

Farmers, workers: thirty years of new rural labor unionism in Brazil*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the dependencies and conditionings net that supports the origin, evolution, and the current configuration of the new Brazilian rural syndicalism. The study rebuilds the characteristics of the social basis of the movement, the leaders profile, agenda, and behavior privileged in each of the three moments of the adopted time line. The research covers from the genesis, in middle seventies; through the constitution of the CUT, the crisis in the late eighties; up to the union with Contag, in the beginning of current decade. The study highlights the growing dissemination of specific organizations representing family based agriculture.

Keywords: Syndicalism; Rural syndicalism; Family farming; Agrarian issue.

Introduction

Data from the 2001 IBGE's *Pesquisa Sindical* [research on labor unions] show that, at the turn of the century, from the 10,286 labor unions then existing in Brazil, 3,911 were rural unions, something around 38% of the total. These unions congregated 9,1 million workers, corresponding to 47% of the total of associated workers at the time in the country, what amounted to an average of 2,336 workers per union. From those 3,911 organizations, 37% were affiliated to a central labor organization, with 33% of these gathered around the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* – CUT, the rest, 4%, being affiliated to other centrals. These data give an idea both of the enormous weight of the rural versant of Brazilian syndicalism and, particularly, of the importance of the new unionism in such universe.

Under a theoretical perspective, the significance of the new rural unionism is no less important. As it shall be seen throughout this article, the main social basis of the movement and its principal leading personnel, consolidated along its trajectory of thirty years, have been the family based producers of different origins, and not the rural salaried workers. Contrary to the experience of most developed and peripheral countries, in the Brazilian case this representation occurred in a very particular form. While the European farmers gathered together in cooperatives or professional organizations, and whilst in large part of Latin America this association occurred by means of peasants' movements or agrarian fronts, in Brazil those social

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groups united themselves around the labor unions. This specificity, sufficient in itself for allowing a series of sociological interrogations, has its interest enlarged when one observes that, in its outset, the CUT has been constituted as an heir of the left-wing movements' tradition, inspired by socialist ideas; thus, by an ideological alignment that is not an obligatory characteristic.

This article assembles information and analyses resulting from a comprehensive research that covers a period extending from the genesis of the new rural unionism, in the mid-seventies, through the formation of the CUT, the moment of crisis at the end of the eighties, and the junction with the Contag, until the beginning of the present decade, with its emphasis on the growing dissemination of specific organizations representing the family based rural producers. Thus, it discusses the thirty years trajectory of this social movement. The network of dependences and conditioning circumstances sustaining the origin, evolution, and present configuration of the new Brazilian rural labor unionism is subjected to analysis, in order to provide a reconstitution of the characteristics of that movement's social base, their leaders' profile, and the privileged themes and forms of action in each of the three moments in which the adopted periodization is structured. The question underlying this text concerns knowing the reasons why, in Brazil, a so singular experience of autonomous rural workers' organization is constituted within a labor-unions' Central that is the heir of a socialist tradition. Through such question, we intend to make evident the fractures and articulations occurred throughout that trajectory, and to discuss the meanings of that course for thinking the configuration of rural social movements in Brazil.

The hypothesis guiding and supporting this exposition rejects two extreme ideas present in the literature on social movements. They cannot be duly interpreted as a mere unfolding of their protagonists' social condition given by their positions in the class structure, in a kind of political and ideological automatism; nor can they either be conceived in an abstract manner, as resulting solely from interactions rationally constructed by their members as a function of the interests involved. ¹ As recalls Charles Tilly (1988), the account of the bibliography suggests that, in spite of the existing different versants and emphases, there is a growing convergence in the studies on the theme, in the sense that the adequate apprehension of social movements' structure and dynamics would need to consider the manner how four fundamental instances are composed: the social networks involving their participants; the identities unfolded into collective conflicts; the structures given by the accumulation of shared understandings; and, finally, the structures of political opportunities, which are significant for the history of social movements and, simultaneously, transformed by the practice of those movements.

In the specific case of the new rural labor-unionism, this is equivalent to say that: i) a conjunction of factors – involving the more prominent characteristics of Brazilian agrarian conflict, the composition of the mediators, and the system of identities and oppositions forged among those farmers – brought about, in mid seventies, an organizational experience of family based agricultural producers in Brazilian rural space, in dialogue with segments of urban workers and strongly influenced by orientations of socialist inspiration; ii) the evolution of this specific experience gradually generated certain tensions arising precisely from those determined political and intellectual traditions, above all from those related to the place assigned to these non-salaried forms of labor within a political project which contested the capitalist development; iii) some characteristics of the crisis that affected the world of labor in the turn to the 1990's mitigated part of those tensions, as the impossibility of, or difficulty in, combining the representation of salaried segments with the representation of non-salaried forms of labor; iv) on the other hand, other tensions were formed in this new setting, chiefly those concerning the character of the labor-union movement agents' actions; more precisely, many conflicts resulted from intents – characteristic of that new period – for equalizing social critique and proposition, mobilization and institutional participation. In this new context, the agents of Brazilian labor-union milieu have been progressively confronted with the necessity of formulating not only criticisms and demands, but also of contributing more actively to the

elaboration of policies, by occupying posts in instances of the State, mediating classical claims, and creating innovative development alternatives for Brazilian rural space. On the one hand, pushed by social demands and, and on the other, pressured by the State, these agents were confronted both with the necessity of seeking to establish structural ruptures, a role traditionally expected from them, and simultaneously making technically competent, realistic and plausible proposals in the immediate horizon of time. This new configuration of constraints influenced the debates within the labor-union milieu and the practices of its agents, among them the composition of the “agenda”, the definition of their flags of struggle, and the choice of the social segments to be privileged, what imposed a true redefinition of content in their political project and, consequently, inaugurated a new phase in the history of rural social movements in Brazil.

In order to develop this argument, besides this introduction, the article is divided into three parts. The first reconstitutes the genesis of the new rural labor-unionism through the recomposition of the social relations network that involved Brazilian agricultural modernization after the *coup d'Etat*, the constitution of the Contag and, years later, the emergence of the syndical oppositions. The second concerns the moment of consolidation of the new labor-unionism, with the creation of the CUT and the unfolding of the debates over the place of rural workers in that structure. The third is dedicated to the analysis of the intents to overcome the crisis of the rural labor-unionism in mid 1990's, when the settlement of old tensions and the emergence of new ones are made explicit. At the end, the original questions are resumed and some notes are outlined taking into consideration determinant aspects of the present scenery, especially the perspective of labor-union legislation reform and the current movement of creation of specific organizations representing family based agriculture.

GENESIS OF THE NEW RURAL UNIONISM

The term ‘new unionism’ has been originally coined to designate the passage from the traditional craft unionism to the industrial union, at the end of the Nineteenth Century, in England. In the words of Hobsbawn:

“When applied to the period of its origin, the 1880's and the beginning of the 1890's, the term ‘new unionism’ may suggest three ideas [...] a new set of political strategies and forms of labor-union organization, in opposition to those existing in the ‘old unionism’. Secondly, it suggests a more radical social and political positioning of labor unions within the context of the socialist worker's movement. And, thirdly, [it suggests] the creation of new labor unions, until then non-organized or non-organizable, as well as the transformation of old labor unions according to lines followed by the innovators. Consequently, it suggests an explosive growth of labor union organization as well” (1989:221).**

In the Brazilian case, the expression ‘new unionism’ is also applicable to situations similar to those pointed out by Hobsbawn. It has been used to designate the vigorous resumption movement of struggles and social mobilization in plain context of dictatorship, the emergence of strong leaderships and innovative experiences questioning the former labor unionist tradition and, yet, the explosion in the numbers of affiliated workers. The reasons and issues related to this emergence and consolidation have been the object of important works. For Antunes (1995), the rise of the new unionism can be explained by the late constitution of an expropriation of the workers' labor force. Its more eloquent manifestation took place in the ABC region of Sao Paulo state, and gave origin to the strikes occurred in the final years of the 1970's. From there, leaderships would be projected, and later on would be at the head of the creation of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) and the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT). In this condition, the

** Retranslated from the Portuguese (N. do T.).

ABC's labor unionism commanded other political tendencies in the opposition to the military regime, giving heterogeneous and multifaceted contours to that experience then being molded. In another well known work, Rodrigues (1997) reconstitutes the trajectory of the CUT in order to show how the emergence and the expressivity attained by that Central are due to its insertion into a larger movement for citizenship in the country. The emphasis here does not fall on the conditions inherent to the process of capitalist development in Brazil and its implications for the work and the workers, but on the social actions concerning the struggle for rights. In a different line from that of the just mentioned researchers, Boito (1991) emphasizes the persisting characteristics of the old model. In his analysis, the persistence of the unionism's corporatist structure and of determined traits of syndical action are signs that the old practices and mechanisms of state control over labor unions remained present. In all these analyses, the empirical basis lays predominantly on urban industrial workers' unionism. However, in spite of its justified significance, this urban industrial workers bias ended up obscuring – at least in the social sciences literature – the influence that the rural versant of this new tradition would come to exert.

The works of Medeiros (1988; 1997) and Novaes (1987; 1991) fulfilled an important part of the lacuna and became an obligatory reference in the study of rural social movements.² In the first case, the author, in one of her works, analyses the history of social movements in the countryside, distinguishing the different stages of the agrarian social conflict in Brazil and their correspondences with the constitution of specific identities, in articulation with the evolution of the forms of representation. The persistence of the agrarian conflict and its different forms of manifestation throughout time are the background for the understanding of the successive return of flags of struggle as that of the agrarian reform. It is in such dialectics that organizations emerge and reemerge, as expressions of the conflict and as holders of the promises of its overcoming. In the second case, the author stresses the weight of the rural versant of the new labor unionism, with emphasis on its tensions in relation to the official syndical structure commanded by Contag, and calls attention to the peculiarity of the forms of labor present in this rural component of the CUT. Following the path opened by these works, the approach here developed sees this versant of Brazilian labor-unionist movement as situated between constraints originated from two orders of facts: the evolution in the quality of the agrarian conflict, on the one hand, and the internal arrangements and tensions in the unionist field, on the other.

The 1960's represented a turning point in the history of XXth century Brazilian agriculture, engendering an inescapable reference framework for the performance of the rural social movements, with the emergence of the so-called conservative modernization and its regulatory expression, the corporatist pattern. Considering the fact that it is already available a reasonable bibliography about the period and its meanings, what is important here is to recall that such pattern was based on a triad involving: the change in the technical and productive basis of Brazilian agriculture, with all the process of technological improvement and development of agro-industrial complexes; the architecture of social classes, with a greater and intense integration between agrarian, industrial, and financial capitals; and a relative change in the role of the State and the public policies. With this triad, which involved green revolution/qualification/corporatism, the parameters have been settled for the new forms of accumulation in Brazilian agriculture and the new forms of domination over the rural populations, in a pattern that would be in effect until the mid 1980's (Sorj, 1980; Mueller, 1986). The State thus became repressor of the conflicts and, simultaneously, inducer and regulator of the modernization process.

The years that followed the military coup - in which occurred the organization of the Contag and the large network of its component labor unions - took place within these largely adverse marks for labor-union's practice of critique and confrontation. As showed by Medeiros (1988), conflicts continued to occur, but their marked isolated character did not allow for confronting the tough repression of the period. In face of these circumstances, the Contag sought to create

ways of dealing with that multiplicity of conflicts. The politico-unionist project then being forged already carried some legacies from the former period. Among, the most significant was the support of the agrarian reform as a unifying flag of struggle for the ensemble of the subordinate segments in the rural sector. This was particularly important, for it also allowed for Contag to consolidate itself as the interpreter of a strongly significant claim of Brazilian society's progressive sectors. The agrarian reform and the enforcement of labor rights became the main political demands of rural labor unionism. These two political demands expressed the reading on the agrarian conflict made by the rural unionism in the period, and they unified the claims of the rural workers for the two decades that followed. A second fundamental feature was the constitution of a pattern of union action characterized by a certain prudence and respect for the limits imposed by law. On the one hand, the legislation, by means of the *Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural* [Rural Workers Statute], recognized the agrarian social conflict and determined the forms through which it should be dealt with. On the other hand, the same legislation instituted a quite strict limit for union action in dealing with such conflicts, whose infringement or questioning resulted in harsh repression. At that moment a tradition was started in dealing with these problems through denunciations and demands claiming for measures of compliance with the rights foreseen by law. Prudence and legalism have been the two faces of this pattern of union action, which allowed Contag to give conflicts an institutional treatment and, especially, to enlarge the organizative network in Brazilian countryside (Medeiros, 1988). In its turn, the third and fourth fundamental features of post coup labor unionism – the autonomist tendency Contag started to cultivate in relation to other organizations and the large capillarity it managed to attain – occurred in a combined form, having as counterpart the development of a highly vertical and rigid organizational model (Novaes, 1991). The very institutional regulatory apparatus of syndical representation determined the conditions for this design of Contag's politico-syndical project and, by extension, of the rural labor unionism post coup: the labor-union unicity and the institution of the compulsory syndical tax allowed simultaneously for an impulse and a limitation to the constitution of Brazilian rural labor unionism. The rule of unicity instituted the obligatoriness of representation of the whole set of countryside's segments through a single union, based on the municipality. This single union would come to hold the monopoly of representation of farmers and rural workers. Besides the institutional aspect, the competition with other forces for the control of the organization and the command of the struggles reinforced an even more corporatist discourse, which served as well as a protection against disputes and preserved a system of loyalties inherent to internal rules of formation and reproduction of leaderships (Ricci, 1994). In its turn, the collection of the syndical tax instituted a permanent supporting mechanism whose compulsory character decisively contributed to a certain accommodation of a large portion of unions being formed at that moment. The institutional triad was completed by the *Funrural*, which allowed those representative entities to celebrate agreements for medical and health care, what strongly contributed to the enlargement in the number of unions and, more than that, to mold a syndical practice that, in many cases, was reduced to welfare assistance. The struggle for rights and what it represented in publicizing the agrarian conflicts and in giving continuity to the struggles in the period post coup, the visibility of the struggle for the agrarian reform, and the capillarity of the syndical structure of representation of Brazilian rural workers, all have been gains that have had, as a counterpart, the relative taming of union action with regard to other forces, themes, and problems of the country at the time.

The role of the Church, especially the Catholic Church, has been determinant for the consolidation of a critique of this tradition that was being established in Brazilian countryside in that period. Already in the 1950's, the presence of Christian labor unionism was undoubtedly significant. Under the influence of the social encyclics, the Church stimulated the course for labor unions' recognition charts, up to the point of becoming the most influential force in some regions, as the Northeast, at the time of the military coup (Novaes, 1987). And even in the moment that immediately followed the coup, the presence of the Church still persisted, although under different forms, depending on the region, what ended up contributing to the establishment of lines of continuity between the labor unionism of the periods pre and post coup, since the

Church's protecting mantle succeeded in preserving leaderships and providing more visibility to denunciations (Novaes, 1991). In the turn from the 1960's to the 1970's, the Church's action concerning rural labor unionism acquires a new orientation with the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council, in 1965, in which the Church assumed the "option for the poor"; and, mainly, with the resolutions of the Episcopal Conference of Medellín, in 1968, whose purpose has been that of adapting for Latin America the orientations of the Vatican. It has been from those references that the movement later self-denominated *Teologia da Libertação* [Liberation Theology] became responsible for a politicization and engagement of ecclesial agents who spread out over both the countryside and the cities (Novaes, 1987; Iokoi, 1996).

The creation of the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* – CPT [Pastoral Commission for the Land], in 1975, issued from the *Encontro Pastoral das Igrejas da Amazônia Legal* [Legal Amazon Churches Pastoral Meeting], gave a determinant impulse to the enlargement of that kind of action of the Church within the rural milieu. With the purpose of "interlinking, advising and giving dynamism to those who work in favor of men without land and rural workers", the CPT passed to be present in the areas of conflict, with its agents becoming part of the community itself. Novaes (1987) points out that, with these agents, the Church provided a language to the movement, through rituals (celebrations, vigils, walks) and communitarian practices (ground-clearings, encampings, etc.). In such a language, those already mentioned elements – participation, mobilization, awareness of social reality – forged a determined identity among the members of the community. Being multiplied at the same pace of the intensification of the modernization process, the countless conflict situations became the privileged *locus* for the action of the *comunidades eclesiais de base* [ecclesial base communities]. The CPT rapidly spread out in convergence with the actions of other pastoral agents in the rest of the country, and just four years later fifteen similarly organized regional entities were already in operation. With that, the Church provided an alternative of organization for the rural poor. And, with its working methods of community organization - mainly, with the conception of social action imbedded in those methods -, it also generated an acute critique of the form of union action that had been being consolidated.

The analysis of the documents and discourses of agents and organizations linked to that work of the Church at the time shows the great difference between the elements involved in the discourse of the syndical oppositions and those characterizing the discourse and practices of the official unionism. In a significant example, Sader (1988) points to the similarities presented by the notion of liberation, as it appears in the pastoral speeches, in relation to the notion of revolution, as it appears in discourses of socialist inspiration: "referred to social reality, the two notions occupy the same place in the respective discursive matrices. They point to a totalizing event which subverts and refounds social life from the ideals of justice set in movement by the people in action". First, what appears here is the wager on the necessity of social transformation that would result from social mobilization guided by ideals of greater justice and solidarity. Second, in such confrontation with inequalities and oppression - which would necessarily occur through social mobilization -, the self-recognition and the knowledge of reality constituted themselves as starting points for affirming the identity of the social group (pastoral, CEB, labor union) and, at the same time, for unveiling in the reality the mechanisms resulting from the inequality and the oppression.

In what comes to its social basis, the new rural unionism encompassed a variety of work situations in the countryside – from the family based agriculture, with some insertion in the market and some access to public policies, to situations of direct closeness with physical violence and deprivation of the more basic social goods and public equipments – and a set of situations that covered geographically an important portion of the country, what assured its national character. It is worth noticing, however, that such ensemble of regions and categories ended up not having the same weight in the formulation of the political orientations of this new unionism and in the composition of its posts of direction. When analyzed under this perspective, one can say that the political project of CUT's rural labor unionism had as its privileged basis

the family based farmers from the axis involving the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul/ West of Santa Catarina/ Southwest of Paraná, and the family based producers of the Amazon region, especially of Pará, in a first moment those situated near the *Transamazônica*. These two regions came to occupy the main directive posts until the 1990's. Northeast's farmers have also participated in significant, but secondary positions. There too, the farmers were family based producers, mostly from the *sertão* [the hinterland of the Northeast region]. Similarly, farmers of Sao Paulo, the Center-West, and other states and regions, mostly salaried workers or squatters, have also been present, but their participation has never attained the proportions and influence of the former groups. This conformation of the social basis has strongly determined the constitution of the agenda and the political demands in the period.

As to the political project, therefore, since the beginning the diversity of situations found in the social basis of the new unionism in the countryside pointed to a potential dispersion of themes and fronts of struggle. Notwithstanding, the conjuncture of the period, which in its course brought a progressive weakening of the dictatorship and an ascension of the social critique and its supportive forces, provided the conditions for the amalgamation of that diversity into a unifying agenda and into political demands that made sense for those living and experiencing the conflicts, expressing the basic claims of that set of segments. Finishing with the dictatorship was a fundamental and unifying demand. The dictatorial State was identified as oppressor and, at the same time, as inductor of a modernization that caused the exclusion. Therefore, the agrarian reform, the labor rights, and the end of violence in the countryside were the basic claims, and they brought to the same opposition camp the great landed estate, the patronage, and the agents of violence, as the colonization enterprises. Finally, the critique of the official structure of labor-unionism, view as an instrument for restraining and manipulating the workers, completed the set of fundamental themes and demands that guided the constitution and consolidation of the new rural unionism. Those demands and that opposition camp provided as well the substance for the linking of that rural portion of the new unionism with the other tendencies that would come to create and integrate the CUT. Opposition to the State and the patronage, critique of the labor-union structure, and the perspective of a society of socialist inspiration were the common elements characterizing the other tendencies that were present in the urban unionism at that moment. Adding to these elements the perspective of a strong social critique and the privilege accorded to mobilization as a form of dealing with the conflicts, one has the main referential framework for the political project of the new unionism.

As to its organizational model, this versant of labor unionism had to operate, since the beginning, with a fundamental contradiction: to constitute itself in opposition and in an attitude of criticism in relation to a rigid and restrictive organizational model, but recognizing such model as legitimate and important, and assuming it as a privileged instrument. But there is yet a second remarkable contradiction in the organizational model that was being constructed in that period: the majoritarian presence of family based autonomous farmers in the actions and direction of the new unionism. The contradiction is not in the presence itself of this kind of work included within the union central, as much discussed in the 1980's, but in the presence of that social form of work in a structure of representation absolutely rigid and claiming to represent a whole of categories increasingly specialized.

When these characteristics are added to the analysis of life trajectories of the main union leaderships of the period (Favareto, 2001) - something that cannot be reproduced within the limits of this article -, it becomes clear that such labor-union versant has been formed as a result of an ensemble of social practices established since the first half of the 1970's, which had been unleashed by a blockage of the reproduction possibilities of the family based farmers, being unfolded into a larger politico-unionist project that would culminate in the creation of the Central in 1983.

From the Creation of the CUT to the Crisis of the New Unionism

The 1980's became known as the "lost decade", in a direct reference to the low dynamics of Brazilian economy in the period, to what many analysts add the loss of opportunities for promoting ruptures with some of the historic dilemmas of the country – among them, the agrarian issue. But this has also been the period when an institutional democratic order has been consolidated, after two decades of dictatorship. This period has been the scenery for an expressive growth of labor union organization and an increase in the workers' power of influence, as indicated by the creation of the Centrals and the explosion in the number of labor strikes (Pochmann et al., 1998).

In 1983, the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* - CUT was founded in a congress that took place in the city of Sao Bernardo do Campo. In spite of having participated in the whole articulation process, even as the seat for several preparatory meetings, the Contag opted for not endorsing the creation of the Central. The detonator of the scission between these groups has been the resolution adopted by the organizers of the congress allowing for the participation of the *oposições sindicais* [unions' oppositions], what was considered by the Contag as a transgression of the principle of unity. Throughout the years that followed, the Contag opted for the non-affiliation to any Central, although its president, José Francisco da Silva, came to assume the vice-presidency of the CGT, another Central, created a few years later. This caused an intensification of the polarization between CUT and Contag. CUT's first congress had the expressive participation of 5,222 delegates. The rural sector has been responsible for the largest representation, even exceeding that of the industrial workers. The Central's national direction was composed by 149 members, including the body responsible for its actions on the national level – its *Executiva Nacional* [National Executive Board] – and the leaders charged of the organization of the Central in the states. From this group, approximately one third was composed by rural workers. Exceptuating the states of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, which jointly had 36 leaders integrating the national board (none of them were rural workers), one comes to the conclusion that, in the rest of the country, approximately 40% of the leaders responding for the construction of the CUT were rural workers. For the National Executive Board were nominated leaders from the Amazon region (Avelino Ganzer, STR Santarém – PA) and from the Northeast region (José Gomes Novaes, STR Choça – BA e Luís Silva, STR São Sebastião do Umbuzeiro – PB). The participation of the rural sector in congresses and its presence in directive posts remained in this same level all along the congresses carried out in the decade, signaling the importance of such segment for the Central as a whole when it was being organized on national bases.

The flags of struggle adopted in that congress are an effective sample of the eminently political character of the new unionism then in course of consolidation: "rupture with the International Monetary Fund; end of the salary squeeze; reduction of the working journey without salary cuts; freedom of organization and union autonomy; attention to the basic needs of the population; housing policy; revocation of the national security law; extensive and free political and party organization; against privatization; against any kind of discrimination; support of indigenous populations; for the recognition of the CUT as the paramount representative organ of the workers". Over and above the resolutions that have been adopted, the debates occurred in the congress denote, on the whole, a strong organizational tone and an emphasis on themes of great impact upon the national political agenda: the resolutions affirm "the centrality of the agrarian reform – extensive, massive, and under control of the workers -, the struggle for direct elections, and the support for union's freedom and autonomy". As to the agrarian issue, in particular, the congress emphasized the strategic importance of the agrarian reform, which was mentioned in several points of the approved text. When it came to deal with these propositions in detail, most of the enrolled items were related to proposals concerning important claims of other rural segments, as: i) struggle for the agrarian reform and the attention to the immediate claims of peasants, as minimum prices, storage and distribution, technical assistance; ii) labor rights, social security rights, salaries; iii) association between "Immediate direct elections [*Diretas já*]

and struggle for agrarian reform”; iv) encouragement to occupation and collective exploitation of lands; v) creation of the Rural Secretariat in order to articulate the diversity of struggles in the countryside; vi) the indigenous issue; vii) the extractive activities under workers’ control; viii) accomplishment of the decree assuring two hectares of land for the workers in the sugar cane plantations; ix) *bóias-frias* ^{***}, organization on the locals of residence and integration to the struggle for land”. The text of the resolutions brought yet another twenty items which focused question as: the use of agricultural defensive chemicals, women, social security, agricultural insurance, restrictions to property, misappropriations of public money in the Northeast, infrastructure, command of the struggles, commercialization and cooperative system, agrarian settlements, *garimpeiros* [precious stones and gold prospectors], more space in Congress, education committees in labor unions, debts, financing. As one may notice, here too the organizational tenor is greatly emphasized. Along with that, one could also observe a marked presence of strongly ideological themes and the acknowledgement of much diversified labor situations (indigenous issue, extractive activities, relations of salaried labor, small farmers), but with emphasis on rural land policies.

The third congress, the last of the 1980’s, assembled 6,244 delegates. Among them, approximately 32% were rural workers. However, from then on, the participation of this segment in the national board, as well as in the congresses of the Central, starts to decline significantly. From the 124 leaders elected, only 23 were rural members. Avelino Ganzer (Santarém – PA) – again in the vice-presidency – and Adelmo Escher (Francisco Beltrão), as substitute, have been elected for the National Executive Board. For the first time, the axis of the resolutions did not consider socialism as the main perspective. On the contrary, the analyses in the approved text were framed in terms of “capitalist development and struggle of resistance”. On the one hand, this was due to the impacts of the events that were starting to occur in Eastern Europe, taking to an end decades of bureaucratic socialism; on the other, to an attenuation in the discourse motivated by the imminence of the first presidential elections post dictatorship, in which the candidacy supported by the labor-unions generated some expectations of success. The concern with the “diversity of rural workers” appears more emphatically formulated in that same congress, and the agenda began to contemplate the great challenge of CUT’s union organization: building the “unity in diversity”. This would stay as the motto synthesizing CUT’s mission on the rural milieu. The part of the text which deals with the agrarian issue makes a classification of the segments present in the countryside. According to the text, in the South of the country were the “integrated farmers”, qualified as “disguised salaried [workers] and domicile workers”; in the North, squatters; in the Northeast and the Center-West, and also in the North, small proprietors; yet in the North, fishermen and *seringueiros* [rubber latex extractors]; finally, in the South and Southeast, the temporary salaried workers (*bóias-frias*). Farther on, the text warns that “this complex panorama is present in the unions’ associative life, where coexist differentiated concrete interests of small proprietors, salaried workers, squatters and *sem-terra* [workers without land]”.

With the Central’s new institutional design adopted in 1988, the Rural Secretariat ceased to be the structure of representation of the rural workers, being replaced by a Rural Department, what meant a greater autonomy for that segment. The creation of this *Departamento Nacional de Trabalhadores Rurais* (DNTR) has been also the most audacious move of the new unionism in its confrontation with the structure of the official unionism. In the same movement that led to its creation, new experiences of union organization in dissonance with the official structure have been being disseminated, by means of which the farmers associated to the CUT sought to affirm the best instruments for instituting their representation. In that same 1988 congress, a new organizational profile was defined for the Central, which was more turned towards the mediation of capital-labor relations. Although it may seem a paradox, this has been justified by the affirmative moment of the Central’s organization. Thus, in privileging the representation of

^{***} country workers, not regularly employed, who do temporary jobs and works in the fields all day long, and eat the cold meal they bring with them (N.T.).

the salaried workers, but at the same time seeking to differentiate itself from the official structure, the CUT gave room for an institutional accommodation of its rural section on a specific department. After all, at that moment the Contag was supporting the *Plano Nacional de Reforma Agrária* [National Plan for the Agrarian Reform], being aligned with Sarney's Administration and supporting the measures of the New Republic.

The Rural Department was founded with the participation of 419 labor unions. The set of definitions established at that primary moment for the new unionism had a fundamental mark: the acid critique of the corporatist structure. Such critique was strengthened by the outstanding growth of the so-called differentiated organizations (Cedi, 1191a and b; CUT/Contag, 1998a) – those constituted through circumventing the parameters defined by law – and by the increase of unions affiliated to the CUT. But, yet this time, it was not solved the already mentioned ambiguity concerning the structure of the labor-unionism – disavowal of the official structure, but acceptance of official unions in the basis of the Central. On the discursive plan, such ambiguity was solved through proposals of differentiation and regionalization (differentiation in specific organizations of representation for salaried workers and for small farmers, and regionalization of the unions' bases, then organized by municipalities, what, in practice, ended with the framework and the territorial delimitation imposed by the legislation). As to the demands and claims, the creation of the Rural Department brought noticeable innovations. As already said, its creation reserved for the rural workers an institutionally defined place within the Central. With that, certain conditions were created for the organization of this segment according to courses of action determined by its own representatives, and not in a diluted form within the set of claims and definitions carried on by the Central as a whole, many times influenced by a less precise vision of the real diversity of its social basis. This meant dealing more affirmatively with the claims of the non-salaried segments, which were the more numerous and influent in the rural section of the Central.

A first field where one can feel the tenor of the politico-unionist project of “CUT's rural sectors” is the perception of its social basis and of how, in that project, the fundamental claims are organized. The foundational document of the Rural Department deals with themes concerning the following segments: salaried workers, small farmers, fishermen, people living in the forests, indigenous peoples, people affected by dams, women, and people affected by droughts. This ensemble of conflict and production situations was articulated by the notion of rural worker, in reference to a category “instituted” by the *Estatuto da Terra* [Statute of the Land], which was consecrated by the official rural unionism, and adopted both by the urban unionism and the rural unionism influenced by the catholic left. The institutional form in which these segments have been organized was defined through the creation of specific secretariats. In spite of the fact that some secretariats were assigned to these segments, it is important to notice that almost the totality of them was occupied by small farmers.

A second important point to be considered in the politico-unionist project led by the DNTR is the form of representation of the autonomous rural producers. As much in the testimonies of its leaders as in passages of the resolutions one can see the treatment the Rural Department gave to the theme. Initially, when justifying the existence of the Department, the situation of the autonomous producers is treated as another manifestation of the several forms of labor expropriation promoted under capitalism. Such idea understands the autonomous producers as subject to the same conflicts and oppositions affecting the other segments subjected to the capital and, so to say, considers them all as members of a same class. In another passage, and in consonance with this understanding of the place of autonomous producers under capitalist development, the text asserts as necessary a series of policies aimed at their social reproduction – financing of production, technological model, conditions of competitiveness and commercialization. In the considerations on this set of measures, the oppositions are always addressed to as the State and the *latifúndio* [great landed property], as agents opposed to the interests of the salaried and the autonomous workers of Brazilian countryside.

The balance of the new unionism in the 1980's is, so to say, the sum of the contradictions perceived in these two fields. In the politico-organizational terrain, solid bases have been achieved, consolidating the CUT as a Central of national expression, with roots in the whole national territory, and covering a large diversity of productive situations, from the modern farming of the Center-South to the small farmers of the poorest zones of the country. However, it did not succeed in breaking up with the organizational model of corporatist unionism. In other words, CUT passed to occupy a prominent place in the political scenery, its unions passed to share a same identity, but it did not overcome the limits of the *sindicato único* [the single union], based on the municipality, and without roots in the working place. In the terrain of the social struggles, the new rural unionism leaves the 1980's yet with the glories of having been a movement of confrontation with the dictatorial State and the *latifúndio*, enjoying therefore a strong social recognition. Notwithstanding, the political struggle for democratization was already, in a certain sense, a demand of the past, and was progressively losing force. Worst than that, the transition from the dictatorship to the political opening of the regime was coming to an end with a conservative outcome. Lula's candidacy, symbolizing the utopia of social change in the short term, was defeated by the election of Collor de Mello and, with this, the projected horizon of ruptures in the imaginary of the new unionism became out of sight, demanding the adoption of new references, of a new equilibrium between what was immediate and what was structural in the unionism agenda. As a consequence, the advising organs and even the union leaders started to talk about a crisis in labor-unionism. In the case of the new rural unionism, this reading of the situation through which the world of labor and the rural space were passing gave rise to a process of reflection which ended up leading to an attempt of updating CUT's politico-unionist project for this new context.

A New Stage in the History of Rural Social Movements

The changes in the world of labor which became disseminated all over Brazil from the 1990's onwards – introduction of new production and management technologies, structural unemployment, labor deregulation, temporary work, and the outsourcing system – have meant a growing heterogeneity, fragmentation and complexity in the forms of being and living of the working class, with direct impact over the unionist action (Antunes, 1995). In what comes to the workers' historical interests, these transformations implied impacts on the level of the “subjectivity, the consciousness of the working social being”, and on their “class actions, the actions of their organs of representation”. As to the immediate issues, the 1990's reserved serious difficulties for the unions' movement: with the commercial openness, countless sectors of domestic industry went to bankruptcy in face of the competition with imports. Abruptly implemented, without transitional rules and processes, the adjustment caused a drastic decrease in working posts, a fact that was aggravated by the recession moment in which those transformations were taking place. These trends have been deepened with the institution of the *Plano Real*, which opted for the stabilization by means of exchange rate overvaluation, increase in interest rates, and acceleration of commercial openness, with direct impacts over the productive sector and the labor market. With that, employment and work passed to occupy the prominent place formerly occupied by the struggle for salaries. This marked an inflexion of the labor-unionist agenda in relation to the former decade. The main features of such attempt of reorienting the paradigm of unionist action were: i) the necessity of turning political action into an horizontally oriented action, in contraposition to the verticalism established in accordance with the organization by branches of activity, characteristic of the former period; ii) the necessity of reconsidering the social basis of this unionism, chiefly by the inclusion of a multiplicity of social forms of work, besides the traditional situation of salaried labor; iii) the necessity of conferring a more “pro-positive” tone to the unionist action, in contraposition to its marked demanding character of the former period.

The rural space experienced this same set of circumstances, added to some other specific aspects. As already mentioned, with the crisis of the 1980's, the organizational pattern of

Brazilian agriculture, forged since the period of conservative modernization, had its bases eroded. With that, instead of a pattern in which the State assumes and channels for itself the mediation of conflict and production situations, what starts to occur is a selection of demands. Such selection is defined as much by the articulation that those demands represent for the routes of the economy as by the pressure power of their supporters. But the fundamental changes for Brazilian rural space were not limited to the institutional environment. Some socioeconomic tendencies occurring in the basis of the agrarian processes substantially modified the social relations supporting the patterns of domination and accumulation: a marked decrease in the importance of agriculture in the process of income formation of farmers' families (Graziano da Silva, 1999); a process of concentration and specialization in the agriculture of commodities; unemployment joined by the flexibility of salaried labor; an increase in density of the Brazilian municipalities, with an approximation between urban and rural spaces, caused both by the pursuit of new activities and products by segments of urban population, and by the evolution of the urbanization pattern in certain parts of the country (Veiga *et al.*, 2001); decentralization of several public policies with impact on the life quality of the populations of small municipalities and on the social participation in the mechanisms of management of those policies (Abramovay, 2000; Favareto & Demarco, 2004).

After years of debates, controversies, comings and goings – and in a response to the identified crisis -, at the beginning of the 1990's, CUT's rural section makes an important redefinition of its political project. As for the dubieties of the labor-union structure, the new unionism decides to assume the importance of the official labor-union structure and, leaving to a side its ambiguous positioning, affirms the pressing necessity of conquering and transforming the Contag. In what comes to its flags of struggle, the new unionism abandons the older ones – agrarian reform and labor rights, or agrarian reform, agricultural policy, and labor rights – and assumes others – “and Alternative Project of Rural Development, anchored in the expansion and strengthening of family farming”, a segment that starts to be considered with priority in this new strategy that the new unionism intends to build up for the countryside (Favareto & Bittencourt, 2000; Medeiros, 1997).

The CUT's Contag

The creation of the DNTR had occurred in a moment when Contag's hegemony had undergone a strong disruption among rural social movements in Brazil. This decline in the role of the Contag may be credited to: i) the erosion resulting from its closeness to the State, mainly to the government of the New Republic, as already mentioned; ii) its standing aloof from the CUT, not only for its non-affiliation to the central, but also because of its rejection of the freedom and autonomy principles expressed in Convention 87 of the International Labor Organization, on its IV Congress, in 1985; and iii) the episode concerning the 1988 election of its board of directors, effected in an indirect form - in spite of dispositions to the contrary, pointing to elections in a congress – and over which accusations of fraud have been made.³

It occurs that, as already mentioned, CUT's unionism was being institutionalized and was beginning to live its contradictions. First, the *oposições sindicais* [unions' oppositions] had advanced in the sense of wining the unions' directions. In a short time, this had also been reflected in the composition of the federations (instances, in the sphere of the states, congregating the STRs [rural labor unions], that all together conform the Contag). As a consequence of this process, a certain accommodation to the structure until the acidly criticized has occurred. Secondly, the State in the 1990's keeps its differences in relation to the dictatorial State. With the 1988 Constitution and the gradual opening process, though with strong limitations, channels and spaces of dialogue or participation of social actors with pressure power and social recognition have been formed. However, this space for interlocution and expression of the rural workers' demands had been historically occupied by the Contag. These two aspects – the ambiguity of corporatism and the social legitimacy of the Contag – are

possibly not the sole deserving to be mentioned, but they undermined the strategy defined by the CUT, in mid 1980's, of building up its unionism "outside" the official structure.

In short, at the beginning of the 1990's, each of the two projects was in crisis, experiencing dilemmas that required re-adequation and updating. The Contag arrived to that decade with a structure of enviable capillarity (3,280 officially existent unions, from which approximately 2,000 somehow effectively participating in the unionist life), social recognition as a progressive union organization, capacity of interlocution with the State in several levels. This same Contag, however, enters this period undergoing the erosion caused by the form of its relationship with the State and the difficulty in promoting the updating of its unionist project, either in its flags of struggle, or in its organizational forms, or even in the characteristics of its unionist action, still very much guided by legalism. The new unionism, in its time, also enjoyed a strong social recognition, a great capacity of expression and mobilization, and presented contents and practices that renovated the former unionist tradition. In the case of the CUT's versant, the limitative factors were in the difficulty for consolidating itself as a privileged interlocutor in face of the State and for enlarging its insertion among unions of Contag's bases.

The affiliation of the Contag to the CUT took place on the 1995 congress. Although controlling the majority in that meeting, the delegates of the Central opted for a composition with the forces already present in the Confederation. Two factors contributed for the establishment of such arrangement: on the one hand, the pressure of urban union leaders concerned with the enlargement of CUT's influence over a broader set of unions and political forces than those already joined together within the Central; on the other hand, the fear of the Central's leaders themselves of assuming the control of the Contag under the sign of divisionism. This option would definitely mark the character of Contag's transition to the ranks of CUT, a transition in which the transformations experienced by the Confederation remained subordinated to a pact of unity with its traditional sectors – later on one would verify that those changes in fact remained limited.

The Option for the Family Based Agriculture

The assertion that the family based agriculture was its priority - the second element of the updating of its project for the rural sphere - always appeared in CUT's documents associated to a certain interpretation of the role of labor-unionism in face of the agricultural and agrarian situation of Brazil in the 1990's. In such analysis, two arguments were emphasized: the necessity of giving more visibility to, and treating in an affirmative manner, the diversity of segments which participate in the composition of the rural world – in a critique to the generality of the category "rural worker" -, and the search for a more pro-positive content, discussing and proposing a project instead of punctual measures. This reading incorporated, in its manner, the diagnosis of a fragmentation of Brazilian rural reality and of the social and politico-institutional changes that the country was experiencing at the beginning of the decade. Based in this argument, the rural section of the CUT asserted that its priority was the "construction of an Alternative Project of Rural Development" which would have as basis the strengthening of the family based agriculture and the struggle for an extensive and massive agrarian reform. With that, the labor-unionists searched for a definition aiming at a more extensive project, of less demanding and more affirmative character, seeking to contemplate the claims of the other rural segments – family based farmers, laborers without land, salaried workers, retirees, etc.

This new orientation was based on a series of elements: the experiences being developed in the organization of the struggles in the South and North regions of the country - through which a certain way of composing alliances and building up the agendas of demands was being designed -; the role of new mediators as the non governmental organizations and other advising organs – through which the debate on family based agriculture and development models was introduced -; the defeat of Lula's candidacy in 1989 – which removed from the near horizon the possibility

of radical transformation of reality -; and a certain crisis of the agricultural development model – which opened a breach for discussing and proposing alternative projects (Favareto & Bittencourt, 2000).

This set of resolutions, associated with the context of the 1990's, represented a turning point in the debate about the place of these farmers within the Central. If in the decade of 1980 the controversy was referred to know whether or not the role of a labor unions' Central was that of organizing autonomous producers in their condition of small proprietors, the debate in the documents of the decade that followed deals with the opposite difficulty, that of taking into consideration the demands of the rural salaried workers and creating mechanisms able to increase their participation within a union structure with most of the direction posts occupied by family based farmers, and in which the main policies are also directed to that public. The reversal in this aspect has been so strong that, during the 1990's, it became usual among the labor-unionists to mention the experience of organization of small farmers within the Central as a well succeeded example of how is it possible to work with other dimensions of the world of labor that are not restraint to the formal relation capital/labor. This was a clear reference to the challenges confronting the workers' movements of that period in face of the crisis of unemployment and of the new patterns of accumulation.

In what comes to the Contag, in its turn, the adoption of the expression 'family based agriculture' occurred in a moment when its historic flags of struggle were being progressively emptied or taken on by another protagonist. Throughout the 1990's, the struggle for the agrarian reform was being directly associated to another rural social movement – the MST [Movement of Workers without Land]. This fact was due as much to the inherent merits of such movement, its vitality and representativeness, as to the excessive legalism with which the federations and the Contag itself dealt with the theme. This circumstance frequently obscured the fact that part of the land occupations was being in fact led by rural workers' unions. Another of the old flags of Contag – the support to labor rights – lost part of its former historical relevance, although obviously without being transformed in a banality. A significant parcel of the rural population still does not exert its more elementary social and labor rights. However, the ascension of this flag of struggle concerns the period in which the category "rural worker" did not exist, when the recognition of the rural worker's condition in similar terms to the urban worker was yet the main issue. This is what justified the creation of the *Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural* [Statute of the Rural Worker], which provided the basis for the constitution of a rural workers' unionism, and not of a unionism of farmers, autonomous producers, etc. With their fundamental rights recognized and with the crisis faced by the segment of agricultural salaried workers – in spite of the problem caused by the creation of fake cooperatives -, this flag looses the capacity of unifying the demands, opening space for the affirmation of more specific demands and identities.

With such option, Brazilian unionism was at a crossroads. On the one hand, it gave more concreteness, visibility and operational capacity to what is specific in its union bases - the fact that they are composed by farmers, direct producers who, under several modalities, cultivate the land and organize their own work activity. On the other hand, in order to render effective the treatment of its bases' demands, the unionism would need as well to pass through a transformation in its organizational forms, in the profile of its leaders and technicians, and in its agenda. And then, the diversity of situations found in its bases turns this option more complex than it could appear at first sight.

The new orientation expressed in these two changes has a profound significance for the course the new unionism would come to follow: they meant the abandonment of the fundamental characteristics that marked its origin and the adoption of new references, through which the manners of seeing the inherent challenges of the agrarian conflict and the forms of its equating or overcoming are modified. They also meant a realignment of CUT's rural unionism in relation to the ensemble of the rural social movements, notably its distancing from historic partners – as

the catholic left represented by the CPT [Pastoral Commission of the Land] and its agents, and the MST [Movement of the Workers without Land], that had been born in the same context and with the same inspirations – and its approximation to the unionism of the Contag, until then its most tenacious opponent.

The congresses of the Central that occurred on the second half of the 1990's and the beginning of the decade that followed, reaffirmed that movement. The resolutions start to emphasize more and more the specificity of the family based agriculture, especially their character of autonomous producers – with the struggle for the “alternative project of rural development” as their main proposition. The terms “peasant” and “rural worker” practically disappear from the unionist documents. Altemir Tortelli, a farmer of Rio Grande do Sul, affirms himself as a national leadership of the CUT's rural unionism, initially occupying the national vice-presidency of the Central and, later, the presidency of the *Federação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar da Região Sul do Brasil* [Federation of Workers in Family Based Agriculture of the South of Brazil]. Along with this farmer, the national direction of the Central in the period was composed by feminine leaderships of Bahia and Pará, both farmers/family based producers, what reveals another trait of high relevance: the growing feminine organization within the rural social movements.

Conclusion

As pointed out in the introduction to this article, its main purpose was to demonstrate the articulations and fractures occurred throughout the trajectory of thirty years of the new rural unionism. With the orientations adopted in the course of the 1990's, it has been opened a new stage marked by observable moves as much in the domain of the propositions the new unionism seeks to express, as in what comes to its partners and allies. More than internal questions of this unionist versant, the re-adequations occurred in its original project – above all the affiliation of the Contag to the CUT and the adoption of the family based agriculture as identity and priority public for its actions – implied rearrangements in the whole set of forces composing the rural social movements. Hence, the importance of these two events for the history of the political representation of Brazilian family based farmers.

However, as in any attempt of re-adequation or updating of political projects, the contradictions from which they resulted are not exactly appeased, but recomposed, rearranged. In this movement, it is certain that it seem to have occurred a sliding from a perspective of rupture to a more pragmatic position. But it is also certain that the treatment of immediate themes continues to be marked by an ideological drift, what generates an ambiguity of the subjects of the unionist action, who are inclined sometimes towards critique and mobilization, sometimes towards proposition and negotiation. From the perspective of the representation of the diversity of situations, such ambiguity involving the representation of the salaried workers is solved through actions aiming at the construction of specific organizations for this segment; in the case of the family based agriculture it remains unsolved. This becomes evident when one observes the superposition of the unions' map to the map of rural Brazil: a) the presence of the new unionism is practically null in the regions where predominate the more capitalized family based farmers – those who, in general, employ permanent workers; b) notwithstanding, its presence is significant in the regions where predominates the “transitional” family based agriculture; c) the maps also show that the increasing penetration of the new unionism in the Northeast is occurring as much in the *agreste* (where predominates the family based agriculture) as in the *sertão* (where predominates the employers' agriculture); d) in the Northern region, the CUT's unionism practically attained the ceiling of its penetration, encompassing a significant parcel of the operative unions; e) considering the number of unions to be conquered, the greatest possibilities of future growth are situated in the Southeast and Northeast regions; f) in the case of the Southern region, there is an indetermination, since the dispute there, between the new unionism

and the official unionism, is very close, and the growth of the CUT is diminishing its rhythm in the last years. For the constitution of the demands, this is a quite complex situation, not only for their multiplicity, but also because of the equally important fact that certain situations assembled under the organization of the new unionism require political actions of contestation and rupture – as occurs with the case of the structure of landed property, an issue that is fundamental for an expressive parcel of the northeastern farmers. At the same time, other situations demand the deepening of policies and social processes affecting the farmers' market insertion, which is mainly the case of a parcel of farmers of the South and the Southeast, but also of other regions, although with less weight. In this second case, the increase in potentiality and viability of the family based agriculture depend on the improvement and deepening of public policy instruments that are currently being put into effect, as the *Pronaf* [national program for the family based agriculture].

The growing movement of creation of specific organizations for the family based agriculture – stimulated since the turn of the 1980's to the 1990's, but intensified only in the last five years – may be generating an even greater rupture than the entailment of the Contag to the CUT. Reliable data on the numbers of the existing differentiated unions are not available, but for the sphere of the states, one can observe that, in 2004, federations of family based agriculture already existed in ten states. In July of that same year, an *Encontro Nacional da Agricultura Familiar* [National Meeting of Family Based Agriculture] assembled in Brasília approximately 1,500 farmers coming from all the country. At that occasion, it was announced the creation of a *Federação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar* [National Federation of Workers in Family Based Agriculture], what effectively occurred in 2005, in a congress in which Elisângela Araújo, a farmer of Bahia, was elected its president. Besides the expressive representativeness of such organization, despite its minority proportion compared to Contag, it is worth noticing the notorious participation of the President of the Republic in the opening of the meeting that led to its foundation, as well as the presence in the event of Ministers of State and representatives of seven other autarchic government agencies or ministerial structures, what symbolizes, in a certain way, its political acknowledgement by the State. The meeting's closing session, with the blessing of bishop Dom Mauro Morelli, is significant as well: either for his active presence in the forefront of one of the most propagandized governmental policies, the policy of food and nutrition security, or for his well known proximity with the rural social movements situated at the left of the political spectrum. This new organization of the family based agriculture may mean, in short, an even greater approximation of the new unionism with the State – while its original attitude was of opposition -, as well as an effective rupture of the monopoly of representation of the rural workers on the national sphere, which has been under the command of the Contag for three decades, and yet a realignment with other social movements, from which it was distanced since the beginning of the 1990's. This had repercussions in the Contag's internal balance of forces, and one of the consequences is the renewal of a proposal, so many times presented by its more conservative sectors, in the sense of transforming the confederation into an autonomous central for the farmers, with its disentailing from the CUT.

Finally, a proposal for the reformulation of labor-union legislation has been elaborated by the *Forum Nacional do Trabalho* [Labor National Forum] and is waiting for analysis and vote in the National Congress. Its important novelty is the definition of minimal representativity criteria for the official acknowledgement of labor-union organizations. The reform, however, leaves opened the door for maintaining the labor-union unicity, since it foresees the exclusive right of representation for the organizations already established, provided they are able to prove, within a term to be defined, the existence of a minimum of representativity, corresponding to at least 20% of their bases. Thus, one of its possible consequences is the occurrence of a race for representation. Three controversies are already established. The first concerns the source to be adopted for the calculation of the size of the base and the number of associates – data from CUT point to 33% as the average percentage of associates, against the 53% of IBGE's *Pesquisa Sindical* and the 63% of the PEA. The second concerns the inclusion or non-inclusion of retired

associates into such calculation – if the inclination for excluding them is maintained, the percents collapse, increasing the number of unions in dispute. The third controversy is referred to the interpretation of what are branch and sector of activity in the rural case – The Decree-Law 1161/71, CLT's articles 570 and followings, and the 8th article of the Constitution are mutually conflicting, giving margin for the family based agriculture to be considered a specific category, what would justify the creation of a structure for the representation of its interests, in parallel with a structure turned to the organization of the rural salaried workers.

The decade of 1990 has been the period of consolidation of the family based agriculture as a specific public for public and union policies, and as a stage for important events, as the affiliation of the Contag to the CUT and the institution of the *Pronaf* itself. The first decade of the new century seems to elapse with the possibility of a labor-union reform, and with the cooling down of an extensive agrarian reform, increasingly substituted by the idea of making few and good settlements; and with the dissemination of specific organizations representing the family based agriculture, dividing with the Contag the protagonism in the representation of such segment, and equally under the flag of the union Central. As one can see, three decades having been elapsed since the genesis of the new unionism, the elements responding for its structure and dynamics underwent substantial changes. It is from this new configuration of the field of identities, oppositions, and possibilities that its leaderships shall build up the future stages.

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NOTES

¹ On this respect, see Tarrow’s critique (1998)

² Different works bring important analyses over particular state or regional realities. Specifically for Sao Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, and Minas Gerais, see the works of Coletti (1998), Schmitt (1996), and Commenford & Cintrão (1995), respectively.

³ For more details on each of these moments, see Novaes (1991, pp. 188-190) and Medeiros (1989).

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