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Brazil

Justice for Luiz Eduardo Merlino (1948-1971)!

- IV Online magazine - 2008 - IV403 - August 2008 -

Publication date: Monday 11 August 2008

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June 1971; the young Brazilian journalist Luiz Eduardo Merlino, militant of the Fourth International, dies from torture, 23 years old. Now, his partner, Angela Mendes de Almeida, and his sister Regina Maria Merlino Dias de Almeida have decided, despite the official amnesty the military has enjoyed for twenty years, to bring colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, who has been named by several witnesses as the man responsible for this crime, to justice.

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/Diretas_ja_1.jpg]

Demonstration during Brazil's military dictatorship

Photo: Jorge Henrique Singh

Luckily, Judge Carlos Abrãço took the accusation into consideration; according to Brazilian law, and to international treaties the country has signed, it's impossible for the crime of torture to become proscribed. The court case will start in a couple of weeks. The two accusers neither want the officer condemned nor are they looking for compensation. They simply want the truth; that the judges declare Colonel Ustra responsible for the torture and death of Merlino.

Ustra was the sinister head of the Department of Operations and Information – DOI - of the military dictatorship of Sao Paulo. Hidden under this euphemism was a torture-center with around five hundred victims between 1970 and 1975. About forty of them died, among them our young comrade. According to the official history, verified by two 'juridical doctors' in the service of the military, Merlino committed 'suicide' by throwing himself in front of a car: A ridiculous explanation and one that has been used several times by the dictatorship to cover up its crimes.

In fact, several witnesses, including other prisoners – among them the sculptor Guido Rocha who shared a cell with him – saw Merlino in agony after 24 hours of uninterrupted torture during which he gave no information to his torturers. Subjected to electrical shocks and 'hung like a parrot', that is hung from shackled feet and hands, he was already in very bad shape and almost paralyzed when his executioners threw him on the concrete floor. He died two days later.

As his partner Angela put it; 'the end of impunity starts with memory and the re-establishment of the truth. Under the dictatorship, torture was a policy of the Brazilian state but his executioners have names. Colonel Ustra, then commander of the DOI, is responsible. The torture was the work of him and his subordinates: it happened under his command and with his knowledge.'

This is an important process. If the colonel is deemed guilty, it will be the first time a leading member of the repressive apparatus has been found guilty for a death under torture. Also, the colonel is the object of another juridical procedure, under accusation from the Teles family – a couple, the sister of the wife and two children – who were tortured in the same offices of the DOI in 1972. This procedure is already taking place. In this case as in the one of our comrade Merlino, a favorable sentence would be a symbolic but also highly political victory for justice and truth.

Luiz Eduardo Merlino, also known under his pseudonym 'Nicolau', was one of the leaders of the Communist Workers Party (CWP), an organization from Brazil that sympathized with the Fourth International. In the beginning of 1969 the organization decided to participate in the armed resistance against the military dictatorship that was created in 1964. In 1970-71 he went to Paris in the company of his partner to strengthen the ties with the International, to study the organizational experience of the Ligue Communiste and to establish contact with our organizations in Latin America, in particular in Argentina. During this period I had the chance to get to know him.

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'Nicolau' was a slender young man, wearing glasses and a small mustache, cultivated and full of humor. Calm and determined, he didn't resign himself to remaining in exile and took the decision to return as soon as possible to Brazil, to try and re-organize the CWP – on which the repression had taken a heavy toll – and to insert it in the armed resistance against the dictatorship. We tried to dissuade him from his plans but without success. Once I asked him how he estimated his chances of returning to Brazil without being caught; 'fifty percent' was his answer.

Was the analysis of the period correct or not? Was the chosen tactic the most appropriate one? The strategy the most realist? Thirty seven years on, these questions have lost most of their meaning. What remains is the integrity of an individual, of his decision to risk his life for the cause of democracy, socialism and the emancipation of the workers. For Luiz Eduardo, returning to Brazil was of high moral and political value, a kind of 'categorical imperative', subject to neither concessions or compromises. Certain people who took part in Nicolau's struggle in this period but have since then converted to social-liberalism – I prefer not to mention names – now pretend that those in Brazil and Latin America who risked and lost their lives in the unequal struggle against the dictatorships in the continent were motivated by a 'suicidal spirit'. Nothing could be more absurd. Merlino loved life, loved his partner and he had not the slightest wish to commit suicide. What drove him to take the decision that cost him his life was simply a feeling of duty, a sense of ethics, a commitment to his comrades in the struggle.

The history of the future can not be without the memories of our martyred friends and comrades.

This article first appeared in Inprecor. The translation is by Alex de Jong.