Workers Party and pseudo-left work to dissipate protest movement in Brazil

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The wave of protests that swept Brazil beginning in mid-June has begun to substantially recede. The ruling Workers Party (PT) and various pseudo-left groups within its orbit, though initially taken aback by the mass eruption of discontent over Brazil's crumbling infrastructure, inadequate schools and hospitals and profound social inequality, have set to work containing and dissipating the protest movement.

The eruption of protests across Brazil has thrown the PT into crisis. Brazil's PT President Dilma Rousseff's approval rating has plummeted by 27 points since the onset of demonstrations just a few weeks ago. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, Rousseff didn't attend the finals of the Confederations Cup soccer tournament last Sunday, after having been roundly booed in appearances at earlier games in the tournament.

Over the past two weeks, Rousseff's administration has proposed a flurry of measures that will supposedly increase spending on transportation, healthcare and education, in an effort to stem the rising tide of discontent. Pieces of legislation with broad public support but that had long languished in Congress have suddenly come up for discussion and are scheduled to be voted on this week.

Last Tuesday Rousseff submitted a request to Congress for a plebiscite on various political reforms. The plebiscite, which Brazil's Supreme Court has said must be held within the next 70 days, will focus on campaign finance, the electoral system, senators' use of unelected substitutes, and secret votes in Congress. Rousseff had initially floated the idea of a popular referendum on political reform, but this was shouted down by lawmakers and the toothless proposal for a non-binding plebiscite took its place.

Alongside these measures, Rousseff has proposed a "pact for fiscal responsibility" on the federal, state and local levels, which will translate into accelerated privatizations and attacks on the jobs and wages of public sector workers.

Representatives of the trade union bureaucracy and a number of pseudo-left groups gathered in São Paulo on June 21 to work out a strategy for containing and co-opting the mass protests. The 76 organizations participating included the CUT, the notoriously corrupt PT-aligned trade union federation; the PT itself; the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), which consists of elements expelled from the PT; and the United Socialist Workers' Party (PSTU), part of the Morenoite revisionist organization which split from the Fourth International in the 1960s and long ago abandoned genuinely socialist politics. It had entered the PT at its founding and was expelled in the early 1990s.

A statement posted by the PSTU on its web site last Tuesday makes clear the reactionary and anti-working class orientation of its politics and its role in sowing political confusion with the aim of disorienting and derailing a protest movement that emerged outside of and in opposition to the Brazilian political establishment.

The PSTU begins by claiming the mass protests have "achieved… important victories." The PT's throwing up of a number of conciliatory measures is not in any sense a "victory," but a desperate attempt by the political establishment to tamp down popular discontent and stave off the emergence of a broader movement of the working class against Brazilian capitalism. To palm off measures that are transparently part of the ruling class' political strategy as victories is to encourage illusions that the PT can be pressured into playing a progressive role.

The statement hails the creation of the Assembleia

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Popular Horizontal (APH) in Belo Horizonte as an instance of the formation of "new types of organs of struggle." There is nothing new about this "horizontalism," which insists on a political practice devoid of parties, principles, or perspective, and reduces all questions to the lowest common denominator of middle-class activism and protest politics. It has been an indispensable tool for the pseudo-left over the past decade in maintaining political confusion in the course of a number of protest movements, most notably the Indignados movement in Spain in 2011-2012 and the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States last year.

The protests initially emerged in Brazil in opposition to transit fare hikes several weeks ago and rapidly developed into mass demonstrations decrying inadequate social spending alongside the billions being lavished upon new soccer stadiums for the Confederations Cup this year and next year's World Cup. At their height on June 20, the protests drew a million and a half people into the streets of all the major cities in Brazil, with various other demonstrations of tens and hundreds of thousands continuing over the following week.

As it seeks to defuse popular anger through the passage of limited concessions and the deployment of its pseudo-left political satellites, the PT's real attitude toward the Brazilian working class and its aspirations has been on display in the use of massive police violence against peaceful demonstrators. Acts of vandalism perpetrated by far-right groups, likely with the assistance of police provocateurs, were seized on in a number of cities as a pretext for attacking mass demonstrations at large and forcing their dispersal. Police have also acknowledged infiltrating and spying on organizations involved in the protests.

The PSTU's celebration of "important victories" and "new types of organs of struggle" comes just as mass participation in demonstrations has markedly declined and has been replaced by smaller protest actions by middle class radicals very much along the lines of last year's Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Small protest encampments have sprung up in several cities, and protesters have occupied the chamber of the municipal legislature in Belo Horizonte.

The CUT, which played a minimal role in last month's mass protests, has teamed up with the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) to call joint strikes and demonstrations on July 11. The real purpose of such actions, called by two organizations that work hand in glove with the PT, is to establish firm control over future protests so as to be in a position to safely divert any new outpouring of popular anger into harmless political channels.

The central question posed by the protests in Brazil is the crisis of the revolutionary leadership of the working class. It is necessary to wage an intransigent political struggle for the political independence of the Brazilian working class, to rearm it with a socialist perspective and to build within it a new revolutionary leadership.

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