

The mass protests in Brazil and the crisis of revolutionary leadership

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Over the past week, Brazil has witnessed its largest protests since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. This eruption of mass struggles has exposed, above all, the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class.

The initial trigger for the escalating protests was an increase in bus fares, which was subsequently rolled back in an attempt to dissipate social unrest. Nonetheless, Thursday saw somewhere between one and two million people take to the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and dozens of other cities across the country, pressing demands for greater investment in education and health care and venting popular anger over the billions being lavished on World Cup stadiums at the expense of the people.

In many instances, demonstrators were met with brutal repression, including tear gas, rubber bullets and cavalry charges.

Popular mobilizations of such sweeping dimensions cannot be explained merely by the immediate events that triggered them—in this case, a 20-cent rise in bus fares; in the case of Turkey, the move to bulldoze Istanbul's Gezi Park. They are rooted in the deep-going contradictions of these societies, which have been immensely sharpened by the historic crisis of global capitalism.

Brazil, like Turkey, has been hailed in recent years as an economic success story. Yet the “Brazilian miracle” appears to have hit the wall.

While it has created some 50 billionaires and over 150,000 millionaires, it has proven incapable of resolving the legacy of imperialist oppression and economic backwardness in relation to the basic social infrastructure. Limited social assistance programs that have been hailed for reducing the rate of extreme poverty and creating a new “middle class” have done

little to alter Brazil's status as one of the most socially unequal countries on the face of the planet.

There are growing signs of economic crisis, with the growth rate falling to 0.9 percent in 2012 and 0.6 percent for the first quarter of this year. Industrial production has fallen 0.3 percent, bringing with it layoffs and hiring freezes. Consumer spending is falling, as the majority of the population faces mounting debts. Inflation has risen to an official rate of 6.5 percent, with the cost of basic necessities rising far more steeply.

While the number of university graduates has doubled in the last decade, the majority of those leaving university are unable to find jobs that require their degrees or pay decent salaries.

These young people, university students and recent graduates, made up a substantial portion of the demonstrators who poured into the streets across Brazil this week, with the bulk of them participating in mass social action for the first time in their lives.

The inevitable political confusion of such a mass spontaneous movement was exploited, particularly on Thursday, by forces of the extreme right. Bands of thugs set upon groups of left-wing marchers and a small number of union members who joined the demonstrations, tearing down and burning their banners, attacking them with pepper spray, stun grenades and metal pipes, and ultimately forcing them out of the march. This happened in Sao Paulo, Rio and a number of other cities, indicating a well-organized campaign, undoubtedly coordinated with the police and possibly the military.

The right wing sought to steer the political direction of the protests away from a struggle for social equality, chanting the slogan “no parties” and denouncing political corruption, high taxes and crime.

While the majority of those who marched were unaware of these sinister events, the fact that the fascist thugs could act with impunity is politically significant.

Most of those who demonstrated have lived all of their politically conscious lives under the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) governments of former union leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and his handpicked successor as president, Dilma Rousseff. The Workers Party has been in power for the entire last decade.

Formed in 1980 in the wake of tumultuous mass strikes that shook the military dictatorship, the Workers Party and the trade union federation with which it was affiliated, the CUT, served from the outset as a means of diverting this militant movement of the Brazilian working class back under the domination of the bourgeois state.

Nonetheless, a whole range of pseudo-left organizations dedicated themselves to sowing illusions that the PT could be turned into a revolutionary vehicle for establishing socialism in Brazil.

As the PT won elected office on the municipal and state level, its politics shifted further and further to the right, until ultimately Lula was elected president in 2002 based on a guarantee to continue the IMF-dictated economic policies of his predecessors. Brazilian and international capital came to see the PT as the best instrument for protecting their interests against a revolt from below.

Some of the pseudo-left outfits were expelled from the PT, while others stayed, with their members rising to leading positions. In the case of the Pabloite United Secretariat, both things were true.

Part of its Brazilian section was expelled, going on to set up a new party along the same lines as the original PT, the PSOL (Socialism and Freedom Party), while others stayed, with one member, Miguel Rossetto, becoming minister of agrarian reform and a stooge of the big landed interests.

Others who had previously proclaimed themselves Trotskyists included Antonio Palocci, who became finance minister, and Luiz Gushiken, who was the director of the Lula government's office of social communication. Both have since been criminally charged in connection with the wave of corruption and vote-buying scandals that surround the PT government.

The criminal political role played by these pseudo-

left elements, all of them thoroughly nationalist in their orientation, was to provide a “socialist” veneer to a right-wing capitalist party that worked systematically to subordinate every social struggle to the interests of big business and the Brazilian state. They did so, in part, by promoting the trade unions, which have long since ceased to be seen by the population as a vehicle for social change and have been noticeably absent from the current mass protest movement.

This has provided political space for the Brazilian right to engage in the kind of reactionary populism seen in the recent protests, exploiting popular anger against the corrupt, pro-capitalist political apparatus of the PT. The dangers posed by this development in a country that was ruled for two decades by a military dictatorship, where none of those responsible for the killings, torture, illegal detentions and other crimes it committed have ever been charged, are all too real.

As in Turkey and elsewhere, the limits of spontaneous mass actions, no matter how large, will soon become apparent in Brazil. The decisive political task posed by these events and by the crisis of Brazilian and global capitalism is a turn to the working class and the building within it of a new revolutionary leadership based on the program of socialism and internationalism.

This means a ruthless political criticism of the PT and the pseudo-left groups and trade unions that are in its orbit. This is necessary to rearm the Brazilian workers with a revolutionary perspective and forge their political independence from all sections of the bourgeoisie.



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