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Brazil

Brazil rocked by the return of mass protest

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Brazilian President Michel Temer's conservative government is [reeling in the face of an explosive corruption scandal](#). After a period of confusion and demoralization following the impeachment of Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff last spring, workers and students appear to have found their voices again and are pouring into the streets to oppose Temer. On April 28, tens of millions of Brazilian workers participated in the largest general strike ever conducted in the Western hemisphere, and a national mobilization dubbed Occupy Bras lia "Brazil's federal capital "on May 24 will be a major show of force against Temer's neoliberal reforms to Brazil's pension system.

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On April 28, Brazilian workers participated in a one-day mass strike against plans by the Temer government to enforce even stricter austerity measures. Can you describe the size and scope of the strike?

In 2016, after the parliamentary coup against Dilma Rousseff, Temer's government went on the offensive and began to implement an austerity package so severe that, in practice, it meant the dismantling of the constitution of 1988 [established after the fall of the military dictatorship] and the Consolidated Labor Code (CLT).

Dilma's government attempted to implement partial counter-reforms, but failed owing to the grave political crisis that wracked her popular front government.

The union movement found itself divided over the course of the past year, unable to develop a united calendar of struggles. A strike against a constitutional amendment that froze social investments for 20 years was restricted to the education sector, and the movement ended up in defeat.

But this year, things changed. A wave of opposition grew against Temer's austerity plans, finding expression in the feminist mobilizations on March 8, International Women's Day, and afterward, in protests on March 15 that brought hundreds of thousands out into the streets.

And on April 28, the one-day general strike exploded. All the trade union federations called for the general strike in a united front that shut down factories, refineries, banks, commerce, public transportation, school and universities. And now, a huge march to Bras lia "the federal capital "on May 24 is also being organized as a united front against the so-called reform of pensions and the labor code, as well as outsourcing.

Now, on the eve of the Bras lia march, new corruption charges are hitting Temer's government, opening up the biggest political crisis since his inauguration, one that could lead to his downfall. This led trade union leaders who met on March 19 to agree that the order of the day is to bring down the government and its counter-reforms.

What are the most important unions and mass organizations behind the strike? What role did trade union federations like the CUT and CSP-Conlutas play in calling and organizing the strike?

The unity between all the union federations and popular movements brought together the entire Brazilian workers' movement against Temer's reforms into the planning of the general strike. This process was a qualitative jump in framework of resistance from what had been a defensive situation.

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Without exaggerating it, we can say in a general way that the CUT [Unified Workers Center, Brazil's largest union federation] and the Workers Party (PT) are the main leaders of the process, and therefore, it has its limitations. Principally, these forces are always trying to subordinate the movement to the strategy of electing former PT president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2018's national elections, and thus rebooting a class collaborationist government.

But in any case, there was a powerful unity among all sectors of Brazil's social movement that made it possible to paralyze the country and bring out demonstrations that took place on that day. The movement has a broad reach and has developed a capillary system, allowing it to reach into large, medium and even small cities.

CSP-Conlutas is a union coalition that represents a minority of the workers, but it played a very important role in the work stoppages in the public sector, the schools, the universities and some sections of industry—such as the factories in São José dos Campos, construction workers in some cities, and road workers in Fortaleza, among others.

Did the strike spread beyond the best-organized sections of the Brazilian working class? Did it draw in unorganized sectors? Favela dwellers? Farmers and agricultural workers? Students? Social movements?

GJ: Besides the main union federations, the MTST [Homeless Workers' Movement] and the MST [Landless Workers' Movement] both played a critical role in mobilizing workers, which, together with the union movement, contributed to spreading the strike to different categories of workers.

They were also decisive in organizing blockades and street demonstrations, adding a lot of visibility to the general strike. Just in the city of São Paulo, there were 50 highway blockades by the early morning hours of April 28.

How did the authorities, private bosses and the media react?

Initially, they tried to harass, delegitimize and ignore the movement in order to downplay it or claim it didn't have much support.

But these attempts by governors, bosses and the mainstream press were all in vain. The power of the general strike trampled anyone who tried to impede it, compelling the major media outlets to cover the shut downs and protests that took place all throughout the day of April 28. It was an historic day!

Turning to the broader political situation, I want to ask about the different political forces in Brazil now. Let's start with the right wing and the bourgeoisie under Temer, who, since taking office after Dilma's impeachment, has embarked on a series of drastic austerity measures and attacks on basic democratic rights. Some of his supporters even openly praise the old military dictatorship. What are Temer's main goals, and is the Brazilian ruling class united behind his administration?

Everything is happening very quickly in Brazil. The unity of the bourgeoisie behind the government, which was strong until some days ago, no longer exists.

Temer's government, whose aim was to deepen and accelerate the reforms, is now losing the confidence of a big part of the national and international bourgeoisie, mainly because of the charges filed by JBS [the largest meat processing company in the world, [whose heir recorded a conversation with Temer](#) that is at the center of the corruption scandal engulfing him] with Brazil's Supreme Court.

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At this moment, because of the mobilizations and strikes, divisions are deepening among the bourgeoisie, Temer's government is suspended in midair, and there is a very good chance that the government could fall in the coming days. It remains to be seen if some agreement will be reached or if the process will be bloody.

What about the Workers Party? The PT was founded in 1980 as a political expression of Brazil's working-class movement and it succeeded in electing Lula, a former metalworker, president twice, and then Rousseff twice. It was lauded for reducing poverty, expanding education for the poor and improving nutrition for those living in extreme poverty. Yet by the time the right forced out Dilma, the PT had entered a profound crisis. Can you explain the state of the PT?

The PT played a progressive role during the 1980s. It was the product of strikes and a reorganization that occurred at the same time the mass movement went on the offensive to overturn the military dictatorship.

But to the degree that the PT won city halls, seats in parliament and eventually arrived in office at the federal level, it adapted itself to a modus operandi that the right of the party always used to facilitate a promiscuous relationship between the state and big business.

Moreover, the PT didn't dare make any structural reforms. On the contrary, so long as the economy grew [based on a boom in commodity prices for Brazil's chief exports], it employed compensatory social measures to maintain Lula's high popularity. But as soon as the economic crisis arrived in Brazil, it precipitated a political crisis, and Dilma's government found itself paralyzed. It could neither meet workers' demands, nor did it succeed in pushing through plans in the interest of capital in a satisfactory manner.

The result was a loss of popular support and a crisis at the base among its social allies, which transformed the PT into a vulnerable and fragile government. All this created the conditions under which the pro-coup sectors of the opposition could act and triumph [by impeaching Dilma and making Temer president].

Do you think the April 28 strike will allow the PT to rebound?

The PT is exhausted and has suffered heavy defeats— not only Dilma's impeachment, but also losses in recent municipal elections. But it is a mistake to say that the PT is finished, just as we cannot really say that the experience of Lulaism has been overcome.

The PT never lost its position in the union and social movements. It remains the majority in those sectors. Likewise, given Temer's crisis and his intention to tear up historical social rights in a country with 14 million unemployed people, workers will remember the period of economic growth experienced during Lula's two terms in office.

In fact, today, Lula leads in all the polls for the upcoming presidential election, and the PT is undergoing a recovery process in so far as it leads the struggle against the Temer government.

A majority of the Brazilian revolutionary left participated in the founding and development of the PT, but over the years, different currents have protested the PT's leadership turning away from the party's original goals and left to begin new political projects. Plus, several important social movements have organized independently— or at least partially so— from the PT, including the MTST and the CSP-Conlutas. Can you explain the strength of some of the forces to the left of the PT?

Today, the socialist left that opposed the PT from the left faces a dramatic challenge. No current of the socialist left has mass influence, and the most important ones have undergone some degree of crisis and fragmentation.

This means that, politically, a polarization is gaining ground and beginning to consolidate between the old PT and the ultra right, represented by congressman Jair Bolsonaro—who notoriously paid homage on the floor of the National Assembly to the dictatorship's torture chief and [screamed at one PT congresswoman](#): "I wouldn't rape you because you're not worthy of it."

Sectarian and opportunist tendencies are obstacles to the development of a third camp in this moment. The PSTU [Unified Socialist Workers Party] opposes the construction of a Socialist and Left Front. It consciously fights against such a front, relying instead on its own self-proclamations. At the same time, there are tendencies within the left that insist on an electoralist path and on class conciliation.

The challenge facing the socialist left is to prove that it can overcome PT-ism and have the courage to present an alternative. At a minimum, PSOL [Socialist and Freedom Party], the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), the PSTU, and other social movements and political organizations whose political projects are different than the PT should join together in a front.

Given the scale of Temer's attacks, there is a debate on the Brazilian left about whether the only possible way to defeat the right is to unite behind the PT in the 2018 presidential election. What is your view about supporting the PT? Even if it has been complicit with neoliberalism and bureaucratized, is it still a defense against the right? Or is it time to build a new political party?

We are not in favor of repeating the experience of a class-collaborationist government.

If Lula is not jailed or does not lose his right to run for office as a political candidate, the PT will have an opportunity to recompose itself, but it will do so in a framework or a program that serves the interests of capital.

Brazil's left must conduct a thoroughgoing assessment of the experience of the PT in government and where this has left us. The parliamentary coup, the approval of policies that directly attacked social and democratic rights, and the difficult situation in which the left finds itself today were all byproducts of the PT's method of governing. Repeating that today in the midst of a global economic crisis could be even more catastrophic.

As I mentioned before, the challenge for the socialist left is to leave marginality behind, to unify different parties and currents and construct an anti-capitalist program that can win a mass audience. This is the political fight that those of us in MAIS want to push forward.

Within this perspective, PSOL has important responsibilities. The pressures on the movements to capitulate to Lulism are very strong, but they can only be fought successfully by opposing any class-collaborationist projects and by presenting an alternative free from sectarianism, power grabs or self-referential declarations.

Despite Dilma's ouster, vicious austerity and the disorienting impact of the PT's crisis, the Brazilian working class appears to have a unique capacity for mobilization. Some on the left have argued that neoliberalism has so disorganized the working class that socialists must look elsewhere for anti-capitalist social power. How have Brazilian workers retained such a high degree of organization and militancy?

With the economic crisis in 2008, the European bourgeoisie's offensive against the social welfare state generated many struggles and powerful resistance in many countries, including general strikes, most notably in Greece.

When the crisis hit Brazil and when various governments—first Dilma's and then Temer's—increased their attacks on social and democratic rights, there was every reason to expect the Brazilian working class would stand up to fight,

to resist.

We have a history marked by many struggles, but forming a united front between the union federations in unified action with the social and youth movements was decisive. The movement's unity focused all the indignation against the government and its reforms, and this gave us hope that we could defeat Temer and bring him down.

How do you see the relationship between short-term defensive struggles—for instance, the call for new strikes against austerity—and the construction of a mass, working-class political party to the left of the PT?

This question is difficult, and I will give my personal view on the subject.

Today, it is hard to imagine the construction of a new political organization unifying all the legally registered organizations that are to the left of the PT. The PSOL fulfills this role to some extent, but it has limitations. Perhaps the experience in Rio de Janeiro—where Marcelo Freixo, PSOL's mayoral candidate, won roughly 40 percent of the vote—is the closest we have come nationally to achieving mass influence.

But the process is still under way, and there are many elements that we do not have much control over. In fact, one part of the bourgeoisie's offensive is to reform our political system, closing down space for the left by imitating elections in the U.S. We don't know if they will succeed, but a sector of the judiciary does seem willing to destroy the party system.

If we can at least immediately get the Socialist and Left Front into the streets all across the country, drawing inspiration from the Left and Workers Front's (FIT) experience in Argentina, that would be a very important first step.

Finally, the Obama administration maintained a long and friendly relationship with Lula and Dilma, but readily backed Temer as well. Donald Trump's election in the U.S. has energized the populist right in various countries, but open support for Trump also brings with it a raft of liabilities. How has the Brazilian right reacted to Trump, and is there a danger of a return to a more authoritarian, even militaristic, state in Brazil?

The ultra right in Brazil looks at Trump's election with a lot of sympathy. Bolsonaro praised Trump's campaign posture of confronting everything and everybody, and he says he's willing to do the same in Brazil. But I don't think that the right wing in Brazil is unified in seeing Trump's election in a good light. For example, Rede Globo, Brazil's biggest media corporation, was clearly against Trump.

Nor do I see an authoritarian solution to the crisis, including a military intervention, as a priority for the Brazilian bourgeoisie, even if they do aim to close down some of the regime's doors and windows.

In fact, this is already being done. For instance, the new anti-terrorism law, prohibitions against civil servants going on strike, authoritarian actions taken by the judiciary branch, and the attempt to reform the political system in order to restrict organization's ability to express themselves politically are all examples of measures currently being put in place in Brazil.

Each and every working-class struggle today must also defend and expand democratic rights. All in all, we find ourselves living in a historical moment. The class struggles unfolding today will define the future of an entire generation for the coming period.

May 24

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