Life, struggle and People’s Health Movement in Brazil: interview with Sister Anne Whibey

Vida, luta e Movimento pela Saúde dos Povos no Brasil: entrevista com Irmã Anne Whibeyy

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\textbf{ABSTRACT} This text was written from the interview with People’s Health Movement (PHM) activist Anne Caroline Whibey, Sister of the Notre Dame de Namur Congregation, an American woman of Lebanese ancestry, with a recognized trajectory in social development in the state of Maranhão, in northeastern Brazil. At the age of 95, a comrade and lover of all struggles for dignity and justice, she stands firmly on the road. Between road trips Belém/São Luís and São Luís/Belém, currently, she is committed to organizing her personal archive on the history of PHM, in general, and in Maranhão, in particular. After doing that, she often says she ‘can disappear’. Always involved in the work of popular education, approaching the harms resulting from megaprojects in the life of the population, she reaffirms that health and environment are not commodities. Moving forward in the mobilizing action, Sister Anne continues to be aware of her advanced age, gathering effort to accept her limits with joy and determination. This article is based on conversations with Sister Anne, building a story about her history, her coming from the United States to Brazil and her connection to the PHM from the earliest days, as well as reporting her work to cultivate the PHM in Brazil, through the experience of forming groups in Nina Rodrigues and São Luís, in the state Maranhão, and encouraging the construction of the PHM in Belém, Pará.

\textbf{KEYWORDS} Health Education. Community participation. Biography.

\textbf{RESUMO} Este texto foi escrito a partir de uma entrevista com a ativista do Movimento pela Saúde dos Povos (MSP), Anne Caroline Whibey, Irmã da Congregação Notre Dame de Namur, norte-americana de ascendência libanesa, com reconhecida trajetória no desenvolvimento social no estado do Maranhão. Aos 95 anos, camarada e amante de todas as lutas por dignidade e justiça, mantém-se ativamente firme, com o ‘pé na estrada’. Entre viagens rodoviárias Belém/São Luís/Belém, atualmente, está empenhada em organizar o seu arquivo pessoal sobre a história do MSP, em geral, e do Maranhão, em particular. Depois disso, costuma dizer ‘que pode desaparecer’. Sempre envolvida no trabalho de educação popular, sobre os malefícios resultantes dos megaprojetos junto à vida da população, reitera afirmativamente que saúde e meio ambiente não são mercadorias. Avante na ação mobilizadora, Irmã Anne continua a ser consciente de sua idade avançada, reunindo esforço para aceitar seus limites com alegria e determinação. Este artigo é baseado em conversas com Irmã Anne, que construiu uma história, sua vinda dos Estados Unidos para o Brasil e sua vinculação ao MSP desde os primórdios, além de relatar o seu trabalho para cultivar o MSP no Brasil, passando pela experiência de formação de grupos em Nina Rodrigues e em São Luís, no Maranhão, e de incentivo à construção do MSP em Belém do Pará.

Introduction

Sister Anne, 95 years old, a person committed to social struggles, spoke with the authors of the present study on the People’s Health Movement (MSP). During several meetings in Belém (PA), a city where her Congregation, Sisters Notre Dame de Namur (SNDdN), has a permanent home, the social activist spoke about her trajectory of struggles for dignity, always at the side of the people. The initial script had been programmed with a few questions in order to conduct the dialogue, which would be recorded. But the interlocutor gave a different tone and preferred to mine her personal file and scrutinize each record, be it photographs or writings in diaries, single sheets and reports issued to her SNDdN. In addition to the physical material, her memory has predominated. The information that needed to be supplemented was sent later via mobile phone application. Sr. Anne has extensively worked, collecting information material since her arrival in Brazil.

Nowadays, Sr. Anne lives in Belém, due to the closing of the Congregation in 2018, and left in São Luís the collection of her entire life in the struggle. She says that her heart was also in Maranhão, with the people; for this reason, and due to the need to complete searches for materials in her collection, she travels frequently. She emphasizes that it is a pity not to be able to deepen her searches in order to find a better way to incorporate details of the works in the initial years of the MSP. She regrets not being able to name all the people who contributed a lot to the construction of this movement. The records present here are the result of their researched and reported mining.

Arrival and departure from Brazil, her Congregation and the struggle for dignity

In 1971, Sr. Anne arrived in Maranhão/Brazil. In the following year, she went to Rio de Janeiro, where she dedicated herself to the study of the Portuguese language, the historical, geographical and socio-political context. Then she went to São Luís do Maranhão, in the Northeast of Brazil. Graduated in nursing and pedagogy, she started working with the Sisters of Notre Dame in the communities and in the training center for nursing technicians. She developed several works of political-popular training. She recalls that, in 1981, under the motto of the Fraternity Campaign ‘Health for All’, she was involved body and soul in an educational mission with the Catholic Church.

After 12 years of intense work in the name of social justice, she traveled to Nicaragua. There, she joined the revolutionary brigades actions, specifically those of popular education on health issues. She says that, at the beginning of this work, doctors had difficulty interacting with staff in training, but that, during the two years of warm study, this sandinista relationship progressed successfully.

Her Notre Dame Congregation maintained an active dialogue with the revolutionary advance, together with several partner organizations, such as Cusclin (American Citizens living in Nicaragua) and Cisas (Center for Information and Healthcare Advisory Services), this one founded and coordinated by Ana Quirós and Maria Hamlin Zúñiga, with whom Sr. Anne shares the struggle for the health of peoples until today.

In Nicaragua, she lived each stage intensely, particularly in the rural sector, among the agricultural workers in the mountains. Currently, she is very sorry that Nicaragua has wiped out the entire revolutionary struggle and is massacring its people. In addition to this experience, always under the purposes of Notre Dame, she contributed to popular education in Nigeria, returning to Brazil in the late 1990s.

Return to Brazil: engagement and activism in connection with the MSP

Following the virtues and charism of the Congregation to work with the poor in the
most abandoned places, Sr. Anne says that all work with the people must be to demand and influence governing authorities and politicians to assume and fulfill their responsibilities in care with the health of the population. The people must enforce the agreement enshrined in Alma-Ata¹ – which obliges all governments to promote Primary Health Care (PHC) –, making it clear that there is a big difference between tasks and responsibilities, that the population has the right and duty to participate in health care planning and delivery.

Through the Congregation, she was in meetings and articulations in the global agendas with the World Health Organization (WHO). Locally engaged with social movements, such as MST (Landless Workers’ Movement) and BEC (Basic Ecclesial Communities), she continued to mobilize against injustices. With her work in popular health, she traveled to countless municipalities and, in Alcântara, concentrated her efforts with the groups of women, fighting with the families affected by the works of the Launching Base. Several quilombola communities were removed from their place of residence, with the government expropriating traditional territories to serve the aerospace program, a fact denounced by social movements in the International Labor Organization (ILO).

Through the Archdiocese, Sr. Anne was part of the Justice and Peace Commission and the React São Luís Movement, in defense of the environment in the face of the damaging action of the Vale Mining Company. She worked together with other movements, reinforcing the importance of educating the people about the harm that the implementation of mega-projects caused in the lives of the population and the planet. At that time, she reminds that she received a message from Maria Zúñiga, announcing the preparation process for the First People’s Health Assembly Movement (I PHAM), held in South Asia. She mobilized to take more people with her to this event, carrying out a fundraising campaign, with contributions even from the city hall, which guaranteed the departure of Maria Ivana Cesar and Maria Vitória Santos. Thus, in 2000, the three activists established fraternal and solidarity ties between Brazil and MSP in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

**MSP in Brazil: the struggle for people’s health**

Sr. Anne reports that she was impressed by the motivation present in the activists gathered at the World Peoples’ Health Assembly (I PHAM) in Bangladesh in 2000. Representatives of social movements from around the world expressed a collective understanding that health is not merchandise and about the commitment in defense of the least favored. The Brazilian delegation took several materials to set up a ‘Brazilian amazon stand, with the Maranhão style’. She mentioned in this Assembly the serious problems existing in the lives of quilombola peoples with the implementation of the Launching Center in Alcântara. She points out, however, that the situation with the Spatial Basis today is even more difficult than at that time.

Since then, Sr. Anne has presented the People’s Charter for Health² in every corner she passes through. She promoted the translation of all the writings produced during and after the Assembly. In all struggles since then, she carries the MSP slogan. She has abundant written and photographic records. According to her request, she follows her report on the I PHAM, issued to her Congregation in 2000, translated by the authors of the original in English, highlighted in chart 1, and the synthesis of the People’s Charter for Health made by Sister Anne, in chart 2.
Dear sisters,

We welcome you with a warm embrace and want to share an exceptional, rich and meaningful experience that can include all of us.

The Peoples’ Health Assembly, held in Bangladesh from December 4 to 8, 2000, brought together about 1500 people from almost 100 countries around the world. I was privileged to be one of the 30 participants from 10 Latin American countries in this great event.

Over a period of 10 years, eight NGOs have pooled resources to create, organize, coordinate and sponsor this unusual opportunity to bring together, from all corners of the Earth, life lovers, committed to the fight for justice and peace: health for all. For the first time, an international platform was opened for unprecedented grassroots voices. Many professionals and specialists from different areas were invited to hear these voices and respond, such as health, education, economics, ecology, agronomy, biodiversity, social analysis. And even politicians from some governments. The presence of women was remarkable. It was a colorful and inspiring meeting, that gave rise to exchanges between different cultures and religions around the world. All continents were represented.

The dynamics and exchange of experiences exceeded the limits of time and imagination through the impressive awakening of global consciousness from local experiences.

Very anxious to make a synthesis of all the questions, I would just like to share some of the results that apparently touch on the mission of Notre Dame everywhere:

- Previously unanswered questions (at national or international level) were heard, obtained appreciation, response and guidance.
- More than 400 testimonies, stories and presentations from around the world were recorded.
- Indigenous, refugees, landless, victims of the racial and caste system, physically mutilated, community health workers, farmers, workers and unemployed were revealers in their expressions of suffering, as they struggled to create methods of survival and health promotion programs in communities. Health systems fail and do not foresee the poorest populations. Therefore, their calls for international support were heard.
- A commitment was made to unite all local efforts in a global force to alleviate the injustices concerning both the economic system and the health system, such injustices, that oppress the poor in all countries. Empowering grassroots movements provides energy and courage for full-time community participation.

Disunited we beg; united we demand.
- The Assembly marks the beginning of a new international movement of solidarity for change. The creation of an International PHA Center to continue the process started is in progress.
- Health is a human right: everyone, regardless of color, ethnic origin, religion, sex, age, abilities, sexual orientation or class, has the right to a LIFE with dignity.
- Emphasis on ‘People, Not Profits’. The negative impact of the actions undertaken by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (Trips), the World Bank, the IMF and Transnational Corporations (TNC) is clearly emphasized, with its trade agreement that will produce medicines completely out of reach of the world’s poor, as well as other negative implications on people’s health. PHA is committed to requiring changes to the Trips agreement in order to ensure that all individuals have access to the necessary medication.
- The important improvement of education, which leads to a better understanding of the causes of oppressive health systems, will be part of the ongoing process, so that the strategies developed in the transformation process can result in permanent benefits for the poor in the South and North.

Philosophers only interpreted the world; the question is to change it.
- People’s Power:

‘History teaches us that, whatever the changes that occurred, they occurred through the people’. ‘We achieve this (social change) not by conventional methods, but through grassroots mobilization’.

The community must be a participatory actor in the health system, as it is both designed and directed towards it.

Ani C. Wihbey, SND (Brazil) PEOPLE’S HEALTH ASSEMBLY - 2000 GONOSHAStHAYA KENDRA BANGLADESH

Source: People’s Health Charter².
Opportunity was given to full participation in the development of the People’s Health Charter. Although some aspects of the Charter did not meet the expectations of each individual, it was endorsed by the Assembly. PHC values the 1978 Alma Ata Declaration, forcing all governments to promote Primary Health Care (PHC) so that, in 2000, Health for All becomes a reality. As you know, this dream has not become a reality. The Charter is an appeal to all governments and organizations, local, regional, national and international, secular or religious, as well as to all peoples to share the vision of a better world through active participation in the PHA process for justice in all levels. The Charter describes the vision, the global health crisis and its principles. Call to action includes:

- Health as a human right;
- Facing the most comprehensive determinants of health;
- Economic Challenges;
- Social and political challenges;
- War, violence and conflict;
- A health sector focused on the people;
- People’s participation for a healthy world.

The interviewee emphasizes that, as of the 1st MSP Assembly, the participants worked hard in the local communities, promoting the concept of Alma-Ata, understanding that, in order to be healthy, the intervention of many other sectors, social and economic, was necessary, in addition to the health sector. With translated and reproduced material, they also communicated on community radio stations. At that time, in addition to São Luís, the formative work made its way to the interior of Ceará, in the community of Poça da Onça (today belonging to Miraima). There, the first studies of the People’s Charter for Health were developed, strengthening the struggle and solidarity with the people, for health rights and for life itself. Among the challenges that came ahead, they stood firm in the fight against the adhesion of the Brazilian government to the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas).

The MSP in connections with the voice of those who are not heard

Alcântara belongs to the Amazon, rich in biodiversity and natural resources. Part of the territory was expropriated in 1980, and families of indigenous and quilombola descendants had their lives compromised. The areas to which they were relocated were unsuitable for agriculture and fishing. Communities and movements fought against the advance of the people’s misery. During the national FTAA plebiscite, dressed in the MSP logo in São Luís, several activists tirelessly consulted and talked with the people. There were 3,894 municipalities, totaling 10,149,542 people against the issues raised there – ‘No to the FTAA!’ Sr. Anne also shows a replica of the ballot paper, posted on her 2002 agenda.

In 2003, she reminds that she participated in the World Social Forum that took place in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. This meeting was the result of local and regional resistance, in opposition to the submission of Latin America to rich countries. She points out that the long struggle against the FTAA was very tough. As MSP, she composed the delegation coming from Maranhão, with the Interreligious Movements, Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) and MST. The political scenario marked the importance of the new government, with the first Forum occurring after the inauguration of Lula, of the Workers’ Party (PT), as President of the Republic. She
took the material of the MSP to the workshops, as well as several copies of the People’s Charter for Health. She reports that that year marked the beginning of the era of left-wing governments in Latin America. World event of hope, autonomy and sovereignty of the peoples.

Through the MSP, Sr. Anne says that she made many exchanges. She is considered a ‘connector’, a term she uses to speak of the numerous connections she cultivates in favor of the struggle for social justice. She has always worked as a team, she enjoys making alliances with many groups, including people who stand out in their day-to-day work, such as Zaira Sabry Azar and José Jonas Borges da Silva, both linked to education in the field. With them and many other good people, she maintains close ties in favor of liberating education.

She remains comrade and lover of all social and environmental struggles. She has a deep fascination for hearing the voice of those who are not heard. She adds that, together with Father João Maria Van Damme, from ASP-MA (Health Association of the Periphery of Maranhão), she invested energies for a participatory and solidary Church with the people’s pains, and with Sr. Lilis, in Marabá (PA), she joined forces with community health policy training works. She remembers that, when hospitalized, she presented with an MST flag signed by the militancy, that was hoping for her brief recovery.

Among the documents she selected to compose this article, it appears that the MSP, together with the Human Rights Society of Maranhão (SMDH), the MST, the Marcos Passerine Defense Center, the PT and the Urban Quilombo, established solidarity with the three activist nuns in the USA, by combating the effects of nuclear bombs and radiation on the environment. Sr. Anne says that these brave women were arrested because they lived their faith involved in issues of social justice. For her, the Dominican Sisters Jackie Hudson, Carol Gilbert and Ardeth Platte express that any type of weapons threaten human beings, especially those with a genocidal effect.

Another document, the Activity Report of the People’s Health Project of the CMO (Congregational Mission Office)/SNDdN, issued by Sr. Anne in São Luís (MA), in 2005, deals with the difficult challenges facing the damage to life and health (physical and mental) of the people who remain excluded by the project of the transnational steel industries and by the steel complex on the island. It points out that the movements intensified efforts to accompany the communities through educational activities. Thanks to the support of CMO, the Maranhão MSP was at the second World Peoples’ Health Assembly (II PHAM), in Cuenca (Ecuador), in 2005. In this event, collaborators of popular education presented the intense work developed in Northeast Brazil to promote peoples’ health and protect the environment. The aforementioned report informs that Sister Dorothy Stang was murdered on February 12, in Pará. She worked together with rural workers in the area of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, in the fight against land conflicts and in defense of the environment. As Sr. Anne rightly says, their lives continue to face injustice as Sisters of Notre Dame.

Following her photographic records, it can be seen: coffin, candlesticks, crucifix, candles and the dead – São Luís (1612 to 2007). In this scenario, among students, Sr. Anne, dressed in a black T-shirt with the inscription ‘Apollo’, according to her explanation, it is a denial of the Steel Pole, which has been causing acid rain, destruction of mangroves, emission of pollutants, making the ecosystem sick to death. Among the images, it is possible to see explanatory flyers with rivers and silhouettes in agony projecting the names of the transnational corporations and their exorbitant profits. She reports a work by professor Lúcia Regina Nascimento, with her students from the Federal Institute of Maranhão. She and her mother were part of the communities involved in the defense of the island. In recalling, the Sister points out that there is a deep symbiosis...
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in the struggles between her Congregation and the MSP – if there is social and environmental justice, there is health!

As a result of the countless connections, in 2007, she received the title of citizen of Maranhão – promoted by the mandate of State Representative Helena Heluy (PT), for her contribution to social development. For the 30 years of the MST, in 2014, she was among the people honored. It is mentioned in the MST website:

Sister Anne is a fighter for the Congregation of Notre Dame. She chose Maranhão as her land. International fighter for health, land, water, housing, work, culture, joy and love. Female supporter of children and young people, of black, indigenous and landless peoples.

MSP in Nina Rodrigues, activist training journey in the Brazilian northeast

The training process of the MSP in Nina Rodrigues/MA (an area that brings together rural communities) started in 2012. In an deployment of the Fraternity Campaign, whose motto was ‘Fraternity and Public Health’, Sr. Anne negotiated with the parish more time to deepen the meanings between fraternity and struggle for health in its broadest term. Currently, Nina Rodrigues’ MSP has the following activists: Claudenir Gomes da Silva, Marcelo Silva Almeida and Maria de Jesus Farias Santos as its main encouraging people. Sr. Anne, who, since the beginning, has maintained strong ties in the construction of the MSP, was responsible for its movement and its theoretical knowledge. She made her way regularly to Nina Rodrigues for meetings, encounters and studies. She prepared extensive didactic material appropriate to the local reality, adopted the methodology used by the group to work as a health team, incorporating the training process beyond the specific objective of a campaign.

Between 2013 and 2015, she focused on the exploration of content that would help to situate it in the local context and make its connection with the broader context in terms of the structures that support society. For two years, the activists deepened their knowledge about the challenges of living with dignity, with a willingness to oppose any kind of injustice. At the end of the training, also shared by other instructors, a ceremony was organized to receive certificates from MSP activists.

In the periodic meetings, they planned to continue meetings with the communities and to get closer to the municipal management, in order to claim improvements in local infrastructures. They participated in events in the capital, covering all the costs through solidarity funds. In 2016, Nina Rodrigues’ MSP actively participated in the MSP Brazil Meeting in São Luís (MA), organized by Sr. Anne and coordinated by the other collaborators. MSP activists from Porto Alegre (RS), São Luís (MA), Rio de Janeiro (RJ), São Paulo (SP), Brasília (DF) and Belém (PA) were present. Two representatives of the international MSP were also present: Maria Zúñiga, from Nicaragua, and Gabriel Vatik, from Mexico.

At this meeting, Nina Rodrigues’ MSP had the opportunity to connect extensively with activists linked to various expressions of struggle in Latin America. They even strengthened links with local social movements: Justice on the Rails, Nucleus of Extension and Research with Rural and Black/Quilombola Communities and Indigenous Population (NuRuNi) at the Federal University of Maranhão (UFMA), Via Campesina/MST, Group of Studies on Modernity, Development and Environment (GEDDMA/UFMA) and the ‘Vias de Fato Alternative Journal’. In the opinion of Sr. Anne, the contributions of the training workshops have strengthened and have been the basis of all her activities of daily struggle for good living, according to the excerpt of the People’s Charter for Health:
Environmental challenges [...] Water and air pollution, rapid climate change, destruction of the ozone layer, nuclear energy and waste, toxic chemicals and pesticides, loss of biodiversity, devastation of forests and soil erosion have far-reaching effects on people’s health\textsuperscript{2(9-10)}.

Close ties between MSP/MA and MSP/PA

In November 2015, the Sister organized several meetings around the Northeastern MSP. At first, together with the MSP/urban articulation group, at UFMA, in the NuRuNi space, with people coming from many other social movements and the university. The agenda: existence and purpose of the MSP.

Reports on the hearing were circulating for the review of the master plan, which proposed transforming the rural area of the municipality into an industrial area, and permission to construct buildings with more than thirty floors on the island. The movements were against these measures, since industrial pollution had already exceeded all indicators recommended by WHO and Brazilian legislation\textsuperscript{5}. On the agenda on the MSP, among other issues, the dialogue was established around public health policy in Brazil and the systematic threat of privatization of the Unified Health System (SUS). They also wanted to know why the MSP was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. This same question had emerged in the course of activists at the International People’s Health University (IPHU), promoted by the MSP in Porto Alegre, in 2008. The answer was that it was a positive cause, in this case, for the fight for health as a universal right, and that the Foundation’s funding had no labelling, that is, it could be used in the way that the MSP believed was best.

It takes almost four hours to get to Nina Rodrigues, in a peri-urban location. In the Vila Esperança and Palmares settlements, meetings and studies took place. In an environment of many trees, the residents came and sat under the hoses. Representatives talked about their daily problems, the murders and violence against land workers, and the lack of a school in their area of residence. They discussed mobilization strategies.

The day after, the MSP of Nina Rodrigues got together again. They spoke of what they had been developing in their communities, of discussions about what brought people together to guarantee rights. Views were shared on the III World Assembly of the MSP and on the articulations that had been happening in defense of health for all. The group noted that the training and studies they obtained, facilitated by Sr. Anne and her collaborators, were of great value in understanding that health is much more than focusing on the disease, also understanding that it is important to join forces with other struggles.

MSP and the peoples of the Amazon, the struggle goes on!

MSP Brazil was part of the large delegation of MSP Latin America, present at the World Social Forum/2009, in Belém (PA). Together with this group of 30 activists (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Belgium and the United States of America), they worked on building and strengthening the MSP in Latin America, based on the principles of the People’s Charter for Health to achieve health for all. Concomitantly, the MSP participated in the III World Social Forum on Health (FSMS), with fluid exchanges of experiences of struggle for health in different countries of the Americas. They strengthened the defense of the universalization of social security for all peoples. From the FSMS, the ‘SUS – World Heritage Site’ Campaign was launched and the engagement for the World Conference on the
Universal Systems Development was signed. The Belém Charter, prepared and approved at the end of the event, documented the Political Declaration of the III FSMS.

The FSMS/2009 was a milestone for the MSP, embodied by Sr. Anne and MSP Brazil, and consolidated from the course of activists IPHU/MSP/2008. Soon after, in Rio de Janeiro, Sr. Anne connected again at a meeting to refine agendas and expand the performance of the MSP in the various regions of Brazil. In addition to the MSP by Nina Rodrigues and the ‘embryo’ of the urban MSP, Sr. Anne has been, along with other activists, trying to incorporate a certain organicity into MSP Maranhão. And to encourage the same to happen in Belém and beyond. During the 4th World Peoples’ Health Assembly, held in 2018, each Brazilian delegate present in Bangladesh received a translated copy of the MSP Charter, material carefully sent by Sister Anne.

Sister Anne reinforces that MSP Maranhão has almost 19 years of continuous activity. Some members started, other activists joined, and the work continued with people who came and left. Thus, the work never stood still. She also says that, with her age, she has to be realistic and accept the limits with joy. She is excited that the São Luís MSP assumes much more responsibility, adding to the commitment of so many other allies. She continues to organize her archive on the history of MSP, in general, and of Maranhão, in particular. Part of it subsidized this article. She hopes that health activists will increasingly be on the side of the people in the fight against injustice. Today, more than ever, with the real threats to social conquests in Brazil and in the world, she says that proper planning begins with the people, that care must be taken so that academic action does not overlap with popular action. She ends it with the statement that the popular revolution is made with the people.

Collaborators

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