

Workers Party theorist pens diatribe against Brazilian “white trash”

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5 June 2019

On May 28, the professional anti-Marxist Jessé de Souza, currently considered one of the Workers Party’s (PT’s) chief theoreticians, penned a reactionary diatribe against the country’s working class that was reproduced by all of the PT’s online media supporters and, above all, by its mouthpiece, *Brasil 247*.

The timing of the article—titled “Bolsonaro is the chief racist of the Brazilian Ku Klux Klan and the ‘white trash’”—was significant. It came two days after thousands of far-right elements drawn from Brazil’s upper-middle-class layers marched throughout the country in defense of the president’s hated “pension reform,” and two days before hundreds of thousands of students went back to the streets in protest against the government and its assault on public education.

Souza rails furiously against what he terms whites whose daily lives, he acknowledges, “don’t differ a lot from those of blacks and the poor” and who “live in the same neighborhoods” as blacks suffering “material deprivation.” Nonetheless, he holds them responsible for the coming to power of the fascistic Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Making it abundantly clear that he puts quotes around the Portuguese translation of “white trash” (*lixo branco*) exclusively due to the term previously being unknown in the lexicon of Brazilian politics, he clarifies his intention of elevating the century-old American slur to a sociological category. What has happened in Brazil, he insists, is “precisely the case of the ‘white trash’ who helped elect Trump.”

Later, dismissing the role of the Brazilian ruling class in paving the way for Bolsonaro’s rise, Souza argues bluntly: “Even though the elite and the real scoundrels in the middle classes also voted for him [Bolsonaro], his real base of support is the Brazilian ‘white trash,’ close to the blacks and therefore eager to criminalize them, stigmatize them as bandits and murder them with impunity.”

Poor whites in Brazil, he argues, are gripped by an uncontrollable racial hatred that provided Bolsonaro with his political base. He writes: “Bolsonaro is the leader of the Brazilian Ku Klux Klan ‘white trash.’ This is what defines and explains him more than anything else.”

The timing of the article—containing a capsule review of Souza’s recent books, which are “strongly recommended” by jailed former PT president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in letters to the public written from his cell—is clearly intended to steer the youth entering into struggle away from broader sections of the working class, and

is part of the PT’s efforts to derail the growing opposition to Bolsonaro.

Souza’s outburst is by no means an isolated phenomenon. It marks a sharp turn to the right in his pro-PT upper-middle class milieu, which cannot contain its hatred of workers, to the point of importing from the US such backward categories as “white trash.” It is of a piece with the attempts of the French ruling classes to portray the “yellow vests” as anti-Semites, and the #MeToo witch-hunt and other hysterias in the US designed to paint the broad masses of the working population as seething with misogyny and racism.

In Brazil, the motivation for such a campaign is the fact that in the six months since Bolsonaro’s inauguration, the PT’s thesis that he rests upon the apathy and backwardness of Brazilian workers has suffered a debacle, together with Bolsonaro’s own approval ratings.

For years, Souza has presided as a chief PT political theoretician, embraced by the party’s upper-middle class political base, precisely because of his hatchet jobs against the working class under conditions in which workers were deserting the Workers Party in droves.

This took place as PT governments adopted successive waves of austerity measures throwing the full burden of the Brazilian economic crisis onto the backs of the workers, especially from 2011 on. The campaign of slander against the working class was vastly accelerated after the massive 2013 protests against the PT government, the largest since those leading to the fall of the US-backed 1964-1985 military dictatorship and the establishment of the political system the PT would end up heading for 13 years.

Souza’s anti-working-class conclusions are embedded in a fiercely anti-Marxist moralist worldview that he introduces in the beginning of the article. He insists that “slavery, in both its economic meaning, that of the exploitation of the work of others, and in its moral and political meaning of the production of social differences, has maintained itself ‘in practice’ since the abolition of slavery” in Brazil.

Behind this radical-sounding and pretentiously grandiose thesis—which elevated one of his books to the second-best-selling non-fiction work in Brazil last year—lies a mixture of rabid nationalism and base anti-communism. As the late 19th century political descendants of the US slave-holding aristocracy, which made free use of the ‘white trash’ slur, would say—and be aped by its Brazilian counterparts—the “working class problem” is a foreign

problem—imported from Europe—with no social bearing in Brazil.

For Souza, race, not class, is the fundamental dividing line in Brazil. The driving force of the country's development is to be found not in the struggle between the Brazilian working class and the capitalist class aligned with world imperialism, but rather in a supposedly irrepressible hatred of poor whites for poor blacks.

In the run-up to the Brazilian election in 2018, the German-educated Souza had claimed that, at a moment in which the fascists held the most public offices in Europe and Germany since World War II, “fighting fascism is a state policy in Germany.” The implications of this contention are clear: if the “state” fights fascism and it breaks into parliament anyway, it is the working class that is responsible.

From the moment of Bolsonaro's inauguration, the persistent theme in the pro-PT media is that the fascistic president is a lunatic, and the ruling classes have had time to repent and at least follow the pack of “rational” generals around him. The PT's mouthpieces started to concoct reports of “wars” and “rifts” inside Bolsonaro's cabinet, according to which the military was resisting “Bolsonaro's attempts to make Brazil a US colony.” With headlines dominated for months by Bolsonaro's contacts with US imperialism over an intervention in Venezuela, PT representatives went so far as to claim that Bolsonaro was “breaking with Brazilian tradition of pacifism,” sustained “since the Empire”—arguments previously confined to the most reactionary circles of monarchists.

Similarly, the PT has centered its fire upon Bolsonaro's fascistic policies supposedly disrupting the ties established under former president Lula with world capitalism and causing “multinationals to flee the country.” That the PT's pro-imperialist policies were instrumental in driving workers away from the party is ignored; in opposition the party defends these policies all the more aggressively.

The eruption of mass social opposition against the Bolsonaro government has exposed the real source of his election: a massive rejection of the political establishment amid a leftward movement of the working class that could find no political outlet.

As this becomes increasingly clear, pro-PT figures like Souza are working all the harder to vilify the working class as racist and backward. He is by no means alone.

The leading sociologist Rosana Pinheiro-Machado—who spent February and March in the US touring universities to “explain the Bolsonaro phenomenon”—wrote an article for *Intercept* supposedly with the aim of analyzing the growing popular opposition to Bolsonaro, but really serving to utterly dismiss it.

She says that people voted for him “because of corruption, to have a job” or to avoid “the gay dictatorship” and “cure ingrown toenails. Everything. Everything that reached them through WhatsApp.”

This unconcealed contempt for what moved the minority of workers who actually voted for Bolsonaro—portraying them as a mob of bigots fearing “a gay dictatorship”—has impelled these circles to the point where they are spreading Bolsonaro propaganda. The government's claim that “truck drivers” would flock to Bolsonaro's defense in the May 26 demonstration was taken at face value and amplified by the likes of *Brasil 247*.

The exposure of the bankrupt petty-bourgeois thesis of Bolsonaro's popularity among workers—with truckers nowhere to be seen in the demonstrations—has no doubt propelled a furious Souza to double down on the slandering of the working class with his “white trash” diatribe.

These remarkably reactionary “analyses” are, inevitably, compounded by the utmost contempt for socialism and any opposition to the capitalist system, which was clearly expressed in the recent anti-Bolsonaro demonstrations.

Beyond opposing education cuts, the demonstrations were an angry repudiation of the government's far-right crusade against “cultural Marxism,” an ideological campaign reflecting fears within the Brazilian ruling class of the growing interest in socialism among the youth. As it implements brutal austerity, the far-right government knows it is provoking a left-wing reaction of workers and students, and is making a fascist appeal to prepare accordingly.

Thus, the education minister claims that schools and universities are “dominated by communists,” and has asked students to film and publicly denounce “indoctrinating” teachers. The government has imposed censorship over the communications departments of countless government agencies it claims are dominated by leftists.

Yet, among the nominal “left,” neither the Bolsonaro government's fascistic threats nor the socialistic response of the masses are taken with the least seriousness. The fiercest PT defender writing for the *Intercept*, for example—João Filho—went so far as to call the government's anti-communism a “lysergic [LSD] trip.” In other words, the growth of socialist influence among the masses is nothing that Brazilian fascists have any reason to worry about. To the extent that the government claims “socialism has no place in Brazil,” they all agree, and want to move on.

Exposing these forces, which claim to speak for students and workers, is the first task in mobilizing an independent political movement of the working class against the Bolsonaro government and the capitalist system that both it and the PT defend.



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