

Ukraine, Lula's peace plan and the global fight against the extreme right: An interview with Brazilian socialist Israel Dutra (MES/PSOL)

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Israel Dutra, of the Brazilian Socialist Left Movement (MES), speaks to *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal's* Federico Fuentes about Putin's war, solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance and Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's peace proposal. Dutra also discusses the twin challenge facing the international left today: inter-imperialist rivalry and combating the rise of the extreme right. MES is a tendency within the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), of which Dutra is the secretary general.

Could you begin by outlining the position of MES/PSOL on the Ukraine war and how your organisation characterises this conflict that has generated so much debate within the left?

Firstly, I would like to say that we greatly value and respect the work you have done to help make available information about the war through the interviews you have conducted with leftists in Ukraine, a number of which we have translated for publication in Brazil. We have often used the interviews you have done for *Green Left* and *LINKS* with comrades from Social Movement in Ukraine, as well as with leftists in Russia, Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, as reference points to better inform our discussions and help work out our position.

As soon as the war broke out, we immediately went into a state of emergency and adopted a clear statement based on a class struggle perspective. We looked at the fact that Russian imperialism — albeit a very minor imperialism compared to other imperialisms — had taken the reactionary step of occupying Ukraine with the aim of destroying its independent existence. Putin openly sought to justify the invasion by claiming [Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir] Lenin had been responsible for Ukraine's appearance in the 20th century and that this had been a tragic mistake: this was the narrative he promoted to justify occupying Ukrainian territories and incorporating them into the Russian Federation. It was evident that Putin's initial aim was to launch a blitzkrieg, quickly overthrow Zelensky and install a puppet government that would offer no resistance to Russian occupation. Putin's hope was that this puppet government could act as a buffer against NATO — a kind of imperialist protectorate.

Faced with this reality, we saw it crucial to reject Russia's actions and express our solidarity with Ukraine, just as we had done with the war against the Kosovar people [in 1998-99]. Back then, we opposed NATO imperialism, which was bombing Serbia, but also denounced [Serbian leader Slobodan] Milosevic as a war criminal and staked out a left position in support of Kosova, even helping to organise solidarity convoys. We are not facing the exact same situation today, but our basic stance of solidarity with Ukraine follows in that vein.

Our position on this conflict is framed by three factors. The first is that this is an imperialist occupation of a people; of a sovereign, democratic nation with a liberal bourgeois regime, albeit a distorted one like any other, but a regime in which the government was elected by the people. It is not a dictatorship, much less a fascist one as some have tried to slander Zelensky's government: it is a bourgeois government that oppresses its own people, but it is not fascist.

The second factor is the threat of nuclear war. Not since the Cuban missile crisis have we faced such a threat. The world has already reached several critical tipping points when it comes to the climate and economic and social issues. Now, because of Putin's war, the potential for a nuclear war is once again on the table. This is something that should set off alarm bells for everyone, not just socialists, because it is not an abstract issue: Putin has threatened to use nuclear bombs. Given this, we must send a clear message, otherwise we risk opening up the possibility that nuclear bombs could be used in a subsequent conflict — and not just as a threat.

The third factor is that this war has strengthened the extreme right internationally. We see combating the extreme right as a central task for socialist today. Contrary to what others say, in particular those who hold a campist position [which sees the basic division in politics as one between the US-led "camp" and the "camp" of its opponents], it is Putin who represents the threat of the extreme right in this conflict. Putin is no democrat, much less some kind of inheritor of the Soviet Union's legacy. As well as being a dictator, Putin is an extreme right ideologue. On Putin's side we have other extreme right ideologues of international significance, such as Alexander Dugin, and we have the Wagner group, a fascist gang of the worst type: a militia composed of mercenaries and fascists, akin to the Freikorps in World War I.

In light of the fact that we are dealing with a war of occupation; one that poses the threat of nuclear war; and one that involves a fight against the extreme right, we have taken the position of supporting the Ukrainian resistance as well as the pacifist and democratic forces and oppressed nations within the Russian Federation who refuse to be used as cannon fodder in this war.

What kind of practical actions has your organisation taken in light of its position?

In terms of practical solidarity, we have sought to intervene, together with comrades from other countries, in two ways. First, we have sought to work with the best elements of the Ukrainian left, such as Social Movement. This has included participating in a network of left publications that was established for this cause and that includes the Ukrainian left-wing journal Commons. Through this network we have shared and translated information coming out from the Ukrainian left. We also sent two MES leaders, Bruno Magalhães and Roberto Robaina, to Poland to attend the congress of [radical left party] Razem and meet with other Polish comrades with a long trajectory of revolutionary left activism, such as Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski. Bruno then travelled to the Poland-Ukraine border to speak with Ukrainian refugees. As MES, we believe it is critical to not only support the resistance in Ukraine but also help support the seeds of socialist politics that are sprouting in Eastern Europe amid the scorched earth that was left behind by Stalinism, making it clear to them that a genuine left exists — one that is not with Putin.

At the same time, inside Brazil, we have made contacts with the local Ukrainian community, which has very contradictory politics and sees the left as pro-Putin, but despite this we have been working with them. So much so that we convinced many of them to not vote for [former president Jair] Bolsonaro in the past elections. We invited a Social Movement comrade to Brazil and managed to get him to speak in favour of socialism at the biggest annual traditional festival organised by the local Ukrainian community. We have also supported solidarity conveys organised by trade unions and one of our comrades helped translate a book on Ukraine that was recently published in Brazil. So, we are not just talking about Ukraine but also carrying out practical solidarity; we are not remaining

passive but getting active.

Has the PSOL taken this same stance?

I would say that our position slightly differs from the one that PSOL has taken as a whole. PSOL has not adopted a particularly clear stance on the conflict; rather, it has sought to administer differences within the organisation over the conflict. Our tendency represents a little less than half of the party; it is the largest individual tendency within the party. But within PSOL today there is a coalition between two blocs of tendencies, PSOL Popular and PSOL Semente [PSOL Seed], which together hold a slim majority. This has led PSOL to take a somewhat intermediary position.

Generally speaking, given our political weight within the party, our position has tended to be the one expressed in party statements. But overall, the PSOL has not really said much about the war. The party as a whole has not taken a strong stance because among our MPs there are two positions: one that wants to actively intervene around this conflict, which is the position of MES; and one that prefers to not discuss the issue or make public statements on the war, even if publicly they do not criticise our position.

Brazil's president Lula da Silva has received a lot of attention for his proposal to set up a "peace group" of neutral countries and see if an end to the war can be negotiated. At the same time, Lula has been criticised for statements he made that blamed Russia and Ukraine equally for the war. Could you outline how you view Lula's position on the war?

In order to understand Lula's position on the war, we need to understand the current global situation and the role that Lula is seeking to play on the international political scene within this context. The imperialist system today finds itself in crisis. One only has to look around to see that the United States, which has traditionally viewed itself as the global police officer, has never been as weak as it is today on the global level. Moreover, large fissures have emerged within the US bourgeoisie, with establishment sectors that promote a kind of "progressive neoliberalism" that supports certain rights when it comes to women, the LGBTIQ community, etc, being challenged by an emergent neo-fascist or proto-fascist sector that has a strategy of occupying the state and undermining democratic institutions. Within this framework, Lula is attempting to convert Brazil into a kind of counter-hegemon.

It is important to remember that during Bolsonaro's four years in power, he transformed Brazil into a pariah state on the international scene. He was regularly left out in the cold at international gatherings, and seen as a buffoon, a clown. It is also important to remember that Bolsonaro's government was one of Putin's biggest supporters. Just two weeks before the war started, Bolsonaro was in Moscow with Putin and under Bolsonaro, Brazil never condemned the war in the United Nations.

Compared to Bolsonaro, Lula is seen as a breath of fresh air. Lula's return to power rightly raised expectations because he was always a very talented head of state who sought to promote multilateralism and South-South diplomacy and had an integral vision for a world of peace and democracy. This vision coincides with that of Itamaraty [Brazil's Minister of Foreign Relations], which has a long tradition of such a foreign policy, even if this tradition is not as deeply ingrained as it is, for example, in Mexico. When it comes to international human rights, Brazil has a history of taking progressive stances, ever since the fall of the dictatorship, on issues such as recognising Palestine, opposing wars and supporting migration rights.

On the international scene, Lula is still seen as a major league player, but he does not have the same prestige he once had. Moreover, he has not yet come to terms with the new global situation. His

outlook has remained frozen in time from when he was last in power and has not adjusted to the changes that have occurred since then, in particular with regards to growing inter-imperialist competition between the United States and China, as evidenced by the microchips and currency wars under way between these two powers.

This leads Lula to play a contradictory role on the international scene. On the one hand, Lula's declarations on Ukraine generate sympathy because he raises the issue of peace. But, on the other hand, his declarations have tended to be quite vague and confused. Moreover, to date, he has not been able to meet peoples' expectations; rather, he has contributed to generating more crisis and confusion, for example by hosting Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov in Brazil. While, previously, Bolsonaro directly propped up Putin — something that is unexplainable for the campists who see Putin as some kind of anti-imperialist — today, Lula indirectly aids Putin.

So, what about Lula's plan?

When it comes to proposing a peace plan, even Putin has his own "peace plan", which would see Russia continue to occupy Ukrainian territories. But that is not a serious peace plan; it is not even a basis on which to start negotiations.

In Brazil, everyone is still waiting to see what Lula's peace group and peace plan might look like, but so far he has not gone beyond words and, unfortunately, these words have generally not contributed towards finding a just peace.

But Lula's basic idea of negotiations is a good one, right?

In a war, negotiations are not just positive but necessary. In modern warfare, conflict is necessarily fought along two fronts: in the trenches and theatre of operations, and in the diplomatic arena. This is not new. There was a big debate in the workers movement over the question of negotiations when the Bolsheviks took power in 1917 and shortly after signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk [a peace pact with the Central Powers in World War I that ended Russia's participation in the war]. This decision was hotly debated for months by the Bolsheviks, but in the end, there was no other option but to go to the negotiating table amid a war that had already dragged on for several years.

So, negotiations are inevitable and necessary in a war, particular when the war is stuck in a stalemate, like we have in Ukraine at the moment where, on one side, the Russian army has suffered heavy losses and, on the other side, Ukrainians are having to deal with the impacts of the immense destruction that the war has reaped on them, particularly their electricity infrastructure, which has come under sustained Russian attack for the purpose of weaken peoples' resolve to continue fighting back. Today, in Ukraine, there is no clear end in sight to the war, at least in the short-term. There is hope that a new Ukrainian counteroffensive could shift the situation, but there are no guarantees this will occur. So, in a war of these characteristics, negotiations are not just necessary but inevitable. I think Zelensky is wagering on some kind of negotiation and Putin too, in his own way. So too Chinese president Xi Jinping, because the reality is that the outcome of this war will have an impact on imperialism's broader geopolitical crisis.

But we can also say that not all negotiations are either good or bad. We have to move beyond adjectives and look at objectives. For example, negotiations in which Putin agrees to leave Ukraine would be a positive step forward and represent a big democratic victory. But negotiations that lead to a peace of cemeteries, to a frozen conflict, would represent a defeat for Ukraine and not just a temporary victory for Putin but a blank cheque for a person who has publicly stated he is willing to use nuclear weapons, thereby opening up a very dangerous scenario. In this sense, while we understand the generalised, positive sentiment that exists in favour of peace and for an end to a war

that has contributed to rising prices that have made workers' lives harder everywhere, we believe calling for negotiations without any content, raising negotiations as a generic slogan, does more harm than good.

In sum, we think it is a good thing that Lula is using his prestige and standing as a statesman, as a person with good standing among the Global South who is seen as a democrat, to seek a peace plan for Ukraine. But any plan that seeks to force Ukraine to capitulate is regressive.

What about the question of arms? Lula has publicly refused to give Ukraine weapons and blamed the US for prolonging the war through arms deliveries to Ukraine....

To start with, it is evident that this is a struggle between unequal sides and that, therefore, Ukraine has the right to ask for weapons in order to fight back against the invaders. This is not only a socialist position but a basic right in international law: a country that has been invaded has the right to resist in whatever way they see fit.

Of course, we cannot close our eyes to the role that NATO and US imperialism play in the world. And we should not be surprised that this issue [of NATO arms to Ukraine] has generated confusion. For almost a century, US imperialism has globally played the main role of promoting wars, oppressing people and supporting dictatorships, including in Brazil. For this reason, it is in our DNA to be against US imperialism. This just sentiment, in part, explains Lula's position on arms to Ukraine. Unfortunately, the campists seek to use this genuine and just sentiment by placing an equal sign between NATO's previous interventions and its current role in Ukraine — which is clearly not the case — to mobilise support for Russian imperialism.

But it is important to note that Brazil does not really have a history or tradition of sending weapons or troops abroad. Brazil does not have a military capable of really helping Ukraine. In reality, Brazil's military interventions have generally been very modest and its largest intervention, which occurred during Lula's first government when troops were sent as supposed "peacekeepers" to Haiti, has been a complete disaster. We strongly opposed that intervention right from the start.

So, the question of supplying arms is not so relevant in Brazil given the size of the Brazilian military. The key issue for us is how Lula is using his prestige to push for negotiations in a manner that generates further confusion among people about Putin's aims, and thereby indirectly aiding Putin.

Lula's proposal is clearly framed within his overall vision for Brazil's foreign policy. How can we best understand this foreign policy?

This is an issue that requires further development and debate. But I think there are two problems that we need to separate out. When Lula sought in his first governments to promote a multipolar world, he did so amid a context of emergent political processes that were seeking to break away from the more savage versions of neoliberalism that had been imposed in Latin America. Positive initiatives, such as the Bank of the South, were launched at the time; so too ALBA [the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our America], a project promoted not by Lula but by the first generation of what we can call Bolivarian governments — Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador — though they sought to involve more moderate sectors. Amid the chaos that had emerged in the post-Berlin Wall world, the push to actively promote multipolarity at that time was, in and of itself, positive.

But two important changes have occurred since then. The first is China's consolidation into an imperialist power. We are no longer just dealing with a question of geopolitical multipolarity but economics interests that place China in direct competition with the United States. We are no longer

just talking about developing political alliances, as Chávez wanted. China today is no longer simply a conjunctural ally but an imperialist power with its own strategic interests and nefarious aims, such as promoting an aggressive policy of natural resource exploitation in Latin American countries. Brazil today is experiencing a process of reprimarisation [reconversion to primary production] of our economy, with large landowners, in many cases backed by Chinese companies, shifting production towards export-orientated commodities. This has caused local food prices to rise steeply. So, this is the first important change: China has consolidated itself as a non-hegemonic imperialist power that engages in competition with US companies over markets in dependent countries. Given China's role in the world today, we are not dealing with the construction of a harmonious alliance but rather an imperialist and predatory relationship.

The second issue, which is more complex, is that today, alongside the issue of relations between imperialist, semi-periphery and periphery states, we also have the rise of an extreme right current that has taken power in various states and which governments that are not aligned with that current need to politically confront. The world situation cannot be solely understood through the general geopolitical framework of inter-imperialist conflict — we also have to take into consideration the fight against the emergence of a mass neo-fascist political current in global politics when building alliances. Joseph Stalin was a criminal monster, but he was right to form alliances with democratic Allied forces against Nazi fascism. I do not think we are moving towards a war of the same characteristics as World War II now, but we cannot lose sight of this extreme right factor and only see the world through the prism of inter-imperialist rivalry.

We face a very complex situation in which there are two dividing lines internationally: there is inter-imperialist conflict, which is getting more intense and in which there is no progressive imperialist side; and there is the fight for democracy, with all its limitation, against dictatorships and fascism, which the socialist left needs to give more thought to and take sides in. Given all this, Lula should be very cautious when it comes to his foreign policy of multipolarity. At the same time, he needs to be an ally in the global fight against the extreme right. This is necessary because there are governments in Latin America that need support, such as Gustavo Petro's government in Colombia, which is facing an internal challenge from this extreme right current. But he has not done this due to his government's capitalist interests. Moreover, in Peru, Lula's government supplied an illegitimate government that emerged from a US-backed parliamentary coup against a democratically-elected president with weapons to brutally repress protesters. We as MES and PSOL strongly denounced Lula for helping to prop up the rightist Dina Boluarte government in Peru. Thankfully, due to our protests, the government recently announced it would no longer sell these weapons to Peru, but this position of selling weapons to a regime repressing anti-coup protesters, along with other regressive positions he has taken on regional politics, is not what many were expecting from Lula.

You refer to these two dividing lines. Perhaps nowhere else is the intersection of these two lines, and the complexity that this brings with it, more evident than within the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) alliance, which Lula promotes as a positive actor for multipolarity...

Like everything else, BRICS is marked by both these contradictions. We have, for example, the Indian government, which is part of BRICS, but which is governed by an extreme right that ruthlessly attacks its opponents and local peasant movements. Next door, in Pakistan, we have a geopolitical dispute in which US imperialism accuses the government of Imran Khan, an authoritarian capitalist government but one that is not aligned with the US, of cosying up to China. So, we can see at play both inter-imperialist competition and the struggle between democracy and the extreme right.

The problem is that Lula maintains the same vision for BRICS that he had 10-15 years ago. But,

since then, the extreme right has started to impose itself, leading to new realignments. Amid further chaos, we will continue to see further realignments. Within all this, the left cannot lose sight of either contradiction. If we only see the world as divided between democracy and fascism and ignore inter-imperialist conflicts, we will not be able to explain the Taiwan situation. Simultaneously, we cannot ignore the extreme right and refuse to acknowledge the low-intensity cultural and political war under way. The left speaks a lot about geopolitics but not enough about the battle against the extreme right, which has built a base among evangelicals, military sectors, etc. We as the left need to collectively debate how we can best confront this extreme right.

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