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## **Slave-Like Labour, Wineries, and Unions in The Serra Region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil**

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### **Abstract**

On February 22, 2023, more than 200 rural workers in slavery-like conditions were rescued during a federal police operation in Bento Gonçalves, a medium-sized town in the Serra region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. This paper examines the event as a case study, drawing on official documents and in-depth interviews with union leaders and federal inspectors from the Brazilian Ministry of Labour. It also explores descriptive statistics on the prevalence of slavery-like labour in Rio Grande do Sul. The interviews provide further context for these findings, suggesting that the events in Bento Gonçalves should be analyzed at both regional and local levels, with particular attention to the role of workers' unions and local governance.

**Keywords:** Brazil, slave labour, workers' unions, local governance, labour relations

## **Travail forcé, vignobles et syndicats dans la région de Serra du Rio Grande do Sul, au Brésil**

### **Résumé**

Le 22 février 2023, plus de 200 travailleurs ruraux vivant dans des conditions proches de l'esclavage ont été secourus lors d'une opération de la police fédérale à Bento Gonçalves, une ville moyenne de la région de Serra, dans le Rio Grande do Sul, au Brésil. Cet article examine l'événement comme une étude de cas, en s'appuyant sur des documents officiels et des entretiens approfondis avec des dirigeants syndicaux et des inspecteurs fédéraux du ministère brésilien du Travail. Il explore également des statistiques descriptives sur la prévalence du travail forcé dans le Rio Grande do Sul. Les entretiens fournissent un contexte supplémentaire à ces conclusions, suggérant que les événements de Bento Gonçalves devraient être analysés aux niveaux régional et local, en portant une attention particulière au rôle des syndicats des travailleurs et de la gouvernance locale.

**Mots-clés :** Brésil, travail forcé, syndicats de travailleurs, gouvernance locale, relations de travail

## 1.0 Introduction

Bento Gonçalves, a medium-sized town in the Serra region of Rio Grande do Sul, was founded over a century ago by Italian immigrants and is renowned as the wine capital of Brazil. On February 22, 2023, the Brazilian Federal Police, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, rescued 210 migrant workers in Bento Gonçalves—predominantly domestic migrants from the northeastern state of Bahia—who were living and working under slave-like conditions.

Lured with false promises (for instance, a salary of R\$ 2,000, approximately USD\$ 387), workers reported forced labour, including the use of electric shocks and pepper spray, as well as facing delays in wage payments, physical violence, long working hours, and the offer of rotten food. During the day, they harvested grapes at three prominent local wineries—Salton, Aurora, and Garibaldi—and at night, they were coerced into working for other small agricultural producers to repay unjust debts. These debts, imposed by their employer, included inflated charges for accommodation, food, and transportation (Alves, 2023; Ministério do Trabalho e Emprego [MTE], 2023). According to MTE:

In the early hours of the night on February 22, three workers managed to escape from the lodging. Along the way, they found a Federal Highway Police station and called for help. Following the complaints, Federal Police officers and representatives of the Ministry of Labour reached the workers' lodging in Bento Gonçalves and confirmed the slavery-like conditions. In total, 210 workers were taken from their lodging to a nearby gymnasium and escorted back to their homes in Bahia State by police (MTE, 2023, p. 60).

This case study aims to analyze these events by primarily examining official documents, and secondly, by conducting interviews with key figures such as union leaders and Ministry of Labour inspectors. In-depth interviews suggest that the explanation for these events should extend beyond the employer (a local labour supply agency named Fênix) and investigate the relationships among wineries, the employer, workers' unions, and local governance. The instances of violence and exploitation are analyzed, along with the responsibilities of local institutions, and the evolution of local governance after the rescue of the workers.

Before analyzing the events that unfolded in Bento Gonçalves in February 2023, the regulatory and legal framework regarding slave labour in Brazil is presented first.

## 2.0 The Politics of Slave-Like Labour

The expression “slave-like labour” or “labour analogous to slavery” (i.e., *trabalho análogo ao trabalho escravo*) is commonly used in Brazil nowadays (McGrath, 2013, p. 1007). The expression was introduced in 2003 by law No. 10,803 which altered article 149 of the Penal Code and provides for the crime of reduction to a condition analogous to slavery. The Ministry of Labour's Ordinance No. 1,293, issued on December 28, 2017, provides guidance for labour inspectors and outlines five conditions indicative of labour analogous to slavery: (1) forced labour, which involves work demanded under the threat of physical or psychological coercion; (2) excessive working hours; (3) deplorable working conditions; (4) restrictions on mobility, such as limiting a worker's freedom of movement, for instance, due to debts owed to the employer (debt bondage); and (5) confinement to the workplace, which includes any form of limitation on transportation that could facilitate a

worker's departure from the workplace or lodging. The presence of a single element from the conditions is adequate to classify labour as analogous to slavery. Nevertheless, the simultaneous occurrence of two or more conditions amplifies the severity or culpability of the perpetrator (Marinho & Vieira, 2019).

The Brazilian regulatory framework to combat slave labour is multifaceted, encompassing constitutional amendments such as the Constitutional Amendment No. 81 (approved in 2014), ministerial ordinances like the 2011 Manual for Combating Labour in Conditions Analogous to Slavery, and ministerial decrees such as Portaria No. 1,620 (approved in 2021), which institutionalized commissions for the eradication of slave labour at state, municipal, and district levels.

Additionally, Brazilian states have the authority to develop their own plans to eradicate or combat slave labour, independent of federal policy. For instance, in Rio Grande do Sul, the second National Plan for the Eradication of Slave Labour, established by Decree No. 49.123 in May 2012, created the State Commission for the Eradication of Slave Labour (COETRAE-RS). Among its responsibilities, COETRAE-RS monitors the implementation of the National Plan for the Eradication of Slave Labour.

Despite increasingly robust legislation, the prevalence of slave labour in Brazil has not decreased. Between 2003 and 2018, a total of 35,943 workers were rescued from slave-like conditions, with the vast majority being men (95%) and most between the ages of 30 and 39. Among those rescued, 33% were illiterate, and 40% had only completed primary school. Demographically, 41% were identified as *pardos* (grayish-brown skin), 24% as white, 12% as black, 19% as East Asian, and 4% as Indigenous (Suzuki & Casteli, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Scholars predominantly examine slave labour from historiographical or life history perspectives (Gama et al., 2023; Rodrigues Costa et al., 2023; Maestri Filho, 1987; Schwartz, 1988; Guimarães et al., 2023). In recent times, scholars have been paying more attention to public policy, especially in relation to the Bolsonaro government who substantially reduced funding for combating slave labour in Brazil. These diminishing resources, which covered expenses such as fuel, daily rates, airline tickets, and other costs associated with rescue operations, have seen a steady decline over the years. In 2020, only R\$1.3 million were allocated to anti-slavery efforts, marking a 41% decrease from the R\$2.3 million allocated in 2019. This amount had already decreased from R\$2.7 million in 2018 (Longo, 2021).

However, this case study suggests that the role of local governance and the labour relations system—particularly at the local level—is a crucial factor in explaining the persistence of slave labour in the region. In Brazil, collective bargaining predominantly occurs at the local rather than national level. Each local rural workers' union [*sindicato*] is responsible for collective bargaining within its respective municipality [*prefeitura*] or region. Nevertheless, out of approximately 400 rural workers' unions in Rio Grande do Sul, only 120 sign collective agreements, covering 169 of the state's 497 municipalities. The Federation of Rural Wage Workers of Rio Grande do Sul (FETAR) reports that it has never been able to secure a collective agreement in Bento Gonçalves or the surrounding municipalities because local unions do not prioritize such agreements. According to FETAR union leaders, a collective agreement in force would enhance union engagement in addressing issues related to slave labour (Carbonai, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> More accurate statistics on slave labour can be found on the Radar SIT Statistics Information Dashboard of the Brazilian Labour Inspection, accessible on its official website at <https://sit.trabalho.gov.br/radar/>

### 3.0 Research Notes

As mentioned above, focusing exclusively on the employer-employee relationship is limiting when attempting to understand modern slave labour. The intent of this paper is to explore the role and function of certain local institutions that enabled this episode of slave labour: the absence of a collective agreement in collective bargaining, the lack of advocacy for workers' rights by local unions, and the insufficient attention local politics and governance have given to the rights of migrant workers.

This case study adopts a multifaceted approach, utilizing a variety of sources to analyze the events in Bento Gonçalves. In 2023, I conducted seven in-depth interviews with union leaders and Ministry of Labour inspectors. Additionally, ten interviews were conducted in 2022, prior to the events of February 2023. This temporal scope was chosen to capture the longstanding presence of slave-like labour in the Serra region. The rescue of 210 workers in Bento Gonçalves took place within the broader context of ongoing research on slave-like labour in Rio Grande do Sul.

The choice of documentary sources included collective agreements and official reports from the Ministry of Labour. The insights from the 2022 interviews laid the groundwork for subsequent interviews in 2023. The preliminary analysis of the interviews conducted in 2022 has revealed several key features that set the Serra region apart from other regions of Rio Grande do Sul. When comparing the Serra region to other regions of Rio Grande do Sul, several notable differences became apparent in the Serra region: (1) the number of local collective bargaining agreements is significantly lower in the Serra region; (2) the local workers' unions in the Serra region are affiliated with FETAG, which is mainly concerned with family farming—no unions are affiliated with FETAR<sup>2</sup>; (3) Bento Gonçalves is not the only case of slave labour in the Serra region; and (4) the Serra region exhibits a higher prevalence of small farm ownership and family farming.

Only 34% of the municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul have a collective agreement in force. However, it remains important to observe the regional details of this data. The number of collective agreements in the Serra region is significantly lower when compared to the Pampa region, where 90% of municipalities have a collective agreement in force. This percentage drops to 23.2% in the Serra region (13 municipalities out of 56). However, it is particularly in the Serra region, and subsequently in the Pampa region, that cases of slavery in the agricultural sector have been reported. It is important to note that in the Pampa region, municipalities are typically larger, the latifundium prevails, and the number of farm labourers per municipality is generally higher. In theory, these factors could contribute to the persistence of slave-like labour (Carbonai, 2022).

There are two main statistical sources for slave-like labour in Brazil. The first is Radar Statistics and Information Dashboard of Labour Inspection in Brazil (SIT), available at <https://sit.trabalho.gov.br/radar/>. Radar SIT provides data on workers rescued from slave-like conditions and has been collecting data since 1995. However, the system is not regularly updated and tends to underestimate the number of slave labour cases. According to Radar SIT, from January 1 to March 20, 2023, 293 workers were rescued in Rio Grande do Sul, nearly double the 156 rescued in 2022 (External Representation Commission [CRE], 2023).

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<sup>2</sup> As one interviewee suggests: "FETAR is FETAR, FETAG is something else. They cannot mix. Fetar is dedicated exclusively to rural workers and not to family farming" (personal communication, labour inspector 1, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

The second source is the *National Registry of Employers who have subjected workers to conditions analogous to slavery*.<sup>3</sup> This system also tends to underestimate the real number of cases. Nonetheless, these sources indicate that slave labour in Rio Grande do Sul occurs primarily in two regions: first, the Pampas of Rio Grande do Sul, characterized by large landholdings, agriculture, soybeans, and rice; and second, the municipalities of the Serra, marked by family farming and small properties. The events in Bento Gonçalves are not isolated within the Serra region. Since 2019, 19 police operations have been conducted in Rio Grande do Sul, eight of which took place in municipalities of the Serra (CRE, 2023). Beyond the high-profile case in Bento Gonçalves, other instances of slave labour have been reported in the Serra region: in 2022, 26 workers were rescued in Nova Araçá, and 80 in Bom Jesus; in 2024, 18 Argentinian workers were rescued in São Marcos. Additionally, minor cases have occurred in the Serra over the last three years: among others, in the municipalities of Campestre da Serra, Morro Reuter, Gramado, Putinga, São José do Herval, and Fontoura Xavier.

Based on these early findings, several questions arise for inclusion in the interview script: Why hasn't a collective agreement been reached in Bento Gonçalves? Is it possible that labour unions, political parties, or local associations were unaware of the slavery-like conditions endured by 210 workers in the region? These questions guide the exploration of key themes in subsequent interviews, including the role of social actors, local governance, and political culture.

## 4.0 Findings

### 4.1 Getting Out of a Trap

Workers from Bahia took approximately three and a half days to reach Bento Gonçalves, travelling 2,000 kilometres from the state of Bahia to Rio Grande do Sul. They had been promised a salary of R\$ 2,000 (about USD 387), along with food (including during the journey) and lodging (MTE, 2023). However, one worker reported that for three days, he had only a few cookies, water, and coffee to eat and drink (MTE, 2023). Most workers arrived in early January 2023, while others continued to arrive throughout January and February.

According to a union leader, “Workers who move to new regions are often seeking better job opportunities. Often, they come from regions with even lower wages, making them more vulnerable to deception (personal communication, union leader, 2, Bento Gonçalves, November 2023).

Another union leader pointed out that “In the agricultural sector, workers are often migrants due to the seasonal nature of the work. They relocate to regions with better working conditions—or perhaps it's more accurate to say ‘less unfavorable’ conditions” (personal communication, union leader, 3, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

A labour inspector from Porto Allegre mentioned:

Recruitment at Fênix typically took place through personal contacts or job alerts shared in WhatsApp groups. Fênix was managed by an employer overseeing a team of a dozen long-serving workers, who

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<sup>3</sup> The list is available at [https://www.gov.br/trabalho-e-emprego/pt-br/assuntos/inspecao-do-trabalho/areas-de-atuacao/cadastro\\_de\\_empregadores.pdf](https://www.gov.br/trabalho-e-emprego/pt-br/assuntos/inspecao-do-trabalho/areas-de-atuacao/cadastro_de_empregadores.pdf).

initially made direct contact with the new recruits. Subsequently, these long-serving workers took on roles as coordinators for the newly hired employees (personal communication, labour inspector, 1, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

The manager of Fênix enjoyed a favorable reputation in the region, especially for his support of sports activities and collaboration with local family farming. His sudden involvement in such a dire situation was unexpected, hinting at a scheme beyond his control. Initially arriving to work with poultry, he gradually earned the community's respect by sponsoring events and engaging with towns such as Garibaldi, Flores da Cunha, and Bento Gonçalves. His reputable image garnered trust from local wineries and unions alike.

As a union leader from Bento Gonçalves stated, “Nobody would have expected something like this... more than two hundred workers. This matter surprised many people in the city” (personal communication, union leader, 2, Bento Gonçalves, November 2023).

Upon arrival, workers were informed during an early meeting that missing even a single workday would result in the forfeiture of their return trip (MTE, 2023). Their identity documents were immediately confiscated. Rescued workers endured relentless work hours, starting at 5:00 a.m. and ending at 10:00 p.m. from Sunday to Friday, with only Saturdays off. They were monitored by armed security personnel, faced physical abuse from supervisors, and went unpaid. Security measures were overseen by guards coordinated by a retired police officer, with work hours irregularly documented by Fênix (MTE, 2023).

Despite promises of compensation, accommodation, and meals, workers received neither salary nor satisfactory sustenance. In dire circumstances, they resorted to purchasing overpriced goods from local markets and borrowing money from their employer, accruing a steep 50% interest rate.

One of the rescued workers affirmed, “I borrowed 500 reais, and I had to pay 750” (personal communication, rescued worker, MTE, November 2023).

Labour Ministry inspectors reported appalling housing conditions, with facilities designed for a maximum of 100 occupants housing over 200 individuals. Workers endured cold showers, clogged toilets, and inadequate sanitation facilities, with no hot water available. A labour inspector from Porto Alegre pointed out, “They slept in unsanitary conditions, often without tables to eat at, resorting to sitting on the floor and lacking even basic utensils” (personal communication, labour inspector, 1, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

This dire situation persisted for over a month until tensions escalated, prompting the workers to share their appalling food and housing conditions on the Internet. The Fênix guards became aware of the post. On Tuesday, February 21, 2023, at around 8 p.m., the Fênix guards showed up at the lodging and locked a worker in his room and beat him. Other workers arrived from the grocery store and were also taken to the bedroom and beaten. Three workers decided to escape by jumping out of the window (MTE, 2023) and fled through neighbouring properties and sought refuge in a nearby bush, where they remained hidden until dawn. They had a cell phone with them and made contact with their families to ask for help and money to call a transportation app with the intention of going all the way to Caxias do Sul. On the way they made contact with the Brazilian Federal Highway Police. The workers reported death threats, violence that had occurred the day before, physical and psychological assaults.

On the night of the 22nd, the Federal Police initiated a rescue operation action.

A labour inspector from Porto Alegre disclosed:

We found stun guns, truncheons, and clubs when we entered the lodging [...] Workers didn't receive any salary. They didn't even have food. The lodging was sealed [...] We interviewed the workers. We divided the workers into groups and interviewed them separately, to verify if testimonies matched. Workers showed us the aggressors [...] the retired military brigade sergeant [...] he was the head of security. We proceeded with the rescue operation and contacted the municipality's social services to find accommodations. We even arrested the employer to ensure workers' salary. We secured a gymnasium and arranged for city buses to transport the workers. [...] There were rival groups in the gymnasium. We started the procedure to calm everyone down [...] We engaged with the wineries involved, resolving outstanding payments with the [employer's] company through a behavioral agreement. Wages were paid, and buses were provided for transportation [...] and we arranged buses for the workers' return to Bahia (personal communication, labour inspector, 2, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

Four of the rescued workers made the following statements:

I witnessed my colleagues being beaten with cudgels by military policemen and security guards. I observed the use of pepper spray and stun guns. These weapons were even employed to coerce workers out of bed and compel them to begin working" (personal communication, rescued worker, 2, MTE, 2023, November 2003).

They tried to kill me and two other colleagues. (personal communication, rescued worker, 3, MTE, 2023, November 2023).

The guard said that he only needed a 'yes' from the employer to kill me (personal communication, rescued worker, 4, MTE, 2023, November 2023).

He said that a good Bahian is a dead Bahian (personal communication, rescued worker, 5, MTE, 2023, November 2023).

According to the Ministry of Labour's report (MTE, 2022) workers were recruited, transported, housed, and accommodated by the employer, based on false promises regarding the formalization of the employment relationship, salary, and other benefits. Taking advantage of their economic and social vulnerability, upon commencing work, these workers were ensnared in a system



of indebtedness that compelled them to remain on-site until the end of the harvest, as leaving prematurely would result in receiving nothing.

A labour inspector described the levels of stress and anguish these workers were experiencing:

Let me tell you the stress levels these workers experienced: they felt threatened even during the return trip home. They were escorted by the police, and I personally coordinated the boarding process, ensuring control throughout. Despite this, workers were still fearful of being followed. A police car accompanied them the entire way, but they remained terribly scared (personal communication, labour inspector, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

#### ***4.2 Local Governance and Politics of Slave-Like Labour***

The interviews suggest the importance of regional political culture and preferences, even in justifying the events of Bento Gonçalves. The second round for the 2022 presidential election in the Serra's most populous cities was emblematic. In Caxias do Sul, Jair Bolsonaro won 66.43 % of the vote while Lula da Silva received 33.57%. Similarly, in Bento Gonçalves, Bolsonaro claimed victory with 75.89% against Lula's 24.20%. In Nova Pádua, an unprecedented 92.96% of voters cast their ballots for Bolsonaro (Abreu et al., 2023). Moreover, right-wing parties govern all major cities in the Serra.

According to a union leader from Porto Alegre, "Bolsonaro has a strong aversion to the Northeast, which is predominantly Lula's territory. In the Serra, the majority of voters support Bolsonaro" (personal communication, union leader, 3, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

A union leader from Serra mentioned:

That's the Serra [...] family farmers may be small, but they aspire to expand, identifying with the landowners of the Pampas, and they tend to support Bolsonaro [...] First lady Michelle Bolsonaro previously worked as a sales manager at the Aurora winery, one of those three companies [implicated in the slave labour scandal]. (personal communication, union leader, Serra, November 2023).

After the workers were rescued, local wine consortia remained silent on the Bento Gonçalves issue, while the three wineries involved publicly absolved themselves of any responsibility in statements to the press.

A union leader from Porto Alegre described:

The wineries claimed to be unaware of the housing and working conditions of the workers from Bahia. Both unions and employers' associations seemed to justify the events in Bento Gonçalves. The president of the Bento Gonçalves trade association argued that the Serra region was facing a labour shortage. However, why have they not signed

a collective agreement? Improving working conditions could help attract more workers (personal communication, union leader, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

Additionally, city councils in the Serra appeared more inclined to justify the incident rather than condemn it. A week after the events, a city councillor of a right-wing party from Caxias do Sul (the town next to Bento Gonçalves), Sandro Fantinel, became nationally known after making xenophobic statements against the rescued workers in a city council meeting. According to Fantinel, it would be preferable to hire workers from Argentina because they are “clean and honest,” unlike those from Bahia. Fantinel attributed his discriminatory statements to a mental lapse, but the insults to northeasterners are typical accusations of Bolsonaro’s voters. For these statements, some councillors tried to exclude him from the city council without succeeding.

A union leader from Bento Gonçalves added, “They are Bolsonaro supporters. This reflects the social climate that prevails around here. Fantinel’s case is not an isolated one—there are others as well” (personal communication, union leader, Bento Gonçalves, November 2023).

A few months after the events, a lawyer representing the victims of slave labour demanded the impeachment of Jocelito Tonietto, a city councillor in Bento Gonçalves who owned the market where the rescued workers allegedly had to purchase goods at inflated prices, all while maintaining debts with Fênix. As yet, the city council has not issued any comments regarding the impeachment request.

### **4.3 Signs of Change**

The Brazilian labour system is complex and deserves some specific considerations. At present, in the Brazilian agricultural sector, most of the *sindicatos* [unions] are *sindicatos ecléticos*, which are workers’ unions that represent two distinct professional categories: family farmers and rural salaried workers. Both were included, until 2014, within a single rural workers’ union. The issue remained unsettled until the Ministry of Labour issued a clarification through the technical note n. 88 of 2014. The note allowed the dissolution of the so-called “eclectic category of rural worker” into the separate labour categories of rural salaried workers and family farmers. However, until a few years ago, the separation of rural salaried workers and family farmers took place only at the union confederation (Contag and Contar) and at the union federation level (FETAG and FETAR). A growing number of local unions [*sindicatos*], especially in the Serra and central regions of Rio Grande do Sul, decided to no longer represent rural labourers who became de facto union-free: it is the case of Bento Gonçalves, where the official *sindicato* recognized by the Ministry does not negotiate any local collective agreements.

The labourers working in the Serra region—whether they are migrants or not—are no longer represented by any union. Therefore, the FETAR (the state federation of rural labourers) attempted to fill the void left by local unions in the Serra region in order to negotiate collective agreements.

After the workers’ rescue, local politics underwent significant changes that facilitated discussions on labour issues and the potential for collective bargaining in the Serra region. The interviews offer insights into emerging shifts or trends. For instance, on the afternoon of July 2023, FETAR-RS (the Federation of Rural Wage Workers of Rio Grande do Sul) sealed a crucial

collective agreement in the municipality of Caxias do Sul, next to Bento Gonçalves. While the agreement currently encompasses only a handful of municipalities, it stands as a noteworthy milestone for the labour movement in Rio Grande do Sul.

A union leader from Porto Alegre added:

There is still no collective agreement in Bento Gonçalves but this is a step forward [...] after the events in Bento Gonçalves we received a lot of pressure [...] a collective agreement may raise wages above the minimum wage for rural wage workers not covered under a collective agreement [...] Local rural unions in the region no longer represent rural salaried workers [...] nowadays they just represent family farming. This collective agreement is a success. (personal communication, union leader, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

Following the events in Bento Gonçalves, local governance has taken a more proactive stance towards migrant labour and the rights of rural workers, alongside efforts to address collective bargaining agreements. A series of meetings have been convened at the local level, with the aim of bringing together diverse stakeholders to tackle these pressing issues. Furthermore, in March 2023, the Rio Grande do Sul State Assembly approved the establishment of an inquiry commission, known as the External Representation Commission (CRE, 2023), composed of state deputies. This commission was tasked with investigating the incidents in Bento Gonçalves and assessing the state government's policies regarding slave-like labour conditions.

As indicated by the interviews, local governance in Bento Gonçalves has undergone a reorganization, adopting a more proactive stance and showing increased sensitivity to the rights of migrant workers. Following the rescue of the Bahian workers, significant changes took place in local governance. FETAR, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and other trade unions, particularly at the state level, conducted several meetings to address the situation directly. This led to the inclusion of new stakeholders in local governance efforts aimed at bringing about positive change in the region. Initiatives included increased inspections by ministerial inspectors, engaging discussions with family farmers, and the establishment of a collective agreement. A labour inspector noted that it is now feasible to arrange meetings with farmers to clarify labour rights laws.

The state of Rio Grande do Sul, the Ministry of Labour, COETRAE-RS, Fecovinho, FETAR, FETAG, and others are all actively contributing to the supply chain.

A labour inspector from Porto Alegre explained:

We signed a memorandum to educate family farmers about legislation concerning migrants, whether they are Brazilian or Argentine. We distributed printed brochures to explain the law. Together with FETAG and Fecovinho, we organized events focused on family farming and unions. I met with technicians from the wineries in the vineyards. Initially, family farmers were resistant to adhering to the law, but

gradually they began to understand its importance. We were invited to radio stations, and small producers started to grasp the problem. It's a cultural issue; when you visit their homes, you are offered salami and good wine, but they are often reluctant to spend money. Now we are monitoring the situation and engaging with family farmers. We recognize the seriousness of the incident, which also resulted in economic losses for the entire region. (personal communication, labour inspector, Porto Alegre, November 2023).

## 5.0 Conclusions

In the most vulnerable sectors, such as agriculture, wages tend to be lower, and poverty is widespread. Two recent labour reforms have exacerbated this precariousness. First, the Outsourcing Law, enacted on March 31, 2017, during Michel Temer's interim presidency, significantly reshaped Brazil's labour relations by allowing companies to outsource any aspect of their operations across all economic sectors. Under this legal framework, the contracting company assumes liability for labour-related debts incurred by the outsourced party, but only as a last resort, thereby blurring the lines of employer responsibility. Second, Law 13.467/17 (the so-called Labour Reform), which amended over 200 articles of Brazilian labour legislation, further flexibilized labour relations and weakened unions. However, this reform maintained the primarily local scope of collective bargaining, typically confined to municipal boundaries.

This new legal framework, combined with increasing precariousness, renders local rural labour relations susceptible to all forms of exploitation. While the local community was shocked by the rescue of 210 workers from Bahia, interviewees indicated that extreme labour exploitation in the region is not a new phenomenon. Weak local unions, the absence of a collective agreement, a labour-unfriendly political culture, and domestic migrants seeking decent wages are common issues in the area. Consequently, these factors have enabled a well-known and respected—but unscrupulous—entrepreneur to exploit domestic migrant workers. Such institutional conditions create an environment conducive to labour exploitation. When local politics, governance, and labour relations fail to regulate and protect workers, severe cases of oppression and exploitation can arise, particularly in the agricultural sector. Thus, the Bento Gonçalves case is not merely an isolated incident and cannot be attributed solely to the employer-employee dynamic.

Interviews and document analysis suggest a modest shift following the events in Bento Gonçalves. Local associations and businesses have become subjects of public debate, and collective bargaining in the Serra region has garnered renewed attention. A collective agreement was signed in the region, and various trade unions and local associations have initiated efforts to prevent the recurrence of such abuses.

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