

Lula: The Socialism That We Build Will Be Defined by the People

In 1981, Lula da Silva spoke to the first Brazilian Workers' Party convention about his country's path to democratic socialism. Ahead of the second round of Brazil's presidential election later this month, we reproduce his speech here.



Lula Da Silva during a press conference on September 30, 2022 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. (Buda Mendes / Getty Images)

On February 10, 1980, the Brazilian Workers' Party, (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), was created. Metalworker Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was a founding member of that party. He would go on to run as the PT's presidential candidate, eventually winning the presidency and serving from 2003–2010; after his jailing on trumped-up corruption charges for 580 days from 2018–19, he was released and ran for president earlier this month against president Jair Bolsonaro, beating the right-wing incumbent by five percentage points in the first round. The next round of voting takes place later this month.

In Lula's speech at the first PT national convention, he articulated a vision of the workers' struggle as intertwined with the causes of the black, feminist, environmentalist, and Indigenous peoples' movements, toward the construction of socialism.

The creation of the PT results from the intense process of social mobilization at the end of the 1970s in Brazil. A new wave of strikes by a combative trade union movement, the fight against famine, and the confrontation with the military dictatorship that ruled the country at the time helped produced this mass political organization of the working class. The manifesto of the new party, launched on February 10, 1980 at Colégio Sion in São Paulo, stated that "the workers want to organize themselves as an autonomous political force" and concludes by calling for the collective construction of an egalitarian society "where there are no exploited and no exploiters."

The party's program focused on the freedom of association, the dismantling of organs of repression, the improvement of the working class's living conditions, the defense of a "broad, massive agrarian reform under workers' control," the struggle for national sovereignty against imperialist domination, and ends by expressing support for movements defending the rights of women, blacks, and Indigenous peoples.

In his speech at the first party national convention, Lula already talks about the importance of the racial issue, the need to fight against the "macho culture" of not treating homosexuality as a disease, and expresses solidarity with the Indigenous cause. He gave these various struggles a simple and universal name: socialism.

In the following, we reproduce Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's speech at the first National Convention of the Workers' Party, held on September 27, 1981, in Brasília.

Comrades,

On behalf of the National Commission of the Workers' Party and my own behalf, I want to express to my comrades the great joy of seeing the realization of our first national convention. The Organization Party Reform Law [a law passed in Brazil at the time], with all its formalisms, and all its details, failed to dampen our enthusiasm. Although I disagree with the authoritarianism that inspires the Organization Party Reform Law, it was followed in this convention, as it has been in all activities of the Workers' Party since its beginning. And today, with all the legal requirements fulfilled, we arrived at the National Convention, which allows us to obtain the definitive registration of our party.

"We Already Are a Mass Party"

Here we approved, as required by law, our statutes and our program, and we elected our first National Directory. All those who have been following the formation of our party know that neither our statutes, nor our program, nor the names that make up the National Directory came up for debate only at the time of this convention. They have been discussed by the rank and file of the party for a long time, in our municipal and regional meetings and pre-conventions, as well as in the National Preconvention, which we held in São Paulo last August.

For us, realizing this first national convention of the PT means more than mere compliance with legal requirements. For this reason, this convention takes place in an atmosphere of celebration and struggle. It's a party because the Workers' Party is, as I said, "an unexpected child." And the climate of struggle is right because, like every unexpected child, the Workers' Party has to keep fighting to keep living; above all, it has to keep fighting to keep growing.

"Regardless of the social sector to which they belonged, those who believed in the working class, sooner or later, would be on our side."

Comrades, the truth is this: our party is created! A young boy that nobody, except us, wanted; a boy born against disbelief, hopelessness, and fear. We say he is a boy because he is no more than two and a half years old.

This child proved that he would be strong at the Congress of Metalworkers of the State of São Paulo, in December 1978, in Lins.

This child began to crawl at the National Metalworkers Congress, in Poços de Caldas [Minas Gerais], in June 1979. And he only managed to take his first steps when he took to the streets to participate in the struggles of our people against oppression and hunger.

Many doubted us, and even today, there are those who dare to doubt the workers' ability to organize politically. In the beginning, they said that we were a workers' party in overalls, workerist,

limited, narrow, and closed to other sectors of society.

If the party was just being born, how could these eternal disbelievers in the political capacity of Brazilian workers know so much about us? The Workers' Party was born from the workers in overalls and is proud to have been born in overalls.

We were aware that, regardless of the social sector to which they belonged, those who believed in the working class, sooner or later, would be on our side. It was with immense joy that we received, as the first intellectual to join the party, this arts worker called Mário Pedrosa, who for over fifty years has dedicated his life to the struggle of Brazilian workers.

After Mário, whom we honor today, others came — the best in Brazilian culture and intellectuality. It was enough for this to happen for the eternal disbelievers to emerge, saying that the PT, although born from the workers, would become a party of intellectuals, unviable like all the others. Here, it must be said clearly: the Workers' Party does not ask anyone for a certificate of ideology or a professional card, only a willingness to fight and loyalty to our program and our statute. Within the party, we are all equal: workers, peasants, autonomous professionals, parliamentarians, professors, teachers, students, etc.

What this national convention proves to all the unbelievers, all the desperate, and all the fearful is that the Workers' Party is and always has been entirely viable. A few things are worth remembering, comrades. When we set out, in June of this year, to form our municipal commissions, the disbelievers said: "The PT will not make it." We succeeded, and we formed 627 across the country. When we left, at the beginning of this year, for the affiliation campaign, the disbelievers said: "The PT is not viable." We succeeded, and today we are close to three hundred thousand across the country.

Today, as we hold our national convention, there are those who doubt the next step. There are those who think that the PT will not get the 5 percent of votes required by law in the 1982 elections; that the PT will not get the 3 percent of the votes in nine states. We, PT members, are sure that voting will not be our problem, as we are already a mass party. The great challenge ahead is not to make the same mistakes as those who intended to speak on behalf of the working class without even listening to what it had to say.

"Only workers can conquer what they are entitled to."

The Workers' Party is a historic innovation in this country. It is an innovation in political life and in the history of the Brazilian left as well. It is a party that is born from the impulse of mass movements, which is born from strikes and popular struggles throughout Brazil. It is a party that is born of the conscience that the workers have conquered after many decades of serving as a mass for politicians of the bourgeoisie to maneuver, and of having heard chants from so-called vanguard parties of the working class. Only workers can conquer what they are entitled to. Nobody ever gave it to us, nobody ever gives us anything for free.

Change the Relationship Between Capital and Work

Our party was born as a political expression of the union struggle. Most of our leaders continue in the trade union movement, and find in it the source of their energies and the representativeness of their political practice. However, since our first steps, the PT has never confused party politics with trade unionism, nor has it made the trade union movement a transmission belt for the party.

We always defend the autonomy of unionism in relation to political parties. The union is a weapon of struggle for all workers, regardless of their party preferences. As a party, we must never make the mistake we denounced in the government: paternalism and intervention in the trade union

movement.

If we fight for union autonomy and freedom, it is not only against the state, but also against the parties. They accuse us of having abandoned trade unionism to do politics. This would not worry us if fellow members of the base were not, many times, sensitive to this argument. That is why we are addressing these comrades, not careerists who rob workers of their right to engage in politics.

Comrades, in our country, the union, controlled by the government, is not enough to change society. The union is the right way to improve the relationship between capital and labor, but that's not all we want. We don't just want to improve the conditions of the worker exploited by the capitalist.

We want to change the relationship between capital and labor. We want workers to own the means of production and the fruits of their labor. And that can only be achieved with politics. The party is the way that will allow us to act and transform power in this country. In our struggle, party activity must complete union activity, without one wanting to replace or exclude the other.

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In all these years, since the birth of the party, we have never strayed from trade unionism — and there is no persecution, imprisonment, or conviction that keeps us away from the trade union struggle. Some comrades say that, as PT leaders, we should no longer "waste so much time going to factory doors." We want to make one thing very clear: on the day when PT leaders can no longer go to the factory gates, the workplace, or wherever there is struggle for land, it is better to close the PT.

We are not a party of offices, carpeted rooms, or collusion behind the scenes. It is there at the door of the factory, at the workplace, in the struggle for land, on the periphery that we get supplies, that we learn from the people, that we correct the direction of our political project, that we reaffirm our fidelity to the Brazilian worker.

Build Working-Class Unity

Today, the trade union movement is going through a very important moment: the creation of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), of which we are part of the preparatory executive committee.

While we fight for the construction of the central union, some accuse us of defending union pluralism. What we defend, comrades, is above all the freedom of the various tendencies existing among workers to be represented in the trade union movement. But this does not and cannot mean a parallel union or a union of workers for the top far from workers.

The freedom and representation that we want in Brazilian unionism does not admit that a tendency is the patron saint of unity, of which we must all be faithful devotees, under penalty of heresy or political excommunication. It is not in alliance with *pelegos* [*sheep*] that we will unite the trade union movement, but in struggle, in campaigns, in strikes. Those who do not fight do not have the right to speak of unity, as they play the game of the boss and the government, which is to domesticate and divide Brazilian unionism. And who can accuse us of not fighting together with the working class?

Brazil is certainly one of the few countries on this continent that has never experienced agrarian reform. We have so much land and so few owners, although the government claims to be a defender of property... The only agrarian reform that our country has known was when the Portuguese metropole divided it into hereditary, donatary captaincy. And this division continues.

The land passes, hereditarily, into the hands of fewer and fewer owners, with greater extensions of unproductive areas. Multinationals accelerate capitalist exploitation in the countryside and reinforce

large estates, expelling thousands of families who no longer have anywhere to emigrate.

In this huge country, the landless farmer has nowhere to go. There's only one alternative left: fight!

All Support for the Struggle for Agrarian Reform

The PT supports and will always support the struggle for agrarian reform, for the right to land for those who work on it, and for better prices for farmers' products with the elimination of middlemen or intermediaries. That's why we're being sued in the Amazon. But the processes don't scare us.

We are frightened by the thousands of families without a small piece of ground from which to extract the fruits necessary for life. We are scared of the land grabbers, the *jagunços* and the henchmen, who are the armed wing, above the law, of those who gather land as mere capital to be valued by time and by the inflationary economy that weighs on us.

We have traveled to every corner of this country. We consider that the land problem is, without a doubt, the most serious in our conjuncture. It is what causes the migratory cycles, the swelling of slums in the cities, the increase in the price of basic necessities, and the expenses for the importation of products, which, in principle, are typical of our soil. Like farmers, we are tired of waiting for a solution, and we no longer believe in laws that do not materialize in reality. We can only support the struggle of those who live off the land and strengthen rural unionism, creating conditions for greater integration between city and rural areas.

The PT knows that the man of the land is carrying out an agrarian reform by his own hands. As a party, it is from this struggle that we want to gather the concrete, practical elements that will allow us to define a precise policy on the land question.

It's not up to us, from the city, to define what's good for fellow peasants. It's up to you, fellow rural people, to teach us what we should do, how we should act, and what we can support you in. We are a party of city and rural workers. And it is from this union that the seeds of our party proposal germinate.

Due to the lack of freedom of association and the lack of an agrarian reform, unemployment seriously affects the lives of Brazilian workers today — the bitter fruit of the bankrupt economic policy adopted by the current regime. Today's economy is governed by market fluctuations and not by the needs of the nation. This capitalist model is essentially perverse, and we do not believe that it can be remedied.

But we cannot wait for the system to change while the unemployed swell the contingent of marginals, prostitutes, and social outcasts. We have to fight aggressively for more jobs, for job stability, for unemployment benefits, and for a unified real minimum wage. And a small but important step in this fight will be taken on October 1, National Fight Day, when we will take to the streets to express our discontent and our most urgent demands.

Standing With the Struggles

The political scenario of our people has changed a lot in recent years. It was once believed that only political parties and groups were capable of centralizing the organization of the popular movement. Today, however, we recognize that the best fruits are those that, like our party, have their roots in the multiple forms of organization existing in the countryside, in the neighborhoods, in the peripheries, in the centers of work and studies, and in the sectors that have a specific interest to defend, such as women and black people.

“Thanks to this extensive network of popular movements, the PT asserts itself as a political expression that is born from the bottom up.”

Thanks to the popular movement, the trade union movement has had greater expression in recent years. Those who still think that Brazilian unionism is only supported in the factories are wrong.

In the neighborhoods of the city or in the places where they live in the countryside, workers have more freedom to meet, to congregate, to organize, and to carry out their union struggles, with the participation of their wives, children, and neighbors. Thanks to this extensive network of popular movements, the PT asserts itself as a political expression that is born from the bottom up.

We do not accept that daycare centers, mothers’ clubs, residents’ associations, favela movements, groups fighting for land, feminist entities, artistic centers, and other ways in which our people organize themselves at the grassroots level could be manipulated like electoral fiefs or manipulated by political patronage. We recognize the autonomy of the popular movement vis-à-vis the state and political parties.

It is fundamental for the liberation of this country that the residents of a neighborhood or the squatters of a region — regardless of their partisan preferences — can meet at the grass roots, around their specific struggles. If, as political activists, we have a role with popular movements, it is to help them in their political education — without, however, inducing them to our party option.

Doing politics is not just engaging in the party or parties. It is also participating in the fight for sewage in the neighborhood and for the best price of the crop in the countryside. It is by modifying, in each part of this country, the social relations and the relations of production that our people will, one day, manage to modify property relations throughout the country, eliminating the contradiction between capital and work.

Therefore, we do not accept that the popular movement is a reflection or extension of our party activity; we don’t want to protect it. On the contrary, it is our party that must express the aspirations of the popular movement, consolidating them politically.

It is important to say a word about the women’s movement, a specific form of organization that is multiplying throughout this country. Faced with the sexist culture that we breathe, the structures of a society seen as exclusively male work, we recognize the right and duty of women to fight for their rights, freeing themselves from the condition of being bed and table objects, of being destined solely to procreate, of being house slaves, and of being super-exploited workers.

The struggle of women must help us men to reeducate ourselves toward the egalitarian society that we want to build together. However, we are convinced that this struggle cannot be disconnected from the global struggle of all Brazilians for their liberation. The feminine issue is not only of interest to women, nor is it reduced to the conquest of personal freedoms, which, at times, are mere bourgeois palliatives. Men and women, together, must fight incessantly for the emancipation of the companions who are enslaved in the fields and in the factories, who face motherhood with insecurity and fear, who prostitute their bodies because they have no other way of life, and who have never been able to express their word.

There is, in our country, a generically veiled racial discrimination. A black man, however, knows how real, aggressive, and profound this discrimination, which for whites may seem veiled, is. He feels it on his skin. That’s why we must support the organization of black people for their rights in our society, even if we come to discover, in the sunlight, the racism we carry in our guts.

Since slavery, black people in Brazil have been fighting for their liberation. The *quilombos* were more decisive conquests to end slavery than the alleged liberalism of the Portuguese crown or of the republicans in league with English capital. Therefore, we defend the right of black people to express their culture, their word, and their aspirations.

We are for the right of minorities to organize and defend their space in our society. We will not accept, in our party, homosexuality being treated as a disease, much less a police case. We will defend the respect that these people deserve, calling them to greater efforts to build a new society.

We accuse the Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI) of not respecting the rights of Indigenous nations in our country. We denounce the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA) and the large estates as most responsible for the invasion of Indigenous reserves and protected land that [Indigenous peoples] have by tradition and right. We are in solidarity with the Indigenous cause, the Union of Indigenous Nations movement, and Indigenous peoples speaking their own languages and preserving their culture. We do not accept that the Indian is treated as a piece of folklore. Although, wrongly, we have learned to treat the tribes as savages, in fact, we have a lot to learn about humanity, socialization, respect for nature, and love of life from Indigenous peoples.

Abolish the Dictatorship

Comrades! The odious National Security Law weighs on us and on all those who, in this country, fight for justice and freedom. We cannot stop resisting the autocratic regime, implemented in Brazil by a coup d'état in 1964, as long as this law exists, legitimizing the repressive apparatus. It is up to the entire nation to express its rejection of this legislation. The rule of law will only be reestablished when it becomes a shameful memory for our jurists and magistrates, and the repressive apparatus is completely dismantled, without power being an accomplice of terror.

We don't see the political opening as a gift from the gods. Rather, we see it as an achievement of popular movements, the trade union struggle, amnesty campaigns, church protests, and other sectors of our civil society. At one point, the regime's heralds saw that it was more convenient to hand over the rings than to risk losing one's fingers. The new international situation demanded that Brazil look a little more democratic.

Let us not be deceived, however. The political opening was just above, in the lid of the pot. Underneath, the pot remains empty and nothing has changed in the oppressed life of the working class.

The political opening did not reach the countryside, the favelas, or the neighborhoods on the periphery. The suffering people of this nation remain as excluded from political life as ever — and when they take up the fight for their rights, it is treated like a police case. It is therefore up to the PT to encourage the nation to achieve a real opening, in which power has a democratic character and a popular nature.

Some things must be made clear: we are a legal party, a mass party, open to all Brazilians who accept our political program and assume it in their social practice. We did not come up to divide the opposition, as we never accepted that the partisan yardstick of the autocratic regime was a criterion for unity.

We emerged from the struggles of the working class in this country. And if we didn't represent a significant portion of our people, we wouldn't have the remarkable growth that we're having, to the point of surpassing our ability to organize groups, which multiply everywhere every day. We know that diverse political tendencies are found in our society.

We recognize the right of these comrades to organize themselves around their visions and proposals. We regret that, due to the repressive regime in which we live, these tendencies act illegally, even though their banners are fair and legitimate. We fight and will fight for the legalization of all of them, so that their practices are proven by a popular verdict. We are not concerned, however, if a militant wears another shirt under our shirt. We never ask, nor will we ever ask, for an

ideological certificate from anyone.

We are interested in everyone being faithful to the PT program and rules. We are interested in comrades who do not want to make our party a place of maneuver for their proposals. We will never accept that the interests of these tendencies overlap, within the PT, with the interests of the party.

We will denounce, as many times as necessary, certain deviations to which we are all subject, such as economism, which intends to restrict the workers' struggle to the immediate conquests of their survival; politicism, which from the top down wants to impose its ideological dialect on our militants, as if revolutionary discourse were synonymous with revolutionary practice; the colonialism of those who call themselves the vanguard of the proletariat without the workers even knowing them; leftism, which demands statements or positions from the party that are not in line with its legal character and its popular nature; the voluntarism of those who want to move faster than the social movement; the electoralism of those who want to reduce the PT to a springboard for elective positions and political projections; the bureaucratism of those who criticize us for going to factory doors and want a well-organized party, but without popular bases; and the opportunism of those who only put one foot inside the PT and keep the other ready to run when they feel that their intentions are not accepted by the workers.

In the Streets and Elections

We will run in the next elections and present candidates for all positions, in all regions of the country. However, we do not believe that elections are the most important and definitive thing for our party. Undoubtedly, they have their importance and we must always conquer more space in the parliamentary area and in executive functions, in order to echo the demands of workers.

But our weapons of struggle go beyond periodic elections: it is important to strengthen the popular movement, unions, union oppositions, those who fight for land, and all forms of organization, mobilization, and union of our people. It is with this platform that our candidates must be committed. No one will be elected by the PT except as a party candidate, aware of their duties toward the proposals and party discipline.

"We will run in the next elections. However, we do not believe that elections are the most important and definitive thing for our party."

I also want to emphasize our appreciation for the comrades who, in all corners of the country, give evidence of effective service to popular interests, facing all kinds of persecution, slander, arrest, and expulsion: the members of the base ecclesial communities and the priests and bishops linked to them. We are not a denominational party and we do not accept that the Church interferes in our activities, just as we do not want to interfere in the activities of the Church. Between the Church and the party there must be clarity of the different, distinct functions, although we are often, in the oppressed and unjust life of our people, united by the same yearning for liberation.

However, we repudiate the partisan practice that seeks to reduce base communities to party groups. We respect, as a matter of principle, the faith of our people and their right to religious freedom, as a public activity, but we will never be a party of believers or atheists. For us, the division is different, it is between those on the side of liberation and those on the side of oppression. The Workers' Party will never be able to represent the interests of capital.

Recognizing all those in the Church who provide services to the cause of the Brazilian people, we denounce the persecutions that the government carries out against lay people, priests, and bishops in the name of the ghost of communism. Our party will always support, regardless of their confession or religious belief, all those who, in this country, are victims of intolerance, arbitrariness, and cruelty of power.

Toward Democratic Socialism

There are many people who ask: What is the PT ideology? What does the PT think about the future society? Those who ask such questions, at the same time, advance their own interpretations, which in some cases aim to criticize the party. Wouldn't the PT be just one more labor party? Is the PT not just a social democratic party, interested in seeking palliatives for the inequalities of capitalism?

We know where these doubts and interpretations come from. And we know this even because they are shared by some militants of the party itself, who built for themselves the strange theory that the PT is a front or a purely tactical party.

What is important to note here is that these questions only serve to express distrust in relation to the political capacity of Brazilian workers to define their own path. They are doubts of those who demand, from now on, a recipe from the future society; doubts about who offers the dish that the workers should eat. They are doubts of those who are far from the concrete tasks of popular struggles, those who have not yet learned to live with the people, much less to feel what the people feel.

We, from the PT, know that the world is moving toward socialism. The workers who took the historic initiative to propose the creation of the PT already knew this long before they even had the idea of the need for the party. And, for this reason, we also know that it is false to say that the workers, in their spontaneity, are not capable of moving on to the level of the parties' struggle, and must limit themselves to simple economic demands.

In the same way, we know that it is false to say that Brazilian workers, left to their own devices, will deviate from the path of a fair, free, and egalitarian society. Workers are the most exploited in today's society. That's why we feel it in our own flesh and we want, with all our strength, a society that, as our program says, will have to be a society without exploiters. What society is this if not socialist?

"We want, with all our strength, a society without exploiters. What society is this if not socialist?" But the problem is not just this. It is not enough for someone to say that he wants socialism. The big question is: Which socialism? Are we, by any chance, obliged to follow without questioning the first socialist theorist who knocks on our door?

Are we, by any chance, obliged to follow this or that model adopted in this country?

We, the Workers' Party, want to maintain the best friendly relations with all the parties in the world that fight for democracy and socialism. This has been the criterion that guides and will continue to guide our international contacts. A measure of political independence, fully understood in all the countries where we travel, which we must declare here in respect of the truth and as a tribute to all friendly parties. We will continue, with complete independence, solving our problems in our way.

We know we are moving toward socialism, the kind of socialism that suits us. We know that it is not convenient for us, nor is it on our horizon, to adopt the idea of socialism to seek palliative measures for the social ills caused by capitalism or to manage the crisis in which this economic system finds itself.

We also know that it is not convenient for us to adopt bureaucratic socialism as a perspective, which caters more to the new castes of technocrats and the privileged than to workers and the people.

The socialism that we want will be defined by all the people, as a concrete demand of popular struggles and as a global political and economic response to all the concrete aspirations that the PT is capable of facing. It would be straightforward, sitting here comfortably, in the precincts of the

Senate of the Republic, to decide on one definition or the other. It would be too easy and too wrong. The socialism we want will not be born of a decree, either ours or anyone else's.

The socialism that we want will be defined in day-to-day struggles in the same way that we are building the PT. The socialism we want will have to be the emancipation of the workers. And the workers' liberation will be the work of the workers themselves.