

Court ruling in Brazil promotes political rehabilitation of Lula

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In a surprise decision Monday, Brazilian Supreme Court (STF) Justice Edson Fachin annulled the two criminal sentences for corruption of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, popularly known as Lula, which barred him from running for office. Justice Fachin ruled that both cases had to be tried again by the district court based in the capital Brasília, because the 13th district that sentenced him, based in the southern capital of Curitiba, had no jurisdiction over the case.

The corruption cases against Lula stemmed from the famed Carwash (lava jato) corruption probe, which uncovered a massive bribes scheme centered at the state-run oil giant Petrobras. The corruption schemes, involving virtually every Brazilian political party, had been overseen by Lula's Workers Party (PT) during the period when the PT became the preferred instrument of rule of the Brazilian ruling class. Between 2003 and 2016, the PT won four straight presidential victories, first with Lula's two terms (2003-2010), and then with the two victories of his handpicked successor, Dilma Rousseff.

This period ended in 2016 with the ouster of the PT's Rousseff in a fraudulent impeachment carried out by the party's former accomplices in corruption, then-House member Jair Bolsonaro among them. Exploiting the discrediting of the PT by the pervasive scandals and its austerity drive in face of the country's economic crisis, they imposed a massive bottom-up redistribution of wealth, imposing a 20-year freeze on public spending and enacting a labor reform provoking massive wage reductions.

Lula was sentenced twice in 2017 and 2018 in interrelated cases of receiving undercover bribes from two key defendants in the investigation, the OAS and Odebrecht construction giants. These bribes allegedly took the form of improvements to a beachfront penthouse and a country estate owned by a political associate and the OAS itself.

In addition to appeals denying wrongdoing, Lula's defense had filed a habeas petition claiming the charges had no direct connection to the Petrobras scandal being investigated in the Curitiba district, and should be tried elsewhere. This argument was ultimately accepted by Justice Fachin on Monday, clearing the way for Lula's political comeback.

Doubts remain as to whether Lula can be barred again if new trials in Brasília move quickly enough, or if Fachin's decision is struck down by the full STF. Those doubts didn't stop Lula's rehabilitation making front-page news around the globe and unleashing a torrent of speculation in the international corporate press—enthusiastically exaggerated by the international pseudo-left—that Lula could “save Brazil from Bolsonaro,” who has shocked the world with his sociopathic handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the standpoint of millions of workers confronting the horrors of the pandemic, news of a political alternative to confront Brazil's social disaster is no doubt anxiously awaited. Bolsonaro now presides over the world epicenter of the pandemic, with an unprecedented catastrophe of over 2,300 deaths a day on top of more than 270,000 deaths thus far in the year-long pandemic. Hospitals are filled to capacity all over the country of 210 million inhabitants. Faced with what scientists and medical experts

are describing as a war-like scenario even in the country's richest state, São Paulo, Bolsonaro has railed against even the mildest and least effective restraints on economic activity decreed by governors and mayors, including the use of masks.

Nonetheless, the attempt to package the tried and tested stooge of finance capital, Lula, leader of a party which, while in government, allied itself with the most reactionary forces in Brazil, including Bolsonaro himself, is, to put it bluntly, politically criminal.

Leading the charge promoting Lula was the foremost voice of “democratic” imperialism, the *New York Times*, which lionized Lula as a “fiery leftist leader” and proclaimed that Justice Fachin's decision had “the potential to reshape Brazil's political future.” But it was the mouthpiece of the pseudo-left imperialist apologists in the US, *Jacobin* magazine, which offered the most overblown and self-exposing account of Lula's prospective political return.

The *Jacobin* report, titled “Lula Is Back — And He Can Save Brazil From Bolsonaro,” did not even stand up to the first public address by Lula himself. The speech delivered Wednesday at the headquarters of the ABC Metalworkers Union, was a pro-business, pro-military profession of faith peppered with platitudes about Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic, the need for vaccines, masks and social distancing, along with moral preaching about the need to “look after the poor.” In the most critical moment of the speech, he told his audience, “Do not follow a single one of the president's or health minister's moronic decisions. Get vaccinated.”

The *Jacobin* article doesn't bother to present any reason why the PT would reverse the policies it carried out in office, which paved the way to the rise of Brazil's most right-wing government since the 1964-1985 US-backed military dictatorship. Instead, the piece is based entirely on one assumption, that the fall of the Brazilian stock markets on the day of Fachin's decision was an indication that Lula would carry out anti-capitalist policies. *Jacobin* states: “It's telling, though, that Brazil's stock market fell by 4 percent, and the real slipped to record lows against the dollar following the news of the verdict. Investors apparently were not too worried about the apocalyptic COVID-19 death numbers coming out of Brazil—but the return of Lula led to full-on panic.”

This assumption is entirely false. As Reuters noted in a Tuesday analysis of the market's reaction to the decision, before Justice Fachin's ruling, the Brazilian real had registered the third worst performance in the world against the dollar. The São Paulo stock exchange has plunged 20 percent in 2021. The latest shock came with Bolsonaro's attempts to defuse accelerating inflation by sacking the Petrobras CEO, blaming him for high fuel prices—a move enthusiastically welcomed by the PT and the PT-controlled oil workers union, the FUP.

A more sober and realistic assessment was given by the *Financial Times*, which quoted Monica de Bolle, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute in Washington. “What I see happening is a reckoning with the fact that Bolsonaro is a massive threat to institutional stability,” she said.

“The calculation thus is: ‘What is least destabilizing?’” That was also the analysis made by *Foreign Policy*, whose Latin America correspondent Catherine Osborn told the Morning Brief that, after Bolsonaro sacked the Petrobras CEO, “a Lula presidency may be an improvement,” concluding, “I think it’s possible a Lula administration could be more of a ‘rational’ economic actor as far as markets are concerned.”

The *Jacobin* piece is unable to evade a central issue, that of the push towards dictatorship by the country’s ruling elite, spearheaded by the Rousseff-appointed army commander, Gen. Eduardo Villas Bôas, an enthusiast of Lula’s rearmament program. *Jacobin* states: “the elephant in the room is how the Brazilian military will respond.” While recalling that Villas Bôas threatened a coup in April 2018 if the STF granted another habeas petition, *Jacobin* never asks about Lula’s response to such threats. Asking that question would mean debunking the argument in favor of Lula’s potential to “save Brazil” from the current disaster, since the PT is dedicated to chloroforming the working class to the threat of dictatorship.

Lula’s entire three-hour speech and press conference Wednesday was an exercise in deception and lobbying of big business, the armed forces and the police.

Lula began in one of his self-aggrandizing hyperboles, downplayed by his supporters as colorful idiosyncrasies, claiming to be the victim of the “biggest judicial lie in 500 years of history”, i.e., the entire history of Brazil.

He then turned to an overture to the army and police. Lula criticized Bolsonaro’s gun deregulation legislation, stating that the president “is not elected to encourage gun ownership” and that those “who need guns are our Armed Forces, our police, which go into the streets to fight crime with a rusty .38 revolver.”

This ominous declaration in support of a police apparatus that kills 6,000 Brazilians a year was given against the backdrop of a strike threat by police forces against Bolsonaro for his austerity measures, to which the PT congressional caucus responded by claiming Bolsonaro had “betrayed” the police.

Lula proceeded to the national chauvinism that became PT’s stock-in-trade after its poverty relief programs hit a brick wall and social unrest began to grow in 2013 “Brazil was born to be big,” he said adding that, on the PT’s watch, Brazil was “respected by China, Russia, India, Germany, France, England, the United States.”

In criticizing the Petrobras privatization drive, designed to reduce by a third the company’s workforce and to cut costs, Lula ignored the resistance of the oil workers and rambled on in an even more reactionary promotion of national chauvinism, saying that “Germany lost the war [World War II] because it could not get to Baku to get gasoline.” Due to military needs, “every rich country must have a high fuel stockpile,” he continued, charging that Brazil, “a f*ing big country,” is giving away its oil.

In his conclusion, Lula directed himself to big business, telling them: “do not fear me.” He criticized free-market orthodoxy and all but promised generous bailouts for criminal financial interests. Citing the 2008 crisis, he said: “When they go bankrupt, who puts up money to save them? The state! The state they repudiate, the state they destroy.”

In the question-and-answer period, there was an even greater stress on the PT’s chauvinist line. When asked by *Al Jazeera* about the international impact of his comeback, he rambled on again with delusional arrogance, claiming the Iran nuclear deal brokered by himself and Turkey’s Erdogan in 2010 had been torpedoed to hit Brazil’s prestige, concluding that he would restore Brazil’s international credibility in order to attract back former investors.

As many pundits noted, Lula avoided at all cost mentioning Rousseff or her impeachment, which the PT classifies as a coup whenever it feels the need to shrug off questions about its alliances with those who ousted them, first and foremost Rousseff’s vice-president Michel Temer.

The PT’s policies in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic are just as criminal as those of Bolsonaro, except for the president’s incendiary rhetoric. This has been undeniably substantiated by the collective resignation of the scientific committee serving the PT-run state governments in the opposition strongholds of the country’s Northeast. Led by the world-renowned Brazilian neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis of Duke University, a decades-old public PT supporter, the scientists resigned in protest on February 19 in the face of the inaction of opposition governors as it became clear that Brazil was heading towards the current pandemic catastrophe.

The PT’s aim is not to save the Brazilian working class, but to rescue Brazilian capitalism from Bolsonaro, whose policies are seen by growing sections of the ruling class as a threat to their interests.

Lula’s political rehabilitation poses immense dangers to Brazilian workers, including the threat of a military coup, which the PT is dedicated to covering up and has no intention of stopping.

The Brazilian working class is growing ever more restive, with more and more spontaneous strikes and demonstrations against the murderous herd immunity policy being pursued by the entire ruling class. The timing of Justice Fachin’s decision, whatever its judicial motivations, serves clear political needs to channel growing opposition back behind the institutions of the capitalist state.

It is of utmost significance that Lula chose the ABC Metalworkers Union’s headquarters as the site for his press conference. While the PT claims that it is a movement that is “returning to its foundations,” the integration of the unions into the state apparatus to discipline the workforce is emerging as a crucial requirement for propping up the rotting capitalist setup. The same tendency has been demonstrated in the US by the unprecedented intervention of President Joe Biden, the foremost official of world imperialism, in favor of the unionization of Amazon.

As the ruling class attempts to rehabilitate Lula and spread political disorientation, it is ever more urgent that the pro-capitalist nature of the Workers Party, its affiliated unions and the pseudo-left groups that orbit the PT be understood by Brazilian workers.

A new political leadership must be built in the working class, in conscious opposition to the PT and the unions and rooted in the international experience of the working class, embodied in leadership of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International. This means joining the struggle of the Socialist Equality Group (Brazil) in building the Brazilian section of the ICFI.



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