

Brazil's Workers Party government expels 'left' legislators

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On the eve of the first anniversary of forming its first government, Brazil's Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores/PT) carried out the expulsions of a leading national senator and three national deputies for opposing the right-wing economic and social policies introduced under President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva.

By better than a two-to-one margin, the PT's 84-member national directorate voted Sunday to expel Senator Heloisa Helena and the three deputies, Luciana Genro, Joao "Babá" Batista Araujo and Joao Fontes.

Helena was accused of voting 19 times against government-backed measures over the course of the year. She and other members of what is known in Brazil as the radical or "Shiite" wing of the PT have clashed with the party's leadership since the 2002 presidential campaign. They then opposed the party's choice as Lula's running mate of José Alencar, the country's biggest textile magnate and the leader of both one of Brazil's most right-wing parties and an evangelical church.

The formal grounds for the expulsions were the legislators' votes against a so-called reform of Brazil's pension system that was demanded by the International Monetary Fund and promoted by the Lula administration. The pension measures, which are awaiting final ratification by the Senate, would slash workers' benefits and open up pension funds to privatization.

The proposed pension cutbacks provoked massive workers' demonstrations against the government earlier this year. When Lula's predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, proposed the same pension "reform" as part of an IMF deal in 1999, the PT had denounced it as an illegal abrogation of workers' rights. The PT government has now fully embraced the same reform, which raises the retirement age, cuts future workers' pension benefits and taxes retirees' pensions.

Having come into office promising extensive social reforms, Lula's administration has adhered strictly to the type of IMF austerity prescriptions that the PT had denounced when it was in the opposition.

It was more than a coincidence that the day after the expulsions the IMF announced a decision to grant Brazil a 15-month extension on a \$34 billion loan agreement, together with \$6.6 billion in new funding.

"The response of the new administration to financial

pressures has been both ambitious and courageous, balancing fiscal and monetary policy discipline with the resolute pursuit of key social goals to relieve poverty and strengthen the social safety net," said IMF Managing Director Horst Koehler in announcing the new deal.

In reality, the PT government's determination to curry favor with the IMF and the international financial markets has effectively precluded even minimal initiatives to ameliorate the desperate conditions facing Brazil's working class and poor.

In return for IMF support and to counter fears on the part of foreign investors that a PT government would default on Brazil's foreign debt, the government pledged to set aside a budget surplus equal to 4.25 percent of the country's gross domestic product—as much as \$15 billion. The diversion of this massive amount of money to ensure interest payments to the international banks virtually precludes any significant social initiatives.

The expulsions of the four legislators is a clear signal that the PT government will not diverge from this policy and a warning to others that it will not tolerate any opposition to new attacks on the Brazilian working class.

In the coming year Lula, who began his political career as a leader of the militant metalworkers' union, has vowed to implement labor "reform" legislation that would strip unions of many existing rights and make it easier for employers to fire workers, cut wages and eliminate benefits. The stated aim of these measures is to make Brazilian firms more competitive on the world market.

To push through these policies, the party has relied upon an increasingly rigid party regime, in which those who voice criticism of the government's policies are threatened with disciplinary action.

The Brazilian newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo* noted that such expulsions have only been used against left opponents within the party. Those who have violated discipline by aligning themselves with the right have faced no serious consequences. Thus, in 1993 when former Sao Paulo mayor Luiza Erundina accepted an invitation from then president Itmar Franco to join his government, violating a decision of the PT leadership, she merely faced a suspension, which was lifted as soon as she left her cabinet post.

Similarly in 1996, Eduardo Jorge, a federal deputy from Sao Paulo, voted together with the right on financial legislation that the PT opposed. The party merely issued a statement condemning the vote, which he then repeated when the bill came back for ratification.

The PT government was elected last year on the promise of creating 10 million new jobs and reducing a level of social inequality that is among the most extreme in the world. Since taking office, it has presided over a steady growth in unemployment and a marked decline in the living standards of the Brazilian working class and poor.

In Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city and the center of finance and industry, unemployment hit a record 20.4 percent in October. Meanwhile, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) issued a recent report showing that the number of people who are unemployed in the country and looking for work has climbed by 21.7 percent so far this year.

The real income of Brazilian workers has declined by at least 15 percent this year as a result of increased prices and currency devaluations, as well as the government's opposition to salary increases.

Another telling indicator of the decline in social conditions under the PT administration is a recent report from the IBGE that the number of youth between the ages of 10 and 14 in Brazil's cities who are forced to work to help feed their families rose by 50 percent between January and September of this year.

One of the minimal programs touted by Lula when he took office, "Zero Hunger," aimed at providing food handouts to the poor, has yet to materialize. As many as 40 million Brazilians go hungry in a country where the monthly minimum salary is equivalent to only \$80 and nearly half of the population is forced to subsist on this amount.

The three expelled deputies indicated that they planned to found a new party and claimed the support of up to 7,000 PT members. Helena did not indicate whether she would support the move, saying only that she intended to continue working with both those inside and outside the PT. She was a prominent public figure in the PT, in part because of her personal background as the daughter of migrant farmworkers from the impoverished state of Alagoas.

Sunday's expulsions coincided with an announcement by the Democratic Labor Party, led by Leonel Brizola, of a break with the PT-led coalition over what it charged was the government's "subservience to the interests of international finance capital."

The end result is that the PT has become even more dependent upon right-wing parties that were formerly associated with the military dictatorship as it carries out economic and social policies with which these political tendencies are in agreement.

The threat to expel the four legislators has been pending for several months and prompted an international campaign by left Labourites in Britain, Greens and figures such as Noam

Chomsky in the US and British film director Ken Loach.

This petition warned the PT that to carry through the expulsions would "suggest that the PT as a party has given up on its proud tradition of democracy, pluralism and tolerance" and called on it to "reaffirm the PT's role as a beacon of hope to all those around the world who want to work with you to realize our common dream that another world is indeed possible."

Such appeals grossly distort the class and political character of the PT, bolstering the attempt to use the figure of Lula as a cover for what are right-wing policies of a government committed to the defense of capitalist interests in Brazil.

When the PT won the election last October, the WSWS traced the party's steady move to the right and warned:

"What has been made increasingly explicit is that despite Lula's personal background, the Workers Party is not a party of workers, neither in composition, program nor the interests it represents. Formed in the early 1980s by a section of the union leadership, elements of the Catholic Church, university professors and former student radicals, it has moved steadily to the right over the course of three unsuccessful presidential campaigns beginning in 1989.

"It has modified its policies to the extent that they now intersect with the interests of a definite section of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. This intersection is what explains the absence of agitation in Brazil's military barracks against Lula taking office."

These warnings have been thoroughly confirmed. Lula and the PT are the instruments of the Brazilian ruling elite and the international financial institutions in imposing the full burden of Brazil's economic crisis on the backs of the workers and the urban and rural poor. The latest expulsions are merely the logical political outgrowth of this policy, which is creating the conditions for an inevitable confrontation between the PT government and the masses of Brazilian working people.



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