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Brazil

The collapse of the PT and rebuilding the Brazilian left

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1. The situation in which we find ourselves is characterized by a grave political crisis whose epicentre is the collapse of the PT as a party of change and of its government. The PT has spectacularly failed the biggest test of its history, the one which it spent 25 years preparing for. And this failure affects various institutions built in our country over the last few decades.

The Congress showed its congenital weakness, its venality, and the party system laid bare its entrails, showing the limits of the Brazilian version of democracy. These limits are set by the contradiction between the desire for change, expressed by the voters in 2002, and the continuation, even the accentuation, of an economic model that had been rejected at the ballot box.

They are also determined by the supremacy of the government's economic decision-makers, cutting and re-allocating budget resources already decided by Congress. Thus a democracy which does not discuss the most important questions becomes a fake democracy, a democracy which submits to the dictatorship of the markets serves for very little.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/psol3.jpg>]

Whatever the outcome of this crisis, it will result in great losses, a great loss of credibility for political participation and the political awareness of the workers and the people, and a questioning of much that the left has achieved over three decades of struggle. A great responsibility now rests on all those in the popular and democratic camp, who must collectively seek solutions that minimize the losses we are suffering.

2. Nonetheless, this shared responsibility cannot conceal the central source of this crisis. This is the PT's inability to carry out a government of change. Led by the self-proclaimed "Majority Camp", the PT abandoned its programme of social transformation and signed up to neo-liberalism.

Distancing itself from its social base, the Lula government entered into a consortium with all that is most corrupt and degenerate in Brazilian politics (PL, PP, PTB), moving onto terrain where the seductive and corrosive power of money exerts all its force.

In spite of Lula's attempts to shift all the blame onto the PT, the responsibility for the crisis - in all its legal and illegal ramifications - passes directly through the presidential palace.

3. The possibility that some members of parliament involved in the investigations may have their mandates revoked, both from the PT and other parties, does not alter one jot the character of the government and its promiscuous relations with sections of speculative and finance capital, in other words its present class commitments.

It is therefore not correct to confine the problem of corruption to the PT, as if the government played no part in this process of degeneration.

The project which has dominated the PT, conceived and implemented by a part of the leadership, that of seizing the state apparatus, as well as the methods used to do it, were developed as a means of winning control of central government - they crystallised around Lula's election to the presidency. Lula himself is the central figure in this project. He is responsible for its consequences alongside Jose Dirceu and figures like Palocci and Gushiken.

4. The crisis shows that internal corruption has existed for a long time in a party dominated by a political group that felt no constraints on its action. Therefore there was never any real "dispute" over the government's direction, from the popular camp's point of view, between different sections of the "majority camp".

The alignment with neo-liberal economic policies, the alliances with parties of the right, the change in the party's social base and the containment and co-opting of the social movements - all these initiatives were perfectly coherent with the development of this plan to win and hold power at the expense of enormous pro-grammatic and ethical transgressions.

It is a classic (and tragic) case of the degeneration and bureaucratisation of a political current that had its roots in the popular camp and the socialist movement. *But it is now clear that the PT left also made many mistakes.* Whether on purpose, through apathy, or by mistake, it turned a blind eye to various aspects of a process that had long been undermining the party's vitality. We have to recognise that we failed to make the right criticisms, at the right time, with the right force.

5. The ideas and methods of the "majority camp" did not spring up during the Lula government; they already existed, especially in the PT local governments in São Paulo state. It is revealing - of the control that this majority machine exerts over the party - that the accusations of corruption came first from the allies on the right.

And that any reduction in the influence exerted by what now looks like the "rotten bunch" within the Majority Camp, that linked to Jose Dirceu, can only happen by strengthening Lula's direct or indirect control over the party machinery, as witnessed by the appointment of former ministers into key posts in the party leadership, and by the various proposals for "refounding" the party.

Although these proposals have always run into opposition from the minority currents on the left of the PT, which kept alive a struggle over the course taken by the party, *this struggle is now pointless.* It has been reduced to a fight between two bureaucratized sectors for control of an electoral machine stripped of any potential as an instrument of change.

6. With this crisis the Lula government has lost its last progressive vestiges. The representatives of the left who remain in the government have a merely decorative role - lending a thin veneer of legitimacy to a government that is struggling to survive through until the end of its mandate. It is a weak government, hostage to the PSDB and the PFL (the main right-wing parties), which is likely to deepen its neo-liberal policies as a strategy to avoid impeachment and/or regain some room for manoeuvre.

7. Unlike European social democracy, Lula's conversion to neo-liberalism followed the Brazilian tradition of conciliation between new and old elites. A large part of the popular leadership forged in the struggles of the 1970s and 80s was co-opted by the state apparatus, with no attempt to preserve the gains of its original social base.

In fact, the basis of support for the Lula government and even for the PT has been rapidly modified over the last three years, since the publication of the Letter to the Brazilians in 2002 (Known sarcastically as "Letter to the Bankers" by the left, this was the campaign document that pledged a future Lula government to respect the agreements with the IMF made by the previous administration- Trans Note.) The relationship with the organized movements soon changed into one of co-option and bribery, and in the case of the more militant sectors, open antagonism.

8. The threat of impeachment, held like Damocles sword over the head of Lula and his team, became a real possibility after the declarations of (Lula's campaign) publicist, Duda Mendonça. But as was made absolutely clear in an editorial on the Lula government in the Estado de São Paulo, entitled "Bad with him, worse without", this

option is not supported by a majority of the Brazilian bourgeoisie.

(Former president) Fernando Henrique Cardoso has, since the beginning of the crisis, pointed out that the ruling classes are not interested in formally removing the Lula government - the presence of a weakened, pro-neoliberal PT in the federal government, actually strengthens the regime established after the fall of the military dictatorship.

What's more, the turbulence would necessarily hit business, which means it is not the ruling class's first choice. However, the dynamic of the investigations does involve Lula, making him even weaker than before, so even without political support, the possibility of impeachment could be posed.

9. For the progressive sectors, already badly weakened, impeachment would greatly increase existing divisions, leading those closest to the government into a desperate struggle to hold onto their positions. It could also reinforce the idea that the political participation of the popular sectors and the ideas of the left are not viable.

However, to use, in opposition to this, the argument of an attempted coup, is to support a lie that falls apart in the face of the facts; it is also to manipulate the social movements in defence of a government that is not theirs.

Equally, the proposal of a pact between the government and the opposition parties to overcome the crisis merely seeks to keep the current economic policies and company profits intact, whilst avoiding the punishment of a large number of corrupt politicians amongst both supporters of the government coalition and the liberal opposition.

This must be clearly opposed by the left. Proposals like the calling of a recall referendum or a constituent assembly are, on the other hand, quite artificial. The only coherent position for the left is to demand the investigation of all accusations and the punishment of those responsible. [\[1\]](#)

10. The crisis makes clearer than ever the consequences of the path chosen by the government and the party since the election and it deepens the political differentiation in the popular camp. The left in the CUT had already created the Socialist Left Front in 2004 and the more critical PT members of parliament had formalized the Left Block - as an articulation against the government's neo-liberal course - in March this year, well before the crisis erupted.

Now the debate over the kind of public administration and the character of the pro-Lula leadership are clarifying, for broad layers of activists and their social base, the bankruptcy of the PT project symbolised by Lula, allowing a wide-ranging discussion of alternatives.

11. The PT may survive as an amorphous party machine, limited to disputing elected office. But it would be incapable of acting as a channel for the expression of popular wishes for change, and unable to develop a national project with a socialist perspective.

Proposals for "refounding" the PT are condemned to failure, because of the degeneration of the government, because of the strong traces within the party of the methods of the previous leadership, because of the lack of internal democracy, and because of the gulf that has opened up between the party and the government, on one side, and the socialist left and the social movements on the other.

A real "refounding" would only be possible, for those who support such a proposal, if there were a complete break with all those involved in the accusations. And that is not possible because of the web of relations built up by Dirceu. The really existing "refounding" is therefore aimed only at making the party an effective parliamentary and electoral support for the government and for Lula's re-election.

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For the socialist left, on the other hand, “refound-ing” would only make sense if it involved a break between the PT and the Lula leadership; but the PT is inseparable from Lula and his government is definitively compromised as an instrument of progressive change; it is, itself, the centre of the current crisis.

In any case, with or without such “refounding”, the realignment between those sectors of the “majority camp” identified with Dirceu, on one side, and those identified with Lula, on the other, has progressed, and it has co-opted both Left Articulation and the “governmentalist” sector of Democracia Socialista. None of this will change the course of the Lula government. All will find their place in a new PMDB, pragmatic and bereft of utopias.

12. The most urgent challenge for the left is to differentiate itself from the Lula government and the PT leadership and form a socialist pole of convergence for popular sectors, social activists and parliamentarians, capable of regrouping a left that is perplexed, disorientated and suffering rapid dispersion.

This regroupment needs to be able to provide, both in the social struggles and on the institutional terrain, a pole of left opposition to the Lula government. It's a question of saving as much as possible of the political and organisational gains, of the libertarian legacy built by several generations of the left and represented in the experience of the PT.

Today the PT has lost its character as an organisation of the political left. This will be expressed in a significant decline at the next elections. There is no way of justifying the continued presence of socialists on the same ticket as those responsible for the party's conversion to neo-liberalism, for a complete disrespect for democratic methods and for such a disastrous public administration.

Whatever the outcome, it's a question of organising a retreat from the collapse and defeat of what has been the dominant project of the left, regrouping forces and retaking the initiative on new ground. It's a question of actively contributing to overcoming the failed experience of “Lula-ism”, and preventing the premature asphyxiation of the creature that is struggling to be born.

13. The twin failure of the Lula government and the PT as instruments of progressive change opens a profound recomposition of the left as a whole. This will be uneven and prolonged. It entails the rebuilding of political and social organisations, the development of a new project for the country, a new political leadership and the recovery by the workers of their self-confidence and capacity for initiative.

It means taking up again the process of independent class organisation by the workers, to confront both the current crisis and the changes in social structure and political struggle that have resulted from 15 years of neo-liberal globalization. But it does not mean, as some have suggested in response to the crisis, “starting all over again”. Our starting point is qualitatively superior to that at the beginning of the PT's historical cycle: three decades of popular struggle have produced an important fabric of association and citizen awareness in part of the population.

What would be disastrous would be if, as a result of the failure of the PT as a party of change, we were to retreat, either to the pre-1964 political patterns, in which the workers only appeared on the political scene as auxiliaries, as pawns at the service of different sections of the bourgeoisie and the elites, or to an Argentinian kind of situation, where the left is marginalised from the big political questions. It would be similarly disastrous if the PT's survival should lead to a new, lightweight version of populism, without any of the merits of the original.

14. The PT's crisis marks the end of its usefulness as a political instrument for the Brazilian working class, and also the crisis of all its internal currents, which had already begun to collapse when the Lula government changed the nature of the party. But the crisis could also affect all the other organisations built by the workers: notably the CUT, where Trade Union Articulation (the current in the CUT union movement that is linked to the Lula leadership of the PT

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- trans note), supported by the leadership of the CSD (the trade union current led by Socialist Democracy), promote a policy of support for the government and subordination to it; also the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), which faces an impasse in its struggle for land reform.

However, this should not lead us to conclude that these organisations are of no use to the workers and should be abandoned, as the PSTU appears to do with Conlutas (a new trade union co-ordinating body launched by the PSTU to replace the CUT - trans note). The policies of Trade Union Articulation in the CUT, for example, confront strong resistance from an important group of class-struggle and socialist forces organised in the Socialist Left Front - this struggle should be reinforced.

One thing that becomes particularly urgent in this context is the struggle for the autonomy and unity in action of the social movements in relation to parties and government. The Lula government and its choice of class conciliation is opening the door to an offensive by the right. For most of the population, it is the left that is governing Brazil.

The right has fixed its sights on this: it wants to show that neither the left nor the popular classes are capable of governing the country. Thus the defeat of the Lula government and the PT - already quite far advanced - will affect the whole of the left.

15. The dispute over the direction taken by the left was expressed - for many sectors of the PT - in the party's Process of Direct Election (PED - or internal leadership elections) which are now happening. In these, Plinio Sampaio was the only serious 'non-governmentalist' candidate; his support grew as a pole of attraction for those who were unhappy both with the leadership given by the 'majority camp' to the government and the PT, and with the alternative on offer from the pro-governmental left.

Valter Pomar, in spite of his radical rhetoric, takes the pragmatic position in defence of the government that has long characterised his current, Left Articulation - indeed he is being supported by sectors linked to Jose Dirceu and Marta Suplicy. Raul Pont, put forward as a candidate in an attempt to preserve the unity of Socialist Democracy, found his campaign strained by the need to justify taking part in the government; he has ended up taking on the thesis of "refoundation", thereby reinforcing Lula's position that responsibility for the crisis lies with the PT.

With the conclusion of the PED - in a situation where everything continues as before in the PT - the need for socialists to leave the PT can no longer be postponed.

16. Breaking with the PT is central to opening up a space for the political re-composition of the left. There is a huge political vacuum that could not be filled because of the protecting wall set up by the PT. As that barrier collapses, various forces try to fill the space: electoral machines with a vague left profile, the PSTU (Brazilian section of the LIT), the Consulta Popular (a non-party, left forum set up in the late 90s by intellectuals and activists initially close to the MST), the PSOL.

a) The vacuum cannot be filled, in the first place, by any purely electoral and class-collaborationist project. Organizations like the PSB, the PDT and the PV - who are now scrabbling to attract members of parliament from the PT left - are overshadowed by their own histories of incoherence, some of them going back further than the PT's (and which themselves led to defeat a long time ago - eg. the defeat of Brazilian populism, of which the PDT is the heir, by the 1964 military coup, trans note); they are also tainted by possible corruption in different states, and some of them by their own ties to Lula.

The PSB, for example, was the party of Anthony Garotinho (former Governor of Rio de Janeiro state) at the last elections, is now the party of Ciro Gomez, and is supporting Lula's coalition. What is more, none of these parties is

an option for the militant forces breaking away from the PT - who can only regroup around the proposal for an open and militant, socialist party, capable of engaging with the positive aspects of the PT's legacy. What's more, none of these parties can guarantee they will not end up supporting the re-election of Lula or the continuation of his political project at the October 2006 elections.

b) The PSTU, the only other militant party of the Brazilian left, which for the last decade has sought to present itself as the alternative to the PT, has also failed. It has proved incapable of dialoguing with the broader layers of the Brazilian popular movement, both because of its sectarianism as well as its inability to take a pedagogical approach to social struggles. The PT's crisis triggered a latent crisis in its own organisation, and the most open sectors left the party.

c) The Consulta Popular (Popular Consultation), which has been in suspended animation for years, seems to see the crisis as an opportunity to relaunch itself as a non-electoral, political movement. It feeds on the frustration that exists with the way the PT was co-opted by institutional politics. But a political movement that refuses to take part in elections cannot be a central instrument in the struggle of the workers for social change and for power. Electoral processes continue to be key moments of political debate and participation, the expression of a political hegemony that we will never overcome outside of the forms of political struggle that have been established in our society.

There is also a risk of manipulation. While opposing its dilution in electoral processes, it may reserve the option of supporting pragmatically candidates from different parties, ignoring their institutional commitments - for example, supporting in 2006 candidates from parties committed to the re-election of Lula, whilst ignoring the central political divide.

What this shows is that there is no ready-made left alternative to the PT. The task facing Brazilian socialists is one of rebuilding an alternative that does not yet exist, in adverse circumstances and as we go along, by intervening in the central political disputes of the coming period.

17. The PSOL, which is completing its legalization process, is for its part a party that is still being built. Like anything new, it bears the uncertainty of the unknown. It is the only left slate with any legitimacy in this crisis, precisely because it was born out of the expulsion from the PT of left members of parliament (like senator Heloisa Helena, an emblematic figure in the resistance to the Lula government's slide into neo-liberalism) and their decision to create a new legal party framework for those sectors to be able to present a left alternative at the 2006 elections.

The PSOL has a rather narrow public image - partly because of the weight of some sectarian currents in its initial composition, partly because of some political mistakes and omissions made in its legalization phase (like not calling for a vote for Raul Pont in the second round of the local elections in Porto Alegre). But this image is also a result of the cordon sanitaire set up by the 'governmentalist' currents in the PT, who need to dismiss the PSOL in order to justify themselves remaining in the PT. More of a movement than an established party, the PSOL can offer a haven for socialists in this situation of crisis.

18. The PSOL has, in the first place, the merit of being, potentially, the only party in existence that can regroup important militant forces that have been orphaned by the collapse of the PT. The arrival of new layers will probably give it immediately a broader and more open political profile.

The failure of the PT should not obscure the fact that the existence of a class-based party, combining social and political action in a global project for change, and fighting in all different areas of activity, was a huge step forward for the political organisation of the workers.

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The big challenge for the socialist left now, is to try to minimize the risks of dispersion and fragmentation, and to regroup the maximum number of militants, political leaders, left parliamentarians and their electoral base, in the same party, not only those coming out of the PT, but also those currently in other currents co-opted by the Lula government. This is the only way of not compromising the independence of Brazilian workers, which has been so un-dermined by the Lula government and the degeneration of the PT.

19. Secondly, the PSOL has a great asset in its main leader, senator Heloisa Helena, who has shown real electoral weight and will be able to play a significant role in the 2006 polls, as a left alternative to Lula.

Left-wing voters, betrayed by the PT' crimes, will punish the party next year. If this electorate splits its vote among various unreliable parties, like the PSB, the PDT, the PPS or the PV, this will greatly dilute the already fragile terrain of class independ-ence that has been built up over the last three decades.

It is important that the break up of the PT can produce, in our country, something comparable to the emergence of the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC) out of the crisis of the Italian Communist Party - that is a party capable of combining militant intervention in the social movements with the continuation of a serious presence in elections.

For this to happen it is essential that a number of the members of congress making up the Left Bloc in the PT go over to the PSOL; this can have a multiplying effect in electoral terms, allowing the continuation of socialist, parliamentary mandates linked to a collective political project.

If the members of parliament from the PT left were to be scattered among different electoral slates, not only would this not be any guarantee of win-ning re-election, it would also result in an irreversible dispersion what strength the socialist left has been able to build up.

It is only in such a framework - in a militant party with social roots, capable of laying claim to the best of the PT experience - that socialists will be able to stand, in 2006, with a very different profile to that of today, one that is critical and self-critical in relation to the PT, and which has a much stronger, organic link to the social movements and to popular struggles.

20. The PSOL leadership has already decided that it should open its lists not only to those supporting the party as such, but also to other sectors of the left who are critical of the neo-liberal course adopted by the Lula government and who need a slate to stand on. In other words, joining the PSOL can happen through an electoral agreement that does not imply any strategic commitment to the party project as such (which, in any case, remains to be settled!).

But joining the PSOL can be much more than that: it can facilitate the rebuilding of a shared political project and a more stable organizational framework, a potential new pole of re-groupment for the socialist left in Brazil.

It is a challenge, but it is the only logical one for so-cialists to take up. For this the PSOL, reshaped by the presence of the PT left, must see itself as a mass socialist party, open to the participation of and dialogue with all sections of the left, capable of rescuing the best of the PT experience and avoiding its mistakes, but also able to update the strategic and programmatic agenda of Brazilian socialists, which is badly out of step with contemporary reality.

It must seek to incorporate all the diverse experience of the different sectors of the left that are critical of the experience of the PT and the Lula government. And with the social movements it must be capable of developing a relationship based on both acting and learning, rejecting any kind of self-proclaimed vanguardism or subordina-tion of the popular organisations.

21. Whatever positive role the PSOL may play, there is today no way of avoiding a degree of dispersion in the building of a political party organisation capable of taking the place historically filled by the PT.

This is because the PT emerged in the wake of the most formidable mass movement in Brazilian history, which led to the end of the military regime and gave birth to not only the party but also to organisations like the UNE (student confederation), the CUT and the MST, and was able to inspire hope, excitement, creativity and joy in millions of people in Brazil and around the world.

Today we are not in a period of upturn and the fabric of Brazilian society has changed greatly, making such processes more difficult. Rebuilding a left political party capable of achieving hegemony will be complex and may take a long time.

22. The socialist left will have to face, in the coming period, the need for critical and self-critical reflection. Where did we go wrong to end up where we are now? How could our conception of the party co-exist for so long with such a deformed structure, making internal de-mocracy and the participation of the membership little more than a formality? How could we allow, throughout the 1990s, the political centre of gravity to shift from the social movements to the structures of the state apparatus? Lastly, which bits of this legacy do we still want to defend?

The self-organisation, the direct democracy and popular protagonism of the 80s and its relationship with a party-political movement that abandoned neither the electoral terrain nor its principles? A party that was able, in its early years, to integrate the diverse social and political experiences of the different sections of the people? The new life breathed into bits of the state structure by the proposals for participatory democracy and by the experiences of the participatory budget?

The proposal of the World Social Forum, which grew out of this context? The big campaigns of political education around issues like the debt and the FTAA? The crisis will only be overcome if we undertake a programmatic and strategic reflection that prepares the Brazilian socialist movement for the challenges of our time.

23. But programmatic and strategic reflection is fleshed out through tactical intervention in a concrete situation. The crisis of the PT coincides with the crisis of neo-liberal policies, yet the frustration felt at the Lula government disorganises the democratic and popular movement.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/psol2.jpg>]

PSOL national meeting, January 2005

Now, as the crisis deepens, a serious regroupment of forces can probably be achieved around a combination of the struggle against corruption with the struggle against neo-liberalism, pushing the political debate beyond the ethical discussion.

However, this line, raised particularly by the Popular Assemblies, collides with line of the CUT leadership (and supported by the Co-ordination of Popular Movements) of combining the struggle against corruption with the "defence" of the Lula government - an orientation used by various sectors that are dependent on the government to try and subordinate the popular movement to their own agenda. In these unfavourable circumstances, the slogan demanding cancellation of all those reforms passed as a result of the buying of votes could, in an educational way, open up a dialogue with civil service workers and the other more aware sections of the movement.

24. In a situation where the socialist left is losing its reference point in the PT, and runs the risk of dispersion, it is urgent for socialists to begin a political movement that is broader and more flexible than the existing electoral platforms, one that can establish a framework of debate and co-ordination among all the currents, leaders and

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parliamentarians who are committed to rebuilding the socialist project in the Brazilian left.

The creation of a Movement for Socialism will be all the more solid the more firmly it is anchored in a party that can provide its centre of gravity; and only the PSOL can ensure this centre of gravity has a militant and activist base.

In these circumstances, this can help the socialist left, both inside the parties and outside them, to co-ordinate their efforts beyond the electoral horizon of 2006. It can help the recomposition of the left and the rebuilding of its organisations to be worked through with the least possible fragmentation.

25. Strategic considerations and the critique of the PT's electoralism should not obscure the fact that it is through the electoral process of 2006, on the terrain opened up by the failures of the PT and the Lula government, that the population will draw up its balance sheets of the government experience, and project its future political loyalties, hopes and identities.

Nothing solid can be built outside of the polarisation that will be expressed in those elections - a polarisation that everything indicates will be between Lula, the candidates of the right, and Heloisa Helena. No left-wing leadership will be able to avoid choosing sides in this confrontation.

It is important that in this election the largest possible number of candidates and socialist forces regroup in a left pole, on the slate of the PSOL or in alliance with it, allowing a presidential candidate with sufficient electoral weight to have an impact on the debates and in popular perceptions, and fighting for popular mandates that can take this fight further into the future.

[1] Translator's note: Some central leaders of the PSOL have been proposing a Venezuela-style recall referendum to allow the Brazilian people to decide on the future of the Lula government. At the last full PSOL leadership meeting, DS members already in the PSOL argued for caution, on the grounds that this might alienate militants and social movement activists who have not yet broken with the PT. However, a majority voted, in principle, in favour of such an initiative.