

Democratic socialism: new path for the Workers' Party in Brazil

At its first national congress, held in December last year, the Workers' Party in Brazil adopted 'democratic socialism' as a new path, rejecting both 'actually existing socialism' and 'social democracy'. JOSE RICARDO RAMALHO* reports.

The concept of socialism itself was at stake in the recent First Congress of the Workers' Party (known as PT) in Brazil. Strongly critical of the model of 'actually existing socialism', now considered a failure, but also unwilling just to modify capitalism, the PT is searching for its own way, as a party of

the Left in a Third World country.

For the PT's president, Lula, "the Workers' Party must reaffirm socialism. Our party has the credibility to do that since it was born criticis-

ing 'actually existing socialism' and fighting for democratic freedom, trade union autonomy and a multi-party system. Socialism must be democracy, come what may; not only institutionally democratic, but also economically and socially democratic. Above all, to have socialism, we need al-

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ways to be flexible and able to criticise ourselves: to review mistakes and create ways for the people to participate in decision-making."

First Congress

The first congress of the Workers' Party took place in the industrial town of Sao Bernardo do Campo, birthplace of the PT in 1980 and part of the greater Sao Paulo conurbation, from 27 November until 1 December 1991. Organising the congress involved 400 people working for four months, at a cost of approximately 200 million cruzeiros (US\$200,000). The congress was attended by 1 240 delegates from all over the country, as well as 400 special guests, including foreign visitors, who all came to discuss the future of the most important left-wing party in Brazil.

Despite press predictions that the PT was abandoning radical proposals and moving towards the centre, most party leaders denied that the party is heading quickly towards social democracy. "Our poverty in Brazil is so serious, that it requires something stronger than social democracy," says Jose Dirceu, PT secretary general.

The party published 13 theses or proposals ahead of time, for discussion during the congress. All presented analyses and proposals about the international and national situation, socialism, the organisation of society and of the party. The theses reflected the different politi-

cal tendencies, each with different delegate strength in the congress. The majority tendency is called 'Articulation' and is led by Lula himself and Jair Meneguelli, the president of CUT (National Federation of Trade Unions). 'Articulation', considered to be the centre of the PT, controlled around 50% of the delegates in almost all ballots, and managed to get its proposal approved as the guide line for the debate, right from the start.

To the left and right of 'Articulation', other important tendencies fought each other and tried to get their amendments inserted into the text of the main proposal. 'Articulation' lined up most of the time with a group called 'New Left' (12% of the delegates), also attacked as the 'right' of the Workers' Party. The 'leftists' divided into three main groups: 'Socialist Force' (15%) and 'Socialist Democracy' (12%), both with a strong Marxist orientation, and 'Socialist Convergence' (7%), the main Trotskyist tendency inside the party.

A different kind of socialism

Articulation's discussion document, 'For a Democratic and Popular Brazil', presented an extensive analysis of the international situation, and made proposals about the kind of socialist party the PT should be.

On the new international economic order, the document says: "The Workers' Party is engaged in building

a new economic, political and ecological order, with a fundamental demand - the democratisation of power. We cannot have a new democratic order without the large participation of the poor countries of the southern hemisphere, and without the distribution of economic, political, technological and military power, concentrated in the hands of the rich countries."

Analysing the collapse of 'actually existing socialism', Articulation recognizes that "over decades, the regimes of actually existing socialism refused political participation and democracy to the people." The document comes out clearly against the experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It recalls that the Workers' Party has always rejected one-party political systems, state-run trade unions, forced statism in the economy, the exclusion of the people from the exercise of power, the elimination of opposition, and the predominance of the state or party over society or individuals.

The congress approved the Articulation document, as a fair description of the kind of socialism PT wants.

"Since it was founded, the Workers' Party has been trying to build, practically and theoretically, an alternative both to the so-called actually existing socialism and to social democracy. The Socialism that the PT struggles for, means freedom of opinion, demonstration,



Lula campaigns for the presidency in 1989

Photo: CEDI

the press, party and trade union organisation; where the mechanisms of representative democracy, free from the coercion by capital, can combine with forms of direct participation by the citizen in economic, political and social decision-making. The democratic socialism we aim for, established legitimisation by the majority of political power, respect for minorities and the possibility of alternatives in power."

Rejecting 'actually existing socialism' inevitably led to speculation about social democracy. But Articulation denies anything of the sort: "The PT does not see social democracy either as a way of building socialism, or as a real alternative solution for

the problems of Brazilian society. The adoption of the deep structural reforms needed by the country, requires a radical break with the present economic, political and social order, which would be beyond the limits of the social democratic perspective."

Strategy for transformation

The strategy approved by the congress to achieve socialism, was to contest social hegemony in order to produce a revolutionary transformation of Brazil. This means to conceive of political power as being built in the everyday struggles in the trade unions, inside the factory, in schools, in the countryside.

"We do not see the conquest of power as an 'assault on the state', but we also do not see socialism as emerging without struggles and big confrontations as the socialist forces and hegemonies increase in society."

For the PT congress, the struggle for social hegemony cannot take place solely through economic struggle and popular pressure, nor can it be limited to activity in the institutions of the state.

"The PT actions as government today must be a decisive element in the building of our hegemony. That means to govern, to execute policies and to democratise the state, to stimulate participation and popular control, to interact with other social

classes, to really exercise hegemony, legitimated by the electorate."

The minority tendencies also put forward proposals for discussion. The New Left led by Jose Genoino Neto, who is also PT leader in the National Congress, spent weeks campaigning for its ideas throughout the country. In a newspaper article Genoino defines socialism as the radicalisation of democracy, condemning the dictatorship of the proletariat.

"We reject the idea of socialism as a perfect society. We see conflict, diversity and pluralism as human conditions. We value the expression and the democratic solution of differences and conflicts, assuming social and political pluralism."

Socialist Force and Socialist Democracy, which are considered to be the left wing of the party, reject both Stalinism and social democracy.

"Socialism for the Workers' Party should be a period of transition between capitalism and a classless society, humanistic and universal, and can only exist at world level," according to Socialist Force.

"It means a complex social formation, based on the process of social appropriation of the means of production under working class control, but articulated to the continuation, for a long period, of the market, other relations of production and private property, subordinated to a democratic plan."

For Socialist Democracy,

socialism means a revolutionary rupture with the existing order, and the foundation of a new state.

"This revolutionary rupture will count on the active participation of millions of workers and ... will derive its legitimacy from the majority of the population of the country, which would recognize the need for a revolution of the bourgeois establishment. The revolutionary rupture must minimise the need for violence. The revolutionaries have the responsibility to use violence only when it is legitimate in defence of the emergent power, and in preventing the violation of human rights."

For Socialist Convergence, the main Trotskyist group, the choice is "socialism or barbarity": "The objective conditions for revolutionary transformation of humanity are better than ever. And the social cost of the revolutionary way is very small compared to imperialist barbarity."

1980 - 1991: the transformation of the Workers' Party

The Workers' Party was launched in 1980. In eleven years of existence, the PT has achieved much. Its presence within political institutions has increased significantly.

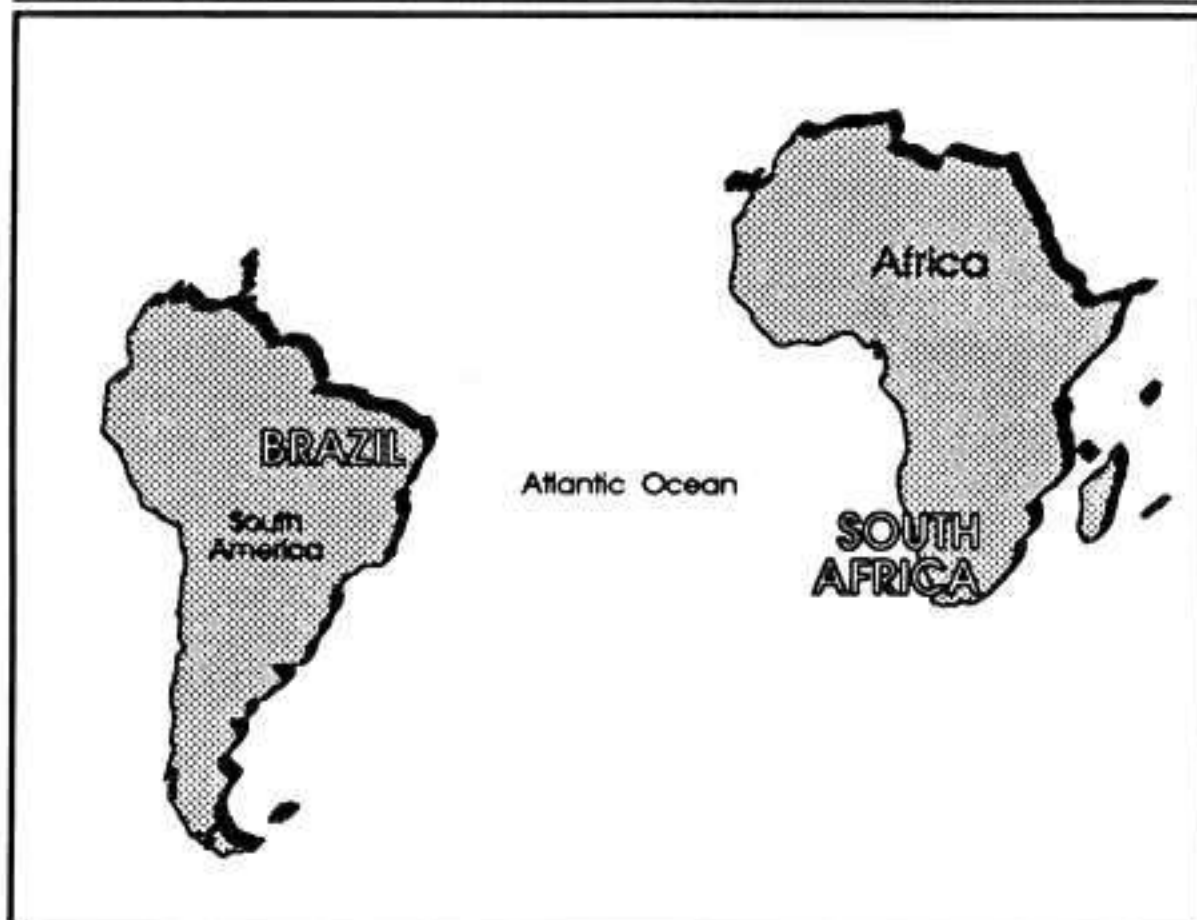
At national level, in the 1982 elections, eight PT deputies were elected; in 1986, there were 16, and the number has now reached 36. Of course, this is still a small number in an assembly of

503 deputies, but it is an extremely active group, attracting the support of the most progressive sectors of Brazilian society.

The Workers' Party performed impressively in the presidential polls of 1989, the most spectacular and active electoral campaign ever seen in the country; the abstentions were only 11.9%. The Workers' Party candidate, Lula, a metalworker from the industrial region of Sao Paulo, who is also president of the party, competed against 21 other candidates. In the first round of the elections he came second in 19 of the 27 states of the Brazilian Federation, and he won in the capital, Brasilia. In the second round he lost by only 4% of the total votes, with 31 million electors supporting him.

In 1988 the mayors of important cities, such as Sao Paulo, Porto Alegre, Campinas and Victoria, all in the rich and populous south eastern-region of the country, came from the Workers' Party.

The political responsibility involved in running these city administrations has made the party more realistic and pragmatic, and has influenced the discussion about political alliances with other parties. The First Congress decided that the changes needed in Brazilian society will require broad unity among progressive forces. "The Workers' Party does not want to own the truth; problems won't be solved only by the party," says Lula in his 'Manifesto to the mili-



tants'. The PT is in favour of a policy of co-operation with other forces in the Left, but without abandoning the main political lines of the party.

Institutional activity has to be used as a way of organising society ever more, says Lula. "This experience of administering big cities has already shown very positive aspects, such as the redeployment of investment towards social problems, a new morality in public administration, fighting corruption and opening space for popular participation."

Another aspect that has concerned the PT, and that the congress discussed, has to do with the organisation of the base. Lula insists the idea of a 'base nucleus' should be reactivated to guarantee the masses a chance to participate in politics, from the home or the workplace.* The congress also approved new rules for women's participation in the decision making

structures of the party. From now on, women should make up at least 30% at all levels.

The Workers' Party and the trade unions: a break with populism and corporatism

What then is important about this party? Is it another trade union party? The Workers' Party grew from the militant new unionism of the late 70s and 80s. This unionism broke with the traditional corporatist and populist unionism which had been established in the 1930s and which was closely tied to the state. The traditional left, ie the Brazilian Communist Party, worked within the bureaucracy of the official corporatist unions.

The military dictatorship, which ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, subordinated the country to the economic domination of foreign capital. In the industrial sector, the regime imposed a wage

squeeze on the workers, and the unions and their leaders were repressed.

In Brazil's most modern industrial sector, working class representative organisations began to emerge, built up on the shop floor by the factory movements. The shop stewards' committees, most of them functioning in secret, spread over the industrial areas of the country. Opposing corporatist trade unionism, the workers fought for the right to independent working class action, trying to break the strict legislation that joined the unions to the state.

After a period of fierce repression from 1968 to 1977, the workers started to defy the anti-strike law, undermining it by a wave of strikes that shook the country and established the freedom to strike and to demonstrate. Agreements with management were reached without the intervention of the Ministry of Labour. A solid, courageous and democratic form of trade unionism came into existence, in which the rank and file participated effectively.

The development of the workers' organisation in the countryside was somewhat different. There was not a long history of union organisation in the countryside. During the military dictatorship new leaders emerged from movements engaging in land struggle. They rejected the caution of the traditional unionists.

* The base nucleus is the basic unit of the party in the workplace or community

Participation, rank-and-file organisation and democratisation became key concepts placing the new rural trade unionists in opposition to the traditional ones. The proponents of these new concepts eventually joined up with the advanced industrial workers' organisation, who held similar principles.

The gap between the 'old' and the 'new' trade unionism became clear when CUT was created in 1983. Representatives of the 'old' generation of rural leaders excluded themselves from it and committed themselves to CONCLAT (National Federation of the Working Classes), the organisation of the traditional trade unionism.

CUT and the Workers' Party

The new trade unionism, organised around CUT, united a variety of workers spread all over the country. They fought for a national minimum wage, for the end of the wage squeeze, for job security and for freedom of trade union and factory committee organisation. These demands, made under CUT leadership, combined with the claim for agrarian reform to form a single struggle for social and political rights.

But this was still not enough. The new trade union movement raised the need for broader political representation for the workers to be recognised as independent political actors. It was in this context that the Workers' Party was born.

The intention was to gather people together from all the progressive political forces of the country. To do this, different sectors of the working class, such as those involved in industrial struggles, in land struggles in the countryside, and in the Catholic-led fight for better living conditions in the cities - all merged with human rights organisations, socialist intellectual groupings, and the left wing of the opposition party of the moment, the MDB. It also gathered left intellectuals who broke with the Brazilian Communist Party because of its centralism and bureaucratism. Having to incorporate people from such a wide spectrum, the emerging Workers' Party kept away from the traditional left forms of organisation. The PT strongly rejected centralism and Stalinism and, whenever signs of them appeared in the party, they were quickly attacked.

This is why, although trade union leaders constituted a powerful section within the Workers' Party, this never resulted in the constitution of a trade union party in the usual sense. The party criticised the populist and legalist heritage of the dictatorship, as well as the centralism and authoritarianism of the traditional left. Democracy and participation became the main watchwords in the moulding of the party.

The Workers' Party represented a completely new element in the line-up of political forces that emerged in the reform of 1979. Most political parties in Brazil were

initiatives of the dominant classes and thus reflected various statist strategies. By contrast, the Workers' Party sought to establish its structure from the base nuclei, benefiting from the trade union and grassroots movements' experience of democratic practice throughout the 1970s. With its origins in extra-parliamentary politics, the Workers' Party has placed the Brazilian working class firmly inside the political system. While struggling for political representation in the National Assembly or Congress, and in local government, the Workers' Party still gives priority to its links with the social movements. It has provided an opportunity for political expression to various kinds of social movements (the women's movements, cultural minorities, environmentalists) without losing its identity as a party linked to the struggles of the working class.

The role of the Workers' Party in Brazil today

The Workers' Party is today the only significant opposition to the government led by President Fernando Collor. Although its own left wing accuses it of moving towards the centre, especially after the party's electoral successes, the truth is that the PT remains essential to the articulation of working class demands. Workers from the cities and from the countryside still have a party fighting for social reforms, for a democratic civil society and for a state controlled by the whole society.

A survey during the First Congress showed that the working class is still far from providing a majority of the militants of the party. Some 705 of the delegates had been to university, and most of them had an income at least three times greater than the minimum wage. This leads some to argue that the Workers' Party is still a middle class party.

But although middle class militants are very active in the PT, the organized working class of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais is also active in the party. The fact remains that the Workers' Party appeals to a working class constituency which other parties have never properly reached.

Democracy in Brazil today is not only about free elections and party representation in the congress, but also a constant struggle to overcome the misery in which 40 million of the population live. This fact cannot be separated from the struggle for freedom of organisation and safety for trade union leaders, often persecuted and even killed, especially in the countryside. The Workers' Party has been and remains a fundamental organisation in the fight to meet the people's basic needs in Brazil - for a decent standard of living for the poor in the cities, for the day-labourers in the countryside, for the Indians who are denied access to their natural resources. ☆

Congress of CUT-Brazil: new challenges bring deep divisions

The major trade union federation in Brazil, CUT, faces similar challenges to the South African labour movement: the need to revive shopfloor structures, defining the role of trade unions in a new democracy, debating social contracts and socialism. Their recent congress showed sharp division. ADHEMAR S MINEIRO* and SERGIO FERREIRA** report.

CUT, Brazil's biggest and most militant national workers' confederation, held its fourth National Congress in September 1991 in Sao Paulo. CUT has grown tremendously since its last congress in 1988. Then CUT had 450 affiliated unions. By 1991 this had increased to 1 679 unions, representing more than 15 million workers.

On the other hand, the congress was marked by deep

divisions between two almost equal blocks of delegates. These divisions expressed not only a struggle for power, but also important doubts about the future direction of CUT (see also Ferreira, Sergio, 1991).

It is very difficult to understand what happened in Sao Paulo without understanding the history of CUT, and the impact of rapid changes in the world and in Brazil.

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** IBASE researcher on trade unions

Changing Brazil, changing world

CUT was built in the last years of the military dictatorship in Brazil, in a world still dominated by the Cold War division between East and West. The confederation organised workers in a new way in Brazilian history. CUT describes itself as a class-conscious union, open to workers' participation, democratic, pluralist, unitary and representative, independent and autonomous of the state and the political parties, and organised by its rank and file from the workplace (see p 76ff).

Brazil faced a national process of transition from dictatorship to democracy in the mid-80s. Finally a new constitution was adopted in 1988, and in 1989 the first direct elections since 1960 for the president of the country were held. CUT was a very active protagonist in the struggle for democracy.

Internationally, the post-war order of two antagonistic blocks, one socialist and one capitalist, was replaced by a new reality. Japan, USA-Canada and "United Europe" compete for leadership among the rich, while there is also an enormous contrast between wealth and poverty, North and South.

This period also saw the crisis in East Europe of what is called "existing socialism". As one of the principles of CUT is the struggle for socialism, although CUT always held strong criticisms on "existing socialism" (for instance CUT supported Solidarnosc in Po-

land), the new reality obliged the confederation to face a new and essential discussion on this issue.

Questions

The congress faced many questions. How should CUT relate to a new government directly elected by the people? Though conservative, it was no longer a military dictatorship or a "transitional government" negotiated with some sectors of the military and the former dictatorship. Should all negotiation with this new government be considered "class conciliation"?

Can CUT's programme, which includes increasing wages, the non-payment of Brazil's external debt, redistribution of wealth and land reform, be called "reformist"? If so, can this "reformism" lead to revolution? Reforms or revolution, or reforms and revolution? Old debates in the left kept on reappearing in discussion of new problems at the Congress.

Do the changes in the international order also change the reality of the international workers' confederations? Should CUT affiliate to ICFTU, which in the past indirectly collaborated with the military in Brazil through its Latin-American branch (ORIT), under the influence of USA AFL-CIO?

Organisational problems

On the other hand, the economic crisis has undermined the relations between the leadership of the unions and the workers they represent.

Many of the experienced leaders, formed in the last ten years, have now assumed regional and national tasks inside CUT. Others play active roles in political parties, or were elected to local, regional or national parliaments. They have become distant from their original constituencies.

Many of the grassroots structures of the workers (the local commissions, or shop steward committees) have collapsed during the crisis, due to unemployment or employers victimisation of union leaders. Many activists abandoned their work, looking for new jobs and survival. All these problems have caused some breakdown in the regular channels of contact between rank and file and leadership of the trade-union movement. This is seen as especially serious for CUT, which aims to organise workers with a new conception of democratic participation.

Moreover, the crisis has affected the private sector of the economy more seriously. Public employees have many legal defences against unemployment, and have acquired the right to organise under the new constitution. This has increased the proportional weight of the public sector delegates at the CUT congress. This is also the sector most actively fighting the government, because of official policies to reduce employees and to privatise enterprises. It is also the sector where the so-called "leftists" have grouped in op-

position to the majority of the leadership of CUT.

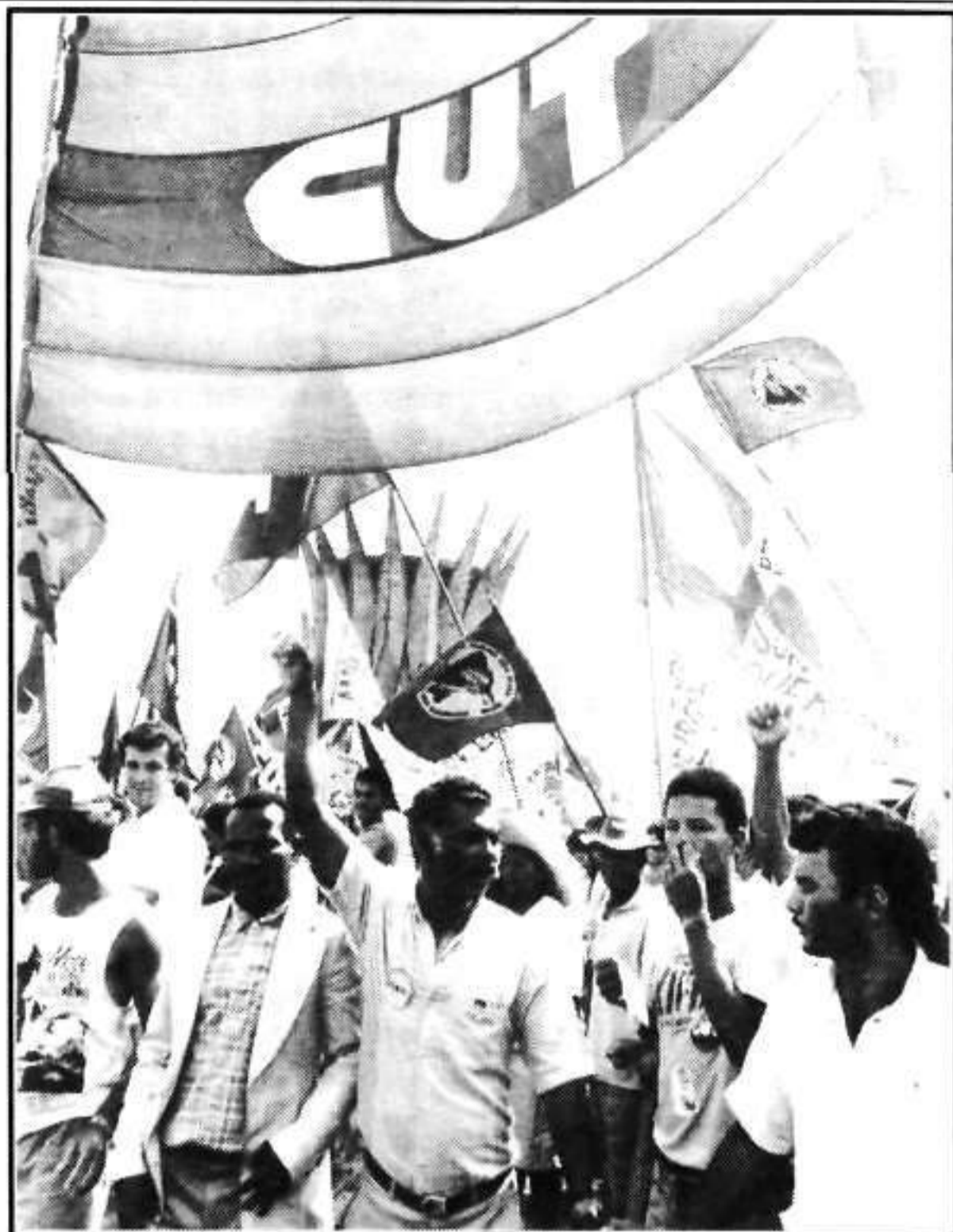
Two blocks

Those are perhaps some important elements to understand the strong division among CUT delegates in Sao Paulo. The Congress was basically divided into two big blocks of delegates. The first one, with just over half the delegates, was led by the group 'Articulacao Sindical' (Unionist Articulation). This group is in a majority in the leadership of CUT, and has close relations also with the majority in PT (Workers' Party), including Lula (the president of PT) and Jair Meneghelli, president of CUT.

The second block consists of various groups, some of them very small. The main groups in this "opposition" block were called

- 'CUT pela Base' (CUT by and for the Rank and File) - itself a gathering of other groups, and the second political force inside CUT;
- 'Corrente Sindical Clas-sista (Class Unionist Current) - the union wing of the Partido Comunista do Brazil (Communist Party of Brazil), pro-Albania until 1990;
- 'Convergencia Socialist' (Socialist convergence) - one of the Trotskyist groups organised inside CUT, and also participating inside PT.

This division began more than a year before with the discussion of how a union like CUT should behave under a government which is elected but conservative.



CUT on the march in 1988

Photo: J R Ripper

CUT involved itself strongly in the presidential election at the end of 1989. The defeat of Lula demoralised CUT activists, especially during the first quarter of 1990.

Negotiating a 'social agreement'

Searching for a response to this new situation, the 'Articulacao Sindical' majority in the CUT leadership proposed that the time was ripe to abandon the phase of only resisting and making demands. It was time to pass to a new phase of affirmative policies on social and economic affairs. The rest of the leadership,

representing all the other tendencies in CUT, insisted that to formulate practical policies would mean respecting and accepting the limits imposed by capitalism, and this could not be called anything except 'class conciliation'. This was unacceptable and against CUT principles.

However, participation in negotiations with the Collor government, which happened in September 1990, was approved by the CUT leadership structures. The other groups in the leadership did not approve the decision. They accused the majority of violating a deci-

sion of the 3rd Congress and participating in a kind of 'social agreement' (or 'social contract').

This new situation forced CUT to face two questions. Firstly, the limits of negotiations, and what was called 'social agreement', with a conservative government. Secondly, the problem of democracy in discussion but unity in action, and the compromise all members of leadership structures must make once a decision is made. This led to a strong polemic on democracy inside the union.

The united mobilisation of a general strike at the end of May 1991 did not end this heated polemic. The opposition groups put forward a thesis that all the points supported by 'Articulacao Sindical' were a final confirmation that this group is for 'reformism' and the bureaucratization of the unions. On the other hand, part of 'Articulacao Sindical' insisted on treating almost all the opposition groups as 'ultra-leftist' and lunatics, having no real proposals to deal with a very complicated conjuncture.

Elections and democracy

Disputes over delegate elections and the regional meetings of CUT worsened the situation. Some regional meetings, where delegates to the National Congress are elected, were under suspicion of fraud. When the 4th Congress was finally opened, the first question to be discussed was whether to validate some regional meetings and the dele-

gates elected from them.

From this point, on the congress was definitely an emotional dispute. The deadlock on whether to apply the principle of "qualified proportionality" to the leadership structures of CUT symbolised the crisis in the organisation. The structure of CUT is very different to the structures of South African unions. CUT is a national confederation representing different professional categories at a national level (which includes local unions, regional unions, national unions, and "oppositional labour movements" that have not yet won elections in the local unions not affiliated to CUT). The national leadership, elected by delegates in the national congress, is elected on the basis of different slates which are presented in the congress representing different political platforms.

The method established in the 3rd Congress was to divide the seats according to the proportion of votes. That means, if 'Articulacao Sindical' has 50% of the total votes, it chooses half of the seats; if 'CUT pela Base' has 30%, it chooses the next 30% of seats, and so on. But in the 4th Congress, the group opposed to 'Articulacao Sindical' proposed a new principle of "qualified proportionality". This means that the proportionality is not only applied to the total of seats, but also to the order of choosing them.

For example, if the block led by 'Articulacao Sindical' has 52% of votes, and the op-

position 48%, the majority block chooses the first seat (eg the president), the opposition the second seat (general secretary, for instance), the majority the third, the opposition the fourth and so on. 'Qualified proportionality' obviously divides the power more equally between the political forces participating in the leadership. But it requires very strong political compromise to operate well.

What way forward?

There was deadlock on introducing "qualified proportionality". Because of their complexity, many important decisions (related to internal restructuring of CUT, and to the question of international affiliation to ICFTU) were postponed to a National Plenary (the second level of decision-making inside CUT) in the mid-1992. The essence of the thesis of 'Articulacao Sindical' was approved, but maybe half of CUT was not convinced about it.

In the end, the 4th Congress showed clearly the difficulties experienced by delegates and national leaders in dealing with questions of democracy, relations with the state, socialism, development, and internal structures. And particularly, the difficulty of dealing with the differences among them. World changes, the evolution of Brazil's economic crisis and political process, and the short eight years of CUT's existence may perhaps explain some of these difficulties. The question now is how to overcome them. ☆