

## Book Review

**Scott B. Martin, João Paulo Cândia Veiga, and Katiuscia Moreno Galhera (2021) *Labor Contestation at Walmart Brazil: Limits of Global Diffusion in Latin America*, 1st Ed. London: Palgrave Pivot ISBN: 978-3030746711. 336 pp. US\$74.99 (hardcover); US\$59.99 (e-book)**

*Reviewed by  
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*Labour Contestation at Walmart Brazil: Limits of Global Diffusion in Latin America* by Scott B. Martin, João Paulo Cândia Veiga, and Katiuscia Moreno Galhera is a significant contribution to the literature on the global retail sector, providing an in-depth analysis of Walmart's labour practices and the different paths the company has taken in Latin American countries. The book is a result of extensive fieldwork and interviews with workers, unions, and activists, presenting a nuanced and context-specific analysis of the challenges and opportunities of labour movements in the context of global supply chains, based on a combination of qualitative research methods, including ethnographic interviews with Walmart workers and analysis of labour-management relations in Brazil, alongside a comparative study with other Latin American countries. The authors also draw on existing literature on Walmart's global strategy and labour practices to contextualise their findings.

The authors begin by highlighting Walmart's global expansion through market seeking methods, which has allowed the company to become one of the world's largest employers. However, this expansion has not been without controversy. Walmart has faced allegations of labour rights violations, including low wages, poor working conditions, and anti-union practices. The authors argue that Walmart's global strategy of "Everyday Low Prices" has created a race to the bottom in terms of labour standards, as the company pressures suppliers to cut costs and increase efficiency.

They draw on existing research to argue that Walmart's labour practices in Brazil are part of a broader trend of global corporations imposing repressive, anti-union policies on workers in the region. The authors also highlight the limitations of global diffusion in Latin America, arguing that local political and economic factors can shape the strategies and outcomes of labour contestation. Overall, the book contributes to a growing body of literature on the challenges and opportunities of labour organising in the context of global capitalism.

For the authors, Walmart seeks to create a work environment that attempts to establish itself by distancing labour conflicts from state regulators, unions and any other members external to the company's internal labour relations. This practice, for the authors, is a great demonstration of the anti-union stance that the company presents in dealing with workplace relations and day-to-day policies in the production routine on the "shop floor".

This posture is treated in the book as a workplace regime based on family norms and an

individualisation of conflicts, together with a set of practices and rules (formal and informal) that structure authority relations between owners and managers on one side, and workers on the other. This workplace regime, called the Walmart Way, is characterised by the authors as an authoritarian workplace regime and is found in all four countries studied. The authors term this workplace culture “repressive familism”, which has, at its core, anti-union posturing as a structuring element.

The book focuses on Walmart’s operations in Brazil, where the company has faced significant challenges such as pressure from labour movements and other state regulations, and the difficulty of implementing its “Everyday Low Prices” strategy in the Brazilian market. These difficulties are particularly centred in Brazil’s local culture in the retail sector. Both the “Walmart Way” and the “Everyday Low Prices” company policies struggled while Walmart was trying to implement its way in the country, mainly because of Brazil’s local labour culture, that has been centred around the mediation of unions and the state – and local “retail culture”, in which the buyers intend to choose and shop from local suppliers and markets rather than from big retailers such as Walmart.

Martin, Veiga and Galhera provide a detailed history of Walmart’s entry into the Brazilian market, highlighting the company’s efforts to avoid labour conflicts through a strategy of market integration. Walmart acquired several Brazilian companies and established joint ventures with local suppliers, allowing the company to bypass local labour laws and weaken the power of labour unions. However, these strategies were not enough to prevent labour mobilisation in Brazil, and Walmart has faced numerous protests, strikes, and legal challenges from workers and their allies.

The authors argue that Walmart’s experience in Brazil is emblematic of the challenges facing labour movements in Latin America. Even though the region faces many challenges with regard to labour protection and trade union rights, it has developed a tradition of progressive labour legislation that usually covers workers directly employed by multinational corporations. However, globalisation has created new challenges for workers and their allies. The book shows the tensions between global supply chains and local labour markets, as well as the difficulties of organising in the informal economy. They argue that labour movements need to develop new strategies and alliances to address these challenges.

The research provides a detailed analysis of the different paths that Walmart has taken in Latin American countries. The authors compare Walmart’s experience in Brazil with its operations in other countries, including Mexico, Argentina and Chile. They argue that Walmart’s strategy in each country has been shaped by local conditions – in which the firm seeks to act by imposing the “Walmart Way”, while at the same time adapting by yielding as little as possible to local realities – including the strength of labour movements, the political context, and the regulatory environment. In Mexico, for example, Walmart has been able to maintain its anti-union practices and avoid labour conflicts by relying on government repression and weak labour laws. In contrast, in Chile, Walmart has faced more intense labour mobilisation and has been forced to make concessions to workers and unions.

The writers conclude by emphasising the importance of labour contestation in shaping the future of work in Latin America. They argue that labour movements need to engage in strategic alliances with other social movements and build coalitions across national borders. In this sense, the book’s discussion on the importance of labour contestation, and the relevance of engaging in new ways of building transnational coalitions, brings the debate about new ways of building a transnational articulation of workers as a way of contesting global corporations back to the table. They also stress the importance of new forms of worker representation and participatory democracy, including workers’ councils and participatory budgeting.

Overall, the book provides a valuable contribution to the literature on labour relations in the

global retail sector and offers important insights for scholars, policymakers and activists working on labour issues in Latin America and beyond. The work presented by the authors on Walmart can be seen as an important step forward for studies of the impacts of global corporations on the service sector, as it presents a comparative and in-depth look at the strategies of a retail giant in countries of the Global South.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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