

Daniel Bensaïd

Principles flouted: on the PT (Brazil)

Brazil's Workers' Party (PT) has, in the course of the past 20 years, developed a politics of class independence while accumulating a quantity of experiences in social struggles and municipal government, notably through 'participatory democracy'. These founding principles are being flouted in the run-up to the country's presidential elections.

The PT was born out of the wave of big engineering strikes in Brazil in 1979-1980. It was the combined result of the massive industrialization of the 1970s, which created one of the most concentrated industrial working classes in the world (particularly in the suburbs of Sao Paulo) and democratic resistance to the dictatorship (in particular, its attempt to control the trade union movement through a labour code inspired by the legislation of Mussolini's Italy). The establishment of the PT marked a cultural and historical break with the political traditions of a country largely dominated by the Church, the army and populism.

In its first electoral contests, in the early 1980s, the PT only gained 3% of the votes as a national average, with a peak of 10% in the state of Sao Paulo, linked to the particular strength of the workers' movement there and to the influence of its leader, Luiz Inacio da

^{1/} The customs union between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.

^{2/} The PT has adopted José Alencar, a big textiles boss and leader of the Liberal Party, as candidate for vice-president. This will in fact do nothing to calm the dominant classes at a time when the socio-economic crisis originating in Argentina threatens to spread to Brazil and Uruguay. However, it could disarm the masses who are faced with attacks from the employers and landowners.

Silva, known as 'Lula'. This was, however, the point of departure for an experience of class independence on a national scale in a country the size of a continent, where the army and church had for a long time constituted the only really centralized forces.

Born out of an impetuous growth of the urban and rural mass movement, the PT implanted itself and developed through the 1980s to the point of being poised to win the 1989 presidential election. This progress was made on the basis of an energetic commitment to popular struggles. The PT's founding platform, without defining a programme or a precise strategic project, reflected the experience of recent struggles, expressed a strong class sentiment ('worker, vote for a worker') and a firm attachment to class political independence against all the populist compromises linking capital and labour in the name of the national interest. On the other hand, this mass but pluralist party was characterized by open debates on the conception of socialism, informed by international experiences (the influence of the Cuban revolution) and the experience of the different radical left currents (of Maoist, Trotskyist or Castroite origin) who had been involved in the formation of the PT. The recognition of currents, the presentation of conflicting motions and resolutions at party congresses, the representation of minorities in the leadership bodies have allowed, until now, albeit at the price of tensions and conflicts, the maintenance of the unity of the party; the legitimacy of the historic kernel of trade union leaders has helped the party avoid fragmentation.

MST activists

In its 20 years of existence, the PT has accumulated experience in social struggles, the institutions and municipal leadership. It has

twice won the municipal elections in the biggest city (Sao Paulo) and has governed for four terms in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre. In a country where social inequality is brutal, the PT has not escaped phenomena of cooption or corruption (which led to it losing control of the municipality of Sao Paulo after its first term). It is, then, interesting to note that, contrary to the image given by the reformist currents, it is in Porto Alegre, where the party is at its most leftwing and radical, that its legitimacy remains the most solid. The experience of the 'participatory budget' seeks to develop forms of direct democracy and a sort of duality of power between the legal institutions and the citizens. Also, in organizing the two first World Social Forums, (in 2001 and 2002), Porto Alegre has in a way become the world capital of resistance to capitalist globalisation.

With this autumn's elections the PT is approaching what is probably the sternest test of its history. The erosion of the political élites, the crisis which is shaking Latin America, the reorganization of relations between Mercosur ^{1/} and Uruguay and the project of the Free Trade Area of the Americas opens a period of turbulence. Some months before the elections, Lula is leading the polls with around 40%, while the right's candidate is enmeshed in financial scandal. Fascinated by the possibility of victory, the PT leadership is already reassuring the bourgeoisie through an alliance with the Liberal Party, guarantees to the employers' organization, reassurances to the IMF on the debt question and strengthened links with international social democracy. ^{2/} There is no doubt that this course, contrary to the founding principles of the party, will lead to deep discontent and sharpened internal polarization, as already seen.

From *International Viewpoint Online* magazine : IV n° 343 - September 2002.