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Brazil

Socialist Resistance response to the PT expulsions

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In the light of the expulsion of Heloisa Helena from the PT, British socialist paper Socialist Resistance responds to Paulo Delgado, PT Secretary for International Relations.

To: Jose Genoino Neto, President of the PT and other members of the PT National Directorate

Dear Jose Genoino Neto and other PT leaders,

It was with sadness, indignation and apprehension that we learnt you had decided to carry out your threat to expel Senator Heloisa Helena and three other PT members of parliament for their opposition to the government's pension reforms. We hope desperately that this sorry end to 2003 has not set the tone for the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) and its administration in the year ahead.

As we said in our earlier petition, Lula's election over a year ago carried with it the sympathy and hopes, not only of the Brazilian people, but of many millions around the world who, like us, share the dreams of an immense and diverse new movement against war and neo-liberal globalisation - this movement to which the PT and the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre have given so much. It seemed to us then that our friends in the PT had, at last, an opportunity to demonstrate that there really is an alternative.

The signs in the first year of the PT's government were seldom encouraging. The priority given to paying the foreign debt, the cuts in social spending, the alarming increases in unemployment and child labour, the legalisation of GM soya, the ambiguous attitude to a Free Trade Area of the Americas, the timidity over human rights abuses in the past, and the inaction over the treatment of Brazil's indigenous peoples in the present - all these tended to overshadow the few positive moments, like the part played by Brazil at the WTO summit in Cancun. The concern felt by many thousands taking part in the European Social Forum in Paris in November was palpable. No doubt this will be repeated at the World Social Forum in Mumbai later this month, whether or not Lula attends. It is increasingly clear that the movement faces a stark choice - either to seek a genuine break with the logic of neoliberal policies, or to seek accommodation with the promoters of these policies. And it seems distressingly clear that the PT government has come down on the wrong side of this choice.

In his reply to our petition, the PT's International Relations Secretary, Paulo Delgado, tells us the PT never promised to perform miracles. Indeed we expected none. We understand the situation facing the PT government, at home and abroad, is complicated. What we did expect, what we believe we had a right to expect, together with everyone else inside and outside Brazil who has followed and supported the PT for years, was a minimum degree of coherence with the ideas and principles that the PT has proclaimed throughout its history, and that we have been proud to share with you.

It is for this reason that the expulsion of the four members of congress seems, symbolically, even more grave than all the shifts and turns on policy. All of these reverses might, with generosity, be put down to force of circumstance. But such a deliberate act of violence, as the great Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff describes it, can only be understood as an attempt to root out the principles of the past, and to penalise those who obstinately insist on acting in accordance with them.

As we said before, we do not believe it is our business to involve ourselves in the detail of the Brazilian government's policies, much less in the internal debates of the PT. However, since Paulo Delgado has taken the trouble to write to

us, we feel several of his points should not go unanswered. He says that:

1. The government's pension reform has nothing to do with pressure from the IMF. ii) He argues, instead, that it is part of the PT's long-standing commitment to a fairer social security system.
2. The central charge against Heloisa Helena and the others, then, is that by opposing these reforms they were making a disloyal attack on party unity.

We have questions for Paulo Delgado on all these points.

1. On the first, is it not a matter of public record, published on the Brazilian Finance Ministry's web site, that pension reform was one of four key conditions agreed by the new government in its interim letter of intent to the IMF back on 28th February 2003? Have the others - a new bankruptcy law to protect foreign creditors, tax reform and the privatization of remaining publicly-owned regional banks - not also been legislative priorities for the government in its first year? Is it not true that one day after the pension reforms were finally agreed in the Senate (and two days before Heloisa and the others were expelled), the IMF approved its new \$ 14 billion package for Brazil, followed 24 hours later by another \$ 7.5 billion from the World Bank? And is it not true that the following week President Bush called Lula to congratulate him on his government's performance - including its success in pushing through the pension reforms? Does Paulo Delgado believe these events are entirely disconnected?
2. On the second point, Paulo Delgado does not mention that very similar pension reforms were vigorously opposed and effectively prevented by the PT when they were put forward by the previous government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Does he remember Heloisa Helena leading the fight against those same pension reform proposals when she was leader of the PT in the Senate, using the very same arguments she has used this time around? Was she attacking party unity then, or was she defending the policies of the PT as laid down on numerous occasions and reproduced in the election manifesto for 2002? Heloisa and many others in the PT have argued that the leadership changed the PT's policy on pension reform, and many other issues, without any full or democratic debate amongst the party members. If that is true, who exactly is being disloyal to whom?
3. Paulo Delgado says there is no comparison between the Brazilian pension system and those of Europe. No doubt there are differences. As we understand it just about everyone on the left in Brazil agreed that some reform of the system's excessive privileges was required. But Paulo Delgado must know that this is of little interest to the IMF and the international markets. Surely he is aware that what they want from the pension reforms they have encouraged in Europe, in Brazil and in dozens of other countries across Latin America and the south is fundamentally the same - a sharp reduction in government spending (often to fund debt repayments) and an opportunity for private financial institutions to move into the pension market?
4. Paulo Delgado goes on to suggest that the four 'dissidents' are, or have been, advocates of an undemocratic, single-party system. This is unworthy of him. In this broad and plural new movement we are all a part of, there is no place for easy ideological labels or the historical blame game. We all know that many of us on the left, inside and outside Brazil, including many of you who voted in favour of the expulsions, have in the past given energetic support to such undemocratic systems. As it happens, that doesn't seem ever to have been true of the four you have expelled. Indeed we understand that Heloisa Helena and her supporters have fought longer and harder than anyone else to develop and defend the democratic and pluralist party life that made the PT such a beacon to so many of us around the world. They have also been champions of the participatory budgets - another of the PT's most precious contributions to the vision of another, radically democratic world, and another pillar of the PT's programme that the Lula government seems to have done almost nothing to implement.

We understand that Heloisa Helena and her supporters have asked for a Conference of the PT to examine the expulsions and declared they will continue to regard her as a member of the PT. In our own modest way, we are happy to follow their example. We look forward to joining with Heloisa and the others, whether at the World Social Forum in Mumbai or at other international gatherings of this wonderful new movement for another possible world - where we shall continue to treat her, and the others if they so wish, as true representatives of the PT tradition that has made such an important contribution to us all.

Yours sincerely,

Socialist Resistance