

Brazil's impeachment crisis and the debacle of the Workers Party

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The vote to proceed with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff conducted by the lower house of the Brazilian congress Sunday night marks the end of a political era and the opening up of a new period of intense class struggle in Latin America's largest country.

For 13 years, the Brazilian ruling class has relied upon the Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*—PT), first under its founder, former metalworkers union leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, and then under his handpicked successor, Dilma Rousseff, to defend the interests of Brazilian and international capital, while dampening social tensions with minimal assistance programs and the collaboration of the union bureaucracy.

The impeachment drive, carried out amid the country's worst economic crisis at least since the Great Depression of the 1930s, arises fundamentally out of the determination of the ruling financial and corporate oligarchy, backed by US imperialism, to fundamentally alter class relations.

Rousseff, Lula and their supporters have charged incessantly that the move to impeach her on flimsy charges of manipulating state funding is tantamount to a "coup." To the extent that it is a coup, carried out through a gross abuse of constitutional procedures, its chief conspirators are to be found not within the Brazilian military or the American CIA, but on the financial markets of Sao Paulo and Wall Street.

Brazilian stocks have gained more than 35 percent since the beginning of the year, largely on the back of the drive to impeach Rousseff, while the national currency, the real, rose more than 10 percent against the dollar.

On the eve of the impeachment vote, leading corporate and financial industry figures aggressively

lobbied the Congress to assure a vote for impeachment in the lower house. Deputies who said that they would not be able to get to the session in the capital of Brasilia had private jets placed at their disposal.

The vote easily surpassed the two-thirds majority needed to pass the process onto the Senate—367 in favor compared to a total of only 146 "no" votes, absences and abstentions. Without missing a beat, *Folha de S.Paulo* carried an article headlined "Business demands unpopular reforms in six months," laying out an agenda for a post-PT government headed by Vice President Michel Temer, the head of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB). Among other things, it calls for the repeal of requirements that the government meet fixed funding levels for health care and education, a radical "reform" of retirement laws, a rewriting of labor laws and a new wave of privatizations, including at Petrobras, the center of the kickbacks-for-contracts scandal that has engulfed not only the PT government, but every major party. What is plainly being prepared is a frontal assault on the social rights and conditions of the Brazilian working class.

Sunday's vote had the character of a grotesque carnival, steeped in reaction and hypocrisy, with deputies waving banners, chanting slogans and even setting off fireworks as they voted to impeach. With fully 60 percent in the lower house facing criminal charges, speakers railed against the corruption of Rousseff, while invoking God, their children and grandchildren, fear of sex being taught in school and the supposed heroism of the junta leaders and torturers of the dictatorship that ruled Brazil for more than 20 years after the US-backed coup of 1964.

As disgusting as the spectacle was, it hardly reflected well upon the PT leaders who were the target of these deputies' ire. The most reactionary and corrupt among

those backing impeachment were, until recently, the coalition partners of the Workers Party, and Lula himself had spent the previous week trying to win their favor with political bribes and promises.

In seeking to counter the “coup,” the PT was unable and, indeed, never wanted to mobilize the working class. Brazilian workers have suffered mass layoffs of over 100,000 a month over the past year, while inflation has eaten away at living standards. With the Rousseff administration imposing austerity measures, the PT government enjoys scant support.

The principal argument utilized by the PT leadership in attempting to deflect the impeachment drive was directed not to workers, but to the Brazilian bourgeoisie. According to Rousseff, a post-impeachment government under Temer would lack the “legitimacy” to enforce the sweeping “sacrifices” being demanded by the stock markets and big business. The PT itself was better suited for the task, utilizing its partners in the unions and various institutionalized “social movements” to smother social upheavals.

While it appears certain that the Senate will accept the impeachment case against Rousseff, requiring a simple majority vote and triggering her suspension for 180 days until the upper house reaches a final judgment, it is far from clear that Temer and his allies will prove capable of restoring stability for capitalist rule. Temer—nicknamed “Dracula” for his marked resemblance to Bela Lugosi in that role—himself faces impeachment charges, and the second and third in line of succession are up to their necks in the Petrobras scandal.

Of decisive importance for the Brazilian working class is an assimilation of the bitter lessons of the protracted betrayal carried out under the banner of the PT. Before there was a Syriza to betray the Greek workers and impose the dictates of European finance capital, and before there was a Podemos being groomed to carry out a similar betrayal in Spain, there was the Brazilian Workers Party.

Founded in 1979, in the midst of massive industrial strikes and a growing student movement that shook the foundations of the military dictatorship, the PT served as a vehicle for diverting these tumultuous struggles back into the safe channels of bourgeois politics. As the apparatus of the party and the affiliated CUT union federation grew, it became ever more firmly rooted in

the interests of a privileged middle-class layer and increasingly hostile to those of the working class.

As with Syriza and Podemos today, a host of pseudo-left organizations promoted the PT as an alternative to the building of a revolutionary party of the Brazilian working class based on the perspective of socialist internationalism. The PT, they argued, offered a new peaceful Brazilian road to socialism.

Central to this political operation were the efforts of a collection of organizations calling themselves socialist and even Trotskyist, all of which had, in an earlier period, broken with the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. They touted Castroism and petty-bourgeois guerrillaism as the new road to power, with disastrous results throughout Latin America.

The followers of the French revisionist Pierre Lambert, the Argentine Nahuel Moreno and the Pabloite United Secretariat of Ernest Mandel all liquidated themselves into the PT. Some were expelled as the party turned ever further to the right, while others have managed to remain inside to this day, among them individuals implicated in the party’s successive corruption scandals.

The drive to impeach Rousseff is a sharp warning to the Brazilian working class. Workers can defend their rights only through a conscious break with the PT and the CUT, which are instruments not for waging the class struggle but for suppressing it.

What is required is a political rearming of the working class and the construction of a new revolutionary leadership, based on a relentless critique of the political tendencies and perspectives that were responsible for the debacle of the PT.

This means building a Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, whose decades-long defense of Marxist and Trotskyist principles provides a powerful foundation for forging a new revolutionary leadership dedicated to unifying the working class internationally against capitalist exploitation, oppression and war.



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