

Brazil's Workers Party advances austerity policies in unity with Bolsonaro

By Tomas Castanheira
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Last Friday, the Workers Party (PT) government in Brazil's northeastern state of Bahia approved, behind the shields of shock troops, its local version of pension reform, the regressive policy implemented by the country's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro at the federal level.

Rui Costa, the PT governor of Bahia, the largest state in Brazil's northeast, followed the line systematically pursued by the party in all the states it governs. In December of last year, his comrades from the PT who head the governments of Ceará and Piauí, also in the northeast, had approved the same measures against the public employees of their states, calling out Military Police riot squads to repress workers' protests.

Costa was worried that he couldn't push through the attacks last year, and rushed to approve them before the beginning of February. He called an emergency session of the state legislature during its recess, offering congressmen two extra salaries (the equivalent of R\$50,000 or roughly US\$12,000) to vote on the reform. On the eve of the vote, the governor had to mobilize pressure against a judge of the Court of Justice, who had suspended the vote on the legislation based on the understanding that it had been organized too hastily.

The greatest fear of the PT government was the resumption of the strike and mass protests by Bahian teachers, which had lost momentum with the beginning of school vacation. Last year, a strong coordinated action was needed by the PT-led unions and their allies to isolate and weaken the strikes carried out by teachers in several Brazilian states, making it possible to pass the state pension reforms. The PT could not afford a renewal of the strikes and the risk of the movement getting out of control of the unions.

As soon as it managed to overturn the court

injunction, the government immediately proceeded to a vote on its regressive bill. Outside, public servants protested, while some of them managed to get into the session of the Legislative Assembly. Inside, protesters shouted against the reform and threw eggs at politicians. The President of the Assembly, and Rui Costa's key ally, Nelson Leal, from the reactionary Progressive Party (PP), which has its roots in the party created by Brazil's military dictatorship, responded to the demonstrators with the threat: "You made a mistake. We are going to vote both rounds today."

By that, he meant that they would speed up the process even more, not respecting the normal procedure of taking at least two days to consider such legislation. However, even before the session resumed, the Assembly was occupied by protesting members of the Civil Police. The state government responded by calling in shock troops from the Military Police to attack the demonstrators, while deputies were leaving the Assembly. Protected by the riot shields of the Military Police, they went to another room where, behind closed doors and without the press, they voted summarily on the Workers Party legislation.

This was not an isolated episode. Rui Costa has long exposed the reactionary face of the PT, pursuing policies that are enormously close to those of President Bolsonaro. Costa pioneered the militarization of school education, one of Bolsonaro's ultra-reactionary proposals. Bolsonaro inaugurated on Monday the first of his "civic-military schools", which are designed to recreate the repressive educational system put in place by the military dictatorship that ruled the country for 20 years after a US-backed coup in 1964. Then, teachers and students who spoke about politics were subject to the terror of "disappearances". Meanwhile, in Rui Costa's Bahia, more than 80 schools have been

implemented along this fascistic model, with the Military Police responsible for “disciplinary management”.

The governor of Bahia is also an advocate of privatization. Last December, after reaching a billion-dollar deal with a Chinese company to build and manage a bridge in the capital, he criticized members of the PT for opposing the formation of partnerships with the private sector and defended the privatization of the sanitation system, promoted by Bolsonaro.

Rui Costa has provoked friction with the PT base in Bahia. He ran roughshod over internal democratic processes in the attempt to impose the candidacy of Military Police Major Denice Santiago for the municipal elections in Salvador, the state capital, this year. The choice, articulated in a meeting with Lula last week, is another clear demonstration of the PT’s sharp turn to the right, appealing to the military and signaling to the bourgeoisie its willingness to violently repress the political opposition of the working class. Rui has denounced PT opponents of running a police officer for mayor as “racists” because the major is a black woman.

Far from an aberration—as some sections the pseudo left pretend—Rui Costa is the personification of the protracted right-wing historical trajectory of the Workers Party. He began his career in the PT at the beginning of the 1980s as director of the Union of Chemical and Petroleum Workers of Bahia, a post he held until 2000. He worked at the Camaçari Petrochemical Pole, the largest industrial complex in the region, employing tens of thousands of workers. Camaçari was the source of the obscene enrichment of sectors of the bourgeoisie, especially the construction conglomerate Odebrecht, which acquired an important part of the local state-owned complex to inaugurate Braskem, the largest petrochemical company in Latin America.

Recently, when investigated by the Lava Jato Operation, Emílio Odebrecht reported that his contact with Lula began in the 1980s, when he was facing a general strike by petrochemical workers at the Camaçari Complex. Lula helped him contain the workers’ revolt and, according to him, “created the conditions so that I could have a different relationship with the unions.” It is no surprise that Rui Costa was initiated into politics as the head of such a union.

The beginning of 2020 saw workers from the petrochemical sector go on strike in several Brazilian states against the massive destruction of their jobs. This is an important milestone in the evolution of the class struggle in the country, and part of the global uprising of the working class. At the same time, the strikes have exposed the role of the unions, which impede the radicalization, unification, and generalization of the movement.

In this context, the crucial task of the workers is to overcome all the political influence exerted by the Workers Party and other bourgeois forces on their movement. To this end, it is fundamental to draw the lessons from the political development of the PT, from its origins as a traitor to the struggles of the workers in the unions, to its current role as the manager of capitalist austerity and the forces of repression against the working class.

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