Presidential slates chosen for Brazil's general elections: a warning to the working class

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The result of the recent Brazilian party conventions held to select presidential and congressional slates for the October general elections must be understood as the sharpest warning to the working class. Whatever the result of the elections, the Brazilian political system will swing violently to the right, deepening the class war austerity measures initiated by the Workers Party's (PT) government after the 2014 elections, and accelerated under the administration of President Michel Temer after the PT's ouster.

Overshadowing the election is the continued imprisonment of the former PT president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on corruption charges related to the massive bribe and kickback scandal centered at the state-run energy conglomerate Petrobras.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee issued a statement Friday calling upon Brazilian authorities to "take all necessary measures to ensure that Lula can enjoy and exercise his political rights while in prison, as candidate in the 2018 presidential elections."

Lula is barred from running, however, under the so-called "Ficha Limpa" (clean slate) law that he signed while in power and the PT supported, which prohibits politicians with criminal convictions from becoming candidates. The PT backed the measure as part of a bow to the Brazilian right and in an attempt to cast itself as an anticorruption party following the mensalão scandal, a massive vote-buying operation in the Brazilian congress.

Opinion polls have shown that Lula would receive approximately 30 percent of the vote in the first round if he were able to run—roughly equivalent to the share of the population saying they intend to boycott the election.

The party conventions responsible for choosing electoral slates lasted until Sunday, August 5, the legal deadline imposed by the Electoral Court (TSE). Maximum time was needed to carry out corrupt, behind-the-scenes horse-trading between the major parties.

Faced with the utter incapacity of any of the bourgeois parties, including the PT, to appeal to any constituency broader than the stock brokers and their envious rivals in the upper middle classes, the Brazilian ruling establishment has sought to postpone to the last moment its decisions over candidates and alliances. The maneuvering has centered on currying support from the reactionary "beef, bullets and bible caucus", comprising more than a third of Congress and mainly comprised of the Democrats (DEM), the Republican Party (PR) and the Progressive Party (PP).

The whole process has further exposed the historical dead end faced by the Brazilian bourgeoisie after five years of economic slump, immediately triggered in 2013 by the sharp deceleration of Chinese commodity imports and later aggravated by the general retraction of world markets following the trade war measures initiated by Washington.

Against such a backdrop, the chief feature of the electoral year has been that of record disenfranchisement, with half of the electorate declaring that it has no candidate, and major contenders generally facing higher rejection than approval ratings. This has, in turn, strengthened the far-right populist challenge of the fascist reserve Army captain, Jair Bolsonaro, who has polled between 15 and 20 percent over more than a year.

Bolsonaro's candidacy is only the most visible manifestation of a sharp move to the right. Major parties are running a record number of military candidates—a 257 percent jump from 2010—and signaling, with the electoral alliances personified by the vice-presidential candidates announced at the end of the conventions, their willingness to carry out a program of all-out austerity, repression and subordination to imperialism.

Tellingly, the greatest catalyst for the formation of slates was the mid-July announcement by Josué Gomes, of the Republican Party (PR), that he would not accept nomination as the running mate of any presidential candidate. This prompted four of the five main contenders—with the exception of Marina Silva, a former environmental minister during the PT government who commands support of parts of business circles frustrated with the PT—to find other alternatives and narrow their negotiations for alliances.

Gomes, a textile mogul and heir to José Alencar, the

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running mate of the PT's Lula in his first successful bid for president in 2003, had been described as Lula's favored choice for the PT's slate. Gomes's party had been in negotiation for months with Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL) before finally announcing support for Geraldo Alckmin of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), the PT's former main right-wing opposition, which had held the presidency from 1995 to 2002.

Gomes's "abstention", a clear nod to a future alliance with the PT, had been precipitated by growing signs that Brazil's Electoral Court would fail to override the Ficha Limpa law and authorize Lula's presidential candidacy pending further Higher Court and Constitutional court appeals.

The official position of Gomes then precipitated Alckmin to move towards the far-right forces in agribusiness and the military supporting Bolsonaro by choosing as his running mate Ana Amélia Lemos, a far-right senator from Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state. Historically left-leaning and the only state to give Lula four straight victories in presidential elections, Rio Grande do Sul is today the state with largest support for Bolsonaro.

Alckmin's choice for a running mate is a manifestation of the Brazilian bourgeoisie's willingness to bring to the center stage of Brazilian politics the most backward elements to create a constituency for a mass far-right movement to divert the growing radicalization of workers and counter it by violent means.

Another major contender who had attempted negotiations with Josué Gomes and the parties around him was Ciro Gomes, of the Democratic Labor Party (PDT). Founded by Brazil's corporatist dictator Getúlio Vargas, the PDT later produced João Goulart—the nationalist-reformist president brought down by the 1964 US-backed coup—and Leonel Brizola, Lula's main populist adversary during the 1980s and 1990s.

Ciro Gomes was Lula's infrastructure minister and credits himself with ending Brazil's hyperinflation in the 1990s as economy minister in the Itamar Franco administration, which introduced the *real* as the national currency. Given the PT's record of right-wing economic policies, accelerated in the run-up to the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, Gomes was able to pose as a left challenger during the initial stages of the campaign, claiming that his presidency would fight financial speculation and raise inheritance and shareholder profit taxes.

After negotiations broke down with the PP-PR-DEM block, the PDT's party convention nominated Rousseff's former agriculture minister and cattle baroness Kátia Abreu, hailed by Ciro Gomes as a "nationalist" and "principled" businesswoman. Abreu was chosen for agriculture minister by Rousseff in 2015 in order to appease the far right tied to agribusiness and delay the desertion of the "beef, bible and bullet" caucus that would seal her fate in 2016.

The far-right connections of a host of the Workers Party former closest allies—who today are only restrained from aligning themselves again with the party because of Lula's legal status—is a stark exposure of the PT's claim to have "learned the lesson" of its ouster and its supposed willingness to make a "left turn". It is also a clear refutation of the phony claim that the PT was removed from power for countering the interests of the Brazilian bourgeoisie.

The candidate that the PT now portrays as its nemesis, the fascist Bolsonaro, was not only part of the PT's congressional alliance from the moment the party came to power in 2003, he was promoted as a "nationalist" representative of "patriotic" lower-ranking officers.

Developments have pushed the PT further rightwards, with the indication that the party will choose its most right-wing politician, Lula's former education minister and São Paulo mayor, Fernando Haddad, to substitute for Lula in the ever more likely event of his being barred from the election.

The personification of lifestyle politics and contempt for the working class, Haddad was the protagonist of the PT's rout in the 2016 São Paulo mayoral elections, barely two months after Rousseff's ouster. Haddad received only 16 percent of the vote, performing the worst in the so-called "red" belt of working-class areas bordering the industrial "ABC" region, where the PT was born in 1980. His result was the worst among PT mayors in the region, with the "ABC" cities ousting every single PT mayor, many of them former factory workers with decades as union officers.

His choice is determined by his right-wing opposition to Rousseff's price control policies and his investment cap to recover São Paulo's Fitch agency "investment grade" rating. These policies are detailed, in his own words, in a "memoir" published in the June 2017 edition of the pseudo-left mouthpiece *Piauí* magazine. The confidence of investors is the main worry of the Workers Party.

This violent right-wing shift by the PT is being provided political cover by the so-called "Free Lula" campaign. It also serves as a means of maintaining the opportunistic status quo among pseudo-left forces, who have maintained a four-decade pact of silence—behind the facade of support for the "factory worker Lula"—over the PT's treacherous policies of subordinating the working class to the interests of international finance capital and the national bourgeoisie.

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