



The Workers' Party of Brazil

perspectives
and challenges



LUIZ DULCI*, member of the National Directorate of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), spoke to *Labour Bulletin* editor Karl von Holdt, and NUMSA president Mtutuzeli Tom, when they visited Brazil recently.

The Workers Party of Brazil (PT) is a new kind of left party. What were its origins?

The Workers Party was created at the beginning of 1980 with three basic tendencies. The main tendency came from the so called 'new unionism'. It was the most important both because of the number of activists and people represented, and also because of its social importance. The new unionists had a very strong class perspective, but did not have a very ideologically clear position.

Lula, the leader of the Workers Party and our presidential candidate in 1989, is a typical example of this tendency. I myself have the same

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origins, as an activist in the teachers' union.

A second current were the progressive christians, mostly from the Catholic Church and supporting liberation theology.

The third current, or bloc, were the left-wing political organisations. These organisations already existed in the country but most of them were banned. They proclaimed themselves to be Marxist or Trotskyist. Some of them joined PT from the beginning. Others started to participate after five years. Generally speaking, the two major currents, the unionists and the christian activists, did not have any kind of political experience before. On the other hand, the left political organisations had a history of armed struggle against the dictatorship. They had already engaged in a self criticism of these earlier strategies. In the past they had also acted as very small vanguard groups and they also criticised this aspect of their past.

Now they argued for a mass-based strategy of class struggle. This was the policy they brought into PT. The activists of these left political groups adopted a new politics in relation to mass action and to reaching the people. But internally they maintained classical left concepts and traditions and theory of organisation. Although they now criticised vanguardism, they could not avoid vanguardist practice within the party.

The left groups also proposed that PT should be a *front* of different organisations. The majority tendencies – the unionists and the christians – argued that PT should be a unitary political party.

Did PT manage to develop an ideological programme out of these different currents?

Although the three currents agreed that the party should have an ideological dimension, the unionists and the progressive christians preferred to emphasise direct political action, for the masses to have an experience they had never had before. The political groups on the other hand emphasised more the ideological objectives.

So, apart from actually organising the party nation-wide, the first five years of PT were

characterised by a central debate over whether the party should define its programmatic points. The question was whether the leadership should define this programme – the ideological programme for the party – immediately, or whether this should come gradually through the participation of the masses in political action, so they would learn from their experience.

The question was also whether the party should adopt one specific political doctrine of social transformation, or whether the party should try to make a synthesis of the political culture that could be received from different experiences of the world. The left political groups argued that PT should be proclaimed Marxist in terms of explaining the society and its transformation, and be Marxist-Leninist or Marxist-Trotskyist in terms of action and thinking of the members.

Most of the christians and the unionists argued that they did not need official doctrine or official philosophy in order to exist and to act. They defended a synthesis of the international political doctrines and Brazilian reality. They also thought that the culture that the party was creating should be based on a dialectical relationship among the different groups inside PT: between the new unionism, with experience of work and the workers struggles, the christians and their values, the typical values from the left organisations, and also the other groups like the popular movements, the ecologists, the feminist movements. It would be healthy for the party to express a new ideology created inside this discussion and this exchange of experience, instead of only adopting a simple philosophy like Marxism.

The position that finally prevailed was the one of the new unionists and the christians. This happened at a moment when something similar was happening in society. Society was experiencing a democratic transition and also a modernisation of industry, the economy and cultural values as well as a process of urbanisation. These processes brought up new elements, new movements, new subjects of history. For example, the classical left groups in Brazil had a very small participation of

women, but in the moment when PT was created millions of women started to enter the labour market and this was something new. What structures should be created to receive these women? How would they participate in the party? Because it was something new, it was necessary to give things time to develop.

With these different perspectives, was PT able to develop a unified strategy?

The biggest polemic in the first five years of the party was over the relationship between the struggle to occupy institutional spaces, for example in parliament or in municipal administration, and the social struggle of the unions and other movements. The left political groups had a very severe criticism against occupying these institutional spaces. They still adhered to the classical idea that in order to win power the workers would adopt direct democracy in place of the traditional representative democracy.

On the other hand, the majority believed that in a society with millions of people it would be impossible to establish a system based only on direct democracy. We argued – that is, the majority of unionists and progressive christians – for a combination of strong and creative struggle in the social field, with struggle in the institutional field. We argued for the reform and the democratisation of parliament, of congress, and not only trying to abolish it. We also argued for reform of the judicial system and so on.

So the different tendencies in PT had different priorities. This meant that the commitment of the christians and the unionists to the city elections or in other elections was different from the commitment of the left organisations.

The third fundamental difference within PT was over the goals of the struggle. We were at that time at the end of the military government. The left groups in PT believed that it would be possible to combine the end of military government with a more radical transformation of our society. The majority tendencies believed that this was not possible. We

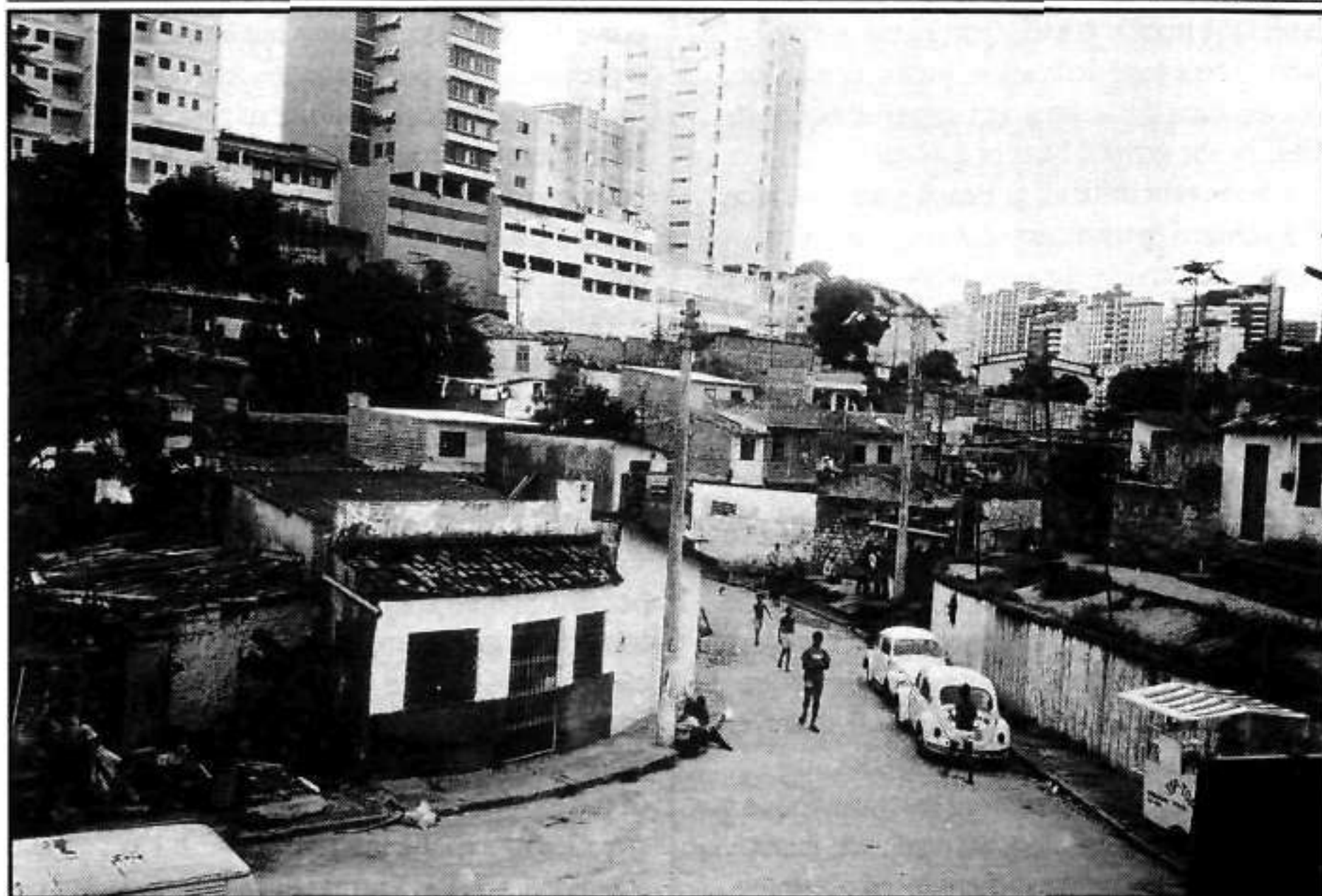
believed that it required a lot of work, a lot of popular pressure simply to obtain a democratic government after the military regime. This meant a *democratic popular* programme. We believed that creating a popular party was already a revolution in itself.

The majority defended a policy of *accumulation of forces* in the process of transformation of society. We still retain this concept and this policy. The left wing tendency criticised this as a policy of gradualism. They argued that this was a struggle in parts and a struggle in phases which they rejected.

How were these differences resolved?

The programme of the party that prevailed in the end was the democratic popular one. The left groups had proposed a programme for transition to socialism. The view that PT should be a political party, not a front of different forces, also prevailed. But it was not to be a monolithic party. It should have different ideas inside it, it should be a mass party and not a vanguard one. This was the position of the majority tendencies inside the party, but it also incorporated an important contribution of the small sectors about internal pluralism. Through mechanisms like proportionality in the elections, we could insure internal pluralism. We also established a norm that PT candidates in elections would be drawn from the different tendencies. For example, if the candidate for mayor came from one tendency then the vice-mayor would be drawn from a different tendency.

The proposal to construct our idea of socialism progressively over time, rather than defining it immediately, also prevailed in the party. The political culture of PT incorporates many important contributions from Marxism together with other doctrines or ideas. For example, the criticism of the capitalist economy in Brazil by PT could be characterised as neo-Marxist. On the other hand, the interpretation of our history and our culture has much of the christian point of view and of cultural groups. In our politics the collective dimension which is a characteristic of Marxism lives together with – not always



Wealth differences are stark in Brazil - the PT aims to restructure society in the interests of the workers and the less-privileged

Photo: Labour Bulletin

very well integrated – strong attention to individual issues, which is linked to the christian philosophy of personal relations. So we have got a kind of synthesis, after a lot of debate and discussions between the different currents in the party. So the three basic different currents in PT participate in everything inside the party.

This enabled us to contest the presidential elections in 1989 with a programme that was approved by 95% of the party. This unity in PT has enabled us to construct alliances with other left political parties which supported Lula's campaign for president. In my opinion, this synthesis was not the result of any individual proposal of a way forward. It came about because these three groups worked together.

But at the same time that this permits us to move forward, it also favours the re-awakening of old questions that were never resolved. For example, in the second round of the presidential elections, there were groups inside the party that argued that PT should not accept

the support of centre-left parties like the social democrats. These groups have a more exclusivist view of the transformation process than the majority in PT.

What are the major challenges and problems facing PT?

PT is recognised by everybody as one of the biggest parties in the country. Both in the quantity and quality of its members, and also because of its social audience. But the organisational structure of the party is still based on nuclei of activists which is inherited from the Leninist version of the party. We have still not been able to create the space for broader participation in the party. We have broad popular participation in the party's election campaigns, but between campaigns only of professionalised activists. This is the greatest challenge today, how to combine the broad participation of ordinary people with the construction of an efficient and organisationally unified party. We cannot

expect the regular popular participation in the party to be a total dedication, a daily dedication. But we want this to be a regular participation in defining the general lines of the party.

This is very difficult in Brazil where the idea of a political party means less and less and is more mistrusted by the population. The population became disillusioned with the political parties that emerged after the military government and ran the transition. This is something that may interest you as South Africans. It was a mistake that we made here on the left. The transition from military dictatorship to democracy was portrayed to the people as a salvation. It was portrayed not only as a political salvation, but also as an economic and social salvation. The right wing parties and the centre political parties wanted to dissociate themselves from the sins of their past and from the dictatorship, so they portrayed the transition as a salvation. On the left, too, we made that mistake. We underestimated the difficulties of obtaining social and economic improvements for the population. The people then became disillusioned with all political parties when they found that there was no salvation.

There are two political challenges facing PT as the leader of the left parties in the country with the real possibility of getting to power through democratic elections. Firstly, PT lacks a culture of government. In other words, we do not know how to govern. This is real and serious among the leadership and even more so in our bases. We have a very defensive attitude in relation to the state. Our bases, not only in the party, but the social bases such as the trade union movement, see the state either as a police state, which it really was for 30 years; or it is a juridical-technocratic state that plans and organises everything from above; or it is a paternalistic state that tries to co-opt people and destroy their organisations. In all these three cases, it is an enemy state. We have difficulties in imagining a state that potentially will be ours and benefit us.

For example, if Lula had won the presidential election in 1989 we would have had great difficulties in governing, not only because of the enemies, the right which is very

powerful, but also because our leadership, our representatives, our strategies and our bases find it very difficult to think of policies to be implemented through the state. We have a position of demanding things. That is a trade union position, isn't it? We criticise from outside. It is also the position of the Christians who make social demands on the state. This is one of the most serious problems that the city authorities where PT governs are having today. The city government may be controlled by PT, but the attitudes of most of the population in relation to the government have not changed.

The second challenge is even more serious because people are not aware of it. The party has grown greatly in the institutional arena, electing mayors and so on. But it has stagnated in the social arena and organisation. The trade union movement is the most important sector of the movement in Brazil, but it has not made any progress in the last two years. It has stagnated. CUT [Central Unica dos Trabalhadores - the major national union federation] has not advanced in its organisation at the base, it has not advanced in the work places - in some areas it has gone backwards. Nor has it advanced exceptionally in the improvement of internal democracy, and in some important respects it has gone backwards as well. The national congress of CUT last year was a reflection of that [See *SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 16 No 3]. The democratic election of a new conservative government has also created new problems for the labour movement, and it has been unable to put forward proposals for the new situation.

This problem is faced by PT too, not only the union movement. PT has had many difficulties in responding creatively to the restructuring of the national economy under the neo-liberalism of the government. The difference between PT and CUT concerning this matter, is that inside the party there is more or less a general consensus that the party lacks proposals and policies for facing the present situation. There is no sector inside the party - except for Socialist Convergence, a Trotskyist group that only represents two or three percent of the party - that considers that

they themselves have an answer for the country. You could observe this in the first congress of PT last year. There was not a struggle over proposals because nobody had a real proposal. What happened was a collective contribution to get to something and you could observe many groups changing their position. I think that nobody is sure and there is a lot of doubt. What has happened is that the policies that were adopted by the party and were very useful in the first ten years of its life, today do not answer the new challenges and the new terrain on which the party is acting, including *the new international order*.

Although many of the tendencies which are in PT are also in CUT, there is really a big difference between the two. Most of the tendencies inside CUT are more arrogant and think they have answers for the problems. Often the majority tendency considers that their proposals do not have good results only because the minorities have damaged or spoilt their action. The minority currents are also absolutely sure they have all the answers. They think that the struggle of workers does not advance only because most of the leadership are conservative. The consequence of this in CUT is that the political debate about paths of action is replaced by a struggle to dominate the structures. This is very different from PT which has other problems, but not this one.

How is PT responding to the political and economic policies of the Collor government?

Today the debate about our immediate policy is focused on the question: should we have an alternative proposal to the policies of the Collor government for restructuring the Brazilian economy and reforming the Brazilian state? Some sectors inside the party are against the very idea of reforming the state. They think that this state should be destroyed. Therefore, it is not up to us to present proposals for its reform. They also argue that it is not up to us to present an alternative way, different to *Collor, of restructuring the capitalist economy*.

On the other hand, the majority argues that we have to present an alternative global

proposal for reforming the economy with democratically popular characteristics. So even within the capitalist structure, we should argue for a reform to ensure a democratic and popular character. The majority argues also for reform of this state into a democratic popular one. That does not mean a state that would drive the country to socialism. Even to reform the state, it would be necessary to establish alliances with other parties on the left as well as sectors like the social democrats.

They hold these views because of the current correlation of forces in both national and international spheres. This includes the affects of the crisis of the socialist Utopia. There is not a socialist culture among workers except in vanguard sectors that have been formed in the last ten years. These factors make it very difficult to implement any kind of modification in a state or in the economy, even if these are democratic modifications and do not question capitalism itself.

This is a complicated problem for PT because it is a socialist party. For us, democratic socialism is not just a symbol as it is for the social democratic party. The socialist goal energises the party and is a stimulus for people to join it. The overthrow of capitalism, the construction of a new society with a different logic is something very real for our militants. But we feel that today, if we want to engage in concrete political action and not only political debate, we cannot exclude ourselves from the debates on the restructuring of the economy. Economic restructuring has already been happening without our participation and it will happen independent of our participation.

The same thing applies to the Brazilian state. The ruling class in Brazil has already decided that the state which has been in existence for the last 30 years is no good any more. The state is already being transformed and because we do not have a proposal for the state that we would like to have today – not for the future, not for the socialist state, but for today – we cannot affect this process. Because *we do not have a proposal, the government has advanced with its own neo-liberal proposal for a reduced state*. We see reductions in investment

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in basic services and social investments, we see privatisation and internationalisation of strategic sectors of the economy. And our answer has been defensive and corporatist, defending only the interests of a group.

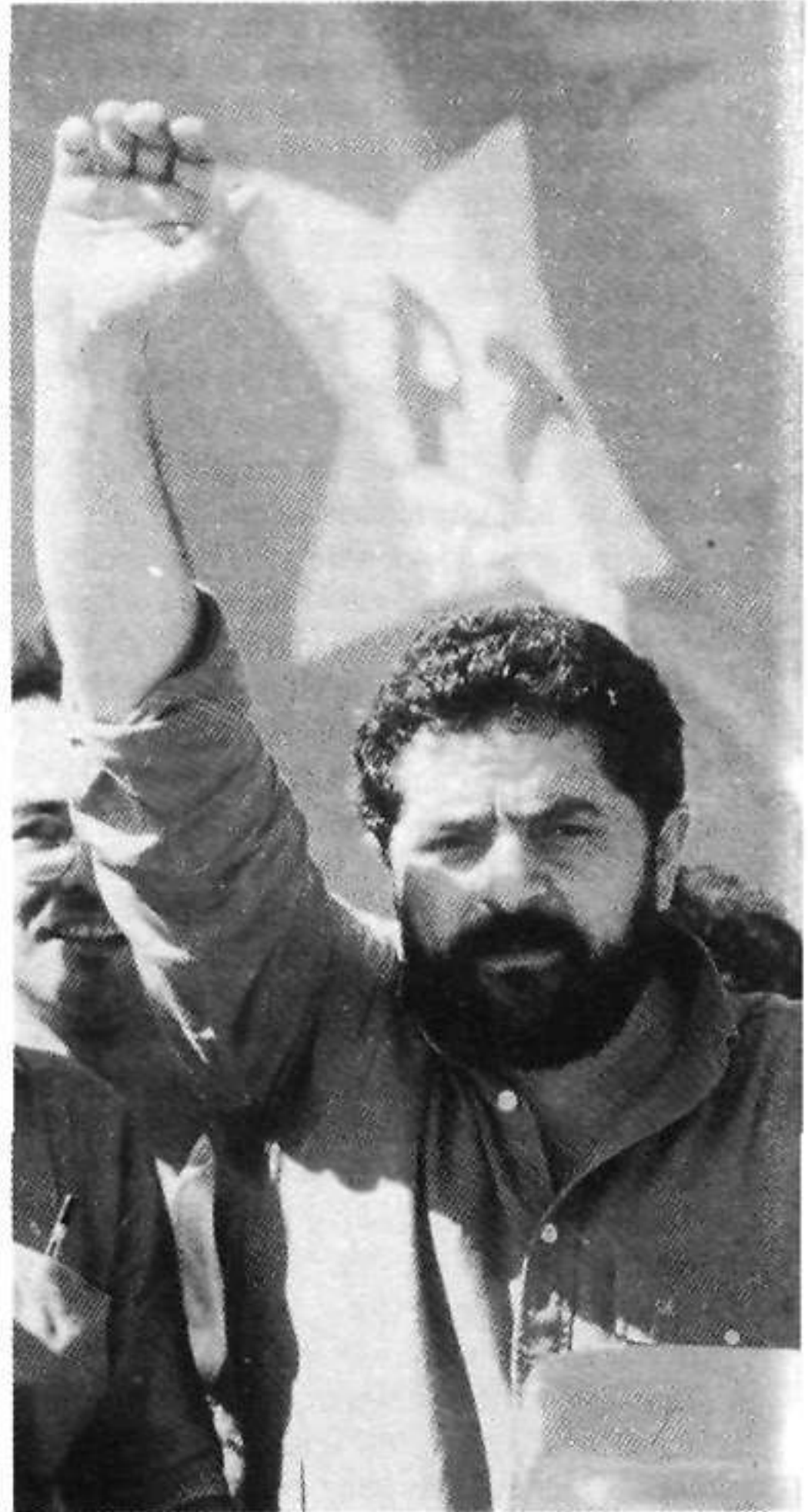
For example, the first big steel plant that was privatised in the state of Minas Gerais was the most modern and profitable steel plant in the country. From the beginning the steel company was state owned, associated with the Japanese. Management was extremely authoritarian, manipulating the policy of tariffs, of prices according to its own interests and not in the public interests. There was no control from society. The government proposed selling this company and what was the answer of the union movement and of PT? Simply the maintenance of the enterprise as it was.

The party has got to produce an alternative proposal. In fact the party was beginning to develop an alternative proposal to the privatisation, but it was not able to discuss this with society nor with the workers in order to transform the proposal into an initiative that would be defended by everyone. The result was that 80% of the 15 000 workers in the company itself defended the privatisation as proposed by the government.

The party's proposal was based on trying to establish a new concept of public ownership, neither state nor private. We were proposing that the company should be partly owned by private capital, partly by the state and partly from worker controlled provident funds. However, we were not able to transform this proposal into political action. Even today among the workers the idea of a minimal, efficient neo-liberal state that is different from the one inherited from the military government has major support. PT is going against the wave. Many members of CUT and PT actually agree with the neo-liberal criticisms of the state that we have today. So they accept the policies of the government because our own alternatives are so weak.

In spite of its weak global proposal, PT is still growing. The restructuring of the economy proposed by the ruling class is very very brutal. This makes a social situation that was already

bad even worse. So although both CUT and PT cannot put forward an alternative global restructuring policy, they are at least able to express the feelings of the people, very authentically and with a lot of combativity. Lula has been travelling the country, the mayors are always talking and expressing this



*PT leader Lula during his presidential campaign
Photo from SEM MEDO DE SER FELIZ*

anguish and the suffering of the people and so PT becomes the representative of this general feeling. So while PT has not been able to

organise significant political demonstrations against government policy, the people will certainly vote for PT in an election. Of course, while this is positive, there is a risk too because the party may occupy positions without a corresponding active support from the population.

Although PT does not have a global restructuring policy, Lula almost won the presidential elections in 1989 and will be running again in 1994. What economic programme is he putting forward in that campaign?

Our economic programme maintains the state in a strategic position in production and in the economy. Our economy is open to the international market, and we cannot avoid this. There should be a balance between production for the internal market and for the external market, but it would be a disaster to cut relations or damage the presence of the Brazilian economy internationally. This would be harmful to our sovereignty because our political sovereignty can be exercised only inside the international market by securing a different position there. So the state would occupy strategic positions in the economy in order to ensure this.

For example, the Brazilian state was fundamental in the creation of a steel industry 30 years ago. Today the key sectors are fine chemistry and the electronic industry. The state should act in these sectors as a direct economic agent or associated with international capital. Besides this, the state should dedicate its resources to social policies in health, education so on. It should be an agent to correct the social imbalance between regions in the country. There will be room for international and national capital, within the framework of regulations. We cannot have the present situation, where all the logic of the economic structure is to service international capital. International capital should have a profit rate similar to what they have in their own countries, not four, five, six times bigger here. It should assume responsibilities concerning the common infrastructure of the country, like transport and services.

In the arena of social policy, 60% of the population live outside the market. They live below the minimum level of consumption of goods and services. Our programme is to reincorporate this sector of the population into what we call social citizenship through urban reform, fiscal remodelling and imposing progressive income tax. As an example, there are 50 000 residential plots that are kept for speculation rather than for building housing. Our policy would be to prevent speculation and encourage the building of houses. Land reform is an important part of our programme. We also have policies for reform in the educational and health systems.

Lula likes to say that this programme, which many comrades consider very modest, would be in Brazil a revolution – not *the* revolution, but *a* revolution. And through different revolutions we can organise this strategy to get to *the* revolution, if it really comes to happen one day!

PT argues that socialism does not just involve socialisation of the economy, but also socialisation of politics. What does this mean?

The first stage of socialisation of politics is to incorporate direct political participation for the great majority of the population that has never participated before. We believe we have made quite good progress at this level. The second stage, which we also thought equally necessary, is politicisation of the daily space in peoples lives. This means what you could call micro politics, within each work place, the neighbourhoods, the small communities and other groups. We have advanced very little at this level. For example, we would like to politicise the work world, not through abstract discussions, but discussion over production, organisation of production, the productive equipment, the pace and speed of production, the environment and the circulation of the product up to the consumer. This would happen through the independent organisation of workers in the work place, not through the political party.

We should now search for a balance, to direct part of the energy that we have accumulated in

the institutional space back into this micro politics. We have to abolish in PT an idea that exists that political parties are the superior form of organisation of people. Due to this, the party has sucked from society many independent movements – not intentionally – but we have drawn the energy from the society into the party. The party has sucked in activists, material resources, experiences. We are thinking today, with a lot of difficulty but a lot of determination too, about how the party can contribute to and stimulate the autonomous independent organisations of society – without being a conveyor belt. For example, an independent organisation of women could have a more creative role in society than an organisation of women in the party.

How is PT responding to the problem of political division within CUT?

At the next meeting of the national leadership of the party the main point of discussion will be the situation in the union movement. Not for PT to determine the way CUT should go because this is not the kind of relationship that exists between PT and CUT. There are differences and even contradictions between us. But for the party, as a democratic institution that intends to guide and direct the movement to democratically say what it thinks. PT should assume its own responsibility for the impasses and difficulties of the main independent movement in Brazilian society – CUT.

CUT may or may not take into consideration these reflections of PT. In the same way, we consider it natural, and even necessary, that CUT as an organisation in civil society should also have an opinion, an evaluation of PT and other left parties' performance concerning the interests of workers. This is a new development – the mutual reflection and evaluation – because for so long CUT and PT have been wary about interfering in the positions of each other.

What is the relation between CUT and PT? Many leading unionists are leading members of PT. Has this led to any confusion of roles – what we call 'the two

hats problem' in South Africa?

There are no institutional or statutory links between PT and CUT. They are autonomous organisations, with distinct purposes and independent structures. We even have leading unionists in CUT who are associated with other political parties from the Left and the centre-Left.

Although the historical objectives of both PT and CUT are very similar – that is, to transform Brazilian society with the perspective of a socialist democracy – the political tactics and kinds of struggle adopted are often distinct. In the past years it has been very habitual to see PT use a tactic (and a main slogan) for the conjuncture and CUT adopt a different one. This has caused tensions. But we have tried to understand and face them with a pluralist concept of society, in which differences are considered natural and even necessary, especially inside the Left.

“Two hats” is really a serious problem. We try to prevent activists taking on so many functions in the two organisations that they become less efficient. The union leaders in PT participate in decision making in the party, but seldom are its daily spokesmen, neither are they in charge of implementing the party's initiatives.

What is socialism? How do you see the relation, between the democratic popular programme of PT and a struggle for socialism?

The concept of socialism, as we all know, is being debated today. It is certain there is no longer one unique, ready-made model of socialism, as there was with Stalinist orthodoxy. Then, one only had to establish a state economy, plus a state politics (the so called proletarian dictatorship) plus a state ideological and cultural life, to mathematically get to the concept of socialism.

Today it is different. A libertarian project of socialism must be rebuilt both in general theory as well as in practice in every country. We already know what we do not want: a predatory, individualist, anti-humanist, anti-ecological and neo-colonial capitalism. But we do not know exactly how the economy, the politics and the culture should be organised

in the socialist democracy we fight for.

And it is not completely negative that things are this way. An historical project 200 years old cannot be redefined and even reinvented in months or even in a few years. History has its own rhythm and, little by little, through action and reflection we will be able to specify our historical horizons.

So far we have got some important clues which permit us to handle the democratic and revolutionary struggle firmly. We want a socialism with all the democratic liberties of today as well as others, which have to be created. We want a plural political party system without any kind of symbiosis between the state and political parties. We want a combination of representative democracy with direct democracy, based in the working place. We want an autonomous civil society, self-organised and able to control democratically the state and economic life, in both public and private companies. The social control over property is just as important as the ownership of property itself.

The main point of our economic project is the socialisation of *access* to goods and services, the basic equality of citizens in terms of well-being, and not establishing state control of economic creativity.

This way, the popular-democratic programme is an intrinsic part and is the necessary historical mediation of our broader socialist project. There is no contradiction between them; one requires the other historically.

If Lula does become president, will he be able to implement PT policies, given for example, the influence of the military in the state and the control of the media by forces hostile to the left?

I'm convinced that Lula will win the elections in 1994 and will be the next president of Brazil. I believe he will be able to accomplish our democratic-popular programme, in spite of the numerous obstacles, because this project corresponds to the structural need of modernisation and democratisation of Brazilian life.

The reaction of the economic and political oligarchies will be ferocious. However, I don't

think they will be able to make our government unviable, due to the popular support we will have and due to our policy of broad alliances, both social and political, which we have already been building.

Concerning the military, they will always be an important factor of power. After the unsuccessful experience of military dictatorship, they seem to be more interested in technological and corporate modernisation than in general political matters. Besides this, PT has got a very good image among the low and middle-ranking military officers.

What lessons has PT drawn from its experience of running the various cities where PT mayors have been installed?

PT was created under the military dictatorship. Our culture has always been one of resistance to the state. When we took office in the government in some of the main cities in the country we soon found out that this culture of resistance was not enough. We also needed a culture of *government*, with proposals that we can implement. Or, at least, we needed a synthesis between criticism and resistance on one side and creative action inside the state apparatus.

We worked hard with this objective to create the popular councils as mechanisms of participation of the workers in the government of the cities. The result is still to be evaluated. The Brazilian popular classes have started to think the state as potentially theirs.

On the other hand, we have found problems of the left itself in the leadership of local governments. A kind of administrative deviation, for instance, which over-values technical solutions instead of political ones. Or, on the other hand, contempt for a technical dimension of the problems.

Our biggest challenge in this field is to combine the conditions of being in the local government, on the other hand, with being in opposition nation-wide. We are government and opposition at the same time. We cannot escape from this double and rich position, which permits us to practice at the local level the policies that propose for the country as a whole, at the same time as we radicalise the class struggle. ☆