

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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México

Lula: The Man the Authorities November 13, 1981.
Most Fear.

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

They had already been waiting for a half an hour in the cold evening air, and judging from the applause, they would have waited much longer. Luis Ignacio da Silva, fondly known among the Brazilians as Lula, had come to speak with the people in one of Sao Paulo's many working class suburbs.

Lula, a stocky, black-bearded man of Italian descent, gave a most impressive performance. His year as Brazil's most outspoken independent union leader had undoubtedly contributed to his fine speaking ability. However, what made his words most effective, was the understanding and compassion they manifested. Lula was their leader not only because he fought for them, but also because he was one of them.

As Lula once commented, "To talk about myself is the same thing as talking about millions of other Brazilians who left the Northeast or who left the countryside, who took the risk of coming to the big city." Like so many of the families of Sao Paulo's favelas (impoverished shantytowns), Lula's had migrated from the drought-ridden Northeast. His father had owned a small plot of non-irrigated land. In 1945, coinciding with Lula's birth, he decided that his land could no longer sustain himself, his wife and their eight children. Consequently, he migrated to the city in search of work, and his family followed several years later.

Lula took his first job in a dry cleaners, at the age of eleven. At thirteen, he moved on to being a factory telephone operator. These were difficult years for Lula and his family. To supplement his income, he shined shoes on weekends. Even still, he could only afford one pair of pants. His family shared a one room apartment without bath with seven other relatives. Lula compared it to living in a chicken coop.

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Lula's first employment as a skilled laborer came to an end indicative of his future: after demanding remuneration for the many unpaid hours of overtime he was forced to put in, he was fired. He held few regrets upon leaving; as it was, the wages were so miserable that often he couldn't afford the bus fare to and from work.

It was his older brother, Frei Chico (which ironically means "little brother"), who invited Lula to his first union meeting in 1968. Frei Chico was an extremely dedicated union activist, and his younger brother admired his conviction. In 1969, noting that there was no shop-steward in his brother's factory, Frei Chico encouraged Lula to be the first. Lula, pleading inexperience, tried to dissuade his brother. But when his brother, accompanied by other union leaders of the Sao Bernardo do Campo Metalworkers Union collectively put on the pressure, Lula accepted the challenge.

Lula soon learned that being a shop-steward was much more difficult than he had imagined. The main obstacle was the Brazilian labor law. Patterned after the corporatist labor code of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, the law provides no protection for labor leaders, and gives the minister of labor the power to collect all union dues, approve or reject all union budgets, and discharge labor leaders as he sees fit. Lula was further disheartened to find that his commitment to the rank and file was not shared by most of the other union leaders. The majority were more concerned with the prestige and PIRKS their positions offered, than they were with the problems of their fellow workers.

In 1975, Lula was elected president of the Sao Bernardo do Campo Metalworkers Union. When interviewed, Lula recalled that:

"It was in 1975, when I assumed the presidency, that I became aware that the union could no longer limit itself to the union headquarters. That, in fact, the labor movements' work began beyond this building, that the true movement was taking place in the factories' doorways, or in the homes of the workers. And based on this realization, we developed our movement from 1976 on."

By 1977, the union's rank and file had grown from its 1972 membership of 80,000 to 120,000 members. The roster included the workers of Chrysler, Ford, Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen, and Toyota, as well as those of many complementary industries.

Convinced that the only way to make headway in their struggle was to refuse to run the corporations' machines, not a single week passed in 1978 without the workers of one or more of the union's factories taking to the picket line. While some victories were achieved, like the 11% pay increase won for the workers of Ford, Toyota, Mercedes-Benz, Chrysler, Volkswagen, and Scania, the high annual inflation rates, undermined the increases won. In 1979, the union called a general strike of all its members. The corporations, in cahoots with the government, turned down the workers' demand for a 63% pay increase.

The following year, the metal workers declared their most important strike ever. What made this 41-day strike historically unique were the demands put forth by the workers. No longer were they simply limited to such economic grievances as wage increases; rather, challenging the government's authority to remove union officials, name shop-stewards, and otherwise determine how unions are run, the majority of the requests were of a political nature. After jailing Lula for the better half of its duration, the government declared the strike illegal, and ordered the workers back to their factories. The new contract approved by the government, provided the workers with even less benefits than those already conceded by the companies.

In February 1981, Lula was tried and found guilty of defying the National Security Law for leading his union in an illegal strike. As a result of this conviction, Lula is no longer allowed to occupy a union or political post. The government's efforts to eliminate Lula from or at least drastically reduce his role in the nation's labor movement have been largely thwarted. As he himself put it:

"Today I am (still) a union militant because I continue to meet with my work companions in the factory entrances, to call them together for union meetings, and to hold the position of president of the Worker's Party."

Lula remains the man most feared by the Brazilian government. First, because he, in a way unsurpassed by any other populist leader in the country's history, has been able to mobilize tens of thousands not only to strike, but to participate in public marches in protest against the government's economic and social policies.

Second, Lula and his union have won the respect and support of a most powerful ally: the Catholic Church. As Lula explained:

"The role of the Church has been of fundamental importance to the extent

that it has defended the oppressed, and the worker. The Church has started to practice Christianity as it truly should. I don't believe that there can be a single transformation in Latin America without the Church's participation."

Unlike in other Latin America nations, where the Church's progressive sectors tend to be limited to the lower echelons of its hierarchy, Brazil has several rebels in purple garb. One of these, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns of Sao Paulo, has been quick to show his support for Lula's efforts. In fact, when the military regime declared the 1980 metalworkers' strike illegal, Cardinal Arns made an official announcement to the contrary: not only were the workers' grievances legitimate, but so much so, that all the Catholic churches of the area were put at the union's disposal to hold its local meetings.

Finally, under the leadership of Lula, his union has successfully undertaken a massive campaign to raise the class consciousness of the rank and file. The repeated strike actions, complemented by the union's informative daily newspaper, have made the workers aware that Brazil's labor law is fundamentally against them; that what economic solutions they can win by striking, at best, are only temporary due to Brazil's galloping inflation; and, that many of their grievances require political solutions. These realizations have not only led to the inclusion of political demands in their contract negotiations, but to the formation of a political party - the Workers' Party.



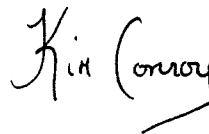
Interview with Luis Ignacio da Silva
(Lula), September 25, 1981, Sao Paulo,
Brazil.

As Lula explained:

"We are well aware that the economic regime is subordinate to the political one ... We have discovered that the union does not exist to change society. Rather, the union exists to improve the relation between capital and labor. And not long ago, we realized that we need to change the society, and that this is only possible with the application of a political solution. For this reason, we organized the creation of a workers' party."

The party already has 300,000 registered members, and hopes to have another 700,000 before next November's elections. Lula, as president of the party, regularly spends his evenings and weekends with urban and rural workers, listening to their problems, explaining the necessary solutions, and convincing them they are attainable, if the workers organize. If the meeting I attended in the working class suburb of Sao Paulo was even a small indication of Lula's power with the people, the government's fear is more than justified.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Kim Conway". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the word "Sincerely,".

Received in Hanover 11/25/81