

Amazon wildfires expose fallacy of “green” capitalist politics

Miguel Andrade
28 August 2019

While much of the world has been gripped by the accelerating surge of deforestation and wildfires in the Amazon rainforest and its implications for the global environment, the Brazilian and international ruling classes have sought to exploit the fires to gain advantage in the geopolitical and trade disputes that divide them.

The wildfires in both the Amazon—covering roughly a third of South America and stretching across all of its countries except for Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay—and in the contiguous Pantanal wetland ecosystem in Paraguay and Bolivia surged in August. Simultaneous states of emergency and alerts were declared across several regions in both Peru and Brazil, while ashes descended over large areas of southern Brazil. Combined with a cold front coming from the south, the ashes blotted out the sun in the southeast of the country.

The August fires are the culmination of a protracted attack on Brazilian environmental and labor regulations. This process accelerated after the world economic crisis hit Brazil's economy with full force from 2013 on, causing landowners to employ more destructive methods in order to lower production and labor costs, particularly by clearing new swaths of land at the edge of the rainforest or along the roads and waterways that run through it.

Deforestation was up by no less than 278 percent in July over the same period in 2018, while wildfires in the country were up 84 percent over last year. May through September is the dry season throughout the center of South America, and is also the time for seasonal agricultural burn-offs for both peasants and plantations.

Amazon deforestation, however, is not merely an incremental phenomenon: having lost 17 percent of its original extension, the forest is predicted to collapse if this loss reaches 25 percent, at which point irreversible damage would result in its desertification and transformation into a savannah. The Amazon forest is a huge carbon dioxide sink, with experts estimating that its biomass holds the equivalent of a hundred years of current levels of US carbon emissions.

With the desertification of the forest, most of these emissions would be released into the atmosphere, making even more difficult the already herculean task of reducing current emissions to contain global warming. Based on the average deforestation rate of recent years, experts estimated that such a collapse would come in 20 years, but the escalation of deforestation rates this year could bring such a point forward by as much as five years.

A prominent role in the increased fires is certainly played by global warming, which is lengthening the dry season. Its most immediate trigger, however, has been the concerted campaign by both Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro and Amazonian state governors in pushing through deregulation and turning a blind eye to the destruction of the forest.

Bolsonaro has staffed his cabinet with climate change deniers who consider climate science a “Marxist conspiracy” and have repeatedly attacked governmental agencies charged with defense of the environment.

In early August, this reached the point of firing the head of the country's Space Research Institute (INPE) for making public, as required by Brazilian law, deforestation data. Bolsonaro claimed INPE was lying about deforestation and was publicly challenged by its head, Ricardo Galvão, who was then replaced by an Air Force colonel believed to be a Bolsonaro loyalist.

For their part, local governments have defunded the work of—and security for—rangers with the National Environmental and Renewable Resources Institute (IBAMA), exposing them to the violent retaliation of private mercenary armies working for big landowners, effectively blocking the enforcement of anti-deforestation laws.

The governor of Acre, Brazil's westernmost state at the border with Bolivia, told supporters at a rally in late May not to pay environmental fines. Thumping his chest, he added that landowners who received fines should personally contact him. At the eastern edge of the forest, in the state of Pará, Governor Helder Barbalho enacted a law in early July vastly widening the conditions for the legalization of private ownership of public land.

Ostensibly directed at giving property rights to peasants who settled public lands after being displaced from other regions by either political or economic pressures, such laws have been used in Brazil for almost two centuries to fraudulently transfer property to big landowners. Barbalho has now scrapped the requirement that the claimant to the property actually settle it, requiring instead that merely the “intention” of settling it be presented. Estimates are that no less than 15 percent of the state's territory will now be up for grabs.

Pará leads the growth in Amazon deforestation, and local newspapers reported on August 5 that owners of large farms on the edges of the BR-163 national road were organizing a “fire day” for August 10, reportedly to “show Bolsonaro they were willing to work” and felt “supported” by him.

The news of the accelerated destruction of the Amazon has provoked justifiable anger and revulsion in Brazil and around the world under conditions of increasing hostility to the inaction of world governments over global warming. Large demonstrations have been held in major Brazilian cities as well as across Europe and internationally.

Popular anger has been intensified by Bolsonaro's scapegoating of the oppressed indigenous populations for the social problems plaguing the region, under conditions in which there are regular reports of environmental activists and peasant leaders being murdered by the private mercenary armies now torching the forest.

However, the debate over the Amazon situation has also exposed the grave dangers for workers and youth around the world stemming from the attempt to corral the fight against global warming behind a renewed push for a “green” rehabilitation of capitalism.

For months, the Bolsonaro administration had been sparring with the governments of Germany and Norway, which were major donors for the so-called “Amazon Fund” set up under the government of Workers Party

(PT) president Lula da Silva in 2008. The Fund was created to help in reducing deforestation and fires, but in May, Bolsonaro disbanded its board of oversight by decree, partly in retaliation against the NGOs that constituted part of it. Both countries then announced the suspension of funding.

In response to criticism from the Norwegian and German governments, Brazilian officials declared that neither country had any right to criticize Brazil. They cited Norway's planned oil drilling in the Arctic, saying it was "hypocritical" to sponsor such a project while seeking to block oil drilling at the mouth of the Amazon River.

The saber-rattling escalated after *Foreign Policy* published an article conjecturing that doctrines such as "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) could be evoked in the near future by major world powers to take control of the Amazon. It added that Brazil was "fragile enough" to bow to pressures, with its control of the rainforest due solely to "purely historical reasons."

Finally, on August 22 a tweet by French President Emmanuel Macron, declaring he would propose an "international discussion" on the Amazon at the G-7 meeting over the weekend, provoked a furious reaction from the Bolsonaro government. One of his intelligence advisers, retired Army Gen. Eduardo Villas Bôas went so far as to quote Ho Chi Minh and cite the devastation of French Pacific colonies by nuclear tests in order to question France's "moral authority." Bolsonaro, in turn, criticized Macron for acting with a "colonial mindset with no place in the 21st century."

On Monday night, the Brazilian government doubled down on the rhetoric, refusing to accept the paltry \$20 million offered by the G7 countries to help fight the fires. On Tuesday, Bolsonaro told reporters in Brasilia that he would take the money only if Macron withdrew "the insults he made against me."

Macron's main worry is not the destruction of the Amazon, but rather making his own nationalist appeal to French farmers opposed to the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement that is being voted upon by the parliaments of both bloc's countries. The French president threatened to veto the deal unless Brazil takes more decisive action to protect the Amazon.

In the long term, imperialist powers have definite strategic interests in relation to the Amazon, which contains 20 percent of the world's fresh water as well as some of the world's largest rare earths reserves and is the site of a veritable "gold rush" for intellectual property over compounds that may be extracted from the rainforest's 3 million species.

With its industry standing to benefit from the free trade pact, Germany expressed reservations over Macron's rhetoric, while other EU countries highly dependent on agriculture, such as Ireland, vocally sided with Macron. Most of the EU governments, however, declined to take an aggressive tone, fearing the agreement could be put in danger, together with the profits expected from the general lowering of wages that will follow the imposition of savage competition imposed upon the workers of both continents with the approval of the deal.

For its part, Brazil's political opposition led by the PT went into hysterical mode, summed up by the headline of what passes for an editorial in the PT mouthpiece *Brasil247*: "Bolsonaro's destruction has produced a dramatic image which will be the symbol of the struggle for the Amazon—and may cause Brazil to lose it." The piece was largely a response to the attempt of agribusiness bosses to tone down Bolsonaro's rhetoric.

The article gives full credibility to the "green" credentials of the imperialist powers using the fires to further their interests. It declares that "as the Amazon is vital for the global ecological balance, it may be declared a world heritage—and not Brazilian anymore—once the government acts deliberately to destroy it."

This dishonest and unserious statement exposes the length to which the PT is currently willing to go to prove itself reliable to world finance

capital. The assumption that an intervention over the Amazon by major imperialist powers is to be naively accepted as legitimate plays directly into the hands of Bolsonaro and Villas Bôas, with their "anti-imperialist" posturing and newly-discovered quotes from Ho Chi Minh.

The thrust of the PT's politics is to declare Bolsonaro a threat to business. Two days later, another piece declared that "landowners have suffered the first major blow stemming from Bolsonaro's insanity. France just declared that it will oppose the Mercosur deal, which could open new markets for national products." The voice par excellence of the neoliberal opposition to Bolsonaro, PT 2018 presidential candidate Fernando Haddad, tweeted in relation to the banker-turned-president Macron, one of the most hated heads of state in Europe, that his criticism of Bolsonaro had "rehabilitated" him.

The pseudo-lefts, led by the Pabloite group Insurgência, are following suit, calling for a "boycott of Brazilian products coming from environmental predation and violations of indigenous rights."

This policy is nothing more than a "green" cover-up for capitalist interests and a moralistic appeal to the upper-middle class circles that constitute the social base of the pseudo-left. Another statement, by the Morenito Resistência group exposes precisely how they intend to carry this policy out. After demanding of imperialist countries "something in exchange" and "financing for an operation of economic transition to a clean production," it spells out that this would in itself demand "an alliance between socialists and greens."

Absent from all of this "analysis" is any opposition to capitalism or any appeal whatsoever to the only social force capable of and uncompromisingly interested in fighting global warming: the international working class. If anything, it is seen as an obstacle to "clean production," as opposed to agribusiness moguls "worried" about the forest and world financial elites determined to reduce consumption by imposing austerity and poverty on the working class.

A real fight against the destruction of the Amazon requires an implacable struggle against these forces, which are responsible for fueling the growth of the far right worldwide.

The Amazon region is no exception to this political process. In northern Brazil, left-leaning states such as Acre ended 20 straight years of PT victories, electing Bolsonaro with 70 percent of the vote. Workers in the region suffered mass repression while rebelling against 19th-century working conditions imposed upon them during the construction of the PT government's mammoth hydroelectric plants, among the most destructive in the world due to the flat geography of the Amazon basin.

During the last two decades, they have further confronted the full barbarism of Brazilian capitalism in the form of a doubling of the incarceration rates for the general population, causing growing and ever more horrific prison riots. As for the indigenous populations, growing migration to urban centers has caused crops to collapse and hypertension, diabetes and obesity to surge.

A progressive answer to the immense dangers caused by the burning of the Amazon rainforest is impossible under a system founded upon brutal exploitation and massive social inequality defended by Bolsonaro and Macron alike. It can come only out of the struggle of the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and the abolition of the profit system.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact