

<http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5522>



Brazil

The shape of resistance in Brazil

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV520 - May 2018 -

Publication date: Monday 21 May 2018

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Between 2002 and 2016, the Workers' Party (PT, by its initials in Portuguese) held the presidency of Brazil for two terms under Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and then under Dilma Rousseff before she was impeached on flimsy charges in August 2016 in what is widely considered a parliamentary coup.

Rousseff's own vice president, Michel Temer, of the center-right Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), promoted the coup and has led an aggressively neoliberal government since that time. Over the last several years, prosecutors have charged various high-ranking politicians and leading businessmen with corruption in the so-called Operation Lava Jato (Car Wash) campaign. [\[1\]](#)

While these prosecutions were initially understood to be apolitical, it's become clearer in recent years that the investigation is politically motivated, including the thinly substantiated charges against Lula himself that led to his conviction and imprisonment last month for a 12-year term that, conveniently enough, bars him from running in October's presidential elections, all but insuring one or another faction of the right will replace Temer.

All this in a country with a powerful military that held power under its own name for more than a quarter century until 1980 and is showing signs of wanting a more assertive role in domestic politics.

Meanwhile, targeted assassinations, like the murder of socialist city councilor Marielle Franco, and police repression are growing apace, even as Brazil's still-vibrant social movements, trade unions, and significant socialist left attempts to stem the tide and articulate an alternative.

Just last spring, millions of public-sector workers launched a powerful strike against Temer's neoliberal reforms. [\[2\]](#) And while the right is making gains, the left-wing Party for Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) has launched a vibrant presidential campaign with "co-candidates" Guilherme Boulos, a leader in the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) and Sônia Guajajara, one of Brazil's most important Indigenous activists.

Martín Mosquera is on the editorial board of the Argentine publication *Intersecciones*. Valério Arcary is a longtime Marxist leader in Brazil, historian, and retired instructor at the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology in São Paulo. He studied in Lisbon and Paris and was a student leader during the Portuguese Revolution of 1974. He returned to Brazil in the 1970s and joined *Convergencia Socialista*, a Trotskyist organization linked to the political current led by Nahuel Moreno.

He was a founder and member of the leadership of the Workers' Party (PT) until his current left the party in 1994 to establish the Unified Socialist Workers' Party (PSTU). He is currently a member of *Resistencia*, which was recently formed through the unification of the Movement for an Independent and Socialist Alternative (MAIS) and the New Socialist Organization (NOS). *Resistencia* is an internal current in PSOL.

This interview was originally published at *Intersecciones* in April. Translation from Spanish by Todd Chretien.

How would you characterize the situation after Lula's imprisonment? What are potential scenarios for the near-term future, keeping in mind October's presidential elections?

All in all, reactionary forces prevail in a still notably turbulent scene. Few could have imagined such a rapid negative turn in national politics as has taken place over the last few months. The announcement of the Brazilian military's intervention in the streets of Rio de Janeiro (under the cover of fighting the war on drugs), the brutal execution of PSOL city council Marielle Franco and her assistant Anderson Gomes, and political imprisonment of Lula have all dangerously intensified the reactionary course of events. The political and social crises have been aggravated appreciably, and how this will all unfold remains unknowable. The current conflict between various political and social forces—classes, fractions of classes, parties, institutions, leaders, etc.—reveals a bitter struggle to determine the country's path. President Michel Temer has no social backing. Be that as it may, the bourgeoisie is advancing despite its own internal divisions and how to achieve its objectives. The working class and the oppressed are on the defensive, but they are resisting courageously in a series of struggles even as the middle class has turned in its majority to the right, including providing the principle social base for the extreme right. The party system of the New Republic (the electoral regime in place over the last 30 years since the fall of the military dictatorship) is shaking without having succeeded in creating a new order to substitute for it: a new equilibrium has not been achieved.

There are various political visions in conflict. The old representatives of the bourgeoisie—the center-right PMDB, conservative DEM(ocrats), and the neoliberal-clientalist (and poorly-named) Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) are fighting to keep the weakened political-party system intact. The fraction of capitalists behind the Lava Jato anti-corruption investigations want to impose a reactionary transformation on the regime with an eye toward making it more efficient, entrenched, and repressive. Lula and the PT, for their part, are looking to survive this brutal offensive without breaking with the party's conciliatory commitments to the powers that be. The extreme right advanced vigorously in the last few years, winning influence among the masses, although only with a minority. A neofascist leader, Jair Bolsonaro—who is an open admirer of the long-ruling military dictatorship—might make it into the second round of the presidential elections.

On the other hand, the reorganization of the left got a shot in the arm with launch of Guilherme Boulos and Sônia Guajajara's presidential campaign. The alliance formed between PSOL, MTST and PCB (Brazilian Communist Party), among other organizations, makes possible a perspective aimed at building new left-wing strategy, one based on confronting the rich and powerful in place of the class conciliationist policies pursued by Lulismo, as Lula's particular branch of politics is known in Brazil. It is possible that neither the PSDB nor the PT will get into the second round of the elections in October. In the last six presidential elections over the course of a quarter century—1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014—the prevailing pattern has been marked by an alteration between two political camps: the PSDB and the PT. This may well repeat itself, but the second round is wide open and could end up with candidates from other parties.

The movement for a Socialist and Independent Alternative (MAIS) emerged from the Unified Socialist Workers' Party (PSTU) over how to characterize the crisis of 2015-2016, which included Dilma Rousseff's impeachment. Can you comment on the terms of the discussion that essentially split the party in half? In addition to the tactical debates, what issues of a strategic nature were at play?

Twenty-five years after the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, we must admit that the forces of revolutionary Marxism, including Trotskyism, are weaker on a global scale. Ruptures opened up between the masses and the enormous political and trade union apparatuses that dominated the working class over the last decades, but they were not—in their immense majority—attracted to the different organizations of the Fourth International. Despite mobilizing and even sparking political revolutions, the masses and their vanguard could not see a potential alternative to the bourgeois-democratic regime. Not only did socialism fail to arise as a possible option, but it was repudiated in various key countries by the majority.

This didn't alter in the least our strategy of permanent mobilization for workers to take power and for the building of Bolshevik parties and an international based on these methods. However, it does oblige us to consider whether or not the weight of capitalist restoration in the ex-workers' states, and the fact that democratic revolutions against the

Stalinist regimes were led by pro-imperialist, bourgeois forces, constitutes a profound blow to the political consciousness of the masses. If it was, as we believe was the case, then the processes in the East must be considered, on the whole, regressive. The vision of a stage after the fall of the Berlin Wall—what the PSTU called the fourth stage—being more favorable for the construction of revolutionary parties was not confirmed, and we had to take this into consideration. In place of this, the vision arrived at by the majority of the PSTU's party congress deepened its commitment to a facile vision, thereby obscuring the contradictions and obstacles that I have described above.

In Brazil, we see an accumulation of disconcerting episodes that contribute to the emergence of an authoritarian regime beginning in earnest with the fraudulent impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, the recent military intervention in Rio de Janeiro, Lula's detention without evidence, and, more generally, the deployment of an increasingly authoritarian state, including more and more frequent assassinations of social and political leaders. How do you analyze these changes in terms of the "political regime" that is being consolidated in Brazil?

We are facing a reactionary transformation of the political regime. Bourgeois democracy in Brazil is less and less democratic. The neocolonial economic project presupposes such a transformation. The executive and legislative branches are losing strength while the judiciary and the armed forces are every day more politically relevant. Basic democratic gains are under attack. When their ability to exercise domination by means of a class consensus diminishes, coercive tendencies grow in order to maintain a bourgeois order. We are rapidly approaching a capitalist democracy that is restricted, amputated, entrenched and repressive. The Lava Jato investigation functions in the service of this reactionary turn, particularly in terms of restricting or annulling democratic rights and especially targeting the leadership of the reformist left (the PT), and reinforcing institutions such as the judiciary, the federal police, the interior ministry and the armed forces.

In a word, we are confronted by a fraction of the bourgeoisie—with TV Globo acting as its publicity agent—that wants to impose authoritarian reforms on the political regime. This section of the ruling class is even willing to target figures from the traditional right wing (such as Michel Temer) and professional politicians who have long been known for corruption (president of the lower house of Brazil's Congress Eduardo Cunha and ex-member of Temer's cabinet Geddel Vieira, etc.) without in any way altering the character of the operation. Thus, any section of the left that lines up with Lava Jato is crossing the class line.

You referred to the emergence of neofascism with a base among the masses in Brazil. Can you talk more about this? Does this have to do with a social and political polarization, with some breaking left and others breaking right? Or are we facing a unidirectional surge to the right in Brazilian society guided by an extreme neofascist vision?

Your second thesis, unfortunately, describes the negative evolution in the situation better. We are not dealing with a simple dynamic of social polarization. We are confronting an unfavorable inversion of social and political forces. The execution of Marielle and Anderson, the gun shots fired at Lula's campaign caravan (before his imprisonment), an upsurge in political assassinations carried out against landless and Indigenous activists, genocidal attacks on Black and poor people in marginalized urban and rural areas, as well as growing violence, intimidation and persecution against activists in social and left-wing movements is setting off alarm bells. Feeding on the fear and hatred scattered on among pockets of the population, the neofascist monster is raising its head. This does not mean we are not facing an immediate danger of a military dictatorship, nor of the threat of a fascist counterrevolution in Brazil.

But this fact does not diminish the gravity of the existence of an extreme right with influence among the masses, even if it's still a minority. Bolsonaro is a fascist leader who is followed by millions and he might get into the second round of the presidential elections. He is organizing a national political movement that promotes campaigns, meetings,

events, etc. Speaking precisely, we can say that an embryo of a neofascist party is developing around Bolsonaro. What is the future of this project? It's very difficult to predict the future. At this point, Bolsonaro is willing to accommodate his immediate objectives to the form of the democratic-electoral regime, but tomorrow?

Now is not the time to underestimate the enemies of freedom. The policy of an anti-fascist united front is today doubly important. Unity in action for energetic confrontation in all areas is key to stopping the neofascist danger.

Lula's detention and the crisis of the PT puts a big question mark over the future of the Brazilian left. PSOL and Guilherme Boulos' campaign appears that it might occupy an important role in a large-scale reorganization of the left. How do we see the possibilities?

Workers, the oppressed, and the youth are resisting colossal attacks even though there have been fluctuations in intensity according to the situation and circumstances at any given moment.

In other words, we see a picture of resistance struggles playing out in an overall defensive situation. For instance, on April 28, 2017, the working class spearheaded a historic general strike against neoliberal economic reforms. And over the last few years, there have been a number of important strikes and land occupations as well as diverse and significant marches by women, Afro Brazilians and LGBT people, all fighting for their rights. The slogans at these mobilizations, in general, have been defensive, but the struggles demonstrate people's ability to react to the impact of the attacks.

At the beginning of the year, Marielle's assassination sparked a powerful convulsion and more than 150,000 people took to the streets the day after her execution. The People Without Fear (PSM) occupation in São Bernardo do Campo became a powerful symbol of resistance, winning land for workers' housing. For their part, the strike by public employees in the city of San Pablo defeated cuts to social security promoted by the local PSDB government. These examples show that there is a disposition to fight coming up from below.

To confront the current capitalist offensive, we must put our hopes in unified struggle—unity to defend the rights of workers and the oppressed, unity to defend wages and jobs, unity to defend public education and health, and unity to fight for justice for Marielle and against all attacks on democratic liberties and Lula's imprisonment.

In this sense, left-wing parties—PT, the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), PSOL, PSTU, PCB—trade unions and federations—Unified Workers Center (CUT), Brazilian Workers Center (CTB), Union and People's Center-National Coordinating Committee for Struggle (CSP-Conlutas), Union Power (Força Sindical), etc.—and all social movements—MTST, PSM, Landless Workers Movement (MST)—all have a responsibility to promote concrete unity in action for social, economic and democratic demands. There is no time to lose. We must wager that the unified struggle of the working class and the oppressed will be able to change things.

How does the overall assessment of Lula's class conciliationist government impact the potential reorganization of the Brazilian left? How do you judge the potential for going beyond Lulismo? How is it possible to avoid the tendencies toward adaption and bureaucratization that decisively weighed down the PT that was in the 1980s, after all, a class-based party that was both pluralist and socialist? Now that PSOL is winning more space for its ideas and, consequently, will be subject to greater institutional pressure to adapt, how can this process be confronted?

Guilherme Boulos' campaign for the presidency is, simultaneously, a symbol and a bet on the reconstruction of a left that speaks the language of class struggle, the language of those from below, and not that of submission, conciliation and accommodation with those from above. The alliance sealed between PSOL, MTST and other diverse

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movements is pushing forward a political initiative that transcends purely electoral boundaries because it opens the door to the reorganization of the left on new political and programmatic bases. In overcoming PTism and its permanent strategy of conciliation with the powers that be, we must also avoid the error of sectarianism. At this moment, the struggle for justice for Marielle, the fight against neofascism, mobilizing against Lula's imprisonment, the unified fight against Temer's government and his reforms, and opposing military intervention in Rio are of decisive importance. Unity of the left in struggle is the principal banner under which we must march today.

However, at the same time, it is necessary to recognize that, unless it breaks with the politics and program of Lulismo, any new left will have a very short run. Class conciliationism is today not only undesirable; in fact, it was responsible for opening the door to the parliamentary coup and the wave of reaction that is hitting our people. The conciliation strategy reveals its impotence and total failure when Lula was imprisoned without heightened resistance on the part of the PT leadership. Thus, in this year's elections, it is critical to affirm a new project for the left, with a new program. If fighting for left unity is fundamental, then during the elections we must emphasize prioritizing the construction of something new, of a new strategy, we must avoid the mistakes of the past. The PT leadership has already demonstrated many times that it will continue on in its alliances with sections of the right and its program of class conciliation with big capital, even while Lula is in prison. We are not going to take a path that has already been shown to end in tragedy. We are taking a different road, betting on the streets, on the independent struggle of those from below, raising an anticapitalist program with Bouldas, Guajajara and PSOL.

May 11, 2018

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[1] <https://socialistworker.org/2016/04/20/the-impeachment-crisis-shaking-brazil>

[2] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/05/24/brazil-rocked-by-the-return-of-mass-protest>