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Brazil

Crisis and rebirth of the Left

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV371 - October 2005 -

Publication date: Thursday 20 October 2005

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By identifying itself for more than two and a half years with the Lula government, which is carrying on the neo-liberal policies started by Lula's predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), the Workers' Party has gone into a deep crisis.

Although this crisis has been accelerated by the scandal of the buying of parliamentary votes by its leaders, which broke out last June, the roots of the crisis are to be found in the rapid change in the identity of the PT. [1]

Built in the course of the wave of struggles which finally put an end to the ferocious military dictatorship at the end of the 1970s, the Workers' Party brought together within its ranks militant trade unionists who were looking for a political instrument, militants from the Christian Base Communities and militants of the revolutionary Left.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/VasquezandLula-2.jpg>]

So for the first time in Brazilian history, the workers established their own class political party, independent of the bourgeoisie, capable of expressing their aspirations and their demands on the political and electoral stage. This party naturally placed itself in the framework of democratic socialism, even though the socialist project that it elaborated remained vague. In the same way, it naturally took on board the mechanisms that came from the best democratic traditions of the workers' struggles from which many of its leaders had come.

Even though the PT's electoral successes fairly quickly gave it many elected representatives - a very privileged social position in Brazil - the democratic and pluralist tradition of the PT enabled it to slow down for years the process of alienation between its leadership and its members - in short, the bureaucratisation of the party.

It was only in the course of the 1990s, in particular after the neo-liberal turn of governmental policies of and the successive failures of struggles of working-class resistance, that the bureaucratisation of the party progressed, while the level of activity of rank and file militants was in regression.

From the moment it came to power, in January 2003, the Lula government confirmed an orientation that was "in continuity" with the policies of FHC. It respected all the engagements undertaken by the Brazilian state towards the financial markets and international capitalist institutions.

The immediate consequence of the arrival in government of the PT was a new flow of members into the party. Even though for some of them that represented a political step forward and a development of their consciousness, many of these new members were seeking to take advantage of this route towards para-administrative jobs, which the PT's elected representatives and its ministers controlled. Simultaneously, the independent activity of the party generally regressed, to the benefit of the involvement in state institutions of its members, or of a wait-and-see attitude.

The social movements, in large part led by PT militants, also adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards the government. It didn't take long for it to become clear that the budget choices and the "reforms" undertaken by the government were in continuity with the neo-liberal policies of the preceding decade, worsening the attacks against the gains of the workers. The pension reform in 2003 in particular corresponded to the international orientation of capital, seeking to reduce the social wage.

It was because they refused to vote for this reform that Senator Héloisa Helena, militant of the Socialist Democracy

current(DS), and the members of parliament Luciano Genro of the Movement of the Socialist Left (MES) and João Batista Oliveira de Araujo, known as Baba, of the Socialist Workers' Current (CST), were expelled from the PT in December 2003. Their expulsion demonstrated the readiness of the PT bureaucracy to also break from its pluralist and democratic tradition.

The expelled members, joined by others - among them one of the founders of the PT and of DS, João Machado - then began building a new party of the left, the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL), trying to preserve what could be preserved of the gains of class political independence, which the PT had incarnated and which it abandoned.

The Brazilian Left, up to then essentially grouped within the PT [2], was thus divided between those who were building the PSOL and those who were partisans of redressing the PT.

For a big majority of the PT Left undertook, within the party, a battle for an illusory reorientation, demarcating themselves from the most ultra neo-liberal wing, which heads the government and is identified with the Minister of Finance, Antonio Palocci, while at the same time adopting an orientation of support to the government.

The "governmentist" Left claimed that it could change the course of the government's policy. But confronted by the denunciations of one of its clients who had been caught with his fingers in the till, the PT majority and President Lula himself in no way showed a healthy reaction.

On the contrary, after having tried to snuff out the scandal by opposing a parliamentary inquiry, they tried to make the leaders of the party who are the most implicated carry the can, by once again suppressing the debate on the reasons for such degeneration.

The elections for the leadership and for president of the party (PED) did not bring the crisis under control. Certainly the Lulaist team remains in a majority, especially in the national leadership where it won almost 60 percent of the places. It also won the presidency of the party, but narrowly. Ricardo Berzoini - candidate of the majority camp - was not able to win the presidency in the first round of the PED.

Though more than 300,000 members of the PT took part in the first round, in the second round they were no more than 230,000. And as was to be expected in a party that had been taken back in hand by its bureaucratic apparatus, it was Ricardo Berzoini who won. [3]

In the second round more than 48 percent of those who took part supported the candidacy of Raul Pont, founder of the PT and of DS, former mayor of Porto Alegre, thus demonstrating the desire of tens of thousands of members to oppose the present course of the PT leadership. Raul Pont won the support of all the other minorities of the party, conducting a campaign in favour of the renewal of the PT and for a reorientation of the government's policy, while at the same time affirming his support for Lula and his government. [4] Over and above the political positions of Raul Pont, tens of thousands of PT members used his candidacy to oppose the course of the Lula leadership.

Raul Pont's political history, his position on the left of the party, his courage, his integrity, enabled these thousands of PT members to demonstrate their discontent by voting for him. But the support of the DS leadership and of Raul Pont to the Lula government also contributed to make his candidacy appear as one of moderate opposition, thus giving guarantees to an important part of the PT apparatus.

The sectors of the Left who remain within the PT nevertheless consider that the PED has shown that the party has a

certain vitality, by mobilizing for the internal vote more than 30 percent of its members. "This level of participation reaffirms that the PT is the principal left party in the country and convinces us that a way out of the crisis can be obtained through the strength of the militants", declared Raul Pont on October 11th.

These sectors are trying to mobilize their bases for the next congress of the party in December and intend to take an active part in the electoral campaign of the PT in 2006. But the price to be paid for remaining inside the PT under these conditions is a heavy one: to support the government, to belong to the same party as the leaders who are accused of corruption, to be in solidarity with one of the most consistently neo-liberal policies in Latin America. And that price will have to be paid during the coming political and social tests.

If the "governmentist" opposition follows its present logic, it will call for a vote in the next election for Lula or one of his supporters. How then can they defend anti-capitalist positions and support Lula when there will be a candidate, Héloisa Helena, who will defend a series of radical positions against liberal capitalism? How can hundreds of DS members support Lula against Heloisa? There is a crucial choice to be made there for the months and years to come!

Parallel to the worsening of the crisis of the PT, those who made the choice of building the PSOL are scoring points. Since Brazilian law demands that a party, in order to be legally recognized and be able to present candidates in elections, must gather nearly 450,000 signatures, the PSOL conducted a mass campaign at the same time as taking part in all the debates and unceasingly criticizing the government's orientation, whose balance sheet from the workers' point of view is becoming increasingly heavy. The PSOL thus succeeded in depositing the signatures, having them validated at state level and finally, on September 16th, being recognized as a legal party by the Higher Electoral Tribunal.

The PSOL thus appears as being able to aim at regrouping a Left which is seeking a political instrument for social transformation. So at the end of September the recomposition of the Left speeded up.

On the 24th, in the course of a public meeting in Fortaleza, capital of the state of Ceara, João Alfredo, federal member of parliament and DS member, announced that he was joining the PSOL along with two-thirds of local DS members. The state of Ceara was the strongest bastion of DS after Rio Grande Do Sul. The mayor of Fortaleza, Luisianne Lins, as well as several other local DS cadres, is however remaining within the PT, and the militants who have joined the PSOL have announced that they will support the local administration of Luisianne.

On 26th, 27th, and 28th September, the press announced the move to the PSOL of leaders and militants of the PT Left in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Campinas, etc. In São Paulo the DS federal member of parliament, Orlando Fantazzini, announced that he was joining the PSOL along with several hundred militants. In Rio it was also the case with federal member of parliament, Chico Alencar, a historic personality of the PT Left.

At the same time, Ivan Valente and Maninha, two other federal members of parliament, militants of APS (Action for Socialism, which was formerly known as Socialist Force, the third big current of the PT Left) announced that they were joining the PSOL. It appears that the entire APS current has decided to do the same. This current supported the candidacy of Plinio de Arruda Sampaio - a historic figure of the PT, identified with the important current of the Christian Left - for the post of president of the PT. Plinio, who was seen as the candidate the furthest to the left in this PED, and who had obtained 13.4 per cent of the vote on September 18th, also announced that he was joining the PSOL.

A number of other national, regional, and local leaders of the PT Left and other small left currents also announced that they were leaving the PT for the PSOL. Worth mentioning in particular are the Movement for Socialist Unity

(MUS) - a current which split from the MES of Luciana Genro in 2004, considering that it was necessary to continue the fight within the PT - and well known leaders of the left of the United Workers Confederation (CUT) such as Jordinho.

So the PSOL has seen an important inflow of new members at the same time as it won its legal recognition, which will enable it to be present in the electoral campaign in 2006. Today it has a federal parliamentary group of seven members of parliament and two senators [5], which guarantees it a presence in the media.

The opinion polls indicate a significant result for the candidacy to the presidency of the Republic in 2006 of its best-known leader, Heloisa Helena. So the PSOL appears as the political instrument capable of preserving the best gains of the PT and a not negligible part of its militant capital.

So the crisis of the first attempt of the Brazilian working class to rise to the level of political independence is going to be lasting. And the division of the Brazilian Left among those who, despite their subordinate position, continue to hope for a refounding of the PT from within and those who have undertaken too of the degeneration of their party of origin, will still be prolonged.

If the coming opening of the electoral campaign will not make it easier to seek terrains of united action between the two components of the Brazilian Left, the militants of the PSOL, involved in social movements, have already taken initiatives aiming to preserve this framework of united action and to set up forums for debates which can facilitate coming together.

Paris October 12th, 2005

[1] See the [article by José Corrêa Leite](#), "The most serious crisis the Workers' Party's history" in International Viewpoint 368, June 2005.

[2] Although the majority of the "Morenoite" Trotskyist current left the PT in 1992 and the ex-Maoists of the PC do B never joined it.

[3] At the time of writing, we only have the partial results announced on October 11th, which are based on the counting of 95.6 percent of ballot papers. Berzoini then had 51.6 per cent, as against 48.4 per cent for Raul Pont. However the electoral commission did not consider it necessary to wait for the end of the count to announce the victory of Berzoini, who was immediately inaugurated "president of the PT" on the party's web site.

[4] See the [interview with Raul Pont](#) in this issue.

[5] The two senators are Héloise Helena and Geraldo Mesquita; the seven federal parliament members are Baba, Luciana Genro, Ivan Valente, Chico Alencar, Orlando Fantazzini, Maninha and Joao Alfredo.