

The pseudo-left and Brazil's municipal elections: A trial run for mass betrayal

By Miguel Andrade
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The expected debacle suffered by Brazil's former ruling Workers Party (PT) in the first round of nationwide local elections on October 2 reduced the party's control to just 40 percent of the municipalities it won in the last elections in 2012. The election, characterized by record rates of abstention and spoiled ballots, has further exposed the deep crisis of the whole Brazilian political establishment, and of the country's pseudo-left in particular.

Last Sunday saw run-offs in more than 50 cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants in which no candidate was able to win an outright majority in the first round. The first round had seen the PT reduced to half of its historic vote in Brazil's largest city, São Paulo, where the incumbent mayor was the party's candidate. It was also completely routed in its birthplace, the so-called "red belt" of industrial cities and towns on São Paulo's outskirts, as well as in historically left-leaning regions such as the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul.

This rout in most cases benefited populist right-wingers, most notably in São Paulo where the regional-chauvinist João Doria, dubbed the Brazilian Donald Trump, was able to win an outright majority in the first round—the first time any candidate was able to do so in the city.

In the second round, however, the country's attention was focused on the election in Rio de Janeiro. In the country's second city and former capital, state representative and former PT member Marcelo Freixo, running on the PSOL (Socialism and Freedom Party, a parliamentary split-off from the PT), was defeated by the first-round frontrunner, the Christian fundamentalist Marcelo Crivella, of the Republican Party, a right-wing former ally of the PT government.

The elections unfolded amid Brazil's worst economic crisis in a century and with the PT hard hit by the right-wing campaign that removed it from office in September with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff on trumped-up charges of budget manipulations. She has been replaced by her former vice-president Michel Temer of the right-wing Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), who has been brought in to implement a full restructuring of class relations in Brazil.

The PT was unable to mobilize support within the working class against impeachment due to its longstanding record of social attacks and its political alliances while in government

with the same reactionary forces which moved to impeach Rousseff. The party all but disavowed the largely middle-class demonstrations against the impeachment, appealing instead to the Organization of American States and Brazilian bankers and businessmen for its defense.

In this context, the race in Rio was pushed to the forefront due to the large vote won by PSOL, PT's main nominal left opposition, in the first round. A number of left-leaning youth flocked to the city to join Freixo's one-month run-off campaign, in a process reminiscent of the recent Bernie Sanders campaign in the United States.

This was the second run for mayor of Rio by Freixo, a prominent human rights lawyer and activist, former PT member and PSOL founder. This time around, his vote totals fell substantially in Rio's working class, industrial northern sector, and the campaign was oriented from start fundamentally to the upper-middle class southern zone of the city, which includes the world-famous districts of Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon.

In the face of the PT's nationwide debacle in the first round, there was a closing of ranks around Freixo's candidacy by the whole of the pseudoleft, including most notably the PSOL currents which had previously criticized him, the "green" REDE party and the Morenoite PSTU and MAIS, which were joined by both factions of the Communist Party, the PT itself and the Liberation Theology-linked faction of Rio's Catholic Church. In short, mobilized behind his candidacy was the whole range of anti-Marxist forces that founded and later supported the PT since 1980.

Freixo's campaign was a case study in pseudo-left hypocrisy. It was initially centered on populist criticisms of the tax structure in the city, mild opposition to the privatization of hospitals, transport and schools, as well as overtures to big business, with the promise of a city-controlled development bank.

Significantly, the campaign made little mention of the city's recent bitter experiences with the World Cup and the Olympics, which were accompanied by the crudest forms of dispossession of the city's most oppressed layers, through expulsions and widespread police aggression in name of property development.

This already empty platform was reduced to nothing more than an anti-corruption campaign. One week before the second-round election, Freixo issued his now infamous “Letter of Commitment to Rio.” This missive was openly aimed at reassuring big business and attracting ruling class support in the face of corruption scandals dogging his opponent, Crivella. He promised a technocratic government and the review of privatization contracts in search of any irregularities – abandoning any opposition in principle to the privatizations. The letter was met with a unanimous reaction from the pseudo-left: “Vote for Freixo in order to push him to the left.”

This end of Freixo’s “left” pretensions was entirely predictable given not only the history of PSOL, but the development of his campaign, which exposed the party’s bottomless opportunism.

Pressed time and again by the press and the right wing on his position regarding the impeachment, Freixo ran away by saying he didn’t want to “nationalize” Rio’s elections. Accused of “Bolshevism” by Crivella, he tried to disavow his own party, declaring to *Folha de São Paulo* that “it is not PSOL which will run Rio.” Unmoved by Freixo’s opportunism, the pseudo-left brought his “popular councils,” reminiscent of the anti-Marxist “municipal communism” currents of post war Europe, to the forefront as a left cover.

One of the most revealing episodes was Freixo’s capitulation to the right wing’s slanderous accusations of anti-Semitism directed against his campaign, which were reminiscent of the slanders against Jeremy Corbyn in the recent Labour leadership contest in Britain. Freixo, who had strong support among Rio’s small, largely secular and left-leaning Jewish community, had declared his support for a two-state solution confined to the 1967 borders, a toothless declaration to the right even of the “official” discussions inside the larger Jewish-Brazilian community.

Nonetheless, he came under attack, most significantly from the Catholic and Evangelical right, after a small current inside PSOL published an obituary of Shimon Peres, citing his involvement in the many internationally recognized crimes of the Israeli state against the Palestinian people. The group which published the obituary was disavowed by both Freixo and the PSOL leadership.

The pseudo-left’s closing of ranks around Freixo’s campaign serves as a damning political self-indictment. Claiming to oppose the PT from the left, these organizations have done everything in their power to prevent the working class from breaking with the forces which founded and supported the PT for almost four decades, including the Catholic Church and the unions.

Their support for Freixo was accompanied by a complete abandonment of any discussion on how the nominal left could suffer such an enormous defeat in São Paulo and its surroundings, one of the largest working class concentrations in the world and one of the world’s most unequal regions.

The real attitude of these layers has been made clear by elements like the anti-Marxist Guilherme Boulos, who appeared on Freixo’s platform in Rio. A fixture at pseudo-left protests, he has dismissed São Paulo’s middle classes as “fascist” and its working class as “alienated and consumerist.”

Along similar lines was an October 7 column by PSOL philosophy professor Vladimir Safatle, who wrote that “the political axis of the country” had moved from São Paulo to Rio (or more precisely its well-heeled southern zone) due to the virtues of Freixo’s campaign.

For more than a year now, Safatle has described the 40-million strong state of São Paulo as a homogeneously conservative, self-indulging, parallel-reality in Brazil. The PT and its main right-wing opposition, the PSDB, are “São Paulo products,” he wrote, adding that they are politically exhausted because the state is politically exhausted. Freixo, he argued, shows the way out by proposing nothing less than “a transmutation of forms of government,” by way of “direct democracy” through the “popular councils.”

More than a year after Syriza’s betrayal of the Greek working class, the pseudo-left forces in Brazil are insisting, as their counterparts in Greece and Europe generally did before them, that Brazilian workers and left-leaning middle-class layers must go through the experience of rule by the likes of PSOL and Freixo in order to build true socialist alternatives. This claim, bound up with the rejection of the fight to build a genuine revolutionary leadership, only betrays their own contempt for the working class. Above all, they are determined to prevent workers and young people from drawing any real lessons from the debacle of the PT, instead attempting to repeat the experience, with what will inevitably be even more disastrous results.

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