

Brazil's mayoral elections expose major parties' rightward lurch

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Last Wednesday, September 16, marked the end of the period for holding party conventions ahead of the Brazil's November mayoral elections. The elections will choose mayors and the members of city councils in all of Brazil's 5,570 municipalities.

This year's mayoral elections are being held under extraordinary circumstances. Brazil's fascistic president, Jair Bolsonaro, has advocated from the very first recorded cases of COVID-19 in the country a policy of herd immunity.

He called the disease "a little flu," claimed without presenting any scientific evidence that the country's warm climate and younger population would reduce the impact of the pandemic and proclaimed as government policy the eugenicist conception that "healthy" Brazilians wouldn't be impacted by the disease and, conversely, that "half of the dead would have died anyway." That meant that nothing should be done to stop the spread of the pandemic.

Later, as the country's Supreme Court granted governors and mayors autonomy to decide health issues, and cities and states began to partially shut down, he railed against local authorities, blaming them for unemployment and lost income, and fired two health ministers who didn't comply with his promotion of quack cures for the disease. Governors and mayors of all political parties, initially feigning concern for the health of workers, are already implementing a homicidal return to classes, the last major activity to face restrictions in the country.

Just last week, Bolsonaro summed up his policies, now embraced by the whole political establishment, praising himself for never calling for quarantines and slandering those taking social-distancing measures and demanding the right to a safe workplace as "the weak."

The result has been more than 4.5 million infections and more than 138,000 deaths. The infection rate, barely controlled in the last month across the country, stands at 30,000 new cases a day, with over 700 daily deaths, and is already climbing again in many regions. Unemployment, previously hidden by quarantine measures, jumped to 14.3 percent in August.

In response to this crisis, conflicts within the Brazilian ruling class center largely on foreign policy, while there is a consensus on a pro-austerity and repressive agenda at home in

preparation for a working class reaction to the capitalist crisis.

On the one hand, the Brazilian ruling class faces an intractable crisis stemming from the impossibility of sustaining the "neutrality" position it had sought to maintain during the first decades of the 21st century, in face of the increasing aggressiveness of US imperialism against China, as the latter surpassed the former to become Brazil's main trade partner.

That position, facilitated by the so-called "commodity boom," was abruptly abandoned in the wake of the fraudulent impeachment of Workers Party (PT) president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, with dominant sections of the ruling class seeking to steer Brazil towards alignment with US imperialism.

Tensions over foreign policy were on display over the weekend, as Speaker of the Brazilian House Rodrigo Maia, reacted strongly to the provocation staged by Brazil's far-right Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on the Venezuela-Brazil border on Friday. Maia stopped just short of accusing Araújo of a crime. Maia was later supported by a joint letter signed by all former foreign ministers of civilian governments since 1985, which called Pompeo's visit a "spurious use of the national territory." In the run-up to Pompeo's visit, dissension within the ruling class was put in stark terms by the conservative daily *Estado de S. Paulo*, which editorialized: "Jair Bolsonaro submits, once again, the national interest to his unshakable willingness to align uncritically with the interests of Donald Trump, even more than those of the United States, which would by itself be unacceptable."

The consensus on internal policy is epitomized by Congress's almost unanimous vote for financial bailouts at the beginning of the pandemic and the universal back-to-school campaign by governors and mayors previously posing as defenders of "science" against Bolsonaro.

Also politically revealing is the record numbers of members of the military and law enforcement running for offices in the coming municipal elections, which is expected to more than double from the last mayoral elections, to over 2,200 candidates. Even more significantly, military candidates are being promoted in key cities by self-styled "left" and "socialist" parties such as the PT and its split-off, the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL).

The policy behind the record enrollment of police in the elections is the reactionary defense of the Brazilian capitalist state against Bolsonaro's recklessness, and of the military commanders surrounding him as the "adults in the room," supposed moderating forces committed to national interests. This has been the hallmark of the opposition led by the PT from the first days after his election in 2018.

In the crucial first month of the pandemic's spread in Brazil, the PT's former presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad, signed a letter calling for Bolsonaro to stand down in favor of his vice-president, the ultra-right coup-monger Gen. Hamilton Mourão, as the "least costly means" for a democratic way out of the Bolsonaro presidency.

The mayoral elections are seen as a crucial moment for consolidating these policies in a manner best described by Guilherme Boulos, the mayoral candidate of the pseudo-left PSOL in Brazil's largest city, São Paulo. Boulos described it in his Twitter account as a "wide front" or an "onion tactic" where "the broadest layer is the struggle for democracy against fascism, in this one everyone fits... Perhaps the best example is the movement for the 'Diretas Já'" at the end of the military dictatorship. In that movement for direct elections, he explained, there were "oligarchs who had broken with the dictatorship" side by side with Communist Party and PT leaders. He later added that "this year's municipal elections will be a key moment ... to combat Bolsonaro and his fascist project," that is, to employ the "onion tactic" of alliances with "oligarchs" who have broken with Bolsonaro.

Such policies have served only to strengthen Bolsonaro's enablers in Congress and local governments, as well as the right-wing parties that previously dominated the political system. The PT's choice of military candidates, of which the most prominent is a Military Police major in Salvador in the northeastern state of Bahia, the fourth largest city in the country, has had a similar effect.

"Walking into the abyss," facing a "historical defeat," under risk of "losing every capital," are the expressions describing PT and PSOL electoral prospects that appear in the pro-PT outlets such as *Brasil 24/7* and *Revista Fórum*, as well as in interviews with PT allies such as the Communist Party governor of the impoverished northeastern state of Maranhão.

The crisis of PT mayoral slates is exemplified by the dismal polling numbers of its candidate in São Paulo, where its 2018 presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad was routed in his attempted reelection as mayor in 2016. Haddad suffered an unprecedented defeat for an incumbent São Paulo mayor, receiving only 17 percent of the vote, losing all of the city's "red belt" of working class districts on the city's outskirts and polling his best in the upper-middle-class western sector of the city.

This year, the party's mayoral candidate, city councilor Jilmar Tatto, is polling at only 2 percent. Leading PT figures such as former foreign minister Celso Amorim have publicly

endorsed the perceived "left opposition" to the party, Guilherme Boulos, prompting PT leader Gleisi Hoffmann to threaten dissenting members in the city with disciplinary action if they endorsed Boulos instead of Tatto.

The PT is now attempting to solve the crisis by summoning former president Lula to give the party's right-wing, pro-military line a left veneer. This renewed campaign was kicked off on Brazilian Independence Day, amid party conventions, with a nationalist twenty-minute speech by Lula broadcast on the party's social media.

The speech combined harsh criticism of Bolsonaro's criminal neglect of the pandemic and the growth of social inequality—a direct product of the bailouts the PT supported in Congress—with charges that US imperialism was involved in Rousseff's removal in 2016 and barring Lula from running in the 2018 election by means of corruption charges. Lula insisted that, "like the majority of Brazilians, don't believe and don't accept pacts from above with the elites," precisely the kind of pacts being signed by his own party's leaders.

His conclusion underscored the ever more rabidly nationalist line being advanced by the PT. "The gravest aspect of this whole situation is that Bolsonaro takes advantage of collective suffering to, covertly, commit crimes against the country," he said, adding that this "subjects our soldiers and ambassadors to vexing situations."

Lula's phrases against "pacts from above with the elites," combined with criticisms of US imperialism—whose role he and Rousseff generally dismissed even when faced with public revelations of actions by Washington, such as the 2013 NSA espionage against Rousseff's offices—are an attempt to give a left face to the unpopular "broad front" policies the PT has promoted.

This is the same essential role played by Bernie Sanders in the US Democratic Party or Jeremy Corbyn in the UK Labour Party. However, the PT is not using an "outsider" or "backbench" figure, but refashioning the same old Lula, who previously bragged of being "respected" by war criminals like George W. Bush and Barack Obama and helping the Brazilian banks "make more money than ever."

The left-sounding rhetoric of Lula notwithstanding, his denunciation of "crimes against the country" and railing against the "humiliation of soldiers" represents an explicit defense of the capitalist state under conditions in which it faces the growing threat of a social upheaval by the Brazilian working class.



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