

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly outlines the shape of a map of South America, specifically Brazil.

# Trade Unions in Transformation

## Building Trade Union Power with Gender Equality: The Case of the Unified Workers' Central of Brazil

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- In 2015, the Unified Workers' Central (Central Única dos Trabalhadores, CUT) of Brazil, one of the world's largest trade union federations and the most important one in Latin America, implemented gender parity in its decision-making bodies at national and state level. With this step it put itself at the forefront of the international trade union movement as far as gender equality is concerned.
- Gender Parity marks the culmination of a decades-long construction process of more equal gender relations. This extraordinary power building has taken place in a progressive and open trade union atmosphere, incorporating the women workers' request to become subjects of this trade union movement and has brought real transformations.
- While the illegitimate Temer government is systematically dismantling public policy as well as social and labour rights, the progress in gender equality and other anti-discriminatory policies will not be affected by the regression dominating the political path of Brazil today. Gender equality has shaped the CUT's identity, its associational and societal power is intrinsically linked to women's participation, and there is no way back.
- Trade Unions in Transformation is an FES project that identifies unions' power resources and capabilities that contribute to successful trade union action. This study features among two dozen case studies from around the world demonstrating how unions have transformed to get stronger.



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## Abstract

The Unified Workers' Central (Central Única dos Trabalhadores, CUT) of Brazil, one of the world's largest trade union federations, the most important in Latin America, and the country's most representative, in 2015 implemented gender parity in its decision making bodies at national and state level. With this step it put itself at the forefront of the trade union movement where gender equality is concerned, being one of the few organisations to have adopted such a measure. Gender parity marks the culmination of a long construction process of more equal gender relations which started with the CUT's foundation in 1983 and of which the minimum quota for either sex at its Executive Committee, adopted in 1993, is one of the most outstanding examples. Female workers have acquired associational and institutional power and have extended the social power of the CUT, which legitimates itself as the defender of women's rights. Parity is understood in the sense of political parity including gender equality with respect to the possibilities of participation, overcoming obstacles like the gender division of labour, a male chauvinist culture and the imbalance in the distribution of positions.

## Introduction

The Unified Workers' Central (CUT) of Brazil elected an Executive Committee at its 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 2015 according to the rule of gender parity which had been adopted at its previous Congress (2012). In previous months the sectional Congresses of the country's 27 federative units (state CUTs) had elected their Executive Committees according to the same standard in preparation of the National Congress.

Gender parity is a radical means to overcome the gender imbalance with respect to participation in decision making in the public sphere. In adopting it, CUT has positioned itself as a national trade union federation at the forefront of the female workers' struggle towards becoming subjects of trade union action. Even more radically, the decision has not remained at a level of mere discourse but has been implemented.

CUT is the most representative trade union federation in Brazil, currently covering 30.4 percent of all organised workers<sup>1</sup>. It is the most important federation in Latin America and the fifth largest in size worldwide.

It was founded in 1983 as a result of the movement known as *Nuevo Sindicalismo* (New Unionism), which arose towards the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties, starting with the big metal worker strikes in the so-called ABC Paulista, the region in

which the automotive industry is concentrated along with various other sectors. The workers' and trade union struggle linked up with social movements such as those of low-income neighbourhoods against rising prices, feminist movements, and campaigns for amnesty for political prisoners, so as to form one joint struggle against the military dictatorship of the time (1964–1985) and for the re-democratisation of the country.

It started as a left wing federation, »a unified class-conscious trade union federation fighting for the workers' immediate and historic objectives from the perspective of a society free of exploitation, where political, social and economic democracy reigns (...) [and] which will be governed by the most ample democracy in all its organs and authorities (...)«<sup>2</sup>

Women have participated in the CUT from its very foundation and have fostered the practice of more egalitarian gender relations and the formation of a policy of gender equality, making way for the federation to extend its antidiscrimination policy condemning all forms of exclusion and discrimination. In 1993, a minimum quota of 30 percent for either sex was adopted at its national and state Executive Councils, a »gender quota«, which in practice meant 30 percent women. This means that the adoption of parity, far from being an isolated measure, is in fact the result of a long process of power building.

1. There are six trade union federations acknowledged by the Ministry of Labour and Employment (2016), according to the criteria established in Act 11.648/2008 ([http://newsletter.cut.org.br/uploads/periscopio/616/arquivo/616\\_periscopio-sindical-.pdf](http://newsletter.cut.org.br/uploads/periscopio/616/arquivo/616_periscopio-sindical-.pdf); accessed 30/6/2016).

2. Statutes adopted at the constituting Congress. 26 to 28 August 1983, San Bernardo do Campo. *Resoluções do 1º Congresso Nacional da Classe Trabalhadora*. 1º CONCLAT, p 8, available on [www.cedoc.cut.org.br/resolucoes-de-congressos](http://www.cedoc.cut.org.br/resolucoes-de-congressos); accessed 30/7/2016.

Parity is an exception in trade unionism. The Public Services International (PSI) adopted it in 2007. At the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA), it is a standard for the composition of the national affiliated federations' delegations to its congresses. In Brazil, the National Federation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG) adopted it in 2013 to be implemented in 2017.<sup>3</sup> Within the CUT, the Federation of Health-Care Workers (CNTSS) and the Federation of Municipal Public Services Workers (CONFETAM) have adopted it, although the statutes provide the quota for the sectoral organisations. None of the country's other union federations has parity. It seems that the CUT is the first national union federation to have adopted it worldwide.

The trade union movement shows very disparate attitudes towards gender equality. In this sense the steps forward function alongside persistent discriminations and forms of women's exclusion. From a historical perspective, for a long time women had been regarded as intruders, marginalized or even totally excluded from the trade unions (Pena 1981: 175; Humphrey 1983; Perrot 1988: 210), although many of them had always worked and been paid on the labour market and have participated in workers' and trade union struggles at different points in time.

This changed towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The greater participation of women in the labour market and emergence of feminist demands on the economy which began in the 1960s was followed by a rise in trade union participation from female workers; it must be acknowledged that this was also due to the fact that the trade union movement in many countries had to envisage groups that had previously been marginalized in its policies as a means of facing up to decreasing membership. Female workers' organisations multiplied and strategies were adopted to commit trade unionism to gender equality, amongst them measures of affirmative action to extend female presence at decision-making levels (CIOSL 1992: 61; Godinho Delgado 2009). At its 2014 Congress, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) spread the campaign »Count us in!«, which had amongst its goals that 80 percent of the General Council organisations have at least 30 percent women

3. The CONTAG, founded in 1963, assembles 27 federations of agricultural workers and many trade unions. It was affiliated to the CUT between 1995 and 2009.

in their decision making bodies by the 2018 Congress (ITUC 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Without losing sight of the fact that the CUT experience is only very recent – parity was implemented in 2015 – this text reconstructs the process, basing itself on the theoretic framework of power resources (Schmalz and Dörre 2014). This analysis will be regarded on two levels: from the point of view of the female trade unionists' action in their struggle to negotiate and gain ground within the CUT, and from the point of view of the CUT as an institution and its transformation by the process of greater gender equality building, both internally and in terms of its incorporation into Brazilian society.

The text is divided into four parts: part one refers to the quota and its impact; part two identifies the power resources which have influenced the change from quota to parity; part three recuperates the discussion on parity; and finally, part four addresses the problematic challenge of consolidating parity with equal opportunities for participation in terms of gender.

## 1. The Quota and Its Impact

### Background

In 1986, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> National CUT Congress (CONCUT), female trade unionists from various federal states and branches brought a motion for the establishment of a body of articulation and organisation for female workers, the National Committee of Working Women (CNMT) and its respective counterparts on state level, and for the foundation of a national campaign on an issue of their particular interest: childcare facilities.

At this moment, power resources decisive for the success of these demands coincided, and in an updated configuration would have an influence along the CUT's future course.

Where structural power is concerned, the impressive growth of women's presence on the labour market since the 1970s has been particularly important: in 1976 they

4. In the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), 19 of the affiliated national trade union centres have more than 40 percent women in their directive committees; ten do not have any. The average proportion of women in the executive committees is 29 percent. ETUC (2016: 6).

made up 29 percent of the economically active population, in 1989, 35.5 percent and in 2007 they exceeded 40 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Where associational power is concerned, women's trade union affiliation was growing: between 1970 and 1978 the number of female union members increased by 176 percent, compared to an increase of 87 percent of male union members (Gitahy et al. 1982: 101), and in 1988 they made up 25.6 percent of all trade union members (Teixeira 2012: 2). Discrimination at the workplace was being reported to the trade unions at meetings of urban female workers (Souza-Lobo et al. 1991; Neves 1995), while rural women struggled for their acceptance as workers and to be accepted by the trade unions independently of their husbands, fathers or brothers (Cappellin 1989; Pimenta 2013). Also, sectors with high female participation such as education, the chemical industry, banking and public services amongst others participated in the foundation of the CUT.

The emergence of a diversified women's and feminist movement at the same time as the emergence of the *Nuevo Sindicalismo* influenced the female CUT trade unionists and opened up a coexistence which represented an outstanding social power resource. The federation's progressive profile completed this favourable atmosphere.

Gradually the women expanded their involvement, although they maintained a merely symbolic presence on the Executive Committees. The National Executive Committee (the superior Executive Committee) had one or two women at the most, and the situation was similar in the state CUTs. This situation became ever more out of step with the increasing number of female workers on the market; with their participation at the Congresses of 1986, 1988 and 1991, prior to the quota, where they made up 24 percent, 24.1 percent and 18.4 percent of all delegates<sup>6</sup>; and with the principles of internal democracy and equality defended by the CUT. Starting from these observations, the female trade unionists followed that without shared decision-making no progress would be made in terms of gender equality (CUT/CNMT 1993).

5. Foundation Carlos Chagas. Database on women's labour ([www.fcc.org.br/bdmulheres/](http://www.fcc.org.br/bdmulheres/); accessed 8/7/2016).

6. Source: National CUT. No data available for the constitutive Congress (1983) or the 1<sup>st</sup> National Congress (1984).

## From a Minimum to a Large Minority

The quota was proposed by the CNMT in 1991, adopted in 1993 (6<sup>th</sup> National Plenary)<sup>7</sup>, ten years after the CUT was founded, and the first Executive Committee to function under this rule was elected in 1994 (5<sup>th</sup> CONCUR). The quota had been adopted in 1991 by the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT), founded in 1980 by the same industry unions that were later to found the CUT, and the party decision stimulated the trade union debate. For Drude Dahlerup (1993) the minimal participation of women in predominantly masculine spheres confers a symbolic position onto them, as though they represented women in general. It was only when they became a *large minority* that a *critical mass* of women was formed, which »implies a qualitative change in the power relations permitting the minority for the first time to use the organisational resources to improve its own situation and that of the group to which it belongs« (p. 176). This is what happened at the CUT through the adoption of the quota.

The social perspective of women was introduced into this sphere, »knowledge of the social reality which only they have the condition to express« (Miguel 2014: 84). The social perspective is understood as »the point of view that group members have on social processes due to their position within them« (Young, cited in Miguel). The testimony of Rosane Bertotti, National CUT Head of Union Skills Department, confirms this notion:

*We all (...) have had to overcome many obstacles to get where we are now. Some of us more, others less, according to their biography (...). We women know what this means, what this pressure is. It's more or less as we use to say: you only know hunger if you have suffered from it, you only know what it is to be cold if you have felt cold. The others may have an idea, they may imagine it. But to feel it on your skin is different. And the trade union women do feel it on their skin. All of them.*<sup>8</sup>

## Impacts of the Quota

In the campaign for the quota, gender relations, and as such also power relations, for the first time became the

7. The national and state plenaries are held annually and represent the highest decision making forums between two Congresses.

8. Interview, 29/11/2016.

subject of discussions and negotiations throughout the federation's political bodies and currents, throughout the country and at two national decision making forums (1992 and 1993). It was necessary for actors to position themselves as to what kind of trade union federation they wanted to consolidate in terms of gender equality (or inequality). It is worth mentioning that many men supported it from the very beginning, amongst them the then-President of the CUT, Jair Meneguelli.

The integration of the large minority of women in the decision making bodies represented strong associational and social power for the CUT. In 2003, ten years after the introduction, one leader of the National Executive Committee assessed this impact as such: «(...) the debate on the introduction of the quota just as its implementation ten years ago have modified the internal relations of the power structures at the inside of CUT trade unionism» (CUT 2003: 43).

Another leader on the same occasion confirmed that «at that moment, many positioned themselves against the introduction of the quota but today there is no one who wouldn't defend it» (CUT 2003: 37). Célia Regina Costa, Finance Director at the CNTSS, relates her experience:

*In our trade union [health workers of Sao Paulo state] women have always been in positions of power. We didn't live this dimension as other branches did. (...) We all voted against the quota (...) I was elected to the state CUT Executive Committee in 1994 and started to meet the real world of the trade union movement. (...) Every time we heard other female colleagues' stories through the state Committee of Working Women we thought: »I can't believe something like this is happening in the trade unions.« And we started to see that something went wrong and that we had to see into this more attentively. I was on fire for the process.<sup>9</sup>*

At the National Executive Committee (1994–1997) consisting of 25 posts, women took office as Heads of the Trade Union Skills and Social Policies Departments and six of them were appointed Executive Directors. During the following administrations they gradually took office as heads of more departments. In the year 2000 they assumed the office of Vice President (2000–2003), a po-

sition they took on again during the administrations of 2006–2009 and 2012–2015, as well as the present one (2015–2019).

From 1994 onwards the female coordinator of the CNMT has served as member of the National Executive Committee, whereby the spokeswoman of women and gender policies participates in decision making.

In 2008 (12<sup>th</sup> National Plenary) the quota was incorporated into the CUT statutes, with a delay of 15 years, this despite the female trade unionists demanding the incorporation of parity into the statutes simultaneous to its adoption. In addition, the quota came into effect with regard to the composition of the executive of the vertical structure, namely sectoral organisations based on the CUT structure, trade unions and affiliated associations, as well as for the delegations to the Congresses and plenaries.<sup>10</sup>

The trade union federations *Força Sindical* and General Workers' Trade Union Federation (CGT) – the latter being replaced in 2007 by the General Workers' Union (UGT) – followed the example of the CUT and adopted the quota. The Brazilian Workers' Trade Union Federation (CTB), founded in 2007, would also adopt it.

## 2. From a Large Minority to Parity

Nineteen years elapsed between the adoption of the quota and that of parity. This section identifies what power resources had been favourable to the conquest of parity in this period of time.

### More Women at the Labour Market and in Trade Unionism

In 2012, the year when parity was adopted, women represented 43 percent of the entire workforce, the same percentage amongst all workers employed on a formal basis and, amongst these workers, 42 percent of all trade union members.<sup>11</sup>

10. In those job categories where one of the sexes does not exceed 20 percent of the common workforce the compliance with the same percentage of representation as a minimum is obligatory.

11. Source: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – National Sample Survey of Households (IBGE-PNAD). Compilation: Inter-union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (DIEESE). Trade Union Subsection of Chemical Workers of Sao Paulo, 2016.

9. Interview, 24/11/2016.

Between 1992 and 2012 their rate of trade union affiliation increased from 14 to 16 percent – while trade union affiliation among male workers fell from 22 to 18 percent – due to their higher participation in the agricultural trade union movement and the growth of the female workforce in the service sector, and the public sector in particular (Rodrigues / Ramalho 2014: 392). Simultaneously, the global rate of trade union affiliation remained fairly constant, between 19 percent of the working population in 1992 and 17 percent in 2012 (p. 387).

The percentage of women employed and organised in some selected CUT branches reveals of a combination of structural and associational power resources reinforcing the demand for parity.

Table 1: Proportion of women amongst all workers in formal employment and amongst trade union members (16 years of age and older), 2012

Industries	% women amongst all workers	% organised women
Public administration	41	43
Education	77	78
Metal industry	18	15
Chemical industry	25	23
Health and social services	79	77
Banking	54	49

Source: IBGE-PNAD. Compilation: DIEESE. Trade Union Subsection of Chemical Workers of Sao Paulo, 2016.

The participation of female delegates in National Congresses following the adoption of the quota shows the solid female presence at the Federation:

In 2003, the 8<sup>th</sup> CONCUR set up the Department of Working Women at national and state level, thereby dissolving the Committee which had been located within the Trade Union Policies Department. A qualitative transformation in the positioning of gender policy in the CUT structure took place whereby gender policy reached the same level in hierarchy as the other policies covered by departments, disposing therefore of many more power resources.

Table 2: Proportion of female delegates in National Congresses

Concut	% of female delegates
6 <sup>th</sup> : 1997	27.60
7 <sup>th</sup> : 2000	31.30
8 <sup>th</sup> : 2003	32.12
9 <sup>th</sup> : 2006	32.30
10 <sup>th</sup> : 2009	38.00
11 <sup>th</sup> : 2012	41.94
12 <sup>th</sup> : 2015	41.85

Source: IBGE-PNAD. Compilation: DIEESE. Trade Union Subsection of Chemical Workers of Sao Paulo, 2016.

### A Consistent Political Incorporation

There are three elements to the Department of Working Women’s leaders’ actions regarding their strategic choices which have had a decisive influence on the fortification of their power resources and which simultaneously reinforce the CUT’s associational power:

Firstly, the Department has the option to vie for more political attention in negotiation and, if necessary, confrontation with the Executive Committees, Congresses and Plenaries to have official decisions correspond to their demands. »Women’s issues« have become the federation’s responsibility, which it will have to answer for. This strategy has provoked debates which have enriched political dynamics and led to real transformations in gender relations. Moreover, it was decisive for building institutional power for women, of which gender parity is the most recent and forceful proof.

Secondly, it has adopted a strategy to act in a unified way with the aim of tearing down obstacles and securing victories. This manifests itself mostly in the way belonging to both political trade union currents resolves itself as against common women’s interests. The CUT has a number of internal currents which the female trade unionists directing the women’s organisation also represent. However, they have opted to build consensus in order to act as one when debating with the Federation, although this could mean they diverge from the groups they must link up and negotiate with for support. In doing so they reinforced themselves so as to reach victories like the quota

and gender parity; developed a strong capacity for networking and intermediating, both amongst themselves and with various political forces; and increased their associational power. By choosing a version of policy capable of identifying strategic objects and concentrating on them, without submitting to the combative and destructive competition which so often marks disputes between different currents, they became a political benchmark.

Thirdly, the Department operates an efficient organisational structure. The work of the Committee and later Department of Working Women has always had and coordinated a networking structure, which today is called the National Women's Organisation. Coordinated by the National Department (SNMT), the Organisation links up the 27 state CUTs and 17 sectoral organisations, represented by their respective Departments of Working Women, as well as the female leaders of the National Executive Committee. Meetings are organised in the run-up to the Congresses, as well as for planning, evaluation and self-training activities. Alongside this, the SNMT maintains contact on a regular basis by means of online communication. These functions are clearly marked by internal democracy; promote gender policy across the entire country; link up with the branches; and reach the constituent trade unions through the branches and state CUTs. This dynamic strengthens both women and the CUT as a whole and mainstreams gender policy throughout the organisation, although on different levels depending on the specific body.

These three elements are nourished by and are a result of the strong internal cohesion and collective identity grouped around the common motivation of successive generations of female trade unionists: the defence of the working women's interests; their empowerment; and the struggle for equality of men and women.

The internal cohesion and the collective identity spring not least from these female trade unionists' adhesion to feminism. Not all of the CUT female trade unionists identify as feminists, although their number is steadily increasing. Feminism is a theory and »holistic political movement against sexism in all spheres (legal, ideological, socio-economic) expressing women's struggle against any form of discrimination« (Gamba 2007: 142). With feminist beliefs linking gender, class and race, female trade unionists participate in order to transform CUT into a forum for both women and men.

From there it was possible to gain policy positions, such the decision of the 4<sup>th</sup> CONCUT (1991) in favour of the decriminalisation and legalisation of abortion in Brazil.<sup>12</sup> It became possible to build majorities to transform »women's issues«, even if they may be controversial, as in the case of abortion, into federation resolutions.

In other areas the female trade unionists used their mediation capacity to institutionalise resources and staff funding for gender policy, which – although it had always been supported by fraternal union organisations and internationally cooperating institutions<sup>13</sup> – became more and more part and parcel of the internal CUT budget.

### The CUT's New Image

From the very implementation of the quota women acquired much more visibility, both as mouthpieces of the CUT and as opinion makers. By assuming posts they promoted women's participation, as Rosane da Silva, then Head of the National Department of Working Women, emphasised in 2015 referring to Rosane Bertotti, Head of the National Communications Department during three terms of office (2006–2015): »It was necessary to have a woman in the Communications Department in order for women to appear in CUT photos and on the website.«<sup>14</sup>

Round tables are not organised without women's presence anymore and in the same vein exclusively male delegations are no longer drawn up. »By now there is an awareness that men can't speak alone«, Carmen Foro, Vice-President, confirms.<sup>15</sup> Language becomes gender inclusive, both in the leaders' discourse and in official texts and resolutions.

From the mobilisation point of view, the campaign initiated by the CNMT in 1995 and renewed in 2000, en-

12. It was unprecedented that a trade union federation positioned itself in favour of the decriminalisation of abortion, which is criminalised in Brazil just as in almost the entire Latin American region and the Caribbean. The only countries where it is legalised are Cuba, Uruguay and Guiana. It is also decriminalised in Mexico City and in Puerto Rico. In some countries (Brazil amongst them) it is allowed on very restricted grounds and there are other countries where it is completely prohibited.

13. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) has always been a reliable ally of the CUT women.

14. Interview with Rosane Bertotti, 29/11/2016.

15. Interview, 2/12/2016.



titled »Citizenship: Equal opportunities in life, work and the trade union movement«, stands out. It aims for a holistic concept in the search for gender equality, obligating the CUT to comply with it in those spheres of life and bringing about motions and actions at various levels in its large spectrum. The link between gender and racial bias unites the women. »If you're a woman and black in this country, the situation becomes even more difficult«, says María Júlia Reis Nogueira, Head of the National Department for the Fight against Racism since its establishment in 2009.<sup>16</sup> Gender and racial inequality are structural characteristics of social inequality in Brazil (Abramo 2006: 40). The economic and social indicators point towards a prevalence of minimum wage, higher unemployment rates and more precarious employment amongst the Afro-Brazilian population, with even greater disadvantages for Afro-Brazilian women. The Departments for the Fight against Racism and of Working Women campaign together against this double discrimination.

It is worth mentioning that in 2014 the CUT had almost doubled the number of Afro-Brazilian trade unionists on its Executive Committees than non-Afro-Brazilian – 65 percent and 35 percent respectively – a higher proportion than people declaring themselves to be Afro-Brazilian or of mixed origin (53 %) and white (46 %) amongst the Brazilian population as a whole. 72 percent of the Departments of Working Women were headed by Afro-Brazilian women (CUT 2014: 21).

The Department of Social Policy and Human Rights, which is responsible for any questions concerning LGBT workers, is also in close contact with the SNMT. »Our work must be cross-cutting«, National Head of Department Jandyra Uehara, says.<sup>17</sup>

### Women Consolidate CUT's Social Power

The CUT integrates the diversity which constitutes the women's movement, including women from the low-income neighbourhoods, urban and rural workers, Afro-Brazilian women, young women, LGBT people, and academics. Maria Betânia Ávila from the NGO *SOS Corpo – Instituto Feminista para a Democracia* in Recife,

holds that the CUT, more so than being an ally, »over time has become a constitutive part of the women's movement.«<sup>18</sup> She adds that the trade union presence has opened up in this movement the understanding of the centrality of the sexual division of labour as a structural factor of gender inequality. This evaluation is shared by Nalu Faria, coordinator of the NGO *Sempreviva Organização Feminista* (SOF) of Sao Paulo and member of the International Committee of the World March of Women (WMW): »Their presence (...) has contributed to the gender and class debate, starting from the concrete questions of the everyday struggle and by means of the presence of the subject »working women«.<sup>19</sup>

The CUT has also contributed to theoretical political reflections by establishing the Centre for Feminist Reflection on Productive and Reproductive Labour (2001–2009) to debate productive restructuring, the sexual division of labour, and public policy, with the objective of fostering women's action. Feminist activist Vera Soares judges the Centre to be »one of the most interesting experiences of the articulation between the CUT, feminist activists and academic feminists.«<sup>20</sup>

The trade union federation is the national coordinator of the World March of Women (WMW). It participates as a partner organisation in the *Marcha de las Margaridas*<sup>21</sup>, the traditional demonstration of the rural female workers organised by the CONTAG, and was a supporter of the Afro-Brazilian Women's March (2015).

Under the present administration the National Department for the Articulation with Social Movements was established to reinforce the alliances between the CUT and all types of expressions of these movements, amongst them the women's movement.

Through becoming acknowledged as a defender of female workers and of women in general, the union federation has extended its social power. It has incor-

16. Interview, 24/11/2016.

17. Interview, 28/11/2016.

18. Interview, 17/1/2017.

19. Interview by e-mail, 19/12/2016.

20. Interview by e-mail, 29/1/2017. The Centre was created during the administration of María Ednalva Bezerra from Lima, CNMT coordinator (1997–2003) and Head of the National Department of Working Women (2003–2007).

21. In tribute to Margarida Maria Alves, assassinated in 1983 by landowners when she was President of the Trade Union of Rural Workers of Alagoa Grande (Paraíba).

porated standards of the feminist movement and adopted measures of power distribution between the sexes. Its discourse in defence of gender equality has become trustworthy since it was backed by official resolutions, concrete action and the cooperation with other social organisations striving for the same goal.

### More Rights for Women During the Workers' Party (PT) Administration

The four national PT administrations – under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016) – have laid an emphasis on the reduction of inequality and the extension of social and labour rights. Upon his taking office, Lula set up Special Departments with the status of Ministries, of Women's Policies (SPM) and of Racial Equality Promotion Policies (SEPPPIR), and installed roundtables for the participation of civil society in the elaboration of public policies, which drew upon intensive participation by the CUT.

Tatau Godinho, Head of the SPM Section of Labour Policy and Women's Economic Autonomy, assesses the trade union federation's contribution as follows:

*Maintaining the dialogue with the female trade unionists was an indispensable aspect of the SPM's action towards the elaboration of policies and for discussing the challenges of their implementation. In the interaction with the various currents and union federations, the CUT plays an outstanding role for its sheer dimension and importance as well as for the strong internal organisation of woman activists.<sup>22</sup>*

Let's have a look at three exemplary achievements for female workers:

The raising of the minimum wage, one of the period's main successes, was the result of a trade union federations' united campaign and turned into government policy. It was a priority for the female CUT activists due to its impact on the improvement of women's living conditions and their economic autonomy. In 2014, 29 percent of working women received minimum wage or less: with

the increase they had access to remuneration which has grown by 77.2 percent in real terms in 14 years (ONU Mulheres 2016: 40). It has also generated an income increase for Afro-Brazilian women due to its high importance in domestic services where minimum wage usually is earned.

Another success was the equalisation of domestic workers' labour rights with other wage earners' rights in 2013, which beforehand had only been partially guaranteed. In that year, women made up 93 percent of all domestic workers.<sup>23</sup> Female domestic workers make up 17 percent of women's labour force. Their national federation FENATRAD, established in 1997, is affiliated to the CUT and integrated into the Trade and Service Workers' Federation CONTRACS.

A third example are the policies for rural women, who in 2014 made up 38 percent of all workers employed in rural areas and 13 percent of women's labour force (ONU Mulheres 2016: 75). Through these policies, their possibilities to acquire land were extended; their entry into the economy was supported; and a specific Department for the Elaboration of Policies for Rural Women and *Quilombolas* (of communities remaining from slavery) at the Ministry for Agricultural Development was established.

It was a period of enormous consolidation of CUT's institutional power, interrupted by President Rousseff's removal from office in 2016.

The CUT aims for the institutionalisation of rights in alliance with other union federations – the women have set up the National Forum of Women Working for Trade Union Federations – other actors of civil society and their international equivalents such as the ILO.

## 3. A Step Forward

The previous section reconstructed the women's leading role and the conditions for the increase of gender equality inside the CUT. The present chapter systematises the implantation and adoption of parity.

22. Interview, 23/11/2016.

23. Source: IBGE-PNAD. Compilation: DIEESE. Trade Union Subsection of Chemical Workers of Sao Paulo, 2016.

## How the Demand Was Triggered

In 2008, when the quota was incorporated into the statutes, the SNMT was already considering advancing one step further. Rosane da Silva, Head of the National Department of Working Women between 2008 and 2015, describes the situation as follows:

*We had made important progresses throughout the CUT history (...) The quota had already been well integrated, we could feel the progress since 1993 with our participation. In 2008 we asked ourselves: (...)*

*Now there comes a great challenge, which would mean taking a step forward. In our internal conversations, we worked on the idea of advancing in the quota policy by proposing e.g. 40 percent of women – with the perspective of reaching parity one time.<sup>24</sup>*

The adoption of parity at the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress of the PT in September 2011 paved the way. Rosane da Silva and the National Head of Administration and Finance, Vagner Freitas (elected President in 2012 and reelected for the 2015–2019 administration), immediately published an article on the Union Federation's website titled »Parity between men and women adopted at the PT is an example to be followed«, in which they establish that »at the next National Congress the CUT must pass a motion for gender parity concerning its board composition (...).«<sup>25</sup> (Silva/Fleitas 2011). In the following month, the 13<sup>th</sup> National Plenary began the debate which was to expand until the positive vote at the 12<sup>th</sup> CONCURT one year later, after parity had been adopted at the 27 state Congresses held before the National Congress.

Another factor which accelerated the debate was the election of the first female President of the Republic:

*(...) if the left itself, and the CUT, in the field of the left, achieve such an important victory like having for the first time in the country's history a female President, then how should our organisations remain stuck in the past? They had to contribute something more in the field of gender equality.<sup>26</sup>*

24. Interview, 23/11/2016.

25. The PT adopted gender parity and minimum quotas of 20 percent for Afro-Brazilian s and young people (under 30 years of age).

26. Interview with Rosane da Silva, 23/11/2016.

## There Is No Democracy Without Women

The coherence between the founding principles of the CUT and their application regarding working women has been a strong argument used by women in their struggle for more participation in power structures. Demanding parity, they established that it was yet another measure »to make the CUT stay coherent with its principles of internal democracy and representation« (SNMT 2012: 3). To adopt it would »demonstrate in practice that our union federation is truly committed to achieving equality (...).« (Silva 2012). They had already argued that the adoption of the quota would mean »accepting that this inequality [of women's participation] was also reproduced within the CUT, in contrast to the democratic and egalitarian agreement underlying its principles and practices (...).« (CUT 1993: 23).

The defence of its principles led to an effort by the CUT to preserve its internal cohesion and collective identity as well as its social power. Any rejection of this motion would have stained its image and been a step back.

However, resistance emerged during the campaign, although with much less support and vehemence than during the quota campaign: through an argument of the obsolete left that parity divides the working class; others expressing a biased view of gender roles and prejudices against women, such as that they weren't ready to take office at the executive; or yet another very familiar view that »It's not the right time« (SNMT 2012: 3).

Some also questioned why men could not defend women's interests. The SNMT answered: »They can and they must. One of the women's demands is for the Federation to take forward the motions and claims they make.« Yet his is not sufficient: »It is necessary that women also take over power, that they pass from ›influence to real power‹, i.e. that they stop influencing in the indirect way, by convincing men with decisive power, and instead move forward to *directly sharing* the decisions which definitively affect both men and women.« (SNMT 2012: 9).

## A Large Majority Wants Parity

It goes without saying that neither parity nor the quota would have been adopted without men's support. The

active support of all the CUT Presidents for the measures of affirmative action and gender policies has been outstanding. Vagner Freitas, President, declared at the ceremony on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women's Organisation at the CUT, celebrated on 30 November 2016 in Sao Paulo:

*This federation has discussed parity and is discussing gender policies because we understand that working women are even more exploited than men, working equally or even more and earning less (...). Our society [the one we aspire for] is one of equal men and women. Equal rights, justice, equal opportunities (...). That's what unites and moves us.*

Sérgio Nobre, General Secretary, stresses that »there is nothing which would justify a trade union federation of the size of the CUT not to have 50 percent women if practically 50 percent of the Brazilian working class are made up of women and many women are union activists. It was time we made this step.«<sup>27</sup>

For the President of the São Paulo state CUT, Douglas Izzo, »the CUT (...) is making a great step towards the realisation of what we defend in theory, i.e. equality between men and women.«<sup>28</sup>

The female trade unionists are unanimous in celebrating gender parity. Junéia Martins Batista, national Head of the Department of Working Women and President of the Women's World Committee of the PSI, celebrates the double victory of experiencing parity in the PSI and now in the CUT.<sup>29</sup> Vice-President Carmen Foro emphasises how important the process of accumulating significant struggles was to finally achieving parity.<sup>30</sup> The national Head of the Department of Labour Relations, Maria das Graças Costa, highlights it as »a very meaningful symbol for us, for being the first union federation discussing the participation of women in power structures in a comprehensive way.«<sup>31</sup>

27. Interview, 30/11/2016.

28. Speech given at the ceremony on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women's Organisation at the state CUT of Sao Paulo, 25/11/2016.

29. Interview, 2/12/2016.

30. Interview, 2/12/2016.

31. Interview, 1/12/2016.

The leaders of the state CUTs reckon that the implementation »will open doors and construct a new way of looking at the woman's role in all social spheres«.<sup>32</sup>

For the leaders of the sectoral organisations the women »felt victorious and more empowered«.<sup>33</sup>

## 4. Political Parity

Numerical parity at the CUT is a political measure. Women are active participants and must decide as much as men. The female trade unionists insist on highlighting it as *political parity* or the »inalienable democratic right of women to participate under equal conditions« (SNMT 2012: 3). Parity is »a qualitative condition, the condition of being on an equal footing, of being par with the others, interacting on equal terms« (Fraser 2002: 68).

To fully achieve this condition there are obstacles which need to be overcome, as the following section will show.

### Doing Away with the Sexual Division of Labour

Adopting parity »demands changes in the practices keeping women away from trade union activities as well as the incorporation of a new conception of labour which considers their labour in the family and domestic sphere under the definition of trade union policy« (Silva 2012).

The sexual division of labour lies at the bottom of the inequality of conditions and chances between the sexes when it comes to assuming public positions. The Brazilian data is evident:

*In 2014 women were busy 21 hours a week on average carrying out socially reproductive labour, which makes 59 hours a week if added to the principal working hours – 6.0 hours more than men's total*

32. Interviews by e-mail with the state CUT Heads of the Departments of Working Women of Bahia, Ceará, Paraíba, Rondônia, Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Tocantins on various dates.

33. Interviews by e-mail with the Heads of the Departments of Working Women of the following industries' federations: commerce and services, wood and construction, metal, chemical, health and social security, transport and logistics, textile, security and vigilance; and with the delegate of the Federation of Educational Workers to the National Women's Organisation on various dates.

*working hours (PNAD 2004 and 2014). In 2014, 51.3% of men and 90.7% of women declared to be carrying out some type of domestic labour.*

(ONU Mulheres 2016: 62)

The profiles of the female and male delegates to the National CUT Congresses with respect to their family situation confirm this picture. At the 3<sup>rd</sup> CONCUR (1988), 69.7 percent of the female delegates were single, divorced and/or widowed, whereas 63 percent of the male delegates were married (Castro et al. 1991: 38). At the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> CONCUR (2003 and 2006), 61.8 percent and 61.1 percent of the female delegates were single, divorced and/or widowed, whereas 74.1 percent and 73.4 percent of the male delegates were married or living in a stable relationship (CUT et al. 2006: 19). This means that men continue to have family structures which support them in their union activism, while women mainly take over political roles if they are liberated in some way from their family responsibilities. Female trade unionists do not hesitate to conclude that »men dedicate themselves only to trade unionism, while women continue to have a double or triple working day«, »domestic labour and family care carry on being women's responsibility alone.«<sup>34</sup>

### Overcoming Machismo

The inequality of conditions of participation also originates from *machismo* culture manifesting itself in various ways: the lack of respect for women within the organisations; psychological violence and harassment; the evident inequality of the number of men and women entitled to union leave; the lack of structures within the organisations for debates of women's interest; the pressure weighing on female trade unionists to prove continually that they are able, »while a certain complicity eases off the demands on men«; and subtle barriers, namely double-faced leaders joining in to the *politically correct* discourse of defending gender equality but secretly acting against women. It also manifests itself in many women replicating male chauvinist thought and attitude structures; a type of competence between women stimulated by this culture; and a submissive self-image »derived from the conviction of coming second in every respect.«<sup>35</sup>

34. Interview with the state CUTs' and sectoral organisations' Heads of the Departments of Working Women.

35. Ibid.

### Democratisation of the Assumption of Executive Positions

When parity was adopted, the national executive was enlarged, increasing its Executive Committee from 32 positions to 44. The women leaders are convinced that one of the reasons for that was the intention to integrate the women without excluding any man and they heavily criticise the expansion. The male explication is that the increase responded to a request by branches and regions who felt underrepresented, without any relation to parity.

Men's adherence to power is an obstacle to full equality of participation between the sexes.

The distribution of executive positions follows many criteria: associational power of the female members, political and economic weight of some trade unions, sectors/branches, political currents, regions, gender. In the National Executive Committee women have not yet assumed those executive positions considered to be the most important – President, General Secretary, Department of Administration and Finances, nor the Department of International Relations. They did assume Vice-Presidency but will that turn out to be the highest office open to women?

Under the present administration (2015–2019) with 44 executive positions, deputy departments and new departments have been created. Women currently hold the offices of Vice-President and Deputy General Secretary, eight thematic departments and four deputy departments. Men hold the offices of President, General Secretary, Department of Administration and Finance and its deputy department, six thematic departments and four deputy departments. The sixteen positions of head of executive departments are held in gender balance.

At the 27 state CUTs with 14 executive positions in their Executive Committees, the lowest average of women in office reaches almost 30 percent – with the exception of the Department of Labour Relations which ranges far below the others with only 14.8 percent women – but the Heads of the Departments of Working Women criticise the higher concentration of women in those positions considered to be of low power while a majority of men hold those positions which are higher up in the

hierarchy. They also observe that »those women holding the positions of President, General Secretary and Administration and Finance are under much more pressure than the men.«<sup>36</sup> The eight female Presidents (29.6 percent of the total) created their own collective in order to support and consolidate each other in the exercise of the mandate.

In the sectoral organisations, the situation is variable. There are sectors with female predominance at grassroots level and a high percentage of women in executive positions, but male predominance in the positions at the top of the hierarchy; others with few women and only in positions of scarce relevance; or even with female presidency, contributing greatly to gender policy but with as yet unused capacities to increase the number of women and extend it to other main executive positions.<sup>37</sup>

The leaders of the three levels – national, state and sectoral – acknowledge the importance and appreciate the assumption of any executive position. However, they hold that any executive position should be accessible to either sex. This debate constitutes the agenda of the National Women's Organisation. Women call on the trade unionists to »accept parity as an evolution of relations between men and women and not as a threat«.<sup>38</sup>

### Seeking Political Parity

At a seminar entitled »The parity we want: strengthening women's political and trade union participation«<sup>39</sup>, the National Women's Organisation produced guidelines for the progression towards political parity. The national Head of the Department of Working Women, Junéia Martins Batista, summarises these guidelines:

*It is fundamental to consolidate ourselves at national level. We keep visiting the state CUTs to get to know the problems and think of strategies of how to overcome them in a way adequate to any reality. More-*

*over we are promoting regional cooperation which represents an alternative for a giant country like Brazil (...). In the sectoral organisations the situation is very diverse. There are those who have reached parity and those who refuse to even implement the quota. We must monitor and stimulate this process more closely.<sup>40</sup>*

At local level, the emphasis lies on grassroots activity aiming to reach working women both at work and in their everyday life and put young women first.

Job training under a gender perspective for both sexes continues to be the strategic baseline, in cooperation with the Skills Department and allied organisations. The sexual division of labour and cultural issues will continue to be addressed in own activities and in cooperation with other organisations.

### Final Considerations

The CUT has never eschewed the debate on trade union structures which exclude women and takes action to transform them, having been developing a coherent and consistent path for more than three decades since its foundation. The CUT's experiences with parity motivate trade unionists from some of the other Brazilian trade union federations to introduce this debate into their organisations.

From the point of view of continental trade unionism, this means support for the TUCA in its policy of gender equality promotion for its 53 national trade union federations in 23 affiliated countries in which there is a »co-existence (...) of internal mechanisms of democratisation; gender parity at the direction level; (...) and certain corporative, anti-democratic, patriarchal and exclusionary trade union traditions at the national level« (Anigstein 2016: 139). At the global level, it can contribute to the debate on strategies for achieving more gender equality by means of the ITUC's campaign »Count us in!«.

At the level of national policies, the trade union experience is a stimulus to the struggle for a turn-around of the scarce female participation. With only 9.9 percent

36. Interviews with the state CUTs' Heads of the Departments of Working Women.

37. Interviews with the Heads of the Departments of Working Women of the CUT sectoral organisations.

38. Interviews with the state CUTs' Heads of the Departments of Working Women

39. Organised by the SNMT with the support of the FES. Sao Paulo, 1/12/2016-2/12/2016.

40. Interview, 2/12/2016.

women in the Chamber of Deputies and 16 percent in the Senate, Brazil ranges 155<sup>th</sup> amongst 193 countries in the ranking of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and ranks the worst among South American countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016).

The Brazilian economy has changed dramatically during the last two years. The economic crisis was joined by the political crisis which in 2016 resulted in the removal from office of President Rousseff, who had been elected in 2014 for a second term of office, through a *coup d'état* perpetrated by the conservative political forces, the mass media and the legal system and accomplished by the two chambers of Parliament, aiming for the implementation of a privatisation agenda for small government in economic matters, and taking antidemocratic and retrograde stances in policy and social issues. The new government, illegitimate from the CUT, the PT and the social movements' points of view, is systematically dismantling public policy as well as social and labour rights, causing a severe weakening of institutional power for the CUT and generating high unemployment rates which in turn affect its structural power resources. This backlash also includes the progress achieved under the PT administrations in terms of gender equality, racial equality and human rights, with an impact on cultural and social practices. The Trade Union Federation is leading the resistance together with the social movements and other sectors of society – with a notable participation from women – in protest also against the overthrow of the country's first female President through what had been a highly misogynistic campaign.<sup>41</sup>

The high level of gender equality attained at the Federation, reaching as far as the equal distribution of its executive positions, is the result of a process including several levels of power resources. The growing and consolidated participation of women in the labour market and their

increased trade union affiliation in Brazil are elements of structural and associational power which the CUT has not ignored. However, such power resources do not always lead to transformations of gender relations in trade union organisations and there are sufficient examples of that. What is much more decisive is how the Department of Working Women has made strategic use of the various resources which make up associational power beyond membership rates, such as organisational efficiency, internal cohesion and collective identity, as well as the development of articulation and intermediation capacities. What also stands out as a fundamental factor for success is the female trade unionists' insistence on imposing the debate on »women's issues« onto the decision making bodies in addition to requesting their ever more equal own participation in them. Parity proves how much women have advanced in the CUT in terms of institutional power.

This extraordinary power building has taken place in a progressive and open trade union atmosphere from its very beginning, incorporating the women workers' request to become subjects of this trade union movement as one dimension of its profile. The process of building gender equality within the CUT is neither free from conflicts or contradictions nor has it come to an end, but it has always been progressing and has brought real transformations, confirming the existence of a political will among both women and men to practise an inclusive and equal trade unionism consistent with its democratic principles.

The progress in gender equality and other anti-discriminatory policies from the CUT will not be affected by the regression dominating the political path the country is undergoing. Although no organisation is immune to the negative effects of this regression, the transformations developed here are based on a significant level of consolidation and have shape the CUT's identity, so that associational and social power is intrinsically linked to women's presence and participation. There is no way back.

41. The female trade unionists of the CUT headed the women's demonstrations in support of Dilma Rousseff. The Ex-President was the main invitee at the celebration on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women's Organisation at the trade union federation in November 2016.



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