

NEOLIBERALISM AND TRADE UNIONISM IN BRAZIL IN THE 2000'S

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The Brazilian trade unionism, as well as the international trade unionism, suffered heavily from the impact of neoliberalism, which was implemented and consolidated in Brazil throughout the 1990s. However, the two biggest Brazilian labour federations, the CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*) and the FS (*Força Sindical*), responded to the neoliberal politics of the 1990's in different ways. The FS's approach shows support for neoliberalism, although its support was selective rather than unlimited. The CUT's course was more complex, fluctuating between adopting of some elements of neoliberal discourse to resistance towards neoliberal policies. Despite of these differences, both organizations moved towards a model called "*citizen unionism*" that in fact is a kind of "providing service" unionism (GALVÃO, 2006). The characteristic of this new style of unionism is that it offers workers services that until then had been provided by the State. When opting for citizen unionism, unions help the neoliberal agenda and undermine labour rights. They weaken universal policies and encourage those of a limited and compensatory nature; and thus promote the individualization of the unemployment problem and blame unemployed workers for their own condition.

Nevertheless, the negative economic conditions at the end of the Cardoso administration undermined neoliberalism and enabled Lula's victory in the 2002 elections (GALVÃO & NOVELLI, 2002; GALVÃO & NOVELLI, 2004). The unions had an important role in that victory and gained political prominence in PT's administration. This prominence can be verified by the incorporation of trade unionists in different positions in the federal administration, their participation in tripartite forums created by the government, and the approval of some government measures.

The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of neoliberalism on Brazilian trade unionism during PT's administrations. For this, the first part of the article summarizes certain elements of the political environment that allow us to characterize these governments. Our focus is not to discuss the political economy or the nature of the development model, but to think about how the labour movement has been transformed

and to indicate some of the causes of the reorganization process triggered by the rise of the PT to federal power¹. The second part seeks to point out the differences and similarities between the labour federations, seeking to recover their key demands, as well as the conflicts that they have lead.

I.

Lula's election is the result of neoliberalism's declining support, to which social movements have actively contributed, but at the same time it reveals the difficulties in shaping a new model of economic development.

The first Lula term was marked by the maintenance of neoliberal macroeconomic policy, which triggered criticism from various social movements, including the trade union movement. The macroeconomic orthodoxy, however, applied in a favorable international context and aided by some compensatory policies and social fund loans², did not hinder some positive indicators over his two terms: the economic growth between 2004 and 2008 was significant³, the unemployment rate and the informality in the labour market fell⁴, the inflation remained under control, the credit to low-income population increased by expanding its consumption capacity, the minimum wage rose 53.67% over than inflation rate between 2002 and 2010 (GALVÃO, 2012).

These results ensured great popular support for the government, confirmed by Lula's reelection in 2006 and the election of Dilma Rousseff in 2010, and encouraged an

¹ The trade unionism will be dealt with by peak organizations which are the labour federations. When we refer to them overall we have in mind the majority of these organizations that essentially support the PT administrations. Although the article mentions the different labour federations comprised in the Brazilian unionism, it emphasizes the role of the CUT for the following reasons: 1) it is the largest and the most active Brazilian labour federation, 2) it is the main author of the trade union project prevailing in the PT administrations; 3) it has gone through a split process that gave rise to three new peak organizations which lie on the left of the CUT. Two of them are opposed to PT administrations but are quite minority, as we shall see (GALVÃO, TROPIA & MARCELINO, 2013).

² Such as Bolsa Familia (financial aid to poor Brazilian families), microcredit programs and loans to family farming.

³ Between 2004 and 2008, the annual GDP growth was 5.7%, 3.2%, 4.0%, 6.1%, 5.2%. After registering a decline of 0.3% in 2009, it increased again by 7.5% in 2010.

⁴ According to the Dieese/SEADE Survey of Employment and Unemployment, the unemployment in 6 metropolitan areas fell from 21.8% in 2003, the first year of the Lula administration, to 14.1% in 2008 and remained declining notwithstanding the international economic crisis, reaching 11.9% in 2010 (the lowest rate of the period). Dieese also indicates the growth of formal employment in the first decade of this century, estimating that between 1999 and 2009 the informal work dropped from 47.7% to 43.4% (DIEESE, 2012, p. 169).

intense debate about the nature of the ongoing development model, ie if it effectively overcomes the neoliberalism or if it merely introduces some changes in the neoliberal model (NOVELLI, 2011). To Sallum Jr. (2009), the changes observed between the first and second of Lula's term caused a "liberal developmentalist" inflexion in the government. Barbosa and Souza (2010) identified in the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) launched in 2007 and in the increase of public credit to finance real estate and productive investment a "new development model" under construction. Boito Jr. (2012) considers the neo-developmentism the "possible developmentalism within the neoliberal capitalist model in a peripheral country". Arcary (2011, p. 24) characterizes the Lula's government as a "reformism without reforms or with few reforms". To Singer (2012), Lula promoted a "reformism weak enough to discourage conflicts" (SINGER, 2012, p. 22). In other words, it is a "superficial and conservative reformism - since it is a reformism that precisely allows the reproduction of the neoliberal model of capitalism" (GALVÃO et al, 2011, p. 154).

Far from developing this controversy, we are interested here in highlighting some aspects of the social and labour policy that enable us to understand the process of reorganization of the Brazilian labour movement, as well as the relationship between the labour movement and PT administrations.

The Lula government kept in its agenda during his two terms the proposal of implementing a labour and trade union reform and established a tripartite body, the National Labour Forum (FNT), to discuss them. Despite all the discussion generated, the only change made from the union legislation was the legalization of the labour federations (Law 11.648/2008)⁵. The law establishes criteria for representativeness and ensures the transfer of 10% of the mandatory union fees⁶ for the recognized federations.

With regard to labour legislation, although Lula sustained a speech in defense of rights, he didn't interrupt the process of rule flexibilization implemented in the 1990s. Even if less comprehensive, the labour reform promoted by his government obeys the same neoliberal logic that prevailed in the Cardoso era. The difference is that Lula's reform was targeted, addressed to young people entering in the labour market, from

⁵ Although the federations existed uninterrupted since 1983, when the CUT was created, they were not legally recognised until 2008.

⁶ As established by labour legislation introduced in 1940, the mandatory union fee is paid by all workers, even by these not affiliated to the union, and its value corresponds to one day salary.

employees of micro and small enterprises, to service provider workers and to one-person enterprises (a kind of hiring a self-employee that can hide the employment relationship, defrauding the payment of labour rights and social security charges). This strategy impairs the resistance by workers and their unions, as the reform does not affect them as a whole (GALVÃO, 2008).

One can thus identify a governmental tolerance to the precarization of the labour market or, in others words, “contradictory movements in relation to social regulation” (KREIN & BIAVASCHI, 2012, p. 1). This tolerance remains in the Dilma Rousseff administration, that brings back to the discussion the reform of the Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT), acknowledging the possibility of creating new employment contracts to ensure a minimum level of rights for precarious workers (seasonal and hired per hour employees) and the possibility of negotiation to supersede legislation.

Despite the creation of tripartite forums to discuss the reforms sought by the government, the changes in labour laws were not discussed in FNT. Nor the civil servants pension reform held in 2003 was actually discussed at the Council of Economic and Social Development (CDES). Both the labour and the pension reform as well as the participation of union leaders in the tripartite bodies created by government has caused conflicts and divisions, which led to a reorganization of the Brazilian labour movement and the creation of new union federation organizations, as we shall see in Part II of this article.

The expansion of institutional channels (CDES, FNT) and the close relationship between the government and a significant part of the labour movement affected the conceptions and union strategies, helping to strengthen the idea that the main function of the union is negotiating. For some authors, the government adopted measures to “void the autonomous force and undo the independent trade union movement, through a permanent absorption of their leadership and a process of ‘statization’ of workers’ organizations” (DRUCK, 2006, p. 330-331). To others, “unionism has lost much of the status of political actor” and “despite some recovery in union initiative and a certain presence on the political scene (especially in institutional spaces and governance

management itself), it has not been able to drive the political debate as before” (ARAÚJO & VERAS, 2011, p. 110)⁷.

Union advisors, members of the government and union leaders closed to the government make a distinct assessment. For Lucio (2011), unionism has had a positive performance and is able to influence the political agenda, being recognized by the government as a legitimate interlocutor. To Queiroz (2007), “with the exception of civil servants pension reform and the change in labour rights of small and micro enterprise employees, [the government] has behaved according to the thinking of the trade union movement majority”. To Dulci (2010, p. 143), social movements strengthened the legitimacy and governability of the Lula government: “contrary to what its detractors claim, participatory democracy is by no means a process of co-optation of social movements by the state. Attend to the conferences, councils and roundtables does not imply any subordination of movements to the government, or affect in any way their organizational and political autonomy [...] The popular organizations dialogue with the State and opine on public policy, preserving all its freedom of criticism and mobilization. Often openly dissent from the government [...] Indeed, this is what happened during Lula’s first term, in relation to some important aspects of macroeconomic policy”.

These analyzes seem inadequate to us because they are unable to deal with the trade unionist difficulties and contradictions in front of the left wing governments besides the dichotomy between cooptation X autonomy. A more nuanced analysis is required to consider the common origin, the close relationship between CUT trade unions and PT, and the fact that they share the same political-ideological project. How to characterize unionism in a context where neoliberalism loses strength, but at the same time, that the neoliberal ideology is still present⁸?

My main hypothesis is that PT administrations reinforce two union conceptions apparently antagonistic, but complementary in the present situation: i) they consolidate

⁷ Unlike these authors, we consider that even before PT taking power, the unionism didn’t drive the political debate. The point is that in the 1980s the trade union project was not merely to make specific criticisms to the government action. The CUT outlook in the 1980s was contrary to social pacts and class collaboration. The reforms would be obtained by the organization and mobilization of workers, ie, from the popular pressure, and not through the occupation of institutional spaces. With the rise of propositive and citizen unionism, the priority given to bargaining limiting the claims and the possibility of getting reforms to what is "feasible."

⁸ Since fiscal austerity, rigor, labour rights flexibility, new pension reform are issues that remain on the political “agenda” of different countries, including Brazil.

a perspective of class collaboration inasmuch as they expand the institutional mechanisms available to unions act within the State; ii) PT administrations facilitate the defense of immediate economic interests, enabling wage increases and improvements to some bargain benefits, reinforcing a corporatist perspective.

My second hypothesis is that the confluence of these two dimensions is a result of the impact of neoliberalism, which negatively affected several social democratic organizations and parties (Hyman, 1994). The neoliberal hegemony and the crisis of social democracy changed, in the 1990s, the political conceptions of the party and its allies, promoting a kind of social democracy without reforms or, as Lanzaro stated, a “creole” social democracy, marked by the acceptance of capitalism and an “effective but moderate reformer purpose” (Lanzaro, 2008, p. 50).

Lets examine some elements below in order to support these hypotheses.

The participation of trade unionism in the administration gave the PT government the pejorative label of “Trade unionist Republic”. This participation and the visibility resulting from it do not mean that unionism drives the political agenda, but it exerts some influence on it. There are evidences that Brazilian unionism has never been so active in the State and that it is involved in the formulation of public policy in a manner which it did not make before. In this sense, one can suggest that the union has increased influence, but this intervention is limited because a minority of its proposals is really discussed and an even smaller part is implemented ~~indeed~~. The analysis of the union proposals to the government and the unionism achievements reveal that these proposals are not only compatible with the capitalist social order, but also with the capitalist development model promoted by the Brazilian government. The most successful proposal has been the policy of increasing minimum wage. Through the agreement bargained between the unions and the government in 2007 and expected to last until 2023, the minimum wage will be adjusted annually by the rate of inflation plus the last year GDP growth.

The policy of increasing minimum wage is, beside the campaigns to reduce the working time to 40 hours per week and to introduce the protection against unfair dismissal (by signing the ILO Convention 158), one of the few claims addressed to the consolidation and expansion of universal social rights submitted during this period. Overall, the unions have contemplated more specific claims, assuming the idea that economic sector conditions are different, which justifies fragmented negotiations and

differentiated rules, in line with what was promoted during the sectorial chambers experience in the 1990s⁹. Citizenship is no longer understood as a guarantee of universal rights and becomes to be considered as a way to ensure citizen participation in the market, which explains the increasing concern about banking, credit access and consumption capacity.

The political acting of unionism is marked by the abandonment of the class referential, a framework that had characterized an expressive part of the Brazilian left, including the trade union movement in the 1980s, in the context of the struggle against the dictatorial state. Since the 1990s, like other left organizations, CUT progressively incorporates a liberal reading of Gramsci, opposing state to civil society (DIAS, 1994). Thus, the enhancement of social movements in a cross-class civil society gives way to the struggle for hegemony within a democratic rule-of-law state. The discussion about the class nature of the state is replaced by the belief that it is possible to transform the state from within, from political parties who speak on behalf of the workers and that supposedly represent their interests. But this conversion is only completed with the rise of the PT to the federal government. The political and ideological affinity with the PT government facilitates the movement of rapprochement with the state and the priority to institutional action in spite of the organization and grassroots mobilization¹⁰. The pressure on the state is exercised through proposals, without the mobilization required for achieving hegemony in the civil society. So the struggle for hegemony is restricted to having a project, even if it is not a “class” project or at least not in terms of what the capital and labour relationship was formerly conceived. In this sense, it is paradoxical that the socialism and classist speech, which was only marginally present in the repertoire of the CUT in 1990s, takes part again of the national leadership vocabulary in the Lula government, after the departure of the most significant left currents from the federation.

Throughout this changing process, the propositive and providing services unionism assumes a discourse of citizenship and solidarity vague enough to be accepted

⁹ The main claim in this sense was the collective agreement for a specific purpose, which we will discuss in the second part of the article..

¹⁰ The main initiatives promoted between 2004 and 2009 were the Marches of the Working Class, which mobilized once per year tens of thousands of workers, which is small compared to the size of the Brazilian labour market.

by different social forces, such as sustainable development, decent work and income distribution. Who would oppose to such measures, presented in general terms and in a little defined content? This fluidity allows the trade union movement to support employers' interest measures and to promote some initiatives in partnership with the capital, like the seminar Brazil of Dialogue, Production and Employment organized by Fiesp (*Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo*), CUT and FS in May 2011. This seminar was proposed to celebrate a pact in defense of industry, advocating for the employer taxes and contributions reduction¹¹, in order to “encourage priority the productive investments, at the expense of financial speculation” (CUT, 2011, p. 19). On the other hand, “CUT maintains that any tax incentives to companies must be accompanied by the requirement of mandatory counterparts, such as the commitment to job creation goals; respect to unions rights; respect to nationalization indexes along the production process; purchase of domestic machinery and equipment; export targets and presentation of an annual social report” (CUT, 2011, p. 19). The metallurgical action against the sector desindustrialization goes in the same sense of capital and labour partnership: unions criticize the appreciation of the real, which facilitates imports, and high tax burden, warning of the national industry problem. This kind of action and the discourse that sustains it reveals the incorporation of a strategic rationality, in which confrontation is replaced by cooperation relationship. According to the game theory language, it is a win-win strategy, based on the assumption that everyone can win.

CUT is the main formulator of the *Development from the Perspective of the Working Class Project* (2005), which presents proposals for the implementation of a new development model, able to rescue the state leadership and to promote the neoliberalism overcoming. This project culminates in the *Agenda of the Working Class, For the Development with Sovereignty, Democracy and Valuation of Work*, a set of demands elaborated during the 2010 presidential campaign. The agenda, also supported by other federations, is divided into six strategic axes. The Axis 3 deals with the “state as promoter of socioeconomic and environmental development” and proposes, among other measures, to reduce the primary surplus goals and to review the public-private partnerships law as well as the Fiscal Responsibility Law. These measures should be

¹¹ The CUT, which opposed to the social pact in the 1980s, came to accept and defend it in the following decades. The experience of sectorial chambers in the 1990s often back to the federation demands agenda. CUT even proposed a social pact at the beginning of the Lula government to allow the reduction of the interest rate and the resumption of economic growth.

improved and not revoked, which is paradoxical since they affect the state investment ability. It is also paradoxical the defense of “strengthening of the banks, corporations and public pension funds role in the development policies financing” (AGENDA, 2010, p. 10), since pension funds are associated to privatization and productive restructuring processes (GALVÃO, 2012).

Until now we have examined the class collaboration question. Now we move to the immediate economic interests defense. The data provided by Dieese show that unionism enjoyed a considerable success in this matter, if compared to the 1990s: wage increases above the inflation rate, collective bargaining agreements with favourable clauses to the workers concerned and a certain recovery of sector or company-level strikes indicators. According to the Salaries Tracking System maintained by Dieese, in 2003, 18.8% of collective bargaining agreements analyzed had obtained increases above the inflation rate as measured by the INPC-IBGE, 22.8% were equal to INPC and 58.4% below the INPC. In 2006, 86.3% of the collective bargaining agreements stipulated increases above the inflation rate (DIEESE, 2008, p. 3). In 2008, in a context marked by the international crisis, this indicator dropped to 78.3%. In 2010, 87.8% of collective bargaining agreements conquered increases in real wages, a number that rises to 94.6% in 2012 (DIEESE, 2013, p. 3). Trade unions agreements also affected the value of professional minimum wages as well as profit and results sharing (PLR). With regard to the strikes, although the Dieese Strikes Tracking System reveals that the annual strikes average is still lower than in the 1990s (360 against 900), it is possible to consider that “in the period 2004 to 2008 as a whole, the majority of strikes — 65 percent or more — were offensive¹². This contrasts with what happened in the 1990s, when, although there were more strikes, most of them were defensive” (MARCELINO & BOITO, 2010, p. 331).

II

The second part of this article deals with the reorganization of the Brazilian labour movement, trying to point out the differences and similarities between the organizations created and to indicate some of the conflicts in which they were involved.

¹² The authors call offensive the strikes for a real increase in wages and a share of the profits or an increase in that share, unlike DIEESE, that labels this kind of strikes as propositive (demand-driven).

Due to political differences in the analysis of Lula's government and to the possibilities opened with the legalization of the labour federations in 2008, the left trade unionism is divided and three other federations emerged from the CUT: Conlutas (*Coordenação Nacional de Lutas*), in 2004, which had its name changed to Trade Union and Popular Federation-Conlutas in 2010, the Intersindical in 2006, an organization that in 2008 was divided itself, and CTB (*Central Geral dos Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras do Brasil*) in 2007. The right trade unionism was also reorganized with the creation of two new organizations: the NCST (*Nova Central Sindical dos Trabalhadores*) in 2006, which originates primarily from official trade union structure, and the UGT (*União Geral dos Trabalhadores*) in 2007 that it is a merger of three another organizations.

Except Conlutas and Intersindical, all other organizations support the PT governments. The hallmark of this unit was the Conference of the Working Class, on June the 1st, 2010. Only UGT did not participate as it has considered that the conference – whose purpose was to approve the Agenda of the Working Class, above referred – meant, in practice, a support to Dilma Rousseff candidacy, since it not only made a positive assessment of Lula's government as also stood the consolidation and expansion of the advances made in PT administrations.

The relationship with political parties is certainly one of the factors that help to understand the division of trade unionism in different federations, as well as their political positions: some organizations have a clear political party binding like CUT with the PT and FS with PDT, while others, such as UGT, have their leadership divided into different parties: PV, PPS, PMDB, DEM, PSD, which explains its “neutrality” discourse during the 2010 presidential campaign. The three organizations originated from the CUT have different political party ties and positions front of the governments: CTB, in which the PCdoB – political party that integrates the federal government coalition – is predominant, performs specific criticisms to the government; Conlutas, in which the PSTU is hegemonic, stands a rupture with the government, and in the Intersindical fraction that present itself as an instrument of struggle, class unity and building a new federation, prevails the PSOL, that integrates the opposition to the government, but without proclaim an explicitly rupture with it.

CUT, FS, UGT, CTB, NCST and CGTB had their representativeness recognized by the Ministry of Labor between 2008 and 2011. The last survey conducted established

the following figures of representativeness: CUT, 36.7%, FS, 13.7%; UGT, 11.3%; CTB, 9.2%; NCST, 8.1%. CGTB¹³ lost its representation capacity in 2012, when did not reach the 7% required (MINISTRY OF LABOR, 2012). Conlutas does not have enough members to take advantage of this prerogative and Intersindical does not seek to be officially recognized as a federation. It should be noted that, according to the National Register of Unions of the Ministry of Labor, about 25% of registered unions were not affiliated to any federation in May 2013.

These data indicate that, although CUT has undergone a process of losing affiliate members, it remains the biggest labour federation in Brazil, even among civil servants, the major sector in Conlutas and Intersindical (GALVÃO, TROPIA & MARCELINO, 2013). The political and ideological similarities between Conlutas and Intersindical, the proximity between the two political parties that prevail inside them (PSOL and PSTU), and the very similar socioeconomic profiles of their social bases encouraged the rapprochement and the merger attempt of these organizations in mid-2010. However, the different organizational conceptions that characterize their internal functioning and their specific features in understanding the decision making process made this unification unfeasible.

Despite the organizational division and the support given by most of the trade union movement to PT governments, it is possible to observe a unity of action among these organizations, whether they are allied or opposite to these governments. The unit of action is justified as a way of strengthening the workers struggle, allowing them to resist to the effects of the international economic crisis. As an example, we indicate some of the major events and conflicts which erupted between 2009 and 2012. The first set of actions concern general claims like the increase of the minimum wage, the reduction of working hours and the fight against the unemployment.

A second set of actions relates to civil servants who mobilized against the adoption of law projects drawn up by the Federal Executive, such as the possibility of public foundations hiring workers according to private sector rules in non-exclusive state activities, the law that abolishes the full-pay benefits retirement for new civil servants and establishes the complementary pension funds, or attempts to restrict the right of strike in the public sector. The public spending cuts promoted by the

¹³ The CGTB (*Central Geral dos Trabalhadores do Brasil*) is a relatively ancient federation, created to counter the CUT in 1980s.

government, already under Dilma Rousseff, in the name of the fiscal sanity and the budget balance in 2011 and 2012, prompted protests and claims for salary adjustments and restructuring career. The breaking of previously agreements celebrated with the governmental instances and the lack of effective negotiation, notwithstanding the existence of institutional channels intended for that purpose, resulted in significant and prolonged strikes, particularly in the education sector, which constitutes an important base of Conlutas and Intersindical.

The strikes in the public sector reached other categories such as postal workers, bank employees (both public and private banks) and oil workers. Although these strikes are generally triggered nationwide and coordinated by national professional organizations, it is possible to observe differences in the federations position in relation to their conduct and development. CTB usually accompanies CUT in the priority to the negotiation and in the acceptance of agreements to suspend the strikes, seeking to minimize the criticism to the government, while the Intersindical and Conlutas insist on deepening the strikes to improve the proposals, denouncing the pro-government stance of their adversaries.

A third set of actions relates to private sector workers. Among the various struggles recorded in the period, stand out the civil construction workers strikes in 2011 and 2012 in support of better working conditions, social benefits and wage increase. The strikes paralyzed the construction of hydroelectric stations and football stadiums and were sometimes triggered against the unions leadership. The number of workers involved and the fact they affect the great infrastructure works included in the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) implemented by the federal government in 2007, led to a large tripartite agreement, to which Conlutas, despite criticizing the process, joined.

The differences between the federations reveal not only different conceptions of trade union struggle like allow us to glimpse that neoliberalism, although frayed, is still alive and that its impact is diversified among the trade unions. The debate about outsourcing gives us an indication of that difference. In the mid-2000s all federations started to criticize this measure considering it a form of precarious working. But while Intersindical and Conlutas defend ending with this practice, the others federations disagree on how to regulate it. This divergence concerns primarily the extent of the authorized outsourcing (if extended to any type of activity or restricted to some specific ones) and the responsibility of the buyer above the outsourced workers (if the buyer

must assume or simply supervise the payment of labour rights and charges by the service provider).

Another source of conflict between the federations concerns the “social security factor”, a penalty imposed by the Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s retirement reform to encourage workers to stay longer in activity. The end of this deduction, that represents a decrease up to 40% in the pensions benefit, is proposed by all of them, but CUT, FS, UGT, NSCT and CGTB signed an agreement with the government that replaces that mechanism by the factor 85/95. Thus, the penalty would be abolished only in the case of workers that add up to 85 years (women) or 95 years (men) among social security time contribution and age at the moment of retirement requesting.

The federations also differ on fiscal renouncement policy. To contain the impact of the international crisis, Lula’s government has granted a number of exemptions to companies and providing them low rate interest loans through the BNDES. While Conlutas and Intersindical oppose to such a measure, expressing their concern with the social impact of the drop in the state budget, CUT believes that the agreements should set social counterparts, as the maintenance and creation of formal jobs, the fight against the high turnover, the elimination of forced and child labour and the promotion of the “decent” work.

Although the political and economic context is distinct from the 1990s, trade unionism still facing difficulties to overcome the individualistic and pro-deregulation approach that characterized the neoliberal era. One of the most important CUT trade unions, the ABC Metal Workers Union, that is considered a “laboratory in labour relations”, presented to the government in 2011 a project entitled Collective Agreement for a Specific Purpose, allowing negotiation to derogate labour law.

Contrary to that, Conlutas’ criticism to “the government neoliberal policy” is too general and does not have popular appeal, since it does not take into account the differences between the PT and Cardoso governments. After all, what kind of neoliberalism is it? How can we argue that Lula is equal to FHC if the economic conditions were changed between the two conjunctures in question? By leaving aside the nuances, the complexity of the process, Conlutas runs the risk of isolation, becoming unable to engage with the dominant perception among workers, even those who are in your base, that see improvements in their material situation. The federation recognizes the popularity of the government, which enjoys a huge support among

workers, but considers it the result of an illusion (CONLUTAS, 2010). With regard to the need to reorganize the labour movement, its analysis also tends to overlook the role of the base: the criticisms to the biggest federations action are centered in the bureaucracy, the betrayal of the leadership, exempting the grassroots of any responsibility in this process.

Final remarks

The organizations that are opposed to neoliberalism and to PT administrations are still small and face difficulties to organize and mobilize workers. But its criticism seems to reflect on the biggest federations, that suffering defections, living internal tensions and reposition themselves in the political debate. Thus, despite the difficulties highlighted above, the analysis of the trajectory of the Brazilian labour movement in the first decade of this century reveals a certain dynamism. The rupture of the CUT, if indicates an organizational fragmentation, it also creates new spaces for a anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist perspective as well as for the debate on the trade union autonomy in front of the government.

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