

Brazil: Conclat, a setback that cannot be hidden

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The call for a congress for the formation of a new Brazilian trade union federation - the Congress of the Working Class (Conclat) - aroused enthusiasm. The Conclat proposed to unify, in a new class-conscious federation, trade union, popular and student currents resisting the offensive of the Lula Government and the employers. At the same time, this new federation had to confront existing ones (the CUT, Força Sindical and so on) which submit to the Government and the capitalist order.

The Conclat was held on June 5-6, 2010 in the town of Santos, approximately 200 km from São Paulo. The massive participation reflected the expectations created by the process: 4,000 participants and 3,200 delegates; approximately 350 trade unions, federations, movements and associations representing, according to the organizers, more than 3 million workers. In previous months, 926 meetings of rank and file activists were organized, bringing together approximately 20,000 workers, to discuss different theses, make proposals and elect delegates.

The presence of numerous foreign delegations - from 26 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States, Europe and Japan - gave the Conclat a clearly internationalist dimension. The presence of Sotiris Martalis, a Greek trade unionist and a member of the Confederation of Public Sector Trade Unions (ADEDY), was particularly significant. He reported on the struggles of workers in Greece who face a brutal capitalist offensive against wages, employment and pensions.

Relationship of forces

For the thousands of participants engaged in the process of unification, the Conclat represented a kind of synthesis of various experiences. More exactly, it reflected at an organizational and programmatic level the start of a trade union and popular reorganization which, while being in a defensive context, is constructed in opposition to the neoliberal pro-employer programme of Lula's government. The Conclat expressed, moreover, efforts to unify the struggles, to give a perspective to claims, to seek agreement on questions which until yesterday divided the class-conscious and anti-capitalist camp.

Although this remains a vanguard phenomenon, in the minority from the viewpoint of the working class as a whole, and although not present in a decisive sector among the exploited, that of the landless (organized very largely in the MST, the landless rural workers' movement), this unification process reflected the social energy accumulated in meaningful layers of the popular movement.

Indeed, the Conclat reflected to some degree the emergence of a new trade unionism. A trade

unionism that takes up the more concrete demands of the labouring masses and jointly articulates them with the mobilizations of the exploited and oppressed, placing them in an anti-capitalist perspective. It is from this basis that the Conclat indicated the possibility (if only that) of an alternative on the battlefield for a change in the overall relationship of forces.

Because it is this question that the Conclat must face. That is to build an instrument to change (or try to change) the relation of forces between the class-conscious union camp and the union apparatuses which are subordinated, politically and physically, to the capitalist state apparatus. On Thursday, June 3, a note in the newspaper “Folha de São Paulo” showed the outrageous price of this subordination. The trade union federations allied to the government have received from that government since 2008 the sum of 228 million reals (\$126.3 million) in the form of a “refund” of “trade union tax”.

The Conclat was faced with a challenge that had to be overcome: “the failure of the combative and independent left trade union project”, which had begun with the big strikes of 1978-1980 leading to the creation of the CUT. Therefore, the challenge required a step in the construction of a class conscious alternative having an effective impact in key sectors of the working class. A delegate from Santa Catarina (a southern state whose capital is Florianopolis) summarized thus the feelings of the activist rank and file: “We want to create a class trades unionism.”

Yet this horizon was effaced even during the Congress. For the union apparatuses of Conlutas and the Intersindical the validity of their own arguments and “the victory of each of their proposals” was more important. Each apparatus harangued its troops. They listened to nothing. They imposed - from the platform and in the discussion groups - a logic of competition. They wanted to prevail in the battle over the relationship of forces... in the Conclat!

Unfortunately, the Conclat failed to consolidate the path to unity. Instead, it ended with a serious split. This “interruption in the the process of unification” - a process in place since the social forum in Belem (January 2009) - represents, from all points of view, a strong regression. It is impossible to hide or disguise. It was enough to see the bitter, regretful, indignant gestures of the workers and social activist who had made so many sacrifices to come from around the country to perceive the consequences of failure. The contagious hopes of the previous days were quickly extinguished.

A majority without direction

The call of the Conclat was shown on the banners and t-shirts: ‘we will unite to strengthen the struggle’. This simple slogan summed up the task of the Congress: to overcome the fragmentation of the trade union left; to create a new federation as an instrument for organising the struggle against capital. In the various theses presented, one could identify convergences and significant differences.

These concerned the functioning of the future trade union federation, the rules of proportional representation of currents, the integration of currents within the leadership and the powers given to this leadership. The same can be said with respect to the analysis of the national conjuncture: there was a “background tension” related to the election campaign for the presidency in October. During the Congress, the polarization was obvious between those who choose to support Ze Maria (Unified Socialist Workers’ Party, PSTU) and those who supported the candidacy of Plinio de Arruda Sampaio (Party of Socialism and Freedom, PSOL), seen as two different paths to reflect the struggle and the interests of workers against the two parties of the bourgeois order (PSDB and PT). The mutual rejection of “responsibility” concerning the non-concretisation of the Left Front was a constant during the Conference; a Left Front candidacy would have allowed some modification of the centre left/centre right system which Ricardo Antunes presents in “Correio da Cidadania” as the danger of

“Americanization” of the current Brazilian political system.

Nevertheless there was substantial agreement on the situation of trade union and popular struggles and, above all, programme, which created a greater opportunity for unification. There was disagreement on two key issues: 1. The nature of the trade union federation; 2. The name of the new federation. In 11 meetings of the Commission for the reorganization coordination in favour of a new federation, these differences could not be resolved. It was agreed to do so by using the criterion of “workers’ democracy”, i.e. with a vote of the congress. Now we know the result of this decision, in appearance very democratic.

A clear majority of the delegates spoke in favour of the proposal from Conlutas: a trade union, people’s and student federation. Without doubt, a relevant formula, in synch with the plurality of social sectors engaged in trade union and popular reorganization. The Intersindical proposed a trade union federation that would coordinate in the framework of a national forum with the student movement. In accordance with the Conlutas proposal, the same majority of delegates [originating from Conlutas] spoke in favour of the integration of students in the leadership of the new federation.

As regards the name, a majority (impossible to quantify to the extent that the votes were not counted) imposed the name “Conlutas Intersindica”. The delegates from Intersindical (who had prevented the use of the name Intersindical for the new federation), the MAS and others rebelled against this sudden decision and left the Congress. The unification process was “interrupted”.

The “recommencement” of the congress - after the withdrawal of the delegates who had left - deepened the split. The majority eventually forming the “new trade union federation” is essentially derived from Conlutas. From the formal point of view, we can say that Congress took decisions; that there was a majority and a minority; that there existed a “democratic legitimacy”. But this was without the climate of enthusiasm and with a little less than half of the delegates in the room. It is within this context that the formation of the new federation and the establishment of an “Provisional National Executive Secretariat” composed of 21 members was announced, on the basis of consensus, but with a broad priority given to Conlutas. This Secretariat is responsible for “concretising resolutions” and re-establishing relations with sectors who withdrew from the congress.

The main forces have spoken on the outcome of the Conclat. As regards Conlutas, its judgment is reflected in this formula: “what was going to be a great victory of the process of reorganization, unfortunately, became a defeat following the decision of the Intersindical-United for Struggle-MAS bloc to withdraw from the Conference after losing the vote on the name of the new structure.” For Intersindical, the wording is as follows: “Unfortunately, what we did not want happened. We had to interrupt the process of foundation of the federation. The debate on the construction of the federation (political nature and name) revealed the absolute lack of willingness on the part of the majority of Conlutas to construct a synthesis of differing opinions, choosing as a method, on the basis of an arithmetical majority (small and changing) of congress delegates, to seek to impose a single orientation”.

Almost all currents are agreed on continuing to explore the possibilities of unity. However the idea currently predominates that the rupture is “irreversible” if the majority maintains its position and the methods that led to the final failure. Obviously, the “responsibility” of Conlutas and the political form which hegemonies it, the PSTU, is stressed. There is nothing new in stating that the PSTU has a decisive weight in Conlutas and also in many social struggles. It is impossible to understand the emergence and development of Conlutas without regard to the initiative and the active engagement of activists and trade unionists of the PSTU in such a process. Therefore, the majority built by the PSTU in Conlutas has an undeniable political legitimacy.

Admittedly, there is Conlutas-PSTU responsibility in the Conclat failure. By “abuse” of its controlling majority? The fact of “rushing” the minority? This would be a unilateral and sectarian explanation. The drama resides in the inability to exercise a leading role in this majority obtained in the Conclat; a leadership going beyond the ranks of Conlutas-PSTU, i.e. which would go beyond the membership and influence already acquired; to valorise and ensure agreement and consensus. This is necessary in any process of unification that integrates very different forces, traditions and practices; a process in which the maturity and the credibility of a broad leadership should assert itself, whose capacity is examined and looked to by broader layers than those who had come together in Conclat.

This was a serious error. Since the beginning of the congress, one sensed a climate of rupture in the various trends in the Intersindical (which are almost completely political factions inside the PSOL) fearing being annexed by Conlutas and falling into the orbit of influence of the PSTU (indeed, when voting on the nature and the name of the new federation, there occurred a withdrawal of the Intersindical delegates obliging its leadership to withdraw). Also, because it was known that significant sectors of the Intersindical – who would not attend the Conclat – held a negative position on unification with Conlutas because this unification would close doors to left CUT currents who criticize the subordination of the CUT to the government.

“Political autism”, as one rank and file delegate said? It is difficult to say for a “foreign observer”. Nonetheless, the perception remains that the Conlutas-PSTU leadership should not have forced a vote on the name of the new federation. This not only because it did not reflect the process of trade union and popular reorganization, but because it did not respect the sensitivities and pluralism represented in the Conclat.

Before the Conclat the Conlutas congress took place. It was the congress of its “dissolution”. But it was not in reality. The 1,800 delegates participated enthusiastically in the debates and votes, eventually affirming a sort of continuity of Conlutas. The result was an undisputed mandate in defence of this “identity”. Two days later Conclat was driven into the impasse, there was no consensus and no “concessions” were made. The Conlutas -PSTU leadership took refuge in a hermetic centralism faced with a process of reorganisation which went well beyond its activist forces and its field of influence.

Last minute efforts and negotiations were fruitless. At the time of voting, hundreds of delegates would abandon the congress: the majority from Intersindical, but many members of Conlutas also. This with the feeling that it an enormous opportunity had been lost.

Ernesto Herrera

P.S.

* Translation: International Viewpoint.

* Ernesto Herrera is a member of the leadership of the Left Current (Corriente de Izquierda, CI) and the Broad Front (Frente Amplio). He was a member of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International until the 15th World Congress of 2003.