

**THE PEASANT LEAGUES OF THE PCB: THE TRAJECTORY OF A DEBATE
(1926-1945)**

AS LIGAS CAMPONESAS DO PCB: A TRAJETÓRIA DE UM DEBATE (1926-1945)

LAS LIGAS CAMPESINAS DEL PCB: LA TRAYECTORIA DE UN DEBATE (1926-1945)

Leonardo Soares dos SANTOS¹

ABSTRACT: This article deals with the first discussions and records about the Leagues in the reflections that the Party developed around the Agrarian Issue, highlighting the importance of the analysis of international events related to this theme by the communists. It was in the second half of the 1920s that the debate around the term Peasant League arose as a form of organization of rural workers. And this debate would continue throughout the 1930s, with organizations conceived as instruments of mobilization and organization of "peasants" with the clear intention of carrying out an armed insurrection to seize power.

KEYWORDS: Peasant Leagues. PCB. Agrarian issue.

RESUMO: *Este artigo trata das primeiras discussões e registros a respeito das Ligas nas reflexões que o Partido desenvolvia em torno da Questão Agrária, destacando a importância da análise dos eventos internacionais referentes a essa temática por parte dos comunistas. É na segunda metade dos anos 1920 que surge o debate em torno do termo Liga Camponesa como forma de organização de trabalhadores do meio rural. E esse debate seguiria pelos anos 1930, com as organizações pensadas como instrumentos de mobilização e organização de "camponeses" com o claro intuito de efetivar uma insurreição armada visando a tomada de poder.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Ligas Camponesas. PCB. Questão agrária.*

RESUMEN: *Este artículo trata de las primeras discusiones y registros sobre las Ligas en las reflexiones que el Partido desarrolló en torno a la Cuestión Agraria, destacando la importancia del análisis de los acontecimientos internacionales sobre esta cuestión por parte de los comunistas. Fue en la segunda mitad de la década de 1920 cuando surgió el debate en torno al término Liga Campesina como forma de organización de los trabajadores rurales. Y este debate continuaría a lo largo de la década de 1930, con organizaciones concebidas como instrumentos de movilización y organización de "campesinos" con la clara intención de llevar a cabo una insurrección armada para tomar el poder.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Ligas Campesinas. PCB. Cuestión agraria.*

¹ Fluminense Federal University (UFF), Goytacazes – RJ – Brazil. Professor at the Department of History. Doctorate in History (UFF). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5798-8123>. E-mail: leossga@gmail.com

It is interesting to note that the debate on the issues of the peasant movement – and consequently the Peasant Leagues theme – that took place in the PCB during its first two decades of existence, accompanied with extreme perfection the oscillations and contradictions caused by a double relationship of tension, which would continue to be an integral part of the Party's life for several decades to come, but which in this period had much more acute contours, which on certain occasions seemed to lead the Party to disappear: on the one hand, the PCB's undemocratic relationship with the Communist International; on the other, the always incandescent game of disputes between groups within it. Let's see how this happened in the 1920s and 1930s.

For the reconstitution of this debate, we used the testimonies of the time present in periodicals such as *1º de Maio*, *La Correspondencia Sudamericana*, *Marcha*, *A Classe Operária*, *A Nação*, *Boletim do Secretariado Sul-americano da IC*, *O Lutador* and *Boletim Interno do Secretariado Nacional do PCB*. These sources were consulted together with the collection present in the Documental Fund “Communist International”, organized and guarded by the Center for Documentation and Memory of UNESP.

The “Peasant Issue” did not seem, at the beginning of the 1920s, to be something that effectively worried the men who proclaimed themselves “followers” of the Russian Revolution, contrary to what happened with communists in other countries, such as Argentina, Colombia, Italy, China and others. Although its Central Committee considered, in one of its resolutions adopted at the end of December 1926, it was important to “exert influence over the organizations of poor tenants, small farmers, low-ranking officials, inferior employees and fishermen [...]” (CARONE, 1982, p. 49, our translation).

The resolutions were generic, which was symptomatic of the precarious structure of the association, preventing a greater dissemination of political proposals and principles among the population, especially in the interior and peripheral areas. It should be noted that the country's means of transport, equally precarious, made any work of militancy. Which was aggravated by the brutal police repression against the communists of the time.

Faced with so many impediments, the Party members had little choice but to reproduce the formulas and schemes of the Communist International. On an occasion like this, the *1º de Maio*, a publication by the National Committee for International Workers' Relief, linked to the PCB, would publish an editorial exactly on Labor Day. In it, the association presented several proposals (“claims and slogans”) for some of the main social issues in the country. Regarding the social classes of the “camps”, the communists identified the existence of three categories: the “agricultural worker (journalist, wage earner, street

vendor)”, the “small landless farmer (tenant, sharecropper, third party)”, and “the small owner who does not live off the work of others” (*1º de Maio*, 01/05/1926, p. 1). On the basis of this distinction, the program continued, the Party established a specific form of organization for each category: for agricultural workers, the priority form would be that of “trade unions”. As for the small farmer, the “organic demands” consisted of the “development of the Leagues of small farmers” and “adhesion to the International of Peasants” (Idem).

And it was based on the guidelines established by the Communist International (IC) that Brazilian communists began to pay more attention to the problems of the “poor rural people”. And for that, the Peasant Workers' Block (BOC) would be created, which in 1927 would replace the Workers' Block (BO).

Such interest took place in a conflicted context. Having as its fundamental slogan “The land for those who work on it”, the Third National Congress, held at the end of 1928, charged the then-elected Central Committee “with the task of carrying out a more in-depth and detailed study on this issue”, creating to this end a “special commission” (SANTOS, 1996, p. 39). The event would also approve “temporary assignments”, of “general application”, such as: salary according to the cost of living; production and consumption cooperatives, and tax-free supply of raw materials; energetic and decisive fight against the reminiscences of slavery; sanitation of unhealthy areas; primary and compulsory education, with the construction of suitable buildings; reduction of taxes on vehicles that “serve the farming”, as well as the suppression of the tax that prohibits the free trade of its products; hygienic and comfortable residences; supply of instruments; decrease in working hours; broad freedom of association, speech, press, etc.; union with “industrial workers” in the fight against “oppressive imperialism”; help against insect pests; freedom of vote, right to own candidates, organization of “other” Workers and Peasants' Blocs.

“Consignments” that sought to account for the socioeconomic specificities (property regimes, forms of work, etc.) of each region of the country would also be discussed and approved. In the Southeast region, for example, where the concentration of “rural workers” was greater - and among them those involved in coffee production – the Party advocated measures such as “remuneration of settlers equal to that of ordinary wage earners” and “expulsion of overbearing tax administrators” Specific measures were also proposed for the North and “Extreme-North” (“true fiefdoms” in the words of the communists), Northeast (where “the slavery of workers still persisted”) and for a territory that comprised Mato Grosso, Goiás, Rio Grande do Sul and northern Minas Gerais. As part of the attempt to

establish a program that would encompass the specificities between these various regions, the communists would point out the three categories that, in their view, would make up the “peasant class”, namely: the “wage earners” or “agricultural workers”, “the settlers” and “peons”. The curious thing is that this document made little reference to the categories of non-salaried workers and possible forms of organization, which, to a certain extent, contradicted the determinations of the South American Secretariat of the IC (SSA/IC). The latter, from the first half of 1928, defended the thesis that the proletariat and “its party” should “in the first place, unite themselves closely with the peasantry, organizing the agricultural workers as a source for organizing the poor peasants, the tenants, settlers, in Krestintern policy-oriented Peasant Leagues [Russian abbreviation for Peasant International]”.

Which is somewhat intriguing, since there were concrete actions underway by the PCB itself in some regions of the interior of the country with non-salaried sectors around 1928, with the aim of recruiting them into “peasant organizations”. According to Ronald Chilcote, the first ones would be called Peasant Leagues, as the Party itself had proposed for some time. Communist militants would have organized one in the interior of the state of São Paulo, in the areas of Sertãozinho and Ribeirão Preto. The rural workers gathered there would also have, “under the leadership of Teotônio de Souza Lima”, held “protest marches in the large coffee plantations” (CHILCOTE, 1982, p. 231). There is also information from the same year that shows that, in addition to São Paulo, there was a work of organization of “small farmers” in Rio de Janeiro (Federal District) and that the Regional Committees of Pernambuco and Rio Grande do Sul were also highlighting “comrades for this work” of acting in the field (*La Correspondencia Sudamericana*, 30/09/1928, p. 14). In April of that year, the newspaper *A Nação*, already under the great influence of the PCB – reported on the attempt by the “vanguard of small farmers” in Campo Grande to form a “Benefit and Agricultural Society of the United Farmers”. His first initiative would be to send a memorial to the city's mayor, with “urgent demands from local farmers”: “building a new market, repairing impassable roads, fighting ants; transit and free sale of farming products and various other measures that will alleviate the situation of the farmers a little” (*A Nação*, 1927 [probably month of April], p. 3). Some initiatives in organizational terms took shape at a time when some leftist groups, in addition to the PCB, began to insinuate themselves into the rural area of the city.

The PCB's performance in the countryside was based on the almost solitary and voluntarist action of some militants; it was not, therefore, the result of a coordinated plan,

elaborated and meticulously debated by the instances of the Party, that is why it was something so discontinuous and fragmented. The statement below by Otavio Brandão about the first incursions of Party militants into rural areas in the second half of the 1920s is very illustrative:

- There was the following... I forgot; Laura is the one who knew. There in the state of Rio, in an area, she would always go there - it took I don't know how many hours of travel -, to talk to those peasants. And in Sertãozinho, Ribeirão Preto, in that whole area, there was a comrade, Teotônio de Souza Lima. Wonderful. He was a firefighter, he made rockets. The man was an extraordinary dedication. He read, by chance, the newspaper A Classe Operária, in 25, and joined the party. So, he, a firefighter, had a union in Sertãozinho, state of São Paulo, and he organized this extraordinary thing: a march of true peasants, settlers of coffee plantations, towards the city of Sertãozinho to fraternize with the workers. An extraordinary thing. The other thing was in Juiz de Fora. I gathered a group of workers and we went to the outskirts of Juiz de Fora, a coffee farm area. We penetrate there. We held rallies inside the coffee farm, and those settlers signed a petition to the Minister of Justice, protesting the closing of our newspaper A Classe Operária. In 1925. But these attempts failed to be systematic, methodical, planned. Only in Sertãozinho (BRANDÃO, 1993, p. 117, our translation).

In 1930, the organ of the PCB Classe Operária reported the occurrence of a protest by small farmers in Niterói against the collection of fees by the municipality. The local farmers themselves would have mobilized to discuss measures that would facilitate the marketing of products from their crops. Faced with the fact, the newspaper urged Niteroi farmers to organize themselves into a “League of Small Farmers and Peasants”. But consultation of later numbers of the same newspaper does not reveal any information or indication that such a League has been carried out or actually implemented (*A Classe Operária*, 03/07/1930, p. 03).

At the beginning of 1928, the PCB would hold a conference of the suburban area with the cells that worked in the region and would highlight the advances in the work with the men of the countryside: “The QR cell has carried out an important work for the party among the farmers from the Federal District and Est. do Rio. organized 2 agricultural unions and is in the process of organizing 5 more unions. It is good to see, a work like this requires great energy and capacity and for that this cell deserves praise for the work undertaken” (*Boletim Mensal Regional do P.C.B.*, 01/02/1928, p. 2).

Regarding the “Peasant Issue”, the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International of 1928 was incisive about the need to organize the rural masses:

There the fundamental task is to form independent organizations of workers and peasants (the communist party as a class party of the proletariat, unions, peasant leagues and committees, soviets in revolutionary situations, etc.) and to remove them from the influence of the national bourgeoisie, with which temporary agreements are only admissible insofar as it does not impede the revolutionary organization of the workers and peasants and effectively combats imperialism (VI Congresso da Internacional Comunista, 01/09/1928, p. 54, our translation).

This fact would be ratified at the I Communist Conference of Latin America in 1929, which would bring together 14 countries and where the proposals presented by the Brazilian delegation, composed of Paulo de Lacerda, Leôncio Basbaum, Mário Grazzini and Danton Jobim, would be well received. It is necessary to highlight at least two aspects of this First Conference. First, it reaffirmed the idea of the almost central role of the “peasant issue” in the revolutionary movement in that region. As in previous years, the SSA/IC was supported by the thesis of the IC itself, according to which the revolutionary process in the group of “semi-colonial” and “semi-feudal” countries – a group to which all of Latin America would belong – would be conditioned by the effective participation of the “peasantry” as an ally of the (urban) “proletariat”. Due to this concern and the problem contained in the formula of the “anti-feudal” and “anti-imperialist” struggle, the SSA/IC listed a series of measures in relation to the field that should be incorporated by the programs of the PCs of the continent. In the First Conference, for example, it would be indicated as “immediate tasks”: fight against the big landowners, against feudal survivals, against tax impositions, against the imperialist companies that monopolized the commerce and exploited the peasants, against all the “lock” their development, by returning land to communities, opening agricultural credits and creating organizations for the distribution and circulation of their products. Later, a principle would be established that would guide the PCB's performance in the following decades. Based on this principle, it was believed that there would be a “more adequate” form of organization for each sector of rural workers: for “agricultural wage earners” the creation of unions was recommended. As for the “non-salaried” categories such as “small landowners”, “squatters”, “shareholders” and “peasants”, the establishment of Peasant Leagues was proposed. However – it is also important to highlight – the SSA/IC also highlighted the need to establish “alliances” between these two forms of organization (*La Correspondencia Sudamericana*, August 1929, p. 23).

In the 1930s, the IC and its bodies continued to publish theses and diagnoses that had already been matured for at least two years, such as the central role of the peasant class in the revolutionary movements of the group of colonial, semi-colonial and dependent countries. In

its “Thesis Project on the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America”, for example, the IC stated, among other things, that of the three classes that take an active part in the revolutionary movement in Latin America – “petty bourgeoisie”, “peasants” and “proletariat” – “the poor peasants and the agricultural proletariat constituted, almost everywhere, the most powerful spring of the revolutionary movement”. This idea explicitly informed some of the guidelines contained in the draft “IC Resolution on the Brazilian issue”, to be adopted by the PCB. The IC commission in charge of writing the document was emphatic: “Make generic demands about the Brazilian revolution, especially the fight against imperialism, confiscation and division of state lands among peasants on the basis of soviets. For the peasants, the slogan is taken immediately from land ownership.” (WAACK, 1993, p. 30). But there is a significant change in the tone of the guidelines: the insistent proposal to create soviets and armed self-protection groups led to considering the peasant movement almost solely as a vector of armed insurrection. Such guidelines, transmitted directly by the IC, certainly influenced the change observed in the press and in the PCB documents in relation to the emphasis with which the proposals for organizing rural workers were publicized.

The triumphalist tone takes over. In an account published in *La Correspondencia Sudamericana*, Reis Siqueira (sic) asserted that PCB made several advances in the “peasant question”. In the state of São Paulo, for example, “the Party made great progress in this area; For the first time in the history of our Party, cells were organized in agricultural units.” (*La Correspondencia Sudamericana*, 15/02/1930: 24).

And for the first time in Brazil, successive peasant mass movements were taking place with clearly revolutionary characteristics. Movements took place in the “farms” in the course of which the workers took over them, preventing the coffee harvest until they received their back wages.

Unlike in previous years, mentions of Peasant Leagues became more constant, even if they were more about the intention to create them than about existing Leagues. At the same time, the PCB's pronouncements began to enshrine the idea of armed insurrection as the most effective solution to rural problems. This seems to have been the meaning of a report in July 1930, in the communist newspaper *Classe Operária*, about the protests of “small farmers from the outskirts of Nichteroy [now Niterói]” against a resolution by the government of the State of Rio, which determined the of a “traffic tax”. “Revolted”, the “small farmers” decided to suspend sales of their goods to the then Federal District and “Nichteroy”. Wanting to express its solidarity, the newspaper told them:

Companions! Organize yourselves in committees of fight, in local councils and in the League of Small Farmers and Peasants! "Companions! Organize and arm yourselves! Fight by all means, with all weapons, for your interests, in defense of your life and the lives of your children! Fight with energy and decision, expelling the great landowners and taking for yourselves the land that you water with the sweat of your brow (A Classe Operária, 03/07/1930, p. 03).

An expanded plenary session of the SSA/IC was scheduled for May 1930 in Buenos Aires. Soon after, the PCB would go through a major crisis. It can be said that the first three years of the 1930s were almost taken up by internal conflicts around the political line of “class against class” adopted since the removal of the former ruling group in 1930 (DEL ROIO, 1990, p. 101).

In 1931, the SSA/IC highlighted the poor work carried out with rural workers; “Many resolutions have been taken; very little, however, has been carried out” (*Boletim do Bureau Sul-americano da IC*, 01/05/1931, 5). And it still harshly criticized the Brazilian communists:

The Communist Party of Brazil theoretically fights these bourgeois and petty-bourgeois caudillos - a fight in which it makes mistakes -: but its slogans, its position on the peasant question and its activity continue to be completely ignored by the rural masses, because, like the Argentinian party, the Brazilian has no base in the countryside, and without this base all considerations about the agrarian problem, about the hegemony of the proletariat in peasant struggles and in the anti-imperialist agrarian revolution, are nothing more than small talk, without any content (A Classe Operária, 03/07/1930, p. 03).

The *plenum* of the Central Committee of January 1932 would confirm this line and the exclusion - something frequent in this period - of several militants identified with “right-wing deviations” and with “prestism” (DEL ROIO, 2002, p. 44). The Party was, in addition to being paralyzed, practically dismantled when the IC intervened to reorganize it at the end of 1933. And during these interventions, which first formalized in a letter addressed to the PCB leadership in 1930, the IC would formulate proposals about the PCB's performance in the field that would end up in force until practically the 40's. And in this respect, the forms of organization played a fundamental role. However, the way in which they were conceived, through the prism of the insurrectionary line, meant that the Peasant Leagues were assigned almost exclusively military functions. The idea of the peasant masses' need for organization was beginning to become linked, and therefore barely discernible, to the idea of taking power by means of arms.

The IC's first instruction to the PCB was that they should focus on two specific “agrarian regions” – São Paulo and Nordeste, seeking to “recruit militants in these districts,

support their work, distribute literature, organize the movement”. When describing the “method” through which such work would have to be carried out, the IC took up the Chinese example as a parameter to be followed. The struggle undertaken by the Chinese communists against the Kuomintang was constituted in the eyes of the IC leaders as a true insurrectionary model to be applied in the semi-colonial countries. But there was one element in particular whose implementation was insistently proposed to the PCB: the creation of “peasant struggle committees”. For the IC they were the “best organizations to lead the peasants' struggle” (WAACK, 1993, p. 55). This demonstrates that one of the consequences of the consolidation of the Chinese “example” as a paradigm would be precisely to reduce (and confuse) the “peasant question” to a problem of the constitution of rural guerrillas.

The 1932 PCB *plenum* had no doubts about the centrality of the “countryside”:

The importance of work in the countryside is fundamental for the revolutionary trade union movement in Brazil, given the predominant agricultural character of the country. Organize agricultural workers' and settlers' unions on the basis of farm committees, as well as peasant leagues, organizing conferences and, on the basis of these, creating federations (PARTIDO COMUNISTA DO BRASIL, 1932, p. 33).

The second “instruction” exhorted the PCB to establish “closer contacts with the cangaceiro movement” and must also “put itself at the forefront of its struggle, giving it the character of a class struggle, and then link them to the movement”. revolutionary general of the proletariat and peasantry of Brazil” (WAACK, 1993, p. 55-56).

The plenum of the PCB of 1932 would not ratify such orientation in such an incisive way. The leaders remembered that the organization of the rural masses was essential. In the item “Reinforce our penetration in the countryside”, the party defined the IC guidelines as follows:

To direct and organize the struggles of agricultural workers and peasants, placing them under our direction and linking them to the struggle of the urban proletariat. Organize unions on the basis of farm committees of agricultural and semi-proletarian workers, through public conferences of farm delegates, and through a concrete plan of immediate demands. To organize a united front of the poorest agricultural workers and peasants, to fight against the landlords. Collect exact data on the field in order to serve as a basis for the elaboration of an agrarian program of the Party (Plenum do PCB, 1932, p. 54).

Despite the theoretical statements, problems in the field persisted. In 1933, the BSA/IC² produced a letter, addressed to all Communist Parties in South America, entitled “For a decisive turn in peasant work”. It was very uncomfortable for the organization to see that communist action in the countryside was not able to take off. And the problem would originate from a bad theoretical formulation:

The insufficient concern of the Parties for this problem proves the weakness of all their work, being a reflection of all the deviations in the ideological field, of the enormous sectarianism and of the lack of revolutionary orientation that they suffer from.. [...]

The B.S.A. of the IC, considers a closer collaboration in peasant work between him and the Communist Parties of South America indispensable. (Letter from BSA/IC, 1933: 2-3).

On the other hand, there was the conviction that the agrarian question was gaining more and more centrality in the troubled social contexts of Latin American countries.

The task of the Communist Parties consists, precisely, without weakening in the least the defense of the economic and political interests of the agricultural workers and the poor peasantry – to unite the majority of the peasantry for the economic and political struggle against the big landowners and the imperialists, in the broader, more open and direct way, unmasking the feudal-bourgeois and their social-fascist agents who seek at all costs to separate the agricultural worker from the urban worker, and the former from the poor peasant and the whole of the agricultural proletariat and poor peasants, of the rest of the peasantry, of the middle peasantry in particular (Letter from BSA/IC, 1933: 13-14).

Still in 1933, he would return to the subject in a letter addressed directly to the Central Committee of the PCB. The text continued to reaffirm the thesis of the centrality of the agrarian question, at the same time, the Komintern (IC) lamented the weaknesses of the PCB in terms of acting in the countryside, both in practical terms and in the theoretical reading on the issue:

Although the victory of the bourgeois-democratic revolution is only possible by guaranteeing the leading role of the proletariat commanded by the communists, the PCB, in relation to the working peasantry, even having recently obtained some successes, mainly in São Paulo, in the work among the agricultural proletariat, were successes, firstly, not consolidated by a successful recruitment campaign and, secondly, not used to penetrate party influence in the broad layers of the poor and middle peasantry. The Party continues to underestimate the importance of proletarian leadership in the peasant movement and has not conducted any real struggle for the partial demands of the working peasantry, not even listing them. Barely reacting to

² Bureau Sul-americano da Internacional Comunista (BSSA/IC), como passava a ser chamado o SSA/IC.

the struggle of the peasant masses, which has developed spontaneously and has acquired, in several cases, a rather impetuous character, the Party, on the other hand, has sometimes proposed directives that overestimate the maturity of the revolutionary situation and that, therefore, are in abeyance (such as the creation of peasant soviets, proposed in São Paulo at the time of the “civil war”) (Carta da Internacional Comunista ao PCB, 1933, 7-8).

With this in mind, the Komintern stipulated the following practical and organizational tasks for the Central Committee to be carried out with the rural classes, which even included “cangaceiros”:

The Party's immediate tasks in this area are: a) to create party cells in the large agricultural regions, calling on the best and most conscientious agricultural workers and poor and middle peasants who in the past have actively participated in the spontaneous revolutionary movement of the peasants; b) mobilizing part of the urban active cadres in permanent work in the countryside; c) carry out systematic work on existing agricultural unions and create new unions; d) create “peasant struggle committees” in favor of the immediate interests of the poor and middle peasantry and the agricultural proletariat; e) elaborate concrete partial demands and carry out in their defense a series of mass actions that, step by step, lead the peasantry to fight for the immediate appropriation and division of the large estates; f) establish links with the best elements of the “cangaceiros” movement that are closely linked to the masses and conquer the leadership of this movement (Carta da Internacional Comunista ao PCB, 1933, p. 8).

In early 1934, the BSA/IC would hold a meeting on the problems of South America focused on the discussion of the agrarian question. At the end of the event, he would prepare a long document on “The situation of peasants in Brazil”, which underlined the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist character of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Brazil and insisted on affirming that the “agricultural proletariat” was the main ally of the but also insisted that “small and medium landowners” should be drawn into the struggle against “feudalism” and “imperialism”. However, despite considering Brazil as the “China of the West”, the document itself recognized that the “penetration” of the PCB in the “peasant sector” was still very weak. One of the reasons, according to the document, was the underestimation of the “revolutionary potential” of the countryside and of the “peasant revolts” (WAACK, 1993, p. 55-56). The other would have been the leadership printed by Astrojildo Pereira and Octávio Brandão in the direction of the Party (DEL ROIO, 2002, p. 107).

The agrarian question would once again be the subject of extensive discussions at the III Communist Conference of Latin America in October of the same year. Excited that Brazil could soon host a revolution along the lines of China, IC would prepare a series of instructions to be implemented by the PCBs in order to materialize such a project. The

attitude of the Party leadership was simply to include, without any questioning or effort at adequacy, the IC's "instructions" in its political documents. Furthermore, the concern to strictly comply with these "instructions" led the Party to consider the "cangaceiros" as a sort of third group in the rural workers sector, as important as the "peasants" and "agricultural wage earners". It would be these three groups, according to the Declaration of the Central Committee of August 1934, who should compose the "armed committees (...) of the government, as well as to guarantee the possession of their lands, to take and divide the lands of the large landowners" (CARONE, 1982, p. 152).

Months later, in October, the Brazilian delegates present in Moscow, concerned with showing care in fulfilling the IC's "lessons", would focus their speeches exactly on the PCB's performance in the countryside. In Miranda's accounts - which after the failure of 1935 would become known by the suggestive name of "informes-bulwarks" - the countryside was the place where this "revolutionary situation" would be evident. And the IC that a year earlier complained about the PCB's lack of groundedness regarding the reading of rural reality, at that moment asserted that:

In all the states of Brazil there are peasants, workers, cowboys, peons, indians, blacks, mestizos and whites, on farms and mills, who want to take up arms. In all the states of Brazil we are expelled from our lands, farms and fields. Our territory is immense and within it there are examples of Canudos, Contestado, Juazeiro do Padre Cícero, Princesa and thousands of other places, there is an example of the glorious Coluna Prestes, we know how to fight very well, defend ourselves and advance (VIANNA, 1995, p. 32).

Such an "insurreccional" reading contributed to reinforce a type of reading about the "Peasant Question" that had been in force since the beginning of the 1930s with the expulsion of the former ruling group: the Party's action in the countryside should be exclusively based on the promotion of insurrectionary movements with a view to seizing power. The big problem is that the PCB did little in this sense in practical terms, in short, it tried to make us see, with a great deal of voluntarism, that the struggles existing in the countryside – apparently, with almost no Party participation – would be confirming the validity and relevance of the guidelines "suggested" by the IC.

This ambiguity (immediate armed insurrection/accumulation of forces) is fully recognizable when reading the Party's analyzes of the "peasant question". But it is important to emphasize that with the emergence of the ANL, the "peasant" element came to have, as never seen before, a central role in the revolutionary strategy of Brazilian communists. The insistent analogies made by both PCB and IC representatives between the ANL and the

Chinese Kuomintang of the 1920s led to the view that “the entry of the broadest peasant masses” into the struggles against imperialism, feudalism and fascism (DEL ROIO, 2003, p. 112). But if in theoretical terms the role to be played by the “peasants” in a revolution was fully recognized, in practice the Brazilian communists knew that much still had to be done for the effective incorporation of the peasants into the revolutionary process. In a document of July 1935, the Party exulted in the fact that it had broken with “some misunderstandings that prevailed in the past” in relation to the “peasants”. However, he recognized that its performance was still “very weak” in the field, which made it imperative to prepare “cadres of leaders and activists” to carry out this task. Apparently, the Central Committee was guided by the prospect of a long-term organizational and structuring work. Apparently. Then, in the same document, he stated that “the creation of organizations (peasant leagues, ANL committees and agricultural workers' unions) is not essential in some areas”. “The comrades must understand, stressed the leadership of the PCB, that the time has come to break with the tendency to organize the peasants to wait for the revolution and to start the struggle wherever possible, without any fear of going to the armed struggles and guerrillas”. This ambiguity appeared more sharply in a previous document from the month of May. In it we read that the “first task” of the party was to

[...] go to the countryside right now, organize broad peasant organizations, leagues, committees, unions of agricultural workers, organize and trigger peasant struggles and within these mass organizations and through these fights, go, from now on, to form the Party with communists who learn to work in the organization of the masses and who stand out in the leadership of the fights (VIANNA, 1995, p. 76-77).

But the Brazilian communists were fully aware of the difficulties of such an undertaking. And the IC was also well aware of this. Harry Berger, a IC observer, acknowledged that “in cities, we can say that we are more or less well represented. However, the work in the countryside is weak. This is the decisive weak point of all our work. Everything else is going relatively well, in part even very well” (*apud* VIANNA, 1995, p. 431). However, like the PCB members, the men of the IC also formulated very ambiguous analyzes and guidelines, where elements of the “class against class” line coexisted with elements of the “popular front”. Berger was convinced, for example, that “the peasants, in their fight against feudalism, will organize peasant leagues, peasant committees and guerrilla detachments that will be another support of the national revolutionary popular government” (VIANNA, 1995, 427).

By declaring the ANL illegal in July 1935, the Vargas government would contribute to the departure of the possible allies who still believed in the institutional path. Consequently, the communists saw themselves strengthened. More than ever, the insurrectionary path was gaining strength and triumphing over the idea of a “popular front” (DEL ROIO, 2002, p. 58-59). Another factor that contributed to this was the large wave of young soldiers who joined the PCB. This event gave rise to the idea that the ANL was close to winning the support of the majority of the Army. This would only increase the belief that conditions were already in place for the unleashing of a popular insurrection. And certain of this, the communists would start the insurrection in Natal (RN), on the 23rd of November, and in Recife (PE), on the 25th of November. The consequences and repercussions are already well known. In a short time the communists (including the BSA/IC) and their small base of support were dismantled. Counting on the valuable collaboration of the Gestapo, in less than six months, the police would be able to detain practically the entire leading echelon of the PCB and the BSA/IC (DEL ROIO, 2003, p. 114).

Even in 1935, the few members who still managed to escape the police siege sought to elucidate the factors responsible for the failure of the November Intentona. For the Party leadership, the main factor resided in the countryside, where “our peasant work is still very weak, poorly organized even in the places where we have more strength and where there is more agitation. We have to go to the countryside, organize the peasant fights from now on and move from more concrete words and actions to revolutionary work in the countryside”. In this diagnosis, the insurrectionary line adopted by the Party was not subject to any correction. On the contrary, measures were proposed to guarantee their effective implementation, such as the “election” of peasant zones so that the communists could concentrate their efforts on the work of recruiting peasants (VIANNA, 1995, p. 179-180). This measure was openly inspired by the Chinese example of the creation of peasant-based soviets.

Soon after Prestes was arrested in March 1936, the PCB's leadership was transferred to the Northeast. In April the slogan “All power to the ANL” was withdrawn. Apparently, the insurrectionary line was buried. Apparently, one more time. The new Central Committee would claim that the November Uprising had actually been a great success. In an openly triumphalist tone, the National Secretariat asserted that the popularity of the November movement and the ANL, as well as the “authority” of the PCB “grew enormously” (PRETES, 2001, p. 20). The ferocity with which the Government repressed both the movement and the Party would be nothing more than a small setback, nothing that could

weaken the conviction among the “masses” that the ANL and the line it adopted were the way forward for liberation of the country. The “testimony” of January 1936 by João Lopes, the “Santa”, about what had happened in Rio Grande do Norte is, to say the least, revealing. This is how Santa told us:

What I've seen everywhere is a lot of people's satisfaction about this move by the ANL; in jails all excited and satisfied. I saw a large number of young people in jail, cheering the ANL, Prestes and the PC (...) the peasants fighting with weapons in their hands and a red scarf around their neck and a red ribbon on their hat; the peasants' houses decorated with red paper flags on the doors (VIANNA, 1995, p. 220-221).

The “Peasant Issue” continued to play a strategic role in the revolution that seemed to be on its way. In this sense, in addition to the constitution of guerrillas, the communists also highlighted the importance of creating Peasant Leagues for “small owners and peasants” (“small, medium and rich”). This theme was emphatically presented in the clandestine organ *O Lutador*, of the also clandestine ANL. In the issue of 12 December 1936, in the editorial entitled “Importance of the agrarian question”, the writer stressed that there were two most important aspects of the agrarian question at that time:

1st need to incorporate the large rural masses into the alliance movement, without which such a movement would not be fully national or victorious; 2nd the victory of national emancipation will open widely, placing it in the foreground of Brazilian public life, the most likely conditions of the agrarian revolution. Even more: national emancipation will not be consolidated without unleashing the struggles of the agrarian revolution. [...] This is why the national liberators are not neutral or indifferent to the agrarian question; they organize the peasants, support their demands [...] (O Lutador, 12/12/1936, p. 1).

Later, in another text of the same issue, the columnist detailed the difficulties involved in the work of creating organizational entities in rural areas. He pointed out historical difficulties, but he was not discouraged: “It is true that the Brazilian peasant masses do not have traditions of organization, but this does not indicate, however, that they cannot organize themselves. As long as the peasant masses have the will to fight, the problem of organization is practically simple”. And this desire was present for the author: “in recent years there has not been as much as now, such a pronounced fighting spirit of the peasants”. What still needed to happen was the effective mobilization and organization of the “peasants”:

The most diverse means can be used with the benefit of organization. A demonstration (for an application to the local City Hall or for any other reason) is already an embryo of organization. Meetings, frequent assemblies of peasants in a given area to discuss a certain point, constitute an important form of organization: it makes contact between the peasants, those that stand out for their fighting spirit emerge, a feeling of solidarity is created (O Lutador, 12/12/1936, p. 4).

The columnist called attention to the need for communist cadres to act in a very pragmatic way in working together with the “peasants”, avoiding imposing any principle or practice considered strange by them. Therefore, the recruitment campaigns with these agents needed to be very flexible. The same flexibility should be observed for permanent organizations. This was even valid for the name of the entity:

This organization corresponds to what is called the “Peasant League” (the name is not important, but the content). Names should not be imposed. In one municipality it can be “Peasants’ Union” in another “Farmers’ Association”, in a third “Board of Settlers”, etc. “Permanent Association of Peasants” for the defense of all interests (O Lutador, 12/12/1936, p. 4).

Unlike in the immediately preceding years, the Leagues were not seen only as a simple instrument aimed at facilitating the uprising of guerrillas. Even though they still emphasized, still from an insurrectional perspective, “the need to overthrow Getúlio, Sales and their cronies”, the communists returned to their concern with the issue of “defense of the rights” of rural workers. More than making the simple arms of the peasants viable, the Peasant Leagues should have “concrete programs to fight against high taxes, product taxes, high tariffs and railroad freights, against intermediaries who pay them a misery for the product, against the landowners who rob them of their land.” (*A Classe Operária*, julho de 1936, p. 04). In this way, the old agenda of supposedly “peasant” questions and demands – rehearsed in the Party’s internal debates in the second half of the 1920s and which was much closer to the reality of the countryside and the “peasants” – which had been obscured by the voluntarism imprinted by the ruling group that had replaced the one headed by Astrojildo Pereira. In fact, the general lines of such an agenda would be present in several rural workers’ movements for the following decades.

In the 1936 editorial published in *O Lutador*, the columnist stressed:

The mission of the Leagues is to organize the managements and actions of peasants in favor of their demands, both in front of farmers and government authorities; defend the peasants against all abuse (expulsions, etc.); boosting societal education; publicize and explain the motto: “Land for those who work”, etc. When these peasant organizations are more or less numerous, the edition of a period will become indispensable.

Their means of struggle and mobilization are the most diverse and varied: requests, demonstrations, assemblies, marches, strikes, guerrillas, etc. (O Lutador, 12/12/1936, p. 4).

Final considerations

From 1937 onwards, the National Secretariat began to consider a rapprochement with Vargas. In March of that year, the main leaders of the PCB would release a document entitled “Let's win the municipalities for democracy!”. In order to combat “sectarianism” and “leftism”, they would criticize the attempts previously undertaken to trigger guerrilla fights. The insurrectionary line gave way to “the fight for goals that could be resolved within the framework of ‘bourgeois democracy’ and not by the soviets”. The voluntarism expressed in the armed actions gave way to a discourse that emphasized the need for “reeducation of its cadres in the sense of mass legal work and in the preparation of the people for the fight for democracy, against fascism and imperialism” (PRETES, 2001, pp. 26 and 28). Another important aspect of this new orientation is that the Party left the “Peasant Issue” in the background and started to consider the industrial bourgeoisie as the main driving force of the Brazilian revolution. The fight that would be defended at that moment was that of industrialization. And that view would last until 1945.

REFERÊNCIAS

BRANDÃO, Otávio. **Otávio Brandão (depoimento, 1977)**. Rio de Janeiro: CPDOC, 1993.

CARONE, Edgar. **O P.C.B. (1943-1964)**. São Paulo: Difel, 1982.

CHILCOTE, Ronald H. **O Partido Comunista Brasileiro: conflito e integração – 1922-1977**. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal, 1982.

DEL ROIO, Marcos. “Os comunistas, a luta social e o marxismo (1920-1940)”. In: **História do Marxismo no Brasil: Partidos e organizações dos anos 20 aos 60**. Campinas, SP: Editora da Unicamp, 2002. v. 5.

DEL ROIO, Marcos. “Os impactos da Revolução Russa e da Internacional Comunista no Brasil”. In: MORAES, João Quartim de.; REIS FILHO, Daniel Aarão. **História do Marxismo no Brasil: O impacto das revoluções**. Campinas, SP: Unicamp, 2003. v. 1.

DEL ROIO, Marcos. **A classe operária na revolução burguesa. A política de alianças do PCB: 1928-1935**. Belo Horizonte: Oficina de Livros, 1990.

PRESTES, Anita Leocádia. **Da insurreição armada (1935) à “União Nacional” (1938-1945): a virada tática na política do PCB**. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2001.

SANTOS, Raimundo. (org.). **Questão agrária e política**: autores pecebistas. Rio de Janeiro: EDUR, 1996.

VIANNA, Marly (org.) **Pão, terra e liberdade**: memória do movimento comunista de 1935. Rio de Janeiro: Arquivo Nacional; São Carlos: Universidade Federal de São Carlos, 1995.

WAACK, William. **Camaradas**: nos arquivos de Moscou: a história secreta da revolução brasileira de 1935. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993.

How to reference this article

SANTOS, L. S. As Ligas Camponesas do PCB: a trajetória de um debate (1926-1945). **Rev. Sem Aspas**, Araraquara, v. 10, n. 00, e021023, Jan./Dec. 2021. e-ISSN: 2358-4238. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29373/sas.v10i00.15874>

Submitted: 21/09/2021

Required revisions: 20/10/2021

Approved: 23/11/2021

Published: 29/12/2021