

Hundreds of thousands join right-wing protests for ouster of Brazil's president

Bill Van Auken
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Hundreds of thousands of Brazilians joined protest marches throughout the country called on the basis of opposition to corruption and on the demand for the resignation or impeachment of the country's recently re-elected Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) president, Dilma Rousseff.

Behind the demonstrations were various right-wing organizations, but the mass turnout was clearly rooted in rising popular anger over both the widening corruption scandal at Brazil's state-owned oil corporation, Petrobras, and the rapidly deteriorating economic conditions.

By far the largest of the demonstrations took place in Sao Paulo, where estimates ranged from between 200,000 and 1 million participants, but marchers and rallies also took place in all 22 Brazilian state capitals, the federal capital of Brasilia and a number of smaller cities.

The most prevalent slogans were “Fora Dilma” and “Fora PT” (Dilma Out, PT Out), but there were visible minorities raising banners and placards calling for the Brazilian military to intervene against the government. The rally was called on the 30th anniversary of the restoration of civilian rule, after two decades of US-backed military dictatorship. March 15 was also the day on which the military commanders succeeded one another as heads of the ruling junta.

In unintended irony, some demonstrators carried banners declaring their opposition to Brazil becoming “another Venezuela,” even as their actions were in direct line with the right-wing opposition in that country, which has sought to overturn the results of an election by means of street protests.

A significantly smaller series of demonstrations took place on Friday, March 13, called by the CUT union bureaucracy, so-called social organizations, student

groups and others close to the ruling PT. These rallies raised slogans in defense of Dilma, as the Brazilian president is universally called, and of Petrobras. Some equated the calls for resignation and impeachment to a coup.

At the same time, however, the organizers of these rallies were compelled to include demands opposing the PT government's economic austerity program, which represents an attempt to shift the full burden of the country's economic crisis onto the backs of the working class.

While the anti-Dilma demonstrations were dominated by better-off sections of the middle class, the combination of these economic measures, rising inflation and falling living standards, along with the Petrobras corruption scandal, have alienated large sections of the working class from the PT government. Polls have shown the president's overall approval rating nearly cut in half over the past several months, falling to just 23 percent.

There has only been a worsening of the economic and social conditions that brought millions into the streets beginning in June 2013. Then, spontaneous protests over bus fare hikes spilled over into massive demonstrations over the lack of decent health care, education and other social services, and the spending of vast sums on preparations for the football World Cup.

In contrast to those demonstrations, Sunday's rallies saw no violent confrontation with security forces and little if any reference to the social demands of the Brazilian working class. The attempts to channel those earlier protests in a right-wing direction have now taken a much more finished form.

Coming on top of the dozen years of government by the PT, which from its origins engaged in “left” and even socialist pretensions, the present developments

have provided the Brazilian right with its greatest opening since the fall of the military dictatorship. The right's seizing on the corruption scandal to push for the PT's ouster is utterly cynical, of course. Its parties and politicians have all been implicated in similar scandals, and among its major aims is to utilize the revelations at Petrobras to push for the corporation's complete privatization, thus opening the way to a far more extensive looting operation.

While corruption has been endemic to Brazilian politics going back long before the PT even existed, the Petrobras scandal—dubbed “Operation Carwash”—is breathtaking in its scope. Nearly 57 politicians, most of them from the PT and its allied parties in the national congress, have thus far been implicated in the bribery, kickback and money-laundering scheme, which is estimated to have cost Petrobras, Brazil's largest corporation, some \$4 billion.

While no charges have been brought against the president, she was the chairman of Petrobras between 2003 and 2010, when much of the graft took place, and it is alleged that large amounts were siphoned off from the energy giant to pay for her 2010 presidential election campaign.

Money was paid out by construction companies and other contractors to secure inflated contracts with Petrobras. The funds were in part embezzled by Petrobras executives and, in larger amounts, funneled into the campaign coffers and pockets of politicians.

In addition to Petrobras and the politicians, some 30 companies, including some of Brazil's largest construction firms, have been implicated, leading to the suspension of major contracts, the cutting off of lines of credit and the halting of ongoing projects. The Brazilian economic weekly *Exame* carried the headline, “Is the Petrobras corruption scandal going to paralyze the country?”

The PT government's response to the country's deepening economic crisis has been a package of austerity measures attacking workers' rights to unemployment insurance, sick pay, pensions and death benefits. This is combined with cuts in funding for education and health care. All of these measures are aimed at reassuring Wall Street by amassing a budget surplus, even as the PT government pays out some 44 percent of the budget to service foreign debt.

While calling for Dilma's resignation or

impeachment, the parties of the Brazilian right have no disagreements on these measures, which they are supporting on the federal level and directly implementing in those states where they hold power.

Deeply implicated in the present crisis and the sharp dangers it poses to the Brazilian working class are all those pseudo-left elements who promoted the PT as a vehicle for social progress and even socialism, to be emulated internationally.

Among those facing prosecution over the Petrobras scandal is Antonio Palocci, who was finance minister in the government of Dilma's predecessor, the ex-metalworkers union leader and first PT president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, and became Rousseff's chief of staff in 2011. He is charged with taking \$700,000 from the Petrobras graft network for Dilma's presidential campaign.

In the 1970s, Palocci entered political life as self-declared “Trotskyist” affiliated with the Brazilian group aligned with the French revisionist tendency then led by Pierre Lambert. When this group entered the PT, he went in with it, ultimately becoming a congressman, cabinet minister and multimillionaire.

Meanwhile, following the Sunday protests, the Rousseff government sent Justice Minister Jose Eduardo Cardozo and the secretary general of the presidency, Miguel Rossetto, to grovel before the cameras, proclaiming the government's commitment to both fighting corruption and implementing “fiscal adjustment” measures, as well as its desire for “dialog” with the Brazilian right.

Rossetto was a long-time leader of the Brazilian group affiliated with the Pabloite revisionist United Secretariat who became minister of agrarian reform under the Lula government, serving the interests of agribusiness and the rural oligarchy. Now he is the principal mouthpiece for the Rousseff government.



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