

IÊDA LEAL: “OUR BODIES ARE TARGETS”

- *Lessons learned in the anti-racist struggle to defend human rights* •

By Luiz Franco

Since the violent colonial period, defending human rights in Brazil has been a matter of survival for many people, especially black and indigenous people. Despite the historical social and political changes that have occurred in the country, which ended its system of slavery in 1888, racial inequality is still rampant.

Today, the country is a “liberal representative democracy” that aims to guarantee the basic rights of its citizens. However, this representation is still predominantly white and male and pertains to the country’s economic elite. As activist and educator Mônica Oliveira observes, “The Brazilian black population has never fully enjoyed the democracy that we live in and have fought so hard for, especially in the current context”.²

The discussion on what it is like to be a human rights defender today puts the urgent need to combat existing inequalities and discrimination, among other issues, into perspective. It is thus important to mention that human rights defenders³ are surrounded by challenges, especially black people who defend human rights in Brazil, as they are constantly fighting institutional and structural racism, social inequality and for the end of the genocide of black people.

"OUR BODIES ARE TARGETS"

According to Sueli Carneiro, "over the past 25 years, we have seen many rich actions to fight racism being developed".⁴ Even so, barriers to the effective recognition of the rights of the black population in the country still exist. In response to the demands of the black movements, other associations and groups began incorporating racial issues into their agendas, thereby opening windows of opportunity for the creation of new networks to combat the multiple facets of racism together.

Black movements in Brazil have historically sought to build and defend political representation and rights for the black population. This is the case of the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU or Unified Black Movement), one of the coalitions leading black resistance in Brazil.⁴

To contribute to a better understanding of the actions of the black movement in Brazil, the current context and the challenges of black human rights defenders, Iêda Leal, the National Coordinator of MNU and Secretary of the Combat against Racism of the Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Educação (CNTE or the National Confederation of Education Workers) shares the story of her life as an activist in the interview below.

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Luiz Franco • Do you consider yourself a human rights defender?

Iêda Leal • Yes, I do! My degree in Education (Pedagogy) and my activism in the black social movement allowed me to increase my involvement in the defence of human rights.

LF • Based on your experience, what is your analysis of the actions of human rights defenders in Brazil, especially black rights defenders, in recent decades?

IL • It has always been a challenge and I've worked alongside people who believed in building a better world. In this country, it is very complicated for people who are guided by the principle of valuing human beings more than material goods to engage in action because in the current context, human relations are anchored in the unbridled exploitation of the black and most impoverished people.

Therefore, the task of enforcing compliance with international and national treaties – for example, the Federal Constitution, state constitutions, legislation related to the defence of life and the Public Prosecutor's Office – becomes something we have to do daily. The same is true of organising knowledge on how to address the situation and defend life, which means going against the majority who do not believe that guaranteeing life is always what is best and what is right!

In recent decades, we, black women and men, have appeared in the cruellest statistics because our rights have not been respected and because we faced the impossibility of surviving in the country we built. This proximity to chaos allowed us to reorganise in order to occupy spaces of power and directed us towards more engaged action to draw attention to our rights and to orchestrate our struggle racism better.

Black rights defenders who work collaboratively are necessary and have played a fundamental role in reflections on the effective participation of black people in debates. They facilitate effective action against all kinds of discrimination.

LF • How do you view the struggle of black human rights defenders' against structural racism in the country?

IL • It's a very hard struggle! Just imagine what it's like to fight against the structure that sustains our society. Every time the community organises, mechanisms appear to destroy the opportunities, but we have already learned and we understand these mechanisms. We stick together and remain attentive to study the enemy and defeat him.

We cannot give up. Structural racism in Brazil discourages people from fighting. We need to understand this to be sure of our interventions, of our engagement with all levels of government, in the economy, in health, education, sports and leisure, security and any other space where we can intervene. We have to be alert at all times and try to stop the perpetuation of racism in the structure of our country.

LF • What are the greatest challenges for working on the agendas of the black movement and, in parallel to this, what has the transition between agendas and struggles in the past few years been like for human rights defenders in Brazil?

IL • The society we live in is totally racist. Racism is rooted in its structures and so, for me, promoting the debate is fundamental and ends up being the biggest challenge, which is to bring together the agendas of the black movement to defend them collectively and fight for inclusion in spheres of power and decision-making in society while intervening in discussions everywhere we can.

The most challenging thing is to ensure that this agenda is, in fact, respected and debated – not only by the black movement, but by all of society. This is a constant challenge.

We have gone through a very complicated period in our recent history, which involved the political persecution of the leaders of social, union and student movements. This persecution took the lives of many people. In recent years, we have become involved in defending guarantees of life to make people realize that denying people education, health, housing, food, sports, culture and leisure does, in fact, take lives!

The situation is also aggravated by the fact that racial relations are based on the elimination of black bodies from society. We are an easy target for the police, who shoot before asking for names and invade homes and open fire without respecting the homes of black people throughout the country. That is not to mention the arbitrary arrests and unresolved cases that get shelved, with no defence – just convictions.

Bringing this discussion to light makes society take note that defenders of black people exist and that we fight so that everyone's rights are fully respected.

LF • What is the MNU's view on working in a network such as, for example, the Coalizão Negra por Direitos (Black Coalition for Rights)?

IL • Exactly 42 years ago, the MNU realized this, that all forms of organisation that are in line with our struggle are just and important. This helps to expand our rights and our work with networks on the defence of human rights, especially the rights of black people. The MNU was able to set the example in the past, but it now needs to engage in dialogue with all initiatives that emerge in order to further the fight against racism. We are part of this coalition movement that fights for rights, which is very good because we must take action at the local, state, national and international level. I think that this is the way to go. Join forces to fight racism.

LF • How do you see the actions of black women in the black movement?

IL • Our collective action as black women is so fundamental that in 2015, in the Black Women's March, we mobilised over 50,000 women for the demonstration in Brasilia.⁵ Through black women's organising and guidance, the black movement is being reorganised and this is good.

We aren't forgetting black men. We're not forgetting to take care of the elderly. On the contrary, we inaugurated a very collective way of embracing, organising and reorganising the black movement for the struggle. The women have set an example by following the road to the good life. For us, that's what the good life is: collectiveness, the respect and conviction we feel when we carry out actions in a more collective way. To understand that we are part of a legacy of memories of struggle and resistance.

LF • Which self-care practices do you adopt in order to continue mobilising in a context marked by difficulties and challenges?

IL • Actually, we forget about self-care a bit because we get swallowed up by our routines: we are always busy fighting racists, sexists, against LGBTQphobia, running after our rights. We get so involved that sometimes, we forget about self-care.

The one who drew my attention to the issue of protecting ourselves more, of knowing how to enter and leave places, our individual protection and of preparing ourselves physically to

defend ourselves from all kinds of violence was Angela Davis. During a meeting with the black movement in São Paulo,⁶ she spoke about the importance of black women organising themselves for self-defence from both a physical and intellectual point of view.

Therefore, we must always be prepared for an attack. It was important to remember that we need to protect our bodies and minds. I confess that I have become more organised, but there is a need to extend this dialogue to the entire black women's movement to strengthen our care collectively. We need to understand that in this country, when we go out, our bodies are a target. We must keep this in mind to guarantee our lives. Black lives matter!

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Interview conducted by Luiz Franco on January 27, 2020.





Photos: Iêda Leal's personal collection.
In the second image, the encounter with Angela Davis.

NOTES

1 • Rafael Oliveira, "Democracia Não Democrática: Como a População Negra É Sub-representada na Política," *Boletim Economia e Política* 49, no. 49 (May/2016).

2 • Monica Oliveira, "Sem Igualdade Racial Não Há Democracia." FASE, November 16, 2016, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://fase.org.br/pt/informe-se/artigos/sem-igualdade-racial-nao-ha-democracia/>.

3 • "Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms," United Nations, March 8, 1999, accessed February 11, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>.

4 • Sueli Carneiro, "Movimento Negro no Brasil: Novos e Velhos Desafios," *CADERNO CRH* no. 36,

(jan./jun. 2002): 209.

5 • The Movimento Unificado Contra a Discriminação Racial (MUCDR or the Unified Movement against Racial Discrimination), which later became the MNU, was born in a protest held on the steps of the Municipal Theatre of São Paulo in 1978. Flavia Rios, "O Protesto Negro No Brasil Contemporâneo (1978-2010)," *Lua Nova* no. 85 (2012): 41-79.

6 • "E-book Marcha das Mulheres Negras," Geledés, September 27, 2016, accessed June 5, 2020, <https://www.geledes.org.br/e-book-marcha-das-mulheres-negras/>.

7 • "Angela Davis Visita Sede de Geledés e Conversa com Coalizão Negra por Direitos," Geledés, October 22, 2019, accessed on June 5, 2020, <https://www.geledes.org.br/angela-davis-visita-sede-de-geledes-e-conversa-com-coalizao-negra-por-direitos/>.

**LUIZ FRANCO** – *Brazil*

Luiz Franco is graduating from the Bachelor of Sciences and Humanities and the Bachelor of Public Policies Programmes at Universidade Federal do ABC (UFABC or the Federal University of ABC). A human rights activist, he was an intern at Conectas Human Rights and is currently an intern at Ethos Institute. He was the Director of Institutional Relations of the Federação Nacional do Estudantes do Campo de Públicas (FENECAP or the National Federation of Students in the Field of Public Policy and Administration) and the General Coordinator of the Centro Acadêmico de Políticas Públicas (CAPOl or Academic Centre for Public Policies) at UFABC.

email: luizgabriel franco@gmail.com

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