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Brazil

“Neither the 13th nor the 15th represent us”

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On Friday 13 March and Sunday 15 March, Brazil saw two mass mobilizations across the country. Over a million people took to the streets. The first was called by the governing Workers' Party (PT) and its supporters to counter the second, organized by a number of right-wing forces seeking to take advantage of governmental disarray and call for the removal of President Dilma Rousseff. The crisis in government has been caused by a vast and still unfolding corruption scandal involving the state-controlled oil company, Petrobras, and most of the mainstream political parties – especially the PT and its coalition allies – coupled with a sharp downturn in the economy and austerity measures, which are turning Brazil's “emerging economy” into what some are calling a “submerging economy”. The following editorial by Insurgencia was published two days before the pro-government demonstrations.

Both dates called by the government and the right are set-backs and represent cul-de-sacs for the working class

The 8 March, International Women's Day, began well, with thousands of women taking to the streets to demand their rights, reaffirm the struggle for equality and denounce the machismo that is deeply rooted in society. These were demonstrations of courage and hope. Very different from what would follow that night, when 8 March came to a sorry end.

In an attempt to capture the moment, President Dilma made a disastrous announcement, whose main aim was to defend the fiscal adjustment already underway and ask the people to show even more patience. A contradiction in itself, because these measures roll back the rights of all the working class, and affect women even more profoundly.

As the president was speaking, saucepans were banged loudly in middle-class neighbourhoods and condos in at least 12 states. Organised on social media, the protest called for her impeachment and shouts of “Dilma Out!” rang from the balconies, some of them quite luxurious, along with much ruder terms and often overtly sexist language. But even if its epicentre was in the upscale neighbourhoods of some regional capitals, it had a political impact and raised expectations ahead of the demonstrations called for the 13 and 15 March.

But this return towards reaction, with a strong dose of class hatred, which is probably what an impeachment would mean, with the PSDB (the main party of the neoliberal right in Brazil) being the one to benefit, does not mean that it is possible to defend the Dilma government. On the contrary, it is increasingly impossible, because that very announcement by Dilma was to defend precisely what has been distancing the government more and more from the working class, youth and women.

The two dates that mark the polarization between government supporters and the right are both cul-de-sacs for the working class. Each represents its own kind of set-back.

The government has undertaken a brutal attack on workers' rights with its neoliberal adjustment measures. It used the increase in electricity and gas prices to make the population pay for the crisis in the existing energy system. It raised interest rates and cut public spending, putting the country on the verge of recession and pushing household budgets to the brink of bankruptcy. And at the same time people see important party leaders and public figures up to

their necks in plundering millions of dollars at Petrobras.

On the other hand, the demonstrations in posh districts are strengthening Brazil's traditional right, with strong overtones of class hatred. The move is, moreover a cynical one, because they say nothing about other cases of electoral manipulation, like that of Alkmin in Sao Paulo (Geraldo Alkmin of the PSDB was elected in 2014 for the fourth time as Governor of Sao Paulo state), they bang no pans against the big cuts programme of Governor Beto Richa in Parana state, and they are certainly not arguing for any extension of rights and progressive reforms in the country.

But it is a strategic mistake to imagine that indignation is limited to the elite. A mistake that is only too common among the most alienated government supporters. In fact, there is a process of corrosion underway at the very base of society, driven by a combination of austerity, cuts, price increases for energy and for food, rising interest rates and the choking off of credit for most people. No government can remain popular with all this going on. And while the government and its defenders underestimate the impact of their unpopular measures, they cede more and more space for the traditional right to win support among broad layers of the population.

The central problem here is this: the socialist left, and all of the left that wants to fight, cannot allow itself to be imprisoned by this polarization.

The political challenge is a strategic one: to build, starting now, a third camp, of political and programmatic opposition from the left, that points towards a different solution for the country, one rooted in the struggle against cuts, in defence of rights, and for popular and structural reforms. We have to create the conditions for another vision of the country to be able to occupy the streets, one that is not hostage to either the Dilma government's neoliberal adjustment policies, nor to the reactionary alternatives promoted by the right-wing opposition.

Our place is in the streets. Firstly to fight for an end to neoliberal austerity measures – wherever they come from – and to support all social struggles in defence of people's rights; and in the process to raise high a programme of changes and reforms that point to another kind of future for the country. This is the basic minimum that allows us to explain that we will not be taking part in the marches of a reactionary, white elite, but nor will we march to defend a government that has again shown it is simply indefensible.