

Liberalization on Trial: The Workers' Movement

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Fernando Ochoa

to start the machine I want 20% more."

Legal strikes have been abolished since 1964, except in cases where an employer has refused to pay back wages. The penalty for organizing an illegal strike is four to ten years in jail. Brazilian unions, moreover, are prohibited from negotiating directly with employers. Instead, they are symbolic participants in the annual ritual of court pro-

cedures which determine wage increases according to indices computed by the government.¹

Despite this, the Saab-Scania strike spread to other multinationals in Greater Sao Paulo. More than 275,000 workers brought production to a halt at plants owned by Ford, Pirelli, Mercedes-Benz and Fiat, ending what had been hailed as a decade of "labor peace" in

Brazil. Not since the 1968 factory takeovers and strikes in Osasco and Contagem had workers gone out in force, defying the government ban.

In 1968, the government's response had been swift and severe. The wildcat strikes were crushed militarily, hundreds of metalworkers arrested and their leadership deposed by the Ministry of Labor.

By 1978 conditions had changed. President Geisel's Administration was committed to a policy of slow "democratization," and elections, though a crude formality, were only months away. Conditions were ripe for the re-emergence of the Brazilian working class as an active element of political opposition to the regime.

In last May's action, the metalworkers struck for wages 20% above the government-approved limits and demanded both that strike time not be deducted from their paychecks and strike leaders not be punished. The Regional Labor Tribunal of Sao Paulo promptly declared the strike illegal, but workers ignored the court's decision.

Although the final settlement was for 12%, the strikes successfully demonstrated both the vulnerability of the dictatorship and the potential of the workers' movement. Apprehensive about the upcoming elections, the Geisel regime chose not to intervene in the peacefully conducted strikes. Employers were obliged to recognize the trade unions as bargaining agents for the workers and, for the first time, engage in direct negotiations without interference from the Ministry of Labor.

Most importantly, the strikes signified the resurgence of rank-and-file activity within the labor movement and a challenge to its rigid, hierarchical structure. They set the stage for more militant and prolonged confrontations which came in November 1978 and most recently in March 1979.

This new mood of militancy and mobilization—though focused primarily on economic demands—has called into question the traditional relationship between Brazilian unions and the state; between a leadership steeped in collaboration and a restless rank and file.

To understand the growing radicalization of the Brazilian working class, it is important to look briefly at the historic roots of Brazilian

trade unionism and review the history of the trade union movement up to and following the 1964 military coup.

BRAZILIAN CORPORATIVISM

One of the primary demands of the Brazilian workers' movement today is the demand for trade union autonomy. The present structure of Brazilian unions is a legacy of the 1930s and 40s, the era of Getulio Vargas and the *Estado Novo*.^{*} Inspired by Italian fascism, Vargas imposed a corporatist framework on the labor movement based on total subordination to the state and designed to control the class conflict which accompanied Brazilian industrialization. As "Lula," a leader of the Metalworkers' Union, scoffed, "I think that the Brazilian union structure was set up before there was even a Brazilian worker."

The role of trade unions in Brazilian society was clearly spelled out in the Consolidated Labor Laws (CLT) enacted in 1943. Article 514 states that the duties of trade unions are: 1) to collaborate with the public authorities in the development of social solidarity; 2) to maintain legal aid service for their members; 3) to promote conciliation in labor disputes.²

The state, as the embodiment of the general will in corporatist theory, established itself as the arbiter between labor and capital. The CLT created a system of labor courts to function in lieu of direct negotiations between workers and bosses. A trade union tax, equivalent to one day's pay per year, was levied on all workers to finance the unions and thereby heighten their dependence on the state. The use of these tax revenues is limited by law to social service activities, and explicitly barred from serving as strike funds. Hence, union activism is restricted to the sphere of administering an expanded set of social services.

The structure of the Brazilian labor movement was carefully designed to inhibit any kind of independent or collective action. The law allows for only one trade union per category and per geographic area. Unions are

^{*}*Estado Novo* refers to the authoritarian and corporative system established by dictator Getulio Vargas, and embodied in the Constitution of 1937.

forbidden by law to join forces with one another at the local or national level, and from affiliating with labor organizations internationally.³

The Vargas legacy for the working class is a rigid, top-down structure of social control. At the apex of the pyramid stands the Ministry of Labor, with the power to intervene in virtually every aspect of union activity. Its base is a relatively impotent and ill-organized rank and file. And between the two stands a union leadership groomed by the state—the *pelegos*, a term which aptly refers to the sheepskin blanket that makes it easier for the horse to bear the burden of the rider.⁴

THE POPULIST PERIOD

In the aftermath of World War II and the upsurge in the workers' movement in Latin America, the *Estado Novo* was dismantled, but the union structure based on corporatist principles was not. During the so-called "Brazilian experiment in democracy," between 1945 and 1964, the trade unions became the major prop of Brazilian populism. The *Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro* (PTB-Brazilian Labor Party), Getulio Vargas' creation, mobilized masses of workers in support of populist demands such as nationalization of the oil industry in the 1950s and limited nationalizations and land reform in the early 60s.

Despite the massive mobilizations of this period and the radicalization of many trade union leaders, especially during the 1962-63 period of populist President Goulart, the fundamental subordination of the labor movement to the state was never called into question. In addition, trade unions generally discouraged mobilizations at the factory level, and centralized the functions of advancing class demands through the trade union leadership. Rank-and-file activities that did develop were spontaneous and quickly absorbed into the trade union structure.

A parallel union structure which acted as a link between the spontaneous rank-and-file movement and the political strategy of the labor leaders did arise. Inter-union pacts and associations, headed by the CGT (Workers General Command), were formed despite the legal prohibitions. During the mass mobilizations of 1962-63, the trade unions led the

working class to increasingly more radical actions in the form of economic and political strikes. But their structural dependence on the state and the absence of solid ties to the rank and file left the labor movement open to a smashing defeat with the 1964 military coup.

AFTERMATH OF THE COUP

The economic and political program of the military dictatorship required a passive and progressively impoverished working class, on the one hand, and the inflow of foreign capital on the other. Toward this end, the labor laws of the 1930s and 40s provided a ready-made vehicle for political and economic repression.

As a first step, the military proceeded to purge the labor movement of its more militant leaders and activists, and replace them with the more reliable *pelegos*, or trade union bureaucrats. The Ministry of Labor and the political police were entitled to scrutinize all candidates for union posts, barring those who were ideologically reprehensible to the regime. During 1964 and 1965 alone, the Minister of Labor purged the elected officers in 532 trade unions and union federations, or nearly one-third of all such bodies.⁵

With their most militant leadership cut off from political participation and the trade union structure firmly under government control, the weak and spontaneous rank-and-file movement buckled under the intense repression.

HELP FROM THEIR FRIENDS

The U.S. government, labor bureaucrats and corporations also moved in to bolster the new regime, through the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD).⁶ Brazilian trade union leaders were already being trained by AIFLD in Brazil and the United States before the military takeover. The AIFLD ideology of "business unionism"—the harmony of interests between labor and capital, combined with rabid anti-communism—would serve as a useful tool in reorganizing the Brazilian labor movement in the post-coup mold.

In 1963, the Instituto Cultural do Trabalho (Cultural Institute of Labor), AIFLD's organizational base in Brazil, sent 33 influen-

tial trade union leaders to the United States for a three-month course. Upon returning to Brazil, the majority joined the conspiracies that ultimately toppled the populist government of Goulart. In a 1965 *Nation* interview, William C. Doherty, AIFLD's Executive Director, stated that "the crop of Brazilian graduates of the AIFLD course that came back to their country in 1964 were composed of elements so active that they became intimately involved in some of the clandestine activities of the revolution [the military's terminology for their dictatorship] before it occurred. Many of the trade union leaders, some of whom were effectively trained in our institute, were involved in the defeat of Goulart."⁷

Three months after the coup and government interventions in more than 450 unions, Doherty commented to the Brazilian press "that the Brazilian trade unions are enjoying a freedom never seen under Goulart."⁸

Since the military coup, AIFLD "educational" programs have trained over 50,000 Brazilian trade unionists in their in-country programs, and sent over 400 to the Front Royal Institute in Virginia for advanced course work. This layer of union bureaucrats form the core of the *pelegos* in the Brazilian trade union structure.

RESISTANCE

By 1967, resistance to the government's policies of squeezing the wages of the working class began to surface, both within and parallel to the officially recognized unions. In the state of Sao Paulo, the Inter-Union Movement Against the Wage Squeeze (MIA) mobilized the rank and file, in defiance of the law that forbids unions to join forces locally or nationally. Workers formed opposition groups at the factory level, challenging the hegemony of the *pelegos*.

Then, in April 1968 in Contagem, Minas Gerais, a metalworkers' wildcat erupted. Fifteen thousand workers struck against the government's wage policies, and against its attempt to disqualify an opposition candidate who had been elected to head the union. After negotiations with the Minister of Labor failed, the military forcibly intervened to break the strike. Four months later, in Osasco, Greater Sao Paulo, another wildcat

strike broke out demanding higher wages. Again, it was led by one of the few union opposition leaders who had managed to get elected to the union presidency. The strike was immediately declared illegal and crushed.

With massive student demonstrations on the rise and the beginnings of a militant workers' movement, the government moved quickly to repress the growing opposition. The infamous Institutional Act No. 5 granted the President unlimited legal power to crush any and all opposition. Congress was closed, and many members lost their right to participate in politics for ten years. Universities were invaded and professors and students alike were purged.

Systematic torture of opponents of the regime and brutal repression of any manifestations of the workers' movement marked the next four years. By 1972, however, workers demanded special wage increases to offset a drastic decline in their standard of living. Militant workers began to organize factory committees (*comissoes de fabrica*) which pressed their demands through slow-downs and strict adherence to work rules. Through these spontaneous actions that carefully avoided governmental intervention and repression, shipyard workers, bank clerks, bus drivers, construction workers and other sectors were able to win their wage demands.

In the Greater Sao Paulo area from 1973 to 1977, at least 34 job actions occurred.⁹ They developed in direct defiance of the conciliatory attitudes of the *pelegos*, wedded to the government's wage-squeeze policy, and got unofficial support from the growing number of militant trade union leaders who were prohibited from intervening directly because of the anti-strike law.

THE GROWING CRISIS

In 1974, the curtain fell on the "miraculous" performance of the Brazilian economy. As diverse sectors of society began to voice their opposition to the regime, President Geisel made feeble attempts to mollify the working class. The government decreed a 43% wage increase, double the previous year, but it fell far short of stemming the steady decline in workers' real wages resulting from inflation.

Then, in 1977, a political bombshell exploded. In the midst of an already turbulent situation—massive student demonstrations in every major city demanding democratic liberties and an end to dictatorship—the workers' movement was stirred by an unexpected admission. An investigation by economists from the International Monetary Fund forced the government to admit that Delfim Neto, former Minister of Finance and father of the "economic miracle," had doctored the inflation figures for 1973. As a result, workers had been robbed of 34.1% of the raises legally due them under the official indexing system.

Since the early 1970s, DIESSE (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies), maintained by the Sao Paulo unions, had insisted that the government was tampering with the data used to determine wage increases.

The newest revelations sparked an immediate reaction by some of the most important unions in the Greater Sao Paulo area, representing hundreds of thousands of auto, electronics and chemical workers. Officers of

the metalworkers' unions immediately began a campaign for retroactive wage increases to offset the losses in 1973-74. They mobilized mass meetings of tens of thousands of workers to pressure the government to grant the wage readjustment.

The principal demand of the massive May-June strikes of 1978—a 20% increase—was to make up for the wages the government had stolen.

THE TRADE UNION OPPOSITION

The success of these strikes strengthened opposition to the economic policies of the dictatorship and to the *pelegos* within the trade union movement. The program of the Trade Union Opposition, an umbrella-grouping of different opposition forces within the labor movement, called for "the transformation of the unions controlled by the military and its puppets into genuine instruments of class struggle, giving equal importance to organizing the working class at the base level and to combining legal and clandestine forms of struggle."¹⁰ The process of forming factory



In-plant march by steelworkers supporting the wage demands of Sao Paulo metalworkers, October 1978.

committees of the most conscious workers moved to the formation of inter-factory committees. This has laid the groundwork for ousting the *pelegos* or at least curbing their influence over the rank and file.

A group of trade union leaders, known as the *autenticos*, have come to the fore in leading the strike wave. These leaders have either come to their posts in recent elections by defeating the *pelegos* or have managed to survive the years of government repression and purges. Luis Ignacio da Silva, or "Lula," president of the Metalworkers Union of Sao Bernardo do Campo and Diadema, has become their most well-known and articulate leader.

Another round of metalworkers strikes in November 1978, and yet another in March 1979, have made it clear that the *pelegos* are losing their grip on the trade union movement.

Rank-and-file metalworkers pushed for a massive walk-out when their contract came

up for renewal in late October 1978. Over 300,000 went out on strike demanding a 70% increase—instead of the 40% proposed by the government—and the right to negotiate directly with employers about pay and work conditions. They also demanded legal recognition of shop-floor representatives and an end to arbitrary firings. In a coordinated drive, they occupied the plants and downed their tools. This marked an organizational advance over the May strikes that had begun in one plant and spread in domino fashion to others.

At an assembly of 30,000 striking metalworkers, the President of the Metalworkers Union of Sao Paulo, Joaquim dos Santos, was clearly a minority in pushing for an end to the strike and acceptance of the compromise 58% increase offered by employers. Dos Santos, an AIFLD alumnus with over 40 years experience in controlling the massive union, managed to diffuse this rank-and-file pressure with a slick maneuver. He promised to call a

"Lula" has led the metalworkers in three major strikes since May 1978.



vote for the following day in which all strikers—union and non-union members alike—would participate.

When the vote was held, however, only fully paid-up union members were allowed to vote and the *pelegos'* proposal won 4,545 to 1,326. Only 6,000 workers had been able to vote—out of a striking workforce of several hundred thousand.¹¹ Lacking a well-structured organization, opposition leaders were unable to mobilize the rank and file to defy these maneuvers and the strike collapsed. The final agreement approved the 58% increase—only 15% more than the original government offer. More importantly, the 12% wage increase won by striking workers in May, 1978 would be deducted from the November settlement, leaving a meager 3% margin of "victory."¹² The settlement made no mention of factory committees or the right to bargain directly with employers. When the meeting ended, Joaquim dos Santos left with police protection in order to escape the strikers' wrath.

In Osasco, where *autenticos* controlled the union and where all strikers were allowed to vote, workers voted unanimously to reject the proposal accepted by the Sao Paulo and Guarulhos unions. However, with the strike momentum deflated by these divisions, and a growing resistance on the part of the employers, the strike failed and workers were soon forced to return to work.

THE BOSSES' OFFENSIVE

On the rebound from their May defeat, the industrialists of Sao Paulo quickly organized a well-planned campaign to break this year's new strikes. In a document leaked to the press, the Federation of Industrialists of the State of Sao Paulo (FIESP) made suggestions to its members which included: unified forced overtime in order to stockpile products, unified wage negotiations and firing and blacklisting of militant workers.

In an interview with the socialist monthly, *Versus*, an automobile worker at the Ford assembly plant in Sao Bernardo where the Corcel and Maverick are assembled, complained of speed-ups: "The bosses are making time studies of the most essential production sectors, where the most important parts are made and which take the longest to produce.

We produce 505 units a day right now and they are talking of increasing that to 560 cars. We are forced to work eleven hours a day—one hour is already extra, and they could increase it by one more hour. You can't even think about Saturday as a day off because we've been working Saturdays since September 1977 when the Corcel II went into production. There is talk of massive firing right before contract time with a blacklist that would affect a lot of people."¹³

Two thousand workers in Greater Sao Paulo have already been fired without just cause in accordance with the FIESP suggestions. In Sao Bernardo, Volkswagen has fired almost all the workers who participated in the Metalworkers Union's Third Congress this past year, many of them with 15 years or more job experience.

Employers in Brazil have a free hand in firing due to a law imposed in 1967 which abolished job security. Passed primarily due to pressure from foreign investors, the law established a severance pay fund scheme, the *Fundo de Garantia do Tempo de Servico* (Fund for the Guarantee of Time Worked). By handing back to workers the 8% of their wages involuntarily deducted from their monthly paychecks during employment, the employer is absolved of any other obligations or responsibility to justify dismissal. The favored tactic of the multinationals is to fire large sectors of the labor force just before the yearly wage review, and for other multinationals to rehire these trained workers at a reduced wage rate. As a result, involuntary turnover rates are extraordinarily high. In 1970, more than one-third of the workforce in the state of Sao Paulo had put in less than one year on the job, and 74.2% had worked less than three years for the same firm.¹⁴

Lula explained the effects of this system in a recent interview: "A worker who is in the Northeast or even in the interior of Sao Paulo works in a little backyard factory and he hires into Volkswagen or Ford or Mercedes-Benz, he's going to earn in the beginning 10 or 11 cruzeiros an hour, 200% more than he earned before. And then he thinks that he's in heaven . . . Then he thinks 'those guys in the union are a bunch of beasts. I was in the worst shape until the other day and nobody talked about fighting. Now I'm in a good situation and



Production at VW do Brasil was paralyzed by the strike.

those guys want me to fight and lose my job.' Do you understand how this business works? When he begins to perceive that in truth he is being exploited, it takes about a year or two and the firm fires him and grabs another. Just as ingenuous as he was when he first arrived. In Sao Bernardo and Diadema there are firms that have a turnover of 4,000 workers a year."¹⁵

The lack of job stability has a devastating effect upon both wages and working class militancy. Many workers, fearful of reprisals, are intimidated into not participating in the union movement. In a recent report, members of a U.S. Department of Labor fact-finding mission to Brazil, which included several U.S. trade unionists, underlined the dual problem of job instability and the absence of a plant-level union presence in

Brazil. After talking with members of Lula's union in Sao Bernardo and Diadema, the commission concluded the following:

There are only 24 union leaders on the entire union directory who have legal protection against dismissal by the employer during their term of office. There is no provision for plant-level committees in the labor law. Since employers are not legally required to bargain with the local union and frequently fire union leaders or workers who complain, the top union leadership are the only people who can safely bring up a grievance . . . Thus, with only 24 protected leaders in a city-wide local there is *no* official union representation in most of the 650 factories under the local's jurisdiction.¹⁶

The formation of factory committees has become a major element of rank-and-file efforts to overcome the structural deficiencies of the labor movement and the corporatist legacy. As agents of rank-and-file mobilization, these committees exert pressure on both the union leadership and the employers.

THE IDES OF MARCH

Recognition of shop-floor delegates became a major issue in the strikes that erupted in March 1979, as 200,000 metalworkers paralyzed the plants ringing the industrial city of Sao Paulo. The rallying cry of the workers was "78% or strike"—34% above the wage-rise authorized by the government to offset inflation, and equal to the miscalculation of inflation figures in 1973-74. Volkswagen, Ford, Mercedes-Benz, Chrysler, Toyota, Saab—all ground to a halt once again, along with scores of smaller electrical equipment, metal-fabricating and other plants organized by the metalworkers unions.

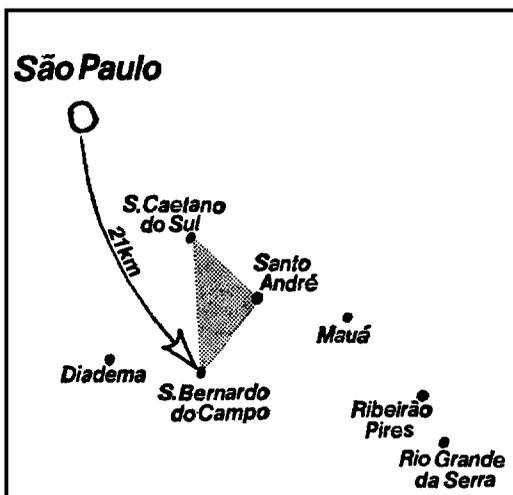
Employers were absolutely intransigent on the issue of recognizing shop-floor delegates. Dismissing union activists was too valuable a weapon against the resurgence of trade union militancy. They also rejected demands for a shorter work week (40 hours instead of 48), job security after 90 days and a minimum wage of US\$200 a month. Instead, the Sao Paulo State Federation of Industries limited their concession to a wage offer that fell 15% short of the union demands.

The government initially tried to head off a strike by creating splits within the labor movement. This time, however, the familiar tactic was less successful. Officers of the Sao Paulo

Metalworkers Federation accepted the employers' proposal in the name of 29 unions. But trade union leaders from Santo Andre, Sao Bernardo and Sao Caetano (the region known collectively as ABC) chose to break with the federation and put the proposal to a vote by the rank and file.

Lula, president of the Sao Bernardo metalworkers' union, reported the settlement proposal to an assembly of 20,000 workers on March 12 and said, "If you want my personal opinion, we shouldn't accept this offer." The work stoppage began at midnight the same day, as metalworkers in the other two ABC suburbs voted to strike as well.

The strike came at an embarrassing moment for the regime, only two days before the presidential inauguration and amidst increasing emphasis on "austerity" to combat inflation. The metalworkers were soon joined by 80,000 public school teachers in the state of Rio de Janeiro striking for higher pay and shorter hours, by bus drivers in Sao Paulo demanding 80% raises, by students protesting attacks on academic freedoms, and other threats of stoppages and strikes. The rhetoric of "liberalization" was on trial, as all sectors of society speculated upon Figueiredo's response to the challenge.



As word of the ABC actions spread, assemblies were held at plants where union leaders had already accepted the bosses' offer. Ten thousand auto workers at the General Motors plant voted to overturn their leaders' decision and join the strike.

Support snowballed among broad sectors of the population, especially when the government declared the strike illegal on March 16. At a solidarity meeting attended by 10,000 people, Bishop D. Angelico Bernardino affirmed that the Church would continue "to defend authentic trade unionism, including the trade union opposition, free from *peleguismos* and servility to the Ministry of Labor and to the powerful."¹⁷ Students, churches, lawyers and journalists collected food and money to sustain the strikers. Office workers at *Ford do Brasil* threatened to strike in solidarity with the production workers.

Within days, decisive action against the strikers put an end to speculation about the new government's posture. President Figueiredo began his second week in office by ordering the intervention of the unions. Elected union leaders, including Lula, were replaced by Labor Ministry officials and union headquarters were occupied by the military police.

The following day, workers occupied the main plaza of Sao Bernardo and charged police barricades to retake the union headquarters, forcing government officials inside to flee. Shock troops and cavalry were immediately dispatched to battle the angry workers. Soldiers were quartered inside the Volkswagen plant and tanks stationed on its patios. The *Jornal do Brasil* described the ABC region as a string of "occupied cities."¹⁸ The democratic veneer had worn thin very quickly.

The government tried to justify its actions by crying "Communist subversion," accusing a left group called Socialist Convergence of instigating the disorders. More than 1600 people were arrested, released only after police intelligence had completed their dossiers.

Despite the government's heavy-handedness, its strike-breaking tactics were ineffective, as massive assemblies and confrontations continued. The Ministry of Labor presented a compromise proposal to the deposed union leaders. Two weeks after the strike began, Lula spoke to 70,000 workers gathered in the municipal stadium of Sao Bernardo do Campo, recommending that strikers return to work to save the unions from perpetual intervention. Under the terms of the compromise agreement, workers would get a 63% raise in

wages, they would be paid for days lost during the strike and protected from retaliatory firings. Other demands would be negotiated during a 45-day period, by a tri-partite commission of worker, management and government representatives.¹⁹

Lula's proposal was adopted and workers have returned, at least temporarily, to the factories. But the ultimate outcome of the strike is still very much in doubt. Workers have vowed to resume the strike if their demands are not met by the May 12 deadline and their elected leaders are not re-instated. They have refused to work overtime to prevent employers from stockpiling for the inevitable next round. And they have protested flagrant violations of the compromise agreement, such as more than 300 dismissals since the strike was suspended.

Elsewhere in the economy and the country, strikes continue to proliferate. Public employees are on strike in several cities and states; 4,000 state schools remain closed; doctors in municipal hospitals are attending only emergency cases. The Brazil of the late 60s and early 70s is unrecognizable.

Splits are reported to have emerged within the Cabinet as to the handling of these strikes. Hardliners want the strikers to be taught a lesson, once and for all, and go so far as to propose federal intervention in the entire state of Sao Paulo. Others favor placating the working class, within limits.²⁰ What remains unclear is whether the strike movement can be contained within its present economic dimensions, or will evolve into a clear political challenge to the dictatorship and its capitalist model of development.

A WORKERS' PARTY

In all of the radicalized trade union activities over the last few years, several basic themes continue to recur: a) demands for substantial wage increases to combat the tremendously high cost of living; b) recognition that breaking with the 40-year governmental control over unions and establishing independent unions is essential for any further advances in the trade union movement; and c) the growing understanding that neither the government nor the tolerated opposition

offer a real political alternative to the working class. This latter awareness is reflected in the widespread invalidation of ballots and blank votes in the November 1978 congressional campaigns in certain working class cities, and the recent call by prominent *autenticos* for the formation of an independent workers' party.

Leaders of the metalworkers unions of the state of Sao Paulo, representing more than a million workers, voted overwhelmingly at their IX Congress in January 1979 to take up the struggle for the formation of a workers' party. "History has shown us," the adopted document reads, "that the best instrument the workers can use to carry out their struggle is their own party. Therefore, in organizing this party, which will include the entire proletariat, workers are struggling for effective liberation from exploitation."

The question of the formation of new political parties has been intensely debated in Brazil, ever since the government announced the possibility of creating new parties to resolve the political deadlock it faces with the opposition. Viewing this as an opportunity for the working class to break with the traditional control of the government and the dominant class, Lula and other trade unionists began to propose the idea of an independent working class party without bourgeois participation or populist leadership from the old PTB structure. According to the thesis approved at the Metalworkers Congress, the workers' party would be "not just an electoral party that simply elects people to assemblies, Congress or the Senate, but besides this and principally a party that functions from the first to the last day of the year, all year, that organizes and mobilizes workers in their struggles for their demands and in the construction of a just society without exploiters and exploited."

Supporters of the MDB claim that a workers' party would just divide the opposition and play into the hands of the government's strategy. Lula, however, in defending the proposal in an interview with *Jornal do Brasil*, stated that ARENA and MDB are "two parties of the bosses—the bourgeoisie who do little for the workers, with the rare exception of some candidates who have ties with the working class. . . . An independent workers'

party," he insisted, "would not divide the opposition but rather strengthen the participation of the working class as a unified element in the broad opposition to the military dictatorship."²¹

Jaco Bittar, *autentico* president of the important oil workers' union of Campinas, near Sao Paulo, has been another strong proponent of an independent workers' formation: "The trade union is an organ for winning immediate conquests while the party should be the organ for changing society. The party has to have a program that takes care of the society in a general sense, transforming it. And we know that this means a struggle against capitalism for socialism."²²

Regardless of the outcome of the 1979

strikes, it is clear that an historic step has been taken during the last few years toward a break with the old union structure and toward independent political action. The Brazilian working class has moved to a crucial position on the political scene. Whatever the next move by the military, be it toward greater liberalization or back to entrenched authoritarianism, it will have to take into account a more militant, unified, independent and growing trade union movement.

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Metalworkers assemble in Sao Bernardo's soccer stadium during the March strike.



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Harry Maurer is a free-lance journalist whose writings on Latin America have appeared in *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *Ms.*, and *The New York Review of Books*. This report on a trip to the Amazon, made in 1978, is an abbreviated version of one scheduled to appear in Harper's.

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