efforts can be measured by the growing number of strikes and stoppages among call-center operators in São Paulo. Practically nonexistent at the sector's inception, strike movements developed to the point of standing out within national bank-worker strikes. Between 2008 and 2012, four national bank-worker strikes took place with effective participation from call-center operators. In 2012 alone, the bank-worker strike reached a peak of 280,000 workers and lasted ten days (DIEESE 2013).

Black women became protagonists of new, often subtle – but politically significant – forms of resistance in the call-center sector: using social networks to expose abuses, forming collectives, and taking the lead in stoppages and strikes (Braga 2017). These practices point to a process of political subjectivation rooted in daily life, marked by the combination of economic exploitation and political expropriation.

Thus, in the 2000s, the call-center sector revealed the contemporary face of Brazilian racial capitalism: an economy that combined technological modernization, employment formalization, and the reproduction of racial oppression. Beneath the surface of glass towers and scripted dialogues pulsed the historical continuity of a social structure founded on the exploitation of Black and female labor.

4 2010s: Reconfiguring Precarity in the App-Based Delivery Sector

During the coronavirus pandemic, Braga and Silva (2022) conducted field research aimed at understanding the extent to which the combination of the employment crisis, labor reform, and the public-health emergency had reconfigured the pattern of labor-market insertion among young Black, poor, and peripheral workers. The investigation sought to examine how these processes interacted to deepen precarization and redefine the boundaries between employment, unemployment, and underemployment in Brazil's major urban centers.

The ethnographic research, carried out between 2019 and 2020 in the area surrounding Avenida Paulista in São Paulo – one of the main financial and symbolic hubs of Brazilian capitalism – demonstrated

that app-mediated work had become one of the primary points of entry into the urban labor market. Young workers, many of whom had been expelled from formal jobs during the crisis or prevented from accessing them, found in digital platforms an alternative means of subsistence. However, this insertion occurred under conditions marked by profound insecurity, long working hours, absence of social protection, and a model of algorithmic management that fully transfers the risks of the activity onto the worker (Abílio, Amorim, Grohmann 2021).

More than a mere occupational reconfiguration, the expansion of platform-based work expresses the radicalization of long-standing trends of labor informalization in Brazil, now draped in a rhetoric of autonomy and entrepreneurship under a hyper-technological digital umbrella. In this context, Black and peripheral youth – historically concentrated in the most vulnerable segments of the productive structure – have become, unsurprisingly, the main contingent of this new digital precarity, reproducing in updated forms the racial and class inequalities that structure Brazilian capitalism. Different profiles of the category across Brazil confirm that most workers in this segment are Black or brown (pardos).

Many of Braga and Silva's (2022) findings can be reasonably generalized to other parts of the country. From a territorial perspective, in numerous areas of Brazilian cities it is possible to observe the concentration of young workers – mostly Black or brown and originating from urban peripheries – whose insertion into platforms reflects the historical continuity of the racialization of labor relations in the country.

These workers cluster in strategic locations – sidewalks in front of shopping malls, public squares, areas near bars and restaurants – that function as hybrid spaces of work, rest, and sociability. In these "informal stations" or "pockets", micro-communities of support and cooperation emerge, where the sharing of information, meals, and devices (such as outlets and chargers) substitutes for absent institutional mediations. This precarious network of solidarity constitutes an "unprotected labor community", typical of the platform era, in which work is organized outside traditional legal frameworks but within dense circuits of economic and technological dependence (De Stefano 2016).

The ethnography also reveals a curious cultural dimension: young couriers – wearing popular peripheral brands, listening to funk or rap – display the signs of a racialized peripheral identity forged along symbolic boundaries between center and periphery. Their presence in central avenues, equipped with motorcycles, bicycles, and brightly colored delivery backpacks, exposes an urban paradox: they render visible the labor force that sustains the city's consumption while remaining invisible in terms of rights and social recognition.

Individual trajectories – such as those of Kleber and Francisco (fictitious names) – illustrate the continuities and ruptures of this process. Kleber, a young Black man from São Paulo's East Zone, had been dismissed from a subcontracted metalworking job after returning from medical leave. Upon entering the delivery sector, he found greater flexibility and a sense of autonomy in contrast to the rigidity of factory discipline. Yet this "freedom" is embedded in what Sennett (1998) termed the corrosion of character: flexibility erodes collective bonds and internalizes control, transforming autonomy into self-management of one's own economic exploitation.

Francisco, a former Black telemarketing operator, compared the mental strain of cognitive work to the physical effort of deliveries. His valorization of the "freedom" from supervisors revealed the shift from a disciplinary logic to one of algorithmic self-control (Abílio, Amorim, Grohmann 2021). Here, the rhetoric of autonomy is internalized as a subjective value, functioning as an ideological mechanism that naturalizes precarity – a phenomenon Nancy Fraser (2022) situates within the current "crisis of social reproduction".

Cases such as those of Higor (16) and Marcelo (17), who used accounts registered to third parties because they were underage, illustrate extreme informality and the absence of effective regulation in digital labor. Their early insertion into platform work reflects the process of "uberization", in which learning to work occurs directly within the experience of labor insecurity. This trend reinforces Braga's (2017) diagnosis of a global "precariat" characterized by chronic insecurity, weakened unions, and fragmented identities.[1]

The case of Lucas (22), a young Black former formal waiter, deepens this diagnosis. After the restaurant where he worked closed, he came to depend exclusively on deliveries, perceiving in them "better prospects" than in formal employment. His trajectory demonstrates the shift from a Fordist ideal of stability to a neoliberal ideal of self-entrepreneurship, even under conditions of profound vulnerability. Lucas embodies, in the realm of labor, what Mbembe (2020) termed necropolitics: the constant exposure of Black life to risk – of streets, traffic, and violence – in the name of an almost always illusory promise of economic freedom.

Taken together, these experiences indicate that app-based delivery work in contemporary Brazil constitutes a reconfiguration of

1 We understand the precariat as the segment of the working class subjected to unstable labor relations, low wages, and limited social protection, whose structural condition of insecurity, resulting from successive reconfigurations of the commodification of labor, is not transitory but permanent. It consists of a group of workers in constant movement between the intensification of economic exploitation and the expansion of political expropriation, a dynamic expressed in high turnover rates, informality, and increasing indebtedness to the financial system (Braga 2012; 2017).

long-standing racial hierarchies, now updated and operationalized by digital platforms. Presenting themselves as "autonomous", workers absorb the costs of reproducing their labor power (equipment, time, risks), while companies exempt themselves from labor responsibilities by denying any employment relationship. This constitutes a regime of accumulation based on the total externalization of risk and the naturalization of racial inequality as an organizing principle of precarity.

Sociologically, the figure of the app-based courier synthesizes three structural dimensions of contemporary capitalism: the racialization of labor, which positions Black youth in the most vulnerable and physically exposed jobs; political and union expropriation, intensified by deindustrialization and fragmented labor ties; and the individualization of risk and responsibility, a hallmark of neoliberalism.

The combination of these factors produces a precarious urban working youth occupying the streets and avenues of major cities – highly visible yet profoundly insecure and legally unprotected. The app, the smartphone, the motorcycle, and the bicycle replace the punch-clock and the factory uniform, but the underlying logic remains the same: racialized exploitation as a historical axis of capitalist accumulation in Brazil.

Thus, app-based delivery work not only expresses a new form of exploitation but condenses a long history of inequality. It translates, into algorithmic language, the persistence of a racial division of labor that spans centuries of social formation. Ultimately, these young Black workers from the urban peripheries constitute the visible link between the slaveholding past and the digital present: an essential yet disposable labor force, self-managed and monitored by algorithms, sustaining the city while remaining excluded from the sphere of salaried citizenship.

Unsurprisingly, in many of the category's recent protests across Brazil, workers frequently invoke the notion of "modern slavery", a term also mobilized in the national campaign against the 6-day workweek. Despite the discourse of autonomy and economic freedom gaining significant hegemony, its limitations became evident when confronted with the harsh concrete reality faced daily on the streets, under sun and rain. It did not take long for them to mobilize. The #BrequedosApps became a major turning point – a culmination of revolt against degrading living and working conditions (Santana, Braga 2020).

When the coronavirus pandemic struck, the situation for the Brazilian working class was already dire, particularly after the 2017 labor reform. Those who still held minimally protected formal jobs were either dismissed or forced into contract suspensions, reduced working hours, and wage cuts. The unprotected – i.e., the

most vulnerable segment of the working class, including racialized workers – faced the tragic choice between the virus and hunger.

By joining the vast ranks of informal workers who make the streets their workplace, many couriers subverted their social invisibility – both through their physical presence in nearly deserted cities and through the essential role they assumed during social isolation. Delivery workers had already been transforming the urban landscapes of large Brazilian cities due to their sheer numbers – whether riding motorcycles or bicycles, carrying brightly colored backpacks emblazoned with platform logos. Exposing themselves to risk, they ensured that large segments of the middle class could remain in isolation.

It was within this context that delivery workers' demands emerged in their struggle against the precarization of work and life. Already exposed daily under conditions of social unprotection – "on their own" and "with no rights", as they themselves articulate – and during the pandemic forced into the tragic dilemma of dying from the virus or dying from hunger, these workers were pushed into high-risk exposure without even the minimal emergency aid from the government. In addition to lacking social rights, they face long working hours, extreme pressure for speed, high accident rates, and poor remuneration.

Despite mobilizing a workforce larger than many economic sectors, platform companies – while making enormous profits – do not consider themselves employers, referring to workers euphemistically as "partners", supposedly intermediating between restaurants, couriers, and consumers. They thus attempt to distance themselves from any employment relationship. Workers operate at their own risk, even supplying their own equipment such as motorcycles and bicycles. Many couriers fall into debt to purchase a motorcycle in order to work.

The already dramatic scenario became even more severe with the arrival of the pandemic, fueling a climate of discontent that culminated in two instances of nationwide strikes in July 2020. These actions constituted the first national mobilization of the category, whose demands, as many participants stated, "ask for the bare minimum". The movement's public platform included: higher minimum delivery fees, higher rates per kilometer, life and theft insurance, accident insurance, provision of PPE (such as masks and sanitizer), paid leave in cases of COVID-19 infection, and an end to unjustified account blocks.

Judging by their demands and testimonies, it was clear that the movement sought redistribution, recognition, and dignity at work. It aimed to secure minimum conditions for a dignified livelihood for workers who, as some emphasized, were "going hungry while delivering food".

The impact on delivery volume suggested consumer support, reflected in a reduction in orders on the strike days and low app ratings. Despite attempts by companies to minimize the mobilization, its effects were felt. Moreover, many workers who did not participate directly expressed support for the demands.

The mobilization encouraged reflection on the creation of collective identities among subaltern classes and strengthened autonomous initiatives, even if it did not, at that point, generate an alternative model of organization beyond traditional forms. Nevertheless, significant steps were taken with the establishment, in 2022, of the National Alliance of App-Based Delivery Workers (ANEA) by movement leaders from across the country.

The movement had major public resonance, revealing the labor conditions of workers who are visually ubiquitous yet socially invisible across urban landscapes – standing at the entrances of buildings and homes, bearing brightly colored backpacks, until then anonymous. This visibility was achieved largely thanks to the category's intense digital activism on social media (Santana 2023).

5 Conclusion

Recent publications by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE), based on IBGE's PNADC, reinforce the broader picture outlined throughout this text. In The Inclusion of the Black Population in the Labor Market (2023), we find that the Black or Brown population constitutes 56.7% of the Brazilian population. Black women and Black men form the majority among the employed, the informal workers, and the unemployed. A total of 45.2% of the Black population works in informal employment. Among Black women, 45.6% work without a formal contract and without contributing to social security. Black women earn 38.9% less than non-Black women, 53.7% less than non-Black men, and 20% less than Black men. Among men, Black men earn 41.9% less than non-Black men and 23.3% less than non-Black women. This disparity extends to managerial and leadership positions, of which only 33% are held by Black women and men. Thus, as indicated earlier, while they are an overwhelming minority in higher corporate hierarchies, Black Brazilians constitute the majority of the unemployed and are concentrated at the bottom of the wage pyramid.

In the 2024 report, DIEESE highlights that although recent years have seen relative political stability – allowing economic activity to expand, unemployment to fall, formal employment to grow, and wages and total earnings to rise – these "improved labor market conditions, however, were not sufficient to reduce racial income inequality in Brazil". Thus, even in favorable economic environments with positive

labor-market indicators, the impact on racialized workers is limited, failing to produce any substantial shift in the structural pattern of inequality, either within or beyond the sphere of work.

One conceptual lens through which to examine the two cases discussed here is what Tilly (1998) defines as durable inequality. For Tilly, inequalities consist in the unequal distribution of attributes across social units – individuals, categories, groups, or regions. Such inequalities do not necessarily persist over time; they may appear in one context and disappear in another, without becoming structurally embedded. Durable inequalities, by contrast, are those that do not vanish through individual effort, merit, or upward mobility. They persist, becoming part of a society's basic structures and enduring across generations. This framework shifts the analytical focus away from individual characteristics to the structural determinations that shape individuals.

For Tilly (1998), durable inequality is neither the natural result of individual differences nor simply a function of merit or effort. Instead, it is socially produced and maintained by organizational mechanisms that repeat over time. This type of inequality emerges relationally, through social categorizations – such as race, gender, class, and religion – that become markers of access to resources, opportunities, rights, and prestige.

From this perspective, durable inequalities persist because they are institutionally organized and embedded in the interactional processes that structure social life. They are maintained through four central mechanisms that reproduce unequal distributions of power and access across generations. The first is exploitation, in which one group extracts resources or benefits from the labor of another, sustaining an unequal relationship. The second is opportunity hoarding, which occurs when organizations distribute opportunities in ways that favor certain groups while restricting access for others. The third mechanism is emulation, through which institutional models that produce inequality are copied and reapplied in new contexts, thereby widening their reach. Finally, adaptation refers to the creation of routines, norms, and cultural practices that naturalize and reinforce these inequalities, making them appear as normal features of social life. Together, these four mechanisms reproduce and maintain inequalities across generations.

When we examine the two empirical cases considered here, these mechanisms become clearly visible in both their structural and dynamic dimensions. In both the call center sector and the app-based delivery sector, the workforce is predominantly composed of racialized workers who are subjected to precarious and despotic labor conditions. Both sectors exhibit a high degree of exploitation of vulnerable segments of the working class, a severe restriction in the horizon of opportunities available to them, the persistent reproduction

of historical structures, and the deep naturalization of routines rooted in durable inequalities. Thus, neither call centers nor delivery platforms escape the racialized logic of the Brazilian labor market. On the contrary, both sectors reinforce and update that logic through new technological frameworks and digitalized management systems.

The sectors also share similarities in the process of consciousness-building and identity formation among workers, particularly in how class, race, and gender intersect. Workers often begin by accepting the conditions to which they are subjected, but gradually develop critical perceptions that give rise to collective indignation – much like in other contexts marked by heavy use of social media and digital platforms (Santana 2025). In this environment, to varying degrees, workers receive organizational support from traditional structures such as unions, as well as from autonomous collectives and social movements. In both cases, these workers have demonstrated their capacity for mobilization, with considerable impact, even if still limited in terms of generating structural change in their conditions.

As becomes evident, confronting this broader landscape of durable inequality requires action across multiple fronts and dimensions. As DIEESE (2024) emphasizes, if "the inclusion of a substantial portion of the Black population continues to occur under inadequate conditions even in favorable political and economic moments, the importance of active measures to reduce racial inequalities becomes unmistakable". Furthermore, any effort to reduce income inequality in Brazil must necessarily involve confronting racial discrimination. Similarly, "policies targeting the Black population will only be effective if implemented alongside measures that address broader socioeconomic inequalities".

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