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Brazil

“More than resisting, the left must re-exist”

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV503 - December 2016 -

Publication date: Tuesday 27 December 2016

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Marcelo Freixo was the mayoral candidate for the PSOL in the municipal elections of October 2016 in Rio de Janeiro. He was interviewed by Francisco Louçã, who is part of the leadership of the Left Bloc in Portugal and of the Fourth International. This interview, which took place on November 27, 2016, was first published by the electronic daily of the Left Bloc, Esquerda.net.

Francisco Louçã: What balance sheet do you draw from the municipal campaign in Rio de Janeiro?

Marcelo Freixo: It was a very beautiful, very strong campaign; we say that it was a sunflower in the asphalt, because we are experiencing a very serious crisis of the Brazilian left. It's the end of cycle, of the era of the Workers' Party (PT), whose origin is not only the coup d'état, but also the errors committed by the PT when it was in government. This crisis affects the left as a whole, not just those who participated in government. We are in a process of crisis all those who identify with or are attracted by a left image, whoever they are.

The left has paid very high price at these municipal elections. These elections have great importance in Brazil, we have more than five thousand municipalities and as life is increasingly urban, the context of the elections in the towns has a considerable impact on national politics. Here in Rio de Janeiro we have made an alliance with the Partido Comunista Brasileiro [1] and the social movements: Movimento Sem Teto, Movimento Sem Terra, Levante and so on.

FL: With all this, and despite all this, Rio de Janeiro has something very special: it is the only big city where the left got through to the second round.

MF: Exactly.

FL: There must be a difference there; the left here has succeeded in emerging as an alternative, which was not the case in other cities.

MF: There were some good campaigns in other cities, but they didn't succeed in getting through to the second round. I think what differentiates the left in Rio de Janeiro from that in other cities is that we have done a lot of work at the base; I think that there has been a left alliance. This was not an alliance between political parties to have more speaking time in the official campaign on television, there was a left alliance made with the social movements on the basis of a programme.

So here in Rio we worked at the base, and I believe that this resulted in the possibility, even with a minimum time on television – in the first round, we only had some 11 second spots in the official campaign – we beat the PMDB, we had 18% of the vote and we went into the second round with a great activist strength [2]. In the second round, we doubled our score and we got 40% of the vote, but that wasn't enough to beat our opponent Crivella. We spent a year and a half debating “If the city was ours”, the name we gave to our programme of municipal government. It is a programme in which more than five thousand people participated, giving their opinion on the city. It is a programme which has been debated in all the favelas, neighbourhoods, and milieus, it is a democratic, broadly debated programme. We have created a large scale work at the base, I believe that the Brazilian left had lost this in a certain sense. I think that the PT governability in a certain way hindered work at the base. One thought rather to the electoral strategies of the big parties with agreements at the top rather than work at the base.

FL: In fact, in the second round, you faced the parties of government, since Crivella had been a minister in the PT government, he is a bishop in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and is a representative of the right. How can you characterize him, how would you describe him?

MF: It's difficult, Crivella is one of the bosses of Rede Record, the second biggest television channel after Rede Globo [3]. He is one of the main leaders of the Universal Church, with Edir Macedo, whose nephew he is [4]. He is a senator, was a minister under Dilma, and in the second round he obtained the support of the PSDB, and the Tucanos, he was supported by the PSD, and the whole spectrum of the right, including the support of the PMDB itself, of Anthony Garotinho (the former governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro). He had the support of all the conservative forces [5].

And the Universal Church does considerable work at the base. We had strong support among the religions of African origin, we had strong support among Catholics, several Catholic priests campaigned for us, in violation of the directives of the archbishop, but more than 85% of evangelists voted for Crivella. This remains a challenge for the left, to debate on what exactly this work at the base is, especially among the poorer milieus of the city.

The Universal Church works with a utopia, with another utopia, which is not ours, but it also works with a utopia and I think we have to pay more attention to that. But we had a beautiful campaign, a campaign which organised several milieus, many youth, different neighbourhoods, the areas we had the strongest growth were the northern and western neighbourhoods, that is the poorest suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. We grew in the popular electorate and I believe that is important.

FL: Is it possible to win against a leader who is populist, charismatic, religious, who has a discourse which is not immediately transposable on the political terrain, because it appeals to religion? How can you beat religious fundamentalism?

MF: The first week of the campaign, we lost time. In fact, we didn't know if we would get beyond the first round. We understood that we would reach the second round only on the evening of the election. We were not prepared for this second round in advance and suddenly we had ten minutes of television, we needed to find more money, so we lost a week of campaigning to structure ourselves for the second round, and this was a week when we suffered many attacks on the social networks linked to Crivella. Attacks at a very low level, with lies, on the networks and on whatsapp, on the telephone networks, this was a particularly disgusting, infamous campaign led by the allies of Crivella.

Here again, it is a campaign that we took some time in countering, these were attacks to which we did not know how to respond, ignoble attacks, going so far as to say that we were linked to drugs trafficking. It was necessary to take legal measures, but with this we lost a week of campaigning and I believe that this was a decisive week, I think that with a week more of campaigning we would have got very close to them.

In any case, there are some lessons remaining about this work at the base, the discussion with the evangelists, about a campaign structure which should be improved. Crivella spent ten million in his campaign [2,700,000 Euros], so it was a very costly campaign, with many resources, many allies. We don't have that, we won't have that, but we should structure ourselves better.

We succeeded much more than we failed and we got 40% of the vote, one million two hundred thousand votes. We nourished the idea that the left is not dead, that another left exists, that there is another way of being left. The collective financing of the campaign exists, we have had fourteen thousand donors during the campaign, we had a collective financing and a collective programme. It was another way of doing politics at a time of crisis for the left.

FL: The Brazilian left is in a situation of crisis, after a palace coup, the defeat of Dilma, and the Temer government, which has quickly begun to be very aggressive from the economic and social viewpoint, but which has a majority in Congress, so can decide practically anything it wants. How do you see the two coming years and the importance of this campaign in Rio de Janeiro for the formation of a new left pole, in the transformation of the left?

MF: This right wing cycle in Brazil was more or less inevitable, we will see a rise of the right, which has already begun, this has been a very hard, very violent blow against Brazilian democracy, a coup which tries to structure itself, at least in the medium term. At this moment, they are trying to adopt a PEC [constitutional reform] which freezes all investment, in particular in public health and teaching for the next twenty years, it is a very hard coup d'état.

It is a way of confronting a crisis of revenues, but by cutting expenditure in the areas where it is most needed, and this has in a certain way led the left to come out onto the streets, to organise in the public places, and I think that its good, but this shows that the line of the federal government in the coming years will be a line of recession, and this will be a line of considerable loss of rights for the labouring classes. I have not the least doubt that rights are being challenged, that we will pay the bill.

Today there is an erosion of the left, a very high erosion of the PT, because all the indications of crisis are attributed to the PT's management. That is what the media do, that is what the PMDB itself does, but after a certain time this doesn't hold, from now on the bill will be presented to the PMDB, it will come to the Temer government. The big question which remains is: what will the left do now, how will it re-establish itself, how will it reorganise? Because if the left comes back in two years and presents itself in the same way, with the same errors as now, this will not advance much.

The work at the base, the work of relating to the demands of the poorest sectors is fundamental. I stress very much what we have done in Rio de Janeiro, to relate the debate on the left to a debate on human rights (different to what it is in Europe), the debate on human rights here is a debate on the very entrails of the city. Cities are born by creating walls to protect themselves from what comes from the outside, including in Europe. Today, Brazilian cities create walls to protect themselves from those within. It is a contradiction in the model of the city. Today, the cities protect themselves from the poverty they themselves create.

The Brazilian left must hear this message, that very often the contradiction of big capital and labour is no longer found at the door of the factory, but at the door of the favela, it is found in the increasing precariousness of work, it is found in the poor and black youth who kill themselves, there is a genocide underway in Brazil. There is a slogan, the left must understand that for the class struggle it must re-exist. I have often said this: more than resisting, the left must re-exist. The left should reorganise in its slogans, by listening more than it talks, by being more democratic internally. I think that here, in Rio, we have shown that it is possible and that it is near to happening.

FL: To conclude, do you see a similarity between the victory of Trump and this emergence of fundamentalisms, of religious ideas, of political fanaticism, of a right wing conservative mentality, of aggressive liberalism?

MF: It is impossible to escape such a comparison, we have seen it here in Rio de Janeiro, a lot of caricatures of the Cristo Redentor taking the Statue of Liberty in its arms and saying “I understand you”, there are many jokes in the midst of a scenario which is not funny, which is very sad. I don't believe that Trump was elected solely thanks to the horrible things he said, but he was not beaten, despite these horrors, I think it is important to think about this. What was a joke, what was laughable, has become the reality.

Rio de Janeiro has never treated Crivella as a theme for jokes like Trump, but he is something very threatening, as dangerous as him. It is very difficult to predict what the Trump government will be, as it is very difficult to predict what the Crivella government will be, what the relationship of the Universal Church will be with the exercise of government, of the government of a city like Rio de Janeiro, it is hardly encouraging, The left must reorganise and re-exist in its practices to be rapidly stronger.

27 November 2016

[1] The Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB) is the smallest of the groups emerging from the successive splits of the historic Communist Party

[2] The PMDB is a powerful centrist party in the national parliament, which has participated in PT governments as well as in right wing governments. According to some analysts it is more an aggregation of local and regional notables than a political party in the classic sense of the term

[3] Rede Globo was founded in 1965 to propagandise for the military dictatorship, and is the second most powerful private network in the world behind ABC in the United States. Rede Record is the fifth biggest world network in television (and radio, publishing, internet)

[4] This church has grown at an astonishing rate since its creation in 1977. It has extended its influence by mixing politics, humanitarian action and religion, aggressively opposing the Afro-Brazilian cults and left Christianity

[5] The parties mentioned are the main parties of the institutional right; some of them have participated in PT governments, at the federal or state and local level