

Daniel Bensaïd, Francisco Louça
et Michael Lowy

Letter to the comrades of the Democracia socialista (DS-PT), Brazil

Dear friends and comrades of DS, Lula's presidency has reached the halfway mark, and the November municipal elections are a good occasion for a kind of provisional balance sheet, on the threshold of a period already characterized by preparations for the 2006 campaign. Since we are unable to participate in the upcoming World Social Forum and contribute in person to your discussions, as we have often done during more than a quarter century of friendly collaboration, we are sending you some thoughts about the development of the Brazilian situation and its international repercussions.

1. The central question, at the end of these two years, is how to characterize the government's policies. We can define them, without the slightest ambiguity, as social-liberal. This is what has earned them the accolades of the IMF and other international bodies. The resolution of DS's 7th national conference in November 2003 clearly acknowledged this fact: 'The first eight months of the Lula government were characterized by the construction of a system of alliances including broad sections of the bourgeoisie, by a fundamentally conservative economic policy, and, on the other hand, by limited progress in introducing changes' (II, 1). And further on: 'The macroeconomic policy has also expressed a total subordination to IMF guidelines' (II, 2). Still more recently, in its balance sheet of the municipal

elections, the DS GT [leadership] observed (November 2004): 'The interest rate hikes, the unprecedented rise in budget surpluses, the subjection to finance capital and to the so-called markets... are strangling the nation.'

The everyday practice of the DS majority over the course of the past year, however, does not seem particularly consistent with the formulations adopted by the conference. How is it possible to characterize government policy in these terms, adopt a hesitant position in face of the concrete reforms that are its manifestations, and continue to participate in the government, without the comrades directly implicated in governmental responsibilities even clearly expressing their disagreement?

2. The conference resolution noted that the initial period of government revealed 'a dynamic of conflict both within government policies and in the relationship between the government and the social forces that got it elected' (II, 12). It drew the conclusion in the same breath that there was a 'dispute over the direction of the government' at the same time as one 'at the level of the party' (V, 9). But there is a fundamental difference between the party and the government. The Party is the result of more than twenty years of struggles and experiences linked to social movement mobilizations. This political history manifests itself in internal contradictions between the party's original self-definitions and its current practice of subordinating them to the government's orientation. This is what enables us to claim the PT's legitimacy and heritage (the PT 'is ours'). By contrast, how could anyone claim that the government, which we have just characterized as conservative and 'in continuity' with Fernando Henrique Cardoso's, 'is ours'?! The party is the product of struggles.

The government is a state institution. Admittedly, the possibility exists in theory of pushing for positive reforms within it. This possibility even exists in governments that are loyally administering the established order, like the Blair, Schröder or Jospin governments. But a government is not for all that a simple sum of its ministers' policies sector by sector, the site of a sort of duality of power between the 'economic' and social ministers. Lula's government thus has an overall set of policies, whose course is determined by its economic and financial choices. In its first weeks or months it was possible for us, from pedagogical motives, to concentrate our critical artillery on its economic decisions, on Meirelles and Palocci. But these so-called 'economic' decisions unmistakably constitute the political orientation of the government, which determine the budgetary constraints and condition the whole set of policies being carried out.

3. In these conditions, participation in the government has become more and more problematic. In discussions among the Fourth International's militants we have insisted on not posing the question in abstract, doctrinaire terms, as a timeless issue, without taking account of the country's characteristics and the PT's history and links to the social and trade-union movements. A number of indications nonetheless provided cause for worry that, in the absence of major social mobilizations (with the exception of the landless peasants), several ministers known as left-wingers could become mere alibis or hostages for policies whose basic choices had already been announced in the Letter to Brazilians during the election campaign.

From the beginning there were different positions about Miguel [Rossetto]'s participation in the government, in the International as

well as in your ranks. But once the DS had decided in favour of participation, without hiding our reservations and doubts, we respected your decision and tried to help rather than put a spoke in your wheel. So we made an effort to convince comrades in our own sections that logically speaking the question of participation in the government should be subordinated to a judgement of the government's orientations. Unfortunately, there was hardly much suspense about it.

In any event, what suspense there was didn't last long: the appointment of Meirelles and Palocci and the first measures taken very quickly made clear what was happening. Whether or not one agrees with the argument, we can understand the concern with not creating additional difficulties for our mayoral candidates, particularly in Porto Alegre, by leaving the government. But since the municipal elections this argument no longer holds good.

4. Without amounting to an agrarian revolution, the National Programme of Agrarian Reform adopted in November 2003 could constitute a substantial reform, supported in fact by the landless peasants during the gathering where it was presented. It could in fact, if applied in practice, set in motion a dynamic of mobilization. Putting aside the controversy over the figures for 2004, it seems clear however that delays are piling up in meeting the programme's goals, and it is more and more doubtful whether these goals will be met during Lula's first term.

Faced with these obstacles, particularly the budgetary obstacles, a more militant rhetoric could have been adopted so as to make clear that the government's macro-economic choices are responsible for the delays, thus preparing a possible resignation from the government

or at least the presentation of a balance sheet that could be defended in the social movements. But apparently on the contrary the Minister of Agrarian Development has kept very discrete in his public statements. He thus risks being caught between a rock and a hard place, between a government policy that he has hardly taken any distance from and the growing discontent of agrarian movements.

More generally, since the government is not a mere mosaic of ministries but the instrument of an overall set of policies—even if Brazil has a presidential regime where there is nothing equivalent to a council of ministers—he cannot take refuge in managing 'one single ministry' and pay no attention to the overall logic of the government's orientation.

5. On the social level, the alarm went off as early as the winter of 2003, with the debate on pension reform. We have considered the argument that this issue did not have the same political centrality in Brazil's political life that pension reform does in France or Germany. This was nonetheless a genuine neoliberal reform of the same type, opening up the possibility of pension funds and, putting aside any technical quibbles, of increased privatization of social provisions.

The affair was serious enough to justify moving beyond oblique (or 'indirect') criticisms, justified by the pedagogical concern of not moving too much faster than the masses in their relationship to the government, to more head-on criticisms. Of course this change of direction would not have failed to raise the problem more sharply of our participation in a government whose policies we would have been openly fighting against. But instead of a clear and forthright opposition to the reform, we had a hesitant orientation, shown in the way the votes of left-wing PT MPs and senators

were divided between 'disciplined' votes in favour, abstentions with an explanation, and votes against. The argument about discipline and the risk of sanctions was not very convincing; the more MPs had opposed the measure frankly (or at least abstained), the more difficult it would have been for the party leadership to take bureaucratic measures.

6. Apparently—the points are closely linked—we underestimated for a long time the importance of the expulsion procedure begun at this time against Heloisa [Helena] and the three dissident MPs. The resolution adopted by DS's 7th conference, 'In defence of democracy and against the expulsion of PT MPs', was very good. It concluded with the announcement of a public campaign against the threats of expulsion.

Less than two weeks after the conference, however, the threats were transformed into a fait accompli. The Party leadership had gone ahead and defused the promised campaign before it had even gotten started. Whatever blunders the accused MPs may have made, these expulsions were no secondary mishap. The Lula leadership was using them to show clearly the Party's subordination to the government, and to divide preventively the oppositions that could not fail to emerge to the social effects of government policies. The bureaucratic sanctions thus illustrated the party's transformation into a transmission belt to society of government decisions, instead of a means of representing the social movements to the government. The recruitment of a kind of more careerist, less activist 'Palocci cohort' to the new PT consolidated and amplified this development.

These bureaucratic expulsions of several MPs who had stayed true to the Party's official programmatic engagements shocked people

in international social and trade union left-wing milieux, far beyond our own ranks. Nevertheless we ourselves put off taking any initiative to protest until we knew what line of defence the DS comrades would adopt, also so as to avoid reducing the defence campaign to a strictly Trotskyist affair. We therefore took up the petition that the British comrades had initiated only after consulting DS comrades during their national conference. The very favourable response to this campaign, unfortunately begun much too late, showed the potential it had.

7. In November 2003 the resolutions of the 7th conference constituted a responsible attempt to preserve unity around a consensus, in the tradition of DS, without for all that hiding major differences in analysis. Likewise the organizational measures decided on (on the press, leadership bodies, etc.) demonstrated a new ambition to create a 'big DS', in the perspective of a more visible, more hard-edged and broader tendency.

But it was the PT leadership that dealt the hand and set the tempo, particularly through the expulsion process that impelled those expelled to take initiatives outside the party or else pay the price of political death or hibernation. Some of us nonetheless considered the proclamation of the PSoL premature, thinking that it would have been preferable to wage a democratic campaign for at least several months for readmission to the PT, while at the same time systematically organizing gatherings and collectives for a 'socialist reconstruction of the PT' (according to the formula used in the conference resolution).

This doesn't make much difference; there is no reliable scientific instrument to decide these issues of tempo and tactics. Politics is a field of forces and initiatives, which no one

can master completely (otherwise the very idea of a decision would lose its whole meaning).

The PSoL was thus founded on the basis of an act of legitimate self-defence. It doubtless has a potential for growth. Even if the PT still absorbs certain forms of radicalization, its turn to the right frees up other spaces of social radicalization; there is life outside the PT. Nevertheless, even if the PSoL manages to organize a significant campaign in 2006, in its current state it is far from constituting a credible alternative to the PT, even to a more and more bureaucratized and corrupt PT. On paper (and perhaps seen from too great a distance) things seem clear: we should succumb neither to an ultraleftist overestimate of the capital that the PSoL has accumulated, nor to a fetishism of the PT. It is therefore necessary:

To work to unite the PT left (what the Ceara comrades in a nice turn of phrase call 'the PTist tendency in the PT') on the basis of a clear substantive alternative to the government's policies. The resolute struggle that these comrades waged during the Fortaleza municipal election campaign is a sign that possibilities still exist. To contribute, in the case of those comrades who wish to do so, to building the PSoL, while avoiding the pitfalls of infantile ultraleftism (like the abstentionist position—or lack of a position—on the election in Porto Alegre, which ignored the obvious fact that a victory for Raul [Pont] in the Porto Alegre municipal elections would have been important for the city, for the internal situation in the PT, and for the global justice movement as a whole). To foster dialogue between left-wing currents inside the PT and small independent forces like the PSoL. A certain complementarity could then be established among the critical left inside and outside the PT, avoiding

attacks on each other and respecting each others' different tactical choices. This concerns particularly the comrades of our own current: even if they are implicated today in different choices and dynamics, they should make an effort not to burn their bridges and to keep their future options open.

8. Of course, a major difficulty of the situation, made still greater in Brazil by the country's size and regional contrasts, is the lack of synchronization of the rhythms of coming to consciousness in the PT, on the PT left, in the social movements, and in different states. Our task should be to combine this inevitably uneven development. But to do so we need a clear orientation and a firm will, rather than increasing hesitations by hesitating ourselves among the hesitators. In Fortaleza the comrades' determination was rewarded. If the DS had the project of posing a clear alternative to government policies, it would certainly be the force most capable of bring together a radical left inside the PT and fostering dialogue with the forces that no longer see this party as the main tool of class struggle.

Clearly a resolute opposition in the PT would prepare several different hypotheses, including the conditions for a possible major break, on a bigger scale than scattered departures out of disgust, capable of claiming a major part of the PT's continuity and historical heritage instead of abandoning them without a fight to the leadership that has usurped them.

9. While in May 2004 the discussion seemed possibly to be still open between comrades in the International and the DS leadership about various hypothetical courses of action after the municipal elections, the room for discussion seems rather to be shrinking and divisions among our militants to be deepening.

This is all the more so because the results of the municipal elections show that we too have paid the price in some cities, like Porto Alegre according to some statements by Raul, for the Lula government's policies, particularly in sectors traditionally linked to the PT. Without any doubt, the campaign suffered in sizable sectors of the electorate from the Lula government's image, from the regression that the Lula government represents in the eyes of some of the PT's most militant sectors, and from the way the PT reacted: looking for broader and broader alliances instead of strengthening its own capacity for social action and valuing the activist experience of a combative, unitary PT.

10. It is a sign of DS's maturity, and a positive aspect of the consensus culture that prevailed at its founding from the beginning of the 1980s on, that people tried to 'give time its time' instead of precipitating divergences in the form, as has been the case in some sections, of a civil war of tendencies and factions.

The paradox is that the orientation of the DS majority seems more conciliatory towards the PT majority today (on the speculative pretext that there are nuances and divisions in its ranks), at a time when more and more people are speaking out, among trade unionists, intellectuals, economists and some sectors of the church, to demand a radical change in government policies. Carlos Lessa's departure (and Lula's absence from Celso Furtado's funeral) symbolizes the abandonment of what might have been left of 'developmentist' expectations. Frei Betto's quiet resignation reveals the difficulties of the Zero Hunger campaign, which exemplify the strangling of social reforms due

to budget austerity. Although some people hoped that government policies would shift leftwards after the municipal elections, Lula has emphatically confirmed its economic course. Even if the up-tick in the conjuncture gives him a bit of pre-electoral manoeuvring room between now and 2006, as seems likely, the 'general line' remains in place, with a few other anecdotal ornaments plastered onto it but none the less shocking (e.g. the made-to-measure immunity for Meirelles, the authorization of genetically modified seeds, etc.).

11. From now on the clock is ticking. Nobody can control its tempo and progression. But the institutional calendar will force clear choices on everyone by 2006. And 2006 is beginning today, with the preparation of the PT and PED conferences. With these dates looming, tactical issues must be subordinated to fundamental and substantive issues. The 7th conference resolution contains on this topic elements of the 'need to breathe new life into a perspective of transition to socialism' (I, 8): a proposal for national autonomy in opposition to globalized dependency; a proposal for a moratorium on the debt (on which a common front could be proposed to Venezuela, Argentina, tomorrow perhaps Bolivia, etc.); and proposals for campaigns on the FTAA, on wages and jobs, on a general perspective for democratic control and a participatory budget on a federal level, and on a radical agrarian and environmental reform. By transforming this kind of platform into concrete campaigns, instead of keeping it in reserve as 'a programme for Sundays', and by raising the issue of a break with the government, we will be able to delineate alliances and convergences on solid foundations

again, inside and outside the PT, rather than on the basis of impressions and fleeting interests.

12. We are very much aware that the expression of the viewpoint elaborated in this letter may be perceived as interference in DS's internal debates. But the situation is quite serious, and its international repercussions are too great to let diplomacy win out over frankness. We belong to the same international organization precisely in order to enable us to establish relationships where plain speaking takes place and benefit from each others' accumulated experience.

This discussion is legitimate in our eyes, all the more because we have taken the time to understand rather than making judgements by mechanically transposing abstract criteria. This is also the reason why the leading bodies of the International have chosen to open a discussion by circulating information and viewpoints, rather than to rush to take formal votes that could have crystallized positions prematurely instead of clarifying what is at stake. Insofar as all the comrades in DS, whatever their short-term party-building tactics, are still members of the International, we hope that our common framework of programmatic reference points will contribute to maintaining the conditions for a serious discussion, informed by experiences that are yet to come. This is what we are striving, to the extent we can, to help with.

Chico, Daniel and Michael

The authors of this letter are long term leaders of the Fourth International, DS-PT being the Brazilian section of the FI.

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