

The far-right threat in Brazil and the role of the Workers Party

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Last Sunday's general election in Brazil was a political earthquake that reduced to rubble parties that had long dominated the political landscape. At the same time it exposed the complete rot of the bourgeois democratic order established in the wake of the 20-year military dictatorship imposed by the US-backed coup of 1964.

That Jair Bolsonaro, a fascistic and buffoonish former army captain and nine-term deputy in the Brazilian Congress, could win a stunning 46 percent of the vote, coming within a hair's breadth of an outright victory, exposes the immense danger of a return of Latin America's largest country, with a population of over 200 million people, to fascist-military rule.

His nearest challenger, Fernando Haddad, the candidate of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) trailed Bolsonaro by nearly 17 points. The two will face off in a second-round election on October 28.

The regions where Bolsonaro beat Haddad by even wider margins than the national total included all of the cities of the so-called ABC industrial belt surrounding Sao Paulo, the center of the Brazilian auto and metalworking industries, birthplace of the Workers Party and scene of the mass strikes of 1978-1980 that forced an end to the military dictatorship. These cities, where the now-jailed former PT President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva got his start as a metalworkers' union leader, gave Bolsonaro 50 percent of the vote, as compared to barely 20 percent for the PT's Haddad.

Similarly, Bolsonaro won 45 percent of the vote, against 20 percent for Haddad, in Rio Grande do Sul, a PT stronghold in the period before Lula's 2002 election and the place chosen for the founding of the World Social Forum in 2001.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, Bolsonaro won every single city, including the capital, with its long history of left-wing activism, and Volta Redonda, a steelmaking center and site of bitter union struggles.

Even in the Northeast, the country's poorest region, which benefited the most from the minimal social assistance programs instituted under Lula—a region considered a political bastion of the PT—Bolsonaro won 23 out of 26 state capitals.

Equally staggering are the votes for the Brazilian Congress, with Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL) going from one seat to 52, just four shy of the 56 seats (out of 68) retained by the Workers Party. The center-right parties that had previously

held the presidency and major power in the legislature, the PSDB and the MDB, both saw their congressional delegations cut nearly in half.

Just as significant was the record rate of abstention and blank ballots, which accounted for a third of the electorate, roughly equal to the number who voted for Bolsonaro. Moreover, every poll indicated that there was more opposition to each of the candidates than support.

Who is responsible for the unprecedented vote for a candidate of the far right in Brazil? First and foremost, it is the Workers Party, which ruled Brazil for 13 years, from Lula's first election to the impeachment of his successor, Dilma Rousseff, in 2016.

The vote on Sunday amounted to a popular referendum on the devastating social and economic crisis confronting the majority of the Brazilian population as a result of the financial crisis that hit the country in 2013, and the policies introduced by the PT government to place the full burden of this crisis on the backs of the working class. This condemned 14 million workers to unemployment, while leading to reduced real wages for those still on the job, along with a sharp growth in social inequality.

The election also expressed popular outrage over the systemic corruption exposed in the Lava Jato investigation into bribes and kickbacks at the state-owned energy conglomerate Petrobras. An estimated \$4 billion was siphoned from public coffers into the pockets of politicians and their corporate backers, while millions confronted unemployment and deepening poverty. Lula, convicted on extremely flimsy evidence involving a beachfront apartment, was nonetheless at the center of this scheme.

Haddad and the Workers Party were unwilling and unable to appeal to the working class or present any program that could attract popular support against the fascistic demagoguery of Bolsonaro, whose political rise was nurtured by the PT, which allied with him in the Brazilian congress.

Whether the hostility of the majority of the population to Bolsonaro—as well as to Haddad and the rest of the political establishment—will result in the neo-fascist's defeat on October 28 remains to be seen. What is unquestionable, however, is that the second-round election will produce the most right-wing government in Brazil since the fall of the military dictatorship.

The Workers Party's pseudo-left satellites are now speaking in terms of a "national united front against fascism." This front is to include, if possible, the traditional right-wing parties as well as various reactionary media outlets, such as *O Globo* and *Veja* magazine, which have been critical of Bolsonaro.

The PT is appealing to the Brazilian ruling class and international capital on the grounds that it will be better able to suppress the resistance of the working class through its ties to the bureaucratized union confederation, CUT, and that Bolsonaro will be more likely to provoke a social explosion.

Anyone believing that Bolsonaro is merely a noxious aberration and that his defeat at the hands of the PT will produce a flowering of democracy in Brazil is living in a dream world.

The turn by the entire Brazilian establishment to the right found stark expression in a speech delivered barely one week before the election by the president of the Brazilian Supreme Court, Dias Toffoli, in which he declared that he no longer wanted to speak in terms of military coup or dictatorship when referring to the CIA-backed seizure of power by the Brazilian armed forces and overthrow of the elected government of Joao Goulart in 1964. Rather, he would speak of it as the "movement of 1964," suggesting that the military coup was legitimate and caused by the "errors" of the political parties.

Toffoli's speech came just weeks after his selection of a reserve army general, whose appointment was suggested by the head of the military high command, Gen. Eduardo Villas Boas, as the chief advisor to the high court. The general appointed was reportedly one of a number of top military officers who helped formulate Bolsonaro's campaign program.

Judge Toffoli, it should be noted, rose to his judicial position as a loyalist of the Workers Party, serving as the legal representative for the presidential campaigns of Lula in 1998, 2002 and 2006.

This increasing elevation of the military into every aspect of political life in Brazil has been fostered by the PT, which oversaw the deployment of the army into Rio's favelas (shanty towns) after having "blooded" its troops in the UN-sponsored occupation of Haiti. Bolsonaro has attempted to exploit the growth of the military's power, indicating that his defeat at the polls would be illegitimate and would justify the army intervening on his behalf.

The PT has paved the way to the present dangers confronting the Brazilian working class. Sharing responsibility are the various pseudo-left organizations that played a pivotal role in founding and promoting the Workers Party.

Among them is the Morenoite-Pabloite alliance, the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), which saw its share of the vote Sunday reduced to just 0.6 percent—compared to 7 percent when it first ran candidates in 2006. It has declared its support for the PT and Haddad in the second round.

From the outset, the leading role in the formation of the PT was played by organizations that broke with the Trotskyist

movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, in the 1960s, some of them promoting the theory that Castroism and guerrilla war had supplanted the necessity of building Marxist parties within the working class. This political orientation contributed to catastrophic defeats for the working class and the rise of military dictatorships throughout Latin America.

Under conditions of massive strikes and militant struggles by students against Brazil's military regime, these same elements joined with sections of the union leadership, the Catholic Church and left academics to found the Workers Party. It as well was to serve as a substitute for the building of a revolutionary party and the fight for socialist consciousness in the working class. The PT was to provide a unique Brazilian parliamentary road to socialism. The dead end of that road—personified in the rise of the fascist demagogue Bolsonaro—has clearly been reached.

The Brazilian working class cannot defend itself as part of a "united front" with the PT and its appeal for support to the Brazilian ruling class. The only road forward lies in uniting the struggles of Brazilian workers with those of the entire Latin American working class, as well as the workers of North America, against the common enemy—finance capital and the transnational corporations.

Such a struggle requires a decisive political break with the Workers Party and all of its pseudo-left satellites. The most urgent question is the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class, based upon the assimilation of the long history of struggle for Trotskyism embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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