UFPE awards honorary doctorate to federal deputy Luiza Erundina

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Social worker and federal deputy Luiza Erundina received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa from the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE) on Friday (6), in recognition of her career "marked by the defense of social rights, citizenship, public policies and popular participation". The ceremony was held in the Professor Denis Bernardes Auditorium, at the Center for Applied Social Sciences (CCSA), and attended by people from various fields of activity, especially Social Work and politics. Luiza Erundina received other tributes from the public at the ceremony, which also featured a musical performance by Barco Invisível, a duo formed by Professor Paula Bujes (fiddle) and UFPE Music Graduate Program student Júnior do Jarro (eight-bass accordion).

The rector of UFPE, Alfredo Gomes, presided over the session. "I would like to express my immense satisfaction at being together this afternoon to honor and celebrate Luiza Erundina. It is a great pleasure to welcome her here to this house; welcome. Greetings to all present here; please make yourselves comfortable so that we can have a beautiful ceremony and celebrate in a fitting manner the history of resilience, resistance, but above all, the leadership of Luiza Erundina," he began.

"Luiza Erundina's life spans geographies and decisive periods in Brazilian history. Born in Uiraúna, in the Sertão region of Paraíba, she graduated in Social Work from the Federal University of Paraíba. She arrived in São Paulo amidst the political persecution of the Dictatorship and there built a trajectory that combined professional practice, collective organization, and public action. Later, she became the first woman to govern the city of São Paulo as mayor, elected in 1988. She also held parliamentary mandates for decades, but listing positions is not enough to explain her greatness. It is important to recognize the ethical and political direction she sought to imprint on this work. It is at this point that her story intersects, in a particularly expressive way, with the history of Brazilian Social Work," stated Professor Alexandra Mustafá of the Department of Social Work at UFPE as she began reading the eulogy prepared to present the honoree's trajectory.

At this point in her speech, Professor Alexandra spoke about the III Brazilian Congress of Social Workers, which took place in September 1979 in São Paulo. "The Congress had been organized under a guideline that did not express the aspirations of a category in motion, which sought to give a new conceptualization to the profession in line with the process of redemocratization of Brazilian society. Social workers, students, and entities had been accumulating criticism of the submissive position that the professional category

had been adopting, its subservience, and the sponsorship of the illegitimate military government. The form of organization and direction given to the preparations for the Congress was questioned, due to the lack of participation, the high cost of registrations, the restriction of debates, and the presence of representatives of the Dictatorship at its opening. The discontent, which did not originate in that plenary session, found a collective way to manifest itself there."

"Luiza Erundina was one of the protagonists of this process. At the time, she was a social worker and teacher, participating in the struggle to reactivate the professional association and union, and was part of the mobilization of municipal workers. With other colleagues, she helped transform the protest into organized political action. She held a parallel assembly and, together with the 600 delegates, redirected the course of the III Congress. In that context, the honorary committee composed of military personnel was dismissed and replaced by union leaders, among them the then president of the ABC Metalworkers Union, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva. And the final plenary session affirmed a commitment to the working class and recognized social workers as salaried workers. That meeting became known as the Turning Point Congress. Not because of an isolated gesture, but because it condensed a collective struggle and opened the way for a new professional direction, both in training and in practice," she continued.

"Luiza Erundina's trajectory also helps us to think about ethics in politics. She made politics her field of professional activity par excellence, and ethics in politics the foundation of her work, not as an abstract quality, nor as mere formal correctness, but as a public commitment, being accountable to the people, recognizing the legitimacy of dissent, defending democratic participation, and not treating power as private property. Her history spanned professional organizations, social movements, municipal government, and parliament. In each of these spaces, it becomes possible to recognize a central conviction: politics is not justified in itself; it finds its raison d'être when it expands rights and makes audible the demands of those who are usually kept on the margins. This conception dialogues with the ethical-political project of Brazilian Social Work, a project historically constructed with debates, divergences, and collective work, guided by the defense of freedom, democracy, social and human rights, and social justice, and committed to an intellectual formation capable of critically interpreting reality," the professor concluded.

Luiza Erundina used her acceptance speech to also talk about the 90th anniversary of Social Work in Brazil, celebrated in 2026. This milestone refers to the creation of the first professional training courses in the country in the 1930s. "The first of these, the School of Social Work of São Paulo, now part of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, initially adopted a training linked to philanthropy and Christian social doctrine, characteristic of the historical context of the time. Over time, the profession of social worker underwent profound transformations. The initial regulation, by Law No. 3,252 of 1957 and later by Law No. 8,662 of 1993, consolidated competencies and responsibilities while Brazilian Social Work reinvented itself. This anniversary is a reason for celebration and an opportune time for us to collectively take stock of the trajectory of our professional

category and its presence in history, and how much it has contributed to the emancipation of the working class and the strengthening of democracy in our country, she pointed out.

The honoree also shared her perspective on the so-called Turning Point Congress. "It's incredible that an event that occurred 47 years ago has such an impact even today as the III Brazilian Congress of Social Workers, enthusiastically celebrated not only by those who were involved, but by all Brazilian social workers, those of yesterday, those of today, and probably will be by future generations of professionals as well. This is because it is a defining milestone in the profile of a profession created nine decades ago and which, even today, sheds light on its future because it is a profession that is constantly realized and recreated in the course of the dialectical process of history. Social work, in my view, is one of the professions most impacted by the events that have marked the last 50 years of our country's history. First of all, because it underwent the changes that occurred during that period and because of the rupture that occurred between its past and its present. Before the 1980s, the professional practice of social workers was characterized above all by reactive positions and passive adaptation to reality. From the 1980s onwards, Brazil was experiencing a social process that demanded political positioning and..." A clear affirmation of commitment to the conflicting social interests. On one side, the interests of the dominant classes, represented and defended by the capitalist state and its institutions. On the other, the interests of the workers and the majority of the population excluded economically, socially, culturally, and politically. And social workers, in turn, as institutional agents, operators of public social policies, had the function of mediating these contradictory interests and managing the conflicts generated. It was precisely this reality of the profession that began to be questioned by social workers committed and engaged in the political process that culminated in the end of the Civil-Military Dictatorship and the beginning of the country's redemocratization process. The rupture occurred with the 'Turning Point Congress', held from September 23 to 28, 1979, in the city of São Paulo, as a result of the accumulation of forces that had been built up throughout the process of political organization of the category and the programming of the aforementioned Congress, from which the professional project began to be rethought not only due to the transformations underway in Brazilian society, but also because of what **Erundina identified** as “contradictions within the profession itself”.

“My participation in the III Brazilian Congress of Social Workers was a consequence of the long journey I have traveled alongside my colleagues since leaving Paraíba, fleeing political persecution under the dictatorship. I arrived in São Paulo on January 28, 1971, exactly 55 years ago. What were I accused of then? Of the crime, in quotes, of trying to help landless rural workers become aware of their rights and organize themselves to fight for those rights. Working with social assistance in the favelas on the outskirts of São Paulo, where Northeastern immigrants, uprooted from their roots and expelled by large landowners, are crammed together, I had to face another challenge, this time that of organizing these workers to fight for the right to housing. In the countryside, the struggle is for land to work. In the city, the struggle is for housing. And the enemy was and always is the same: the private appropriation of the means of production, a dogma of capitalism.

By working with the excluded and seeking to open doors for them…" "With our eyes on the issue and helping them organize themselves, the siege closed in again on us in the institutional spaces where we practiced our profession as social workers. From then on, we had to organize ourselves politically, seeking to create other spaces for professional struggle. It was in this sense that we dedicated ourselves to reactivating the Professional Association of Social Workers of São Paulo, APASP, the starting point for the organization and political articulation of social workers throughout the country, with the creation of professional associations and unions of the category in several states, which came to be coordinated by a national entity, the National Executive Commission of Social Workers' Entities, Cenea. My participation in the process that culminated in the movement that gave rise to the Turning Point Congress occurred in my capacity as president of APASP and Ceneas," highlighted the honoree.

"Inspired by the rich experience of the Turning Point Congress, a reflection is needed both by those who played a leading role in that historical moment for our profession, and by those who are responsible for building the professional project in the present, given that the current historical cycle is going through an institutional political crisis that places new demands and enormous challenges on collective political subjects who must rethink their actions in all their aspects. It is therefore incumbent upon Social Work, as an area of knowledge and professional action, to update its theoretical framework and recreate its instruments of analysis and intervention, in order to adapt them to the new demands of a complex reality in an accelerated process of change. As for us, social workers, as professionals and collective subjects of political action, it is necessary that we rethink our practice in order to contribute to the construction of a societal project capable of consolidating and expanding democratic achievements and making Brazil a just, democratic and sovereign nation," she assessed.

During her final term as a federal deputy for the PSOL party in São Paulo and recently elected as a state deputy for the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo, Luiza Erundina also spoke about her plans for the future. "I am organizing myself for a new undertaking, joining the popular sectors of São Paulo society to strengthen the struggle for the construction of popular power, and I invite you to join this same struggle. Thus, I return to the point where I began 60 years ago, when I graduated in Social Work, inspired and driven by the same dream: to help our people make history, not only in the sense of improving their own lives, but also to join many others aware of their rights and their own strength to lead the turning point towards a new era. A new historical and social cycle, a new humanity. The waiting time is over. 'From our cry emerges the seed of revolutionary hope.' We say enough to every man for himself. We all save ourselves, or there will be no salvation. We sow seeds of hope because we do not surrender to the culture of waste, fear, hatred, fragmentation, indifference, and resignation. Together we will conjugate the verb 'to hope,' as the late master Paulo Freire taught us, towards the realization of our dream, we will build." "A just and sovereign nation, where everyone is guaranteed the full exercise of citizenship," she stated at the end of her speech, to considerable applause.

In addition to the rector of UFPE and the honoree, the solemn table included the vice-rector of UFPE, Moacyr Araújo; the pro-rector of People Management and Quality of Life (Progepe), Brunna Carvalho; the director of CCSA, Marcos Gois; the vice-director of CCSA, Christianne Calado Vieira de Melo Lopes; the head of the Department of Social Work, Tatiane Michele Melo de Lima; the professor of the Department of Social Work, Alexandra Mustafá, who proposed the title approved by the University Council; the elected federal deputy Liana Cirne (PT); and the elected senator Marília Arraes (PT).



Photo by Lucas Emanuel (@lucas_emanuel)

Professors Brunna and Tatiane were also part of the honorary committee that accompanied Luiza Erundina into the auditorium, along with the Undergraduate Coordinator and the Postgraduate Coordinator of the Social Work Course, Adilson Aquino and Maria das Graças Silva; student Bárbara Gomes, representing the Academic Board of Social Work; student Jana Mendes, representing the postgraduate students in Social Work; and the administrative technician in education, Thiago Rodrigues Ribeiro, representing the technicians of the Department.

The title of Doctor Honoris Causa is intended for "personalities of renowned knowledge and recognized public relevance, whose trajectories have contributed exceptionally to the development of society, culture, arts, science, and education." The event was broadcast live by the Communication Directorate (Dircom) of the Superintendence of Communication (Supercom), through the UFPE YouTube channel, available at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYV8M4gggEw&t=11s