

The politics of opportunism: the “radical left” in France

Part five: the Pabloites and the Lula government

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The following is the fifth part of a seven-part series on the politics of the so-called “far left” parties in France. Part one was posted on May 15, part two on May 17, part three on May 19 and part four on May 22.

The role played by the Brazilian sister organisation of the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League) in the coming to power of the government of Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, and its continuing role in defending this government, are indicative of the consequences of Pabloite politics.

Democracia Socialista (DS), the name of the Brazilian section of the United Secretariat, works as a tendency within the Workers Party (PT), which has ruled this country of 175 million people in coalition with conservative parties since October 2002, when Lula won the presidential election.

The Brazilian Pabloites affiliated themselves with the PT in 1980, at the time of the latter’s founding. At that time the United Secretariat made it explicitly clear that this was not a form of entryism. The task of its Brazilian members was “to affiliate themselves unconditionally with the PT, to build it, and not to conduct a policy of entryism, as in the case of a reformist party; to work together with the PT on the elaboration of its program, and not to forcibly compel it to swallow a preconceived program.” So wrote the French organ of the United Secretariat in December 1980. (1)

For Marxist organisations, entryism is understood as work carried out within another organisation without, in the process, abandoning their own program or organisational structure. In 1934, Trotsky proposed just such a tactic for his comrades in France for work inside the French Socialist Party (SFIO), the French section of the Second International, in which a left-wing faction had emerged.

In no way did Trotsky foster illusions about the political character of social democracy. On the contrary, his perspective was to influence the process of political differentiation inside the party, thereby strengthening the Trotskyist tendency. A year later, when the SFIO made a sharp turn to the right and took action against the left faction, Trotsky did not hesitate to abandon this policy and call upon his forces to quit the SFIO.

The PT emerged in the midst of a series of massive industrial disputes that shook Brazil at the end of the 1970s. The strikes arose as the numerical size of the Brazilian working class increased dramatically—the result of foreign investment under the military dictatorship installed in 1964. The movement’s charismatic leader Lula was previously in the leadership of the trade union association, CUT.

The political orientation of the PT was explicitly reformist. Its aim was not the overthrow of Brazilian capitalism which, in light of the country’s close integration with the world economy, would have called for an international socialist perspective. Instead, the PT sought a relaxation of

Brazil’s dependency on US imperialism, combined with reformist measures within a national framework. Such a perspective was to inevitably come into conflict with the increasing globalisation of the world economy.

In view of the origins of the PT, there were legitimate arguments in favour of an entryist policy. For Marxists, such a policy would have consisted of organising the most far-sighted and revolutionary elements and declaring war on all those who sought to use the PT to reconcile the working class with bourgeois institutions. In fact, the latter path was the one taken by the PT under Lula.

In contrast, the United Secretariat declared, in typical Pabloite fashion, that the origins of the PT alone were a guarantee that it would develop a revolutionary orientation. The PT was the “direct expression of the mobilisation for an independent class organisation,” the Pabloites declared. They furthermore claimed that “independent of the original orientation of such a mass workers party, its very existence produces a dynamic that substantially reduces the possibility of class collaboration.” (2)

In the succeeding two decades, the Pabloites have not only worked as loyal members of the PT, climbing up from its ranks in the process, they have also ascended the ladder of the state apparatus to reach high-level positions. Raul Pont and João Verle became, successively, mayors of the city of Porto Alegre; Walter Pinheiro became vice-chairman of the PT’s parliamentary fraction; and Miguel Rossetto became minister of agricultural reform in the Lula government. The most well-known DS member, Heloísa Helena, was the speaker of the PT faction in the Senate and a member of the PT’s party council and party executive. In 1992 she was the deputy mayor of Macéio and was subsequently elected as a deputy to the state parliament in Alagoas. In 1998, with 56 percent of the vote, she entered the Senate, representing the same state. In December 2003 she was expelled from the PT. (We shall return to this question at a later point.)

The governmental activities of the PT in the sphere of local and regional politics assured the Brazilian ruling elite that this party posed no revolutionary dangers.

The PT in government

On October 27, 2002, Lula was elected president, after two previous attempts, with 61 percent of the vote. His campaign was supported by a section of the ruling elite after he made an electoral alliance with the right-wing Liberal Party and a faction of the Democratic Party (PMBD). Lula’s

vice presidential candidate was José Alencar, a textile magnate and leader of the Liberals, a choice that made a mockery of the PT's claim that it favoured a break with neo-liberalism.

Lula immediately filled the country's highest economic posts with trusted representatives of big business. He named as head of the Central Bank Henrique Meirelles, a man who was a political supporter of Lula's hated predecessor, Fernando Enrique Cardoso. The finance department was taken over by Antonio Palocci, who, as mayor of Riberão Preto, made his name by privatising public services and advocating "free market" liberalism. Lula's coalition government promised to fulfil all of the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The DS celebrated the electoral success of the PT as a "popular victory and a serious defeat for neo-liberalism," even though it had to concede that the victory was qualified by "alliances with right-wing sectors and by commitments to continue central elements of the economic policy rejected at the elections." Lula's alliance with big business did not prevent the DS from accepting complete responsibility for the government and deciding to participate in it.

The DS declared: "The democratic and popular movement has embarked on an unprecedented historical experience that is decisive, from any point of view, for our future. The Socialist Democracy tendency of the PT considers itself integrally part of this process, sharing the challenges faced by the PT and the Brazilian left." (3) The DS agreed to allow one of its members, Miguel Rossetto, to take over the Ministry of Land Reform in the coalition government.

International Viewpoint, the English-language organ of the United Secretariat, justified this move by declaring that the DS constituted a significant current inside the PT and noting that at the PT's last congress, the DS presidential candidate, Raul Pont, had received 17.5 percent of the vote. "In this situation, given the inclusive traditions of the PT, Lula was obliged to propose their participation in the government, and to refuse to accept would have been seen within the party, and, in particular, among the millions of voters, as avoiding their responsibilities in the hopes for real change. They therefore felt—a decision which has provoked much debate on the left, in particular outside Brazil—that DS member Miguel Rossetto should try to implement agricultural reform—a burning question in a country where agricultural property is particularly unequal—as a minister of agricultural reform, and that this could help the self-organisation of rural workers." (4)

In other words, after 20 years of uncritically supporting the PT under the illusory cover of "hope for real change," the Pabloites felt themselves compelled to join with the PT in a capitalist government—even though there was no doubt about the actual political orientation of the coalition. Any other course of action would have alienated the millions of voters who had been misled by the DS.

With its entry into the national government, the period in which the PT could hide its bourgeois character behind left-sounding phrases was over for good. It did not take long for its right-wing course to clearly emerge. A comrade of Miguel Rossetto vividly illustrated this. Ernesto Herrera, a leading member of the Pabloite International from Uruguay, gave this devastating account, eight months after Lula's coming to power:

"On January 1, President Lula promised 'the redeeming of the century-old social debt of this country' and thereby pledged to begin to overcome the 'cursed heritage' of Fernando Enrique Cardoso and his neo-liberal successors. There is not the slightest trace of any of this happening. Quite the opposite. The change has been supplanted by unconcealed continuity. The government of Lula in the end accepted the rules laid down by transnational big business. It arrived at an agreement with the committees of the International Monetary Fund, the banks and the main shareholders of privatised state institutions. It carried out the 'reform' of pensions (social insurance) along lines favourable to private pension insurance companies, and at the same time introduced another 'reform' demanded

by Washington, i.e., to taxes.

"In accordance with the neo-liberal plan, the PT accepted the law (which had been demanded by the employers and the IMF) to make labour more 'flexible.' It increased the level of public debt in proportion to GNP, and allowed the 'autonomy' of a central bank that, in reality, was nothing other than a subsidiary branch of the North American Fed. Everything has remained as it was ...or become even worse. Unemployment in the big cities is 20 percent. Average family income has fallen by 16 percent over the past 12 months. Since January, incomes have fallen by nearly 10 percent, in terms of purchasing power, and more than 50 percent of all employees have no social insurance.... The budget for 2004 that has been presented to parliament reduces all of the budget allowances for social policies—only the sums set aside for debt payment remain untouched." (5)

Herrera arrived at the following conclusion: "The ruling faction of the PT has transformed itself into a prop of bourgeois order."

The role of Herrera's comrades in the DS, however, hardly differs from that of the "ruling faction." In the July election of officials in the trade union association CUT, the DS had already supported the official list of Lula against that of a left-wing opposition. On August 5, as parliament confronted large demonstrations and protests, the majority of DS parliamentary deputies supported a draconian set of pension reforms. Only two voted against it, one of whom was Heloísa Helena.

The work of the Pabloite minister for agricultural reform corresponded to the general course of the government. Upon assuming office, Miguel Rossetto declared that approximately 4 million people needed land, and promised in his first year to distribute 60,000 plots of land to farmers. In doing so, he was able to base himself on a regulation incorporated into the constitution in 1988 that permits unused private land (which, according to church groups, comprises around one fourth of the country's arable land) to be expropriated and distributed to landless farmers. But after his first year in office, only 10,000 plots had been allocated, less than the number handed out the year before under the conservative government.

While Rossetto's land allocation pledge took a back seat, the number of "illegal" land occupations doubled, as did the number of farm labourers murdered by contract killers hired by large landowners. According to the Land Commission (CPT), 60 were murdered, compared to 30 the previous year.

In this rural class war, Rossetto assumed the stance of a neutral referee. In an interview with the *O Estado* newspaper last summer, he said: "We don't tolerate any kind of violent demonstrations or actions, irrespective of which side commits them—whether it be the landless farmers or the armed militia of the large landowners." At the same time, under pressure from the landowners, he agreed to sack the head of the Government Agency for Land Reform, Marcelo Resende, because he stood too close to the landless farmers.

In the cities as well, resistance grew to the right-wing course of the government, as Ernesto Herrera explains in his aforementioned article: "Tens of thousands of fighters for social rights and members of the opposition refused to allow themselves to become accomplices. They showed their indignation and rebelled against what they regarded to be the unconditional capitulation by the government of Lula and the PT. Leaflets and posters, mass rallies and trade union meetings, student congresses, seminars and public discussions in various cities were already accusing the government of 'betrayal'.... The honeymoon between the most political and conscious sections of the people's movement and the government is coming to an end. There is now beginning a phase of instability, of rapidly deepening experiences and confrontations with the ruling political system."

All of this, however, did not diminish the unquestioning loyalty of the Brazilian Pabloites of the DS towards the PT.

The expulsion of Heloísa Helena

Facing growing public discontent, the leadership of the PT finally went on the offensive against the left wing of the party. On December 14, 2003, the party council decided to expel four representatives of the left, who were charged with “breaches of discipline”: parliamentary deputies João Batista Olivera de Araújo (known as Babá), from the Socialist Workers faction (CST); Luciano Genro from the Socialist Left movement (MES); João Fontes (no affiliation); and Senator Heloísa Helena from the DS, whose vote against the pension law sealed her fate.

The DS reacted with outrage. In an official statement it declared: “The vote for this expulsion is a hard blow against what the PT represents as a socialist and democratic party. It will lead to an enormous weakening and corrosion of the relations of the PT with left militants throughout the world.” However, in the following sentence, the DS reaffirmed its loyalty to the PT: “The DS, in line with the resolutions of its last conference, reaffirms the centrality of the fight within the PT to win it back to a socialist and democratic orientation.” (6) Miguel Rossetto remained in his ministerial position.

The stance taken by the DS found worldwide agreement in the Pabloite press. In Germany, Hermann Dierkes, who sits in the Duisburg city hall as a member of the open list of the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism, the successor to the ruling Stalinist SED in the former East Germany), made the following comment: “The DS tendency and other party lefts regard this moment in time as too early to give up on the PT as a whole. Instead, their orientation is to carry out a fundamental polemic inside what is, up until now, the most democratic and pluralist left-wing party, in which tens of thousands of politically motivated people are active and hopeful of a better, socialist Brazil.” (7)

Prior to the expulsion of Helena, a leading member of the DS, economics university lecturer João Machado, justified at length why the DS was determined to cling to the PT under all circumstances. In the English-language organ of the Pabloites, *International Viewpoint*, he defended his position in an article that is a classic example of Pabloite duplicity. With many sophistic phrases and talk of “contradictions” and the “dialectic,” he justified the DS’s backsliding into more and more blatant forms of opportunism. (8)

After nine months in office, the Lula government has “confirmed its contradictory and, in many aspects, even surprising character,” wrote Machado. One of the “biggest surprises” is that economic policy “displays great continuity with that of the previous government.” He continued: “On the other hand, the Lula government has maintained coherence with the historical programme of the PT in the areas of international relations, agrarian reform and other sectors.” He concluded that “the great contradictions that exist make it difficult to draw a considered balance sheet of this process.”

Machado went on to call the electoral success of Lula, on the one hand, an “electoral defeat of neo-liberalism” and “a victory for the trade union and popular movement” that has “renewed its possibilities of organization and mobilization.” But, “on the other hand,” the government “has continued and deepened adverse social and economic conditions for the movement, above all, unemployment.”

“A phase of expectation in the government,” he wrote, “is being transformed into another phase, which involves criticism of various policies and processes of unification and mobilization with the objective of pressuring the government and opposing its choices.” There is “an important politicalisation of the social movements under way, having as its axis a redefinition of their role in relation to the government.” Machado continued: “One of the main tasks of the Brazilian left today” is to “help develop this process in the direction of affirming the social movements as basic subjects in the conflict of orientation of society and

government.”

After many more pages of “on the one hand—on the other hand,” Machado argued against breaking with the PT. He justified this on the basis of the party’s “deep roots.”

“The government does not suffocate the possibilities of the party,” he wrote. “The roots of the movement that constructed the PT over these 23 years are deep, and they lie in the working class and the people. The history of the construction of the PT is a history of social, political and cultural struggles in Brazilian society, and also a history of internal disputes. There are strong arguments to reaffirm that this process continues.”

It would be wrong, he concluded, “on the basis of the orientation of the government in the first nine months to conclude that the game is over, as if the options taken expressed in a homogenous manner the entire movement and indicated its entire future; as if there were not contradictions and forces that move in relation to them.”

Finally, he passed explicit judgement on those who leave the PT: “The precipitate exit of small fragments of the PT to join the PSTU [a “left” group outside of the PT] does not constitute an alternative—this possibility does not correspond minimally to the historical meaning of the PT since its creation.... The fight for the PT as a socialist and democratic party is not settled.”

Marchado’s reference to the contradictory and historical roots of the PT masks the decisive questions—that of its program and social function. Using the same arguments, one could justify support for any organisation, even bankrupt reformist ones such as the German SPD (Social Democratic Party) or the French PCF (Communist Party of France), which have deep historical roots in the working class and are wracked by internal conflicts. Decisive for their political course is not historical origins, but social and political orientation.

Machado simply ignores the fact that the PT government is prosecuting a program that has the full support of the IMF and significant sections of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. Indeed, these “historical roots” of the PT—the fact that it enjoys the trust of sections of the working class—makes this party all the more useful to the ruling elite. The PT is able to carry out right-wing policies that the traditional bourgeois parties could presently not implement in an open confrontation with the working class. The dispute over pension reforms last summer showcased this. Under conservative governments, nearly identical reform proposals were time and again aborted due to popular resistance.

While Machado refers to the PT’s “contradictions,” the party leadership has unmistakably made clear that it will, under no circumstances, give way to pressure from the rank and file. It sent a clear signal with the expulsion of Heloísa Helena and the other lefts. It would rather separate itself from popular party representatives than change policy under pressure from below. The logic of its capitalist program drives it further into the arms of reaction, irrespective of discontent within its own ranks. A few months in office have been enough to demonstrate the real character of the PT.

While disillusioned voters and members turn their backs on the party, Machado and the DS have decided to stay with the PT until the bitter end. Their invocation of “deep roots” and inner “contradictions” only serves to throw sand in the eyes of workers and to prevent them from making the necessary break with a party that has revealed itself to be a political trap. Their concerns are also not free of self-interest—a break with the PT would also mean losing lucrative and prestigious posts in the party and state apparatuses.

The example of Brazil clearly shows where Pabloite politics lead. In over 20 years of intensive work, the Pabloites have participated in building a Frankenstein monster that is stabbing the working class in the back. The “anti-capitalist left” which the LCR seeks to build in France would play a similar role.

To be continued

Notes:

1. Daniel Jebrac, *Les portes étroites de la "liberalisation" et la construction du PT*, Inprecor, no. 91, 15 December 1980.
2. *XIe Congrès mondial de la IVe Internationale*, November 1979, Inprecor, numéro spécial.
3. *Brazil: A popular victory*, Resolution of the National Coordination of the Socialist Democracy tendency of the PT, *International Viewpoint* 346, December 2002/January 2003
[<http://www.3bh.org.uk/IV/Issues/2002/IV346/IV346%2006.htm>]
4. *Brazil: another economic model is possible*, *International Viewpoint* 349, May 2003
[<http://www.3bh.org.uk/IV/Issues/2003/IV349/IV349%2005.htm>]
5. Ernesto Herrera, *Dilemma in der PT-Linken...*, Inprekorr Nr. 384/385
[<http://www.inprekorr.de/384-bras.htm>]
6. *Erklärung der Tendenz 'Sozialistische Demokratie' in der PT*, 15. Dezember 2003,
[http://www.die-welt-ist-keine-ware.de/isl/ds_heloisa.htm]
7. Antonio Andrioli, Hermann Dierkes, *Nach den Ausschlüssen der ParlamentarierInnen. Regierung Lula und PT vor entscheidendem Jahr*
[<http://www.die-welt-ist-keine-ware.de/isl/brasiliennachrichten.htm>]
8. João Machado, *Brazil: nine months of Lula's government*, *International Viewpoint* November 2003
[<http://www.3bh.org.uk/IV/Issues/2003/IV354/IV354%2008.htm>]



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