

# WhatsApp is upending the role of unions in Brazil. Next, it may transform politics.

Saturday 29 September 2018, by [LOPES Marina](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2018).

**When Lazaro Rutino needs a break from hauling beef across Brazil in his truck, he swipes on his phone and is instantly connected to dozens of other truckers. Rutino, 59, is a member of eight trucker groups on WhatsApp, the messaging service that has become a staple for Brazilians of all walks of life.**

“It’s a relief from the daily loneliness,” said Rutino, 59, who spends more than a month at a time away from his wife and three children. Rutino uses WhatsApp to secure work, learn about traffic jams and avoid dangerous stretches of highway. But recently, along with thousands of other truckers, he also used it to participate in a [10-day strike](#) that crippled Latin America’s largest economy.

Disparate bands of truckers turned to the messaging app to organize thousands of drivers in the largest and most effective truckers strike in the nation’s history. In two weeks, they squeezed \$2.5 billion in concessions from Brazil’s president, prompted the resignation of the CEO of Petrobras, the state-controlled oil giant, and won the support of the majority of the country.

“We tried to do this many times before WhatsApp, but it has never been so successful,” said Rutino, who has been driving trucks for 40 years.

*[\[Brazilian leader bows to truckers’ demands, but strike continues to cause chaos\]](#)*

Nearly two-thirds of Brazil’s 200 million people use WhatsApp to share memes, set up meetings and, increasingly, vent about politics. Now, the messaging app is helping Brazilians undermine established power structures, injecting a level of unpredictability and radicalization into a country beset by economic and political crises.

WhatsApp is particularly suited to organized movements. Unlike Facebook or Twitter, which often provide information to wider audiences, WhatsApp requires users to be invited to participate in groups, which leads to increased intimacy and secrecy, according to researchers. The platform’s voice messaging and photo sharing options enable users of varied educational backgrounds to take part in discussions. And it is free. Disgruntled Uber drivers, feminists and hard-line conservatives here use the app to share ideas and plan get-togethers.

In the [United States](#) and [France](#), nontraditional candidates have been winning elections. In Brazil, WhatsApp is helping outsiders gain power by replacing enfeebled traditional brokers such as unions.

*[\[Brazil’s military to take over security in violence-scarred Rio de Janeiro\]](#)*

A vegetable stall at Brasilia’s Central Food Supply is nearly out of produce in late May as a result of the strike. (Evaristo Sa/AFP/Getty Images)

The truckers strike began in mid-May. Fed up with rising fuel costs and fruitless negotiations with Brazil's government, thousands of drivers agreed to stop their trips and park their trucks along highways, halting deliveries of goods. Within days, gas stations ran dry, supermarkets began rationing fruit and airports started to cancel flights for lack of fuel.

Desperate to get the economy moving again, President Michel Temer met with leaders of eight unions. They quickly struck a deal to temporarily clear the highways in return for temporary cuts to fuel prices. But most truckers rejected the deal.

Meanwhile, the truckers used WhatsApp to win the support of their fellow citizens. Drivers sent voice messages explaining their plight and linking their demands with general frustrations about the government. Eight days into the strike, [87 percent of Brazilians](#) supported the truckers, according to one poll.

As the strike gained steam, the demands morphed from lower fuel prices to the resignation of Temer. Markets started to panic, and the Brazilian real devalued vs. the U.S. dollar.

### [\*\[How Brazil's political class came undone\]\*](#)

Marcos da Costa, president of the Sao Paulo chapter of the Brazilian Bar Association, watched the episode unfold with trepidation. When Temer called out the army to deal with the remaining strikers, the lawyer decided to intervene. Da Costa and his colleagues were able to highlight 15 truckers who had emerged as representatives of various factions on WhatsApp groups around the country.

"The president had identified the traditional leadership to sign a deal, but it didn't reach the base," da Costa said. "We had to identify the leadership at the base of the movement, which had been started through WhatsApp."

Soldiers take part in an operation to clear a highway outside Sao Paulo that was blocked by striking truckers. (Nelson Almeida/AFP/Getty Images)

Brazilian President Michel Temer, seen at a news conference on the resignation of the CEO of Petrobras, had called out the army. (Andre Coelho/Bloomberg News)

Da Costa called these leaders in for a meeting and transmitted their requests to the state governor. Skeptical about how much sway these representatives held, the governor asked them to order truckers on WhatsApp to temporarily unblock a highway outside Sao Paulo. Within one hour, it was clear, according to da Costa.

The governor struck a deal with the representatives for lower state vehicle taxes and tolls and mediated an accord with Temer to slash the cost of diesel. The truckers relayed the negotiations to their base, which accepted the concessions to effectively end the strike.

"Society will have to find ways to understand and address movements of this nature that are horizontal and can't be tackled by institutional channels," da Costa said. "Today it happened in Brazil with the truckers, but tomorrow it can happen somewhere else."

Yet the tools that facilitate collective bargaining on WhatsApp — secrecy and intimacy — also make the platform a potential instrument for radicalization, intimidation and the proliferation of false information.

The instant gratification and polarization that characterize social media are making people more

impatient with traditional politics and compromise, according to academics. Four months ahead of Brazil's presidential elections, WhatsApp groups are becoming virtual soapboxes on which Brazilians are calling for more-drastic solutions to the country's woes.

With the government, "it takes 40 years to make a decision. Things are slow to change," said Yasodara Córdova, a researcher at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University who studies the relationship between government and technology. "But software changes very fast. Social networks are more responsive, and people want faster answers."

Trucks sit last month in Sao Paulo. Truckers organized the strike on messaging service WhatsApp. It played a part in its resolution as well. (Victor Moriyama/Getty Images)

Brazilians are growing especially restless — 96 percent of them do not feel represented by their government, according to a [February poll](#).

WhatsApp has become a depository for outrage against the political elite in a country where there are 35 political parties and the line between corruption and compromise can be especially thin. Calls for the overthrow of the government and a [return to military dictatorship are routine](#).

There is a lot to be angry about. Brazil is struggling to revive its economy after its worst recession on record. Meanwhile, a sprawling corruption investigation has [ensnared the country's top political leaders](#). There were a record 61,000 violent deaths in 2016.

"The country is a pressure cooker. Social networks increase the pressure and allow it to be organized pragmatically," said Francisco Bosco, a philosopher who wrote a book about social media and political culture in Brazil. "The conflicts and tensions are laid out every day, often in reduced, simple terms that contribute to a polarizing environment and scapegoating."

Afraid of becoming a target of collective anger, 28-year-old Jefferson Evangelista kept off the roads when the strike began. Evangelista, a trucker who supplies McDonald's restaurants throughout Brazil, was eager to go home to his wife and two children after being away from them for 20 days. Instead, he got stuck at a gas station for 11 days while he waited out the strike. "I didn't want to join the strike," he said. "But on WhatsApp they threatened to set trucks on fire and kill you if they caught you driving on the road. I couldn't beat them, so I had to join them."

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