

Bolsonaro's victory and the debacle of Brazil's Workers Party

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The election last Sunday of Jair Bolsonaro, the fascistic and buffoonish former army captain and seven-term federal legislator from Rio de Janeiro, poses a serious threat to the working class in Brazil and throughout Latin America.

Having won 55 percent of the vote—compared to 44 percent for his opponent, Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores–PT) candidate Fernando Haddad—Bolsonaro has already begun to assemble what will unquestionably be the most right-wing Brazilian government since the end of the two-decade-long military dictatorship that came to power in a US-backed coup in 1964.

What is most striking about the incoming government is the predominant role being assumed within it by senior officers of Brazil's military. His vice president will be the right-wing general, Hamilton Mourão, who retired only last year after publicly declaring his support for a “military intervention” to secure “law and order.” On the day of the election, it was announced that retired Gen. Augusto Heleno will be the incoming defense minister, an appointment that breaks with the post-dictatorship practice of putting civilians in that post.

Heleno was part of the so-called “Brasilia group,” a cabal of senior military officers who served as a pillar of Bolsonaro's campaign. The group has reportedly submitted 25 names for appointment to Bolsonaro's transition team, which if accepted would form fully half of the body.

Over the course of his political career including in a television interview on Tuesday, Bolsonaro has insisted that Brazil's military regime, responsible for murdering, torturing and imprisoning tens of thousands of workers, peasants, students and left-wing activists, was not a dictatorship.

In 1999, he told a television interviewer that Congress should be shut down and that the country would be changed only by civil war that completes “the job that the military regime didn't do, killing 30,000 people.” In the final days of his campaign, he indicated that his political opponents, whom he described as “red bandits,” would have to choose between jail and exile.

An emblematic campaign gesture employed by the

candidate Bolsonaro, and aped by his followers, was pointing his finger like a gun, meant to symbolize his support for summary executions of criminal suspects. He wants to unleash the police in a country where cops killed over 5,000 people last year—five times the number in the United States—not to mention the many more killed by off-duty police death squads.

The security forces and reactionary sections of the judiciary are clearly getting the message. On the eve of the election, military police acting on the orders of electoral court justices invaded 17 universities across the country, tearing down banners and posters expressing opposition to fascism and support for democracy, confiscating leaflets and interrupting a class on the history of fascism, all on the grounds that they constituted unlawful campaign activities against the candidate Bolsonaro.

How is it possible that such a figure has been elected to the presidency of the largest country in Latin America, with a population of nearly 210 million, and the eighth-largest economy in the world?

It is the outcome of the thorough-going degeneration, under the impact of economic crisis and boiling social tensions, of the bourgeois democratic order established 30 years ago this month with the adoption of the 1988 constitution. The process of transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule was touted by its stewards as “slow, gradual and secure.” It assured a blanket amnesty to the assassins and torturers of the Brazilian military and a defense of the property and profits of the capitalists who had supported the dictatorship.

The pivotal role in this transition was played by the Workers Party, which served to divert the mass strikes and revolutionary militancy of the Brazilian working class that shook the dictatorship at the end of the 1970s back under the domination of the bourgeois state.

Crucial to the formation of this party were the political activities of groups that had broken with the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and rejected the revolutionary role of the working class. Some of them had previously promoted

Castroism and petty-bourgeois guerrillaism as a substitute for the development of a mass revolutionary socialist workers' movement, with disastrous consequences throughout Latin America. In the founding of the PT, they swung over to the conception that a bourgeois reformist party with ties to the unions could provide a unique Brazilian parliamentary road to socialism.

As the PT's electoral fortunes rose, winning it control of municipal and state governments as well as increasing numbers of seats in parliament, its politics turned steadily to the right. By the time the former metalworkers union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva won the presidency in 2002, the party had become the preferred instrument of rule of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, seen as best equipped to contain the struggles of the working class, while fully committed to carrying out the IMF-dictated economic policies of its predecessors.

Despite its diversion of a small share of the spoils of booming commodity prices and emerging market capital flows into minimal social assistance programs, the PT ruled over one of the most socially unequal countries in the world, with six individuals controlling more wealth than the poorest 100 million Brazilians.

With the advent of the worst economic crisis in the country's history, the PT government pursued policies that placed the full burden of this crisis onto the backs of the working class, while defending the obscene wealth of the financial elite. With average real wages falling 30 percent and 14 million people joining the official jobless rolls, Brazil's billionaires' fortunes only grew, with the wealth of the top 1 percent soaring by 12.3 percent.

The PT, like all of the other bourgeois parties, was fully implicated in massive corruption that siphoned some \$4 billion out of public coffers to pay out bribes and kickbacks.

The votes for Bolsonaro largely represented an expression of popular hatred for all the established parties that presided over social catastrophe and rampant corruption, but most particularly for the PT, which tried to dress up its reactionary policies in fake "left" and even "socialist" colors. This same hatred found expression in the record numbers—fully a third of the electorate—who refused to cast a ballot for either candidate.

The growth of the right wing due to the anti-working class policies pursued by the nominal "left" is by no means a uniquely Brazilian phenomenon. In the US, the identification of the Democrats and Hillary Clinton with the interests of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus opened the doors of the White House to Trump. In Italy, the coming to power of the right-wing anti-immigrant government of Matteo Salvini was prepared by the pro-capitalist austerity policies pursued by a series of "left"

governments, based on successor organizations to the Italian Communist Party. A similar growth of the right has been witnessed throughout Europe, while in Latin America the so-called "Pink Tide" has receded, giving rise to a series of right-wing governments.

How can the working class confront the threat posed by a Bolsonaro administration and the encroaching grip of the military over political and social life in Brazil? It will not be through support for the Workers Party. PT candidate Haddad responded to the election of the fascistic former captain by wishing him "success" and "luck" in forming his government. Party leaders, including Lula, have appealed for "calm," while stressing the "legitimacy" of Bolsonaro's presidency.

The PT has raised the slogan of a "democratic front," by which it means another rotten parliamentary alliance—like the one it previously had with Bolsonaro himself—in an attempt to save the party's sinking fortunes. Various pseudo-left groups have tried to dress up this same policy as a "united front against fascism," in an attempt to justify their backing of the PT. They have all pitched their appeal entirely on the basis of identity politics to the layer of the upper middle class that constitutes their social base.

In the 1930s, with the rise of fascism in Germany, Leon Trotsky stated that the "political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." This assessment retains all its validity in today's Brazil and throughout the planet.

With the debacle of the PT and its pseudo-left apologists, the decisive political task is that of turning to the working class and building within it a revolutionary leadership based upon the program of socialism and internationalism. This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Brazil and throughout Latin America.

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