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Brazil

The 15 March was a great starting point: Pensions yes! Temer no!

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV506 - March 2017 -

Publication date: Saturday 25 March 2017

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Hundreds of thousands took part in demonstrations in 19 state capitals and other cities around the country. There were partial stoppages in at least 28 sectors, with workers in education and public transport, from both the private and state sectors, taking the lead. There were also occupations of ministries, social security offices and other public buildings, and some roads were blocked too. Wednesday, 15 March, was a day of struggle, demonstrations and stoppages on a scale that Brazil hasn't seen for a long time. It showed how strong is the desire and the ability to struggle, among very diverse sectors of the working population and the oppressed, against the pension reform (and other reforms that attack workers' rights) being pushed by President Michel Temer, his finance minister, Henrique Meirelles, and the Congress they control.

But beyond the universal anger at the attack on Brazilians' right to retire, the streets also rang with a significant and sharp rejection of the coup-mongering, Temer government itself. It was no accident that one of the most important slogans of the Women's Day demonstrations a week earlier, appeared again on 15 March - "Pensions stay, Temer go!". Even the cameras of TV Globo, with their "prudent" coverage of the 15th, could not hide the banners and placards that people placed next to their reporters, saying "Out with Temer!".

The 15 March, following on from the big mobilizations in Brazil on 8 March, could open a new opportunity for social resistance against the ultra-liberal reforms, and also against the conservative advance in Brazil and the region. To succeed in this, the organizations that led the 15M demonstrations will have to maintain their unity in action, with the aim of organizing new mobilizations and initiatives to block the pension reform in particular.

Deepening political crisis

The possibility of social resistance is strengthened by the political and institutional crisis "upstairs", among the elite, with the publication, that same Wednesday, of Janot's "second list" (of political figures to be investigated over the Petrobras and Oderbrecht corruption scandals), which is a direct blow to the Temer government.

The federal Attorney General, Rodrigo Janot, sent to the Supreme Court requests to investigate 107 politicians enjoying parliamentary or other immunity. These include the government's two main political operators, senators and federal deputies from the main governmental parties, the speakers of the upper and lower houses, many of the top leaders of the PMDB, the PSDB and, once again, the PT. They are being investigated for electoral crimes, corruption, money laundering and criminal association, based on testimony from the plea bargain by executives of the country's biggest construction group, Oderbrecht, as part of the Petrobras corruption scandal. Janot also sent to the Supreme Court requests to investigate 10 of the country's 27 state governors.

Add to this steaming cauldron the extreme unpopularity of the Temer government, as well as the deepening of the economic crisis, and we have a situation in which there is a real possibility of blocking the pension reform. That would not be any old victory, because it could politically destroy the Temer government and its usefulness to capital in Brazil. This may be the best way of bringing about the "Out with Temer", because the issues raised in the streets, and the growing strength of the struggles "downstairs", are closely tied to the crisis "upstairs".

In spite of the scale of the attacks the government is preparing against workers and the people, in spite of the

importance of the labour reforms for big capital, and in spite of the resonance that the slogan "Out with Temer" has at all the demonstrations, including at Carnival, it is the struggle against pension reform that has the greatest potential to mobilise and unite. This is the counter reform that affects everyone, and which will end the right to retire, with a ferocity and to a degree unparalleled on our continent. It is a proposal that involves making working time equal for men and women, when it's well known that men and women do not work the same in this world; it involves paying contributions for 49 years to have the right to a full pension; it ties social assistance for the poorest to readjustments in the minimum wage, in an attempt to phase out this help to those in acute poverty. All of this is easy to explain and easy for the majority of the population to understand. In fact it is already well understood, as the 15 March made clear.

The challenge now is to build another day of action, which combines street demonstrations with new strikes and all sorts of other initiatives (petitions, referendums, etc.), that can help to draw the immense majority of the population into one big push to block the pension reform. This is the moment to build on the momentum and take advantage of the breach opened up by the protests of 15 March.

Unity and contradictions within the left

We also need to mention the controversial presence of Lula on the 15 March, at the rally on the Avenida Paulista in Sao Paulo. Although this is a time for the broadest possible unity in action (and that means nobody should be vetoed from taking part in this broad front of unions, social movements and parties opposed to the Temer government and its reforms), we also need to make clear that this movement is not about supporting Lula standing for election in 2018. Among other reasons because, as president, his first big project was to begin a drastic reform of public sector pensions. More importantly, because the failed model of class conciliation to protect the privileges of the bankers and landowners, which characterised the series of PT governments, is what opened the door to the defeat that the whole movement suffered with last year's parliamentary coup.

The struggle against the pension reform unites all of the movement and the left. Lula does not unite them. For the left and the social movements face two big challenges. The first is practical: to defeat the Temer government and its reforms. The second is more long-term and strategic: to fashion a project and a programme for Brazil that can also go beyond the class conciliation model of the pink period that has just come to a close in Brazil and in Latin America.

PS:

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