

On the 60th anniversary of the 1964 military coup: Build the Brazilian section of the ICFI!

Socialist Equality Group (Brazil)

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Sunday, March 31, marked the 60th anniversary of the 1964 military coup backed by US imperialism in Brazil, which ushered in 21 years of bloody dictatorship. This 60th anniversary of the infamous seizure of power by the military led by Marshal Castello Branco takes place under political conditions that are unprecedented since the establishment of a civilian regime in the country four decades ago.

On January 8, 2023, the plotting of a coup d'état by former president Jair Bolsonaro and a faction of the military command culminated in the fascist assault on the seats of power in Brasilia. The Armed Forces' deep involvement in this coup attempt is being exposed more and more on a daily basis.

Just two weeks before the 1964 coup anniversary, the media reported the sworn testimony to the Federal Police by former Air Force commander Gen. Carlos Baptista Júnior. He admitted that the command of the Armed Forces participated in several meetings with Bolsonaro after his electoral defeat, openly discussing plans to prevent the elected government from taking office and to establish a dictatorial regime in Brazil.

Under these grave political conditions, the Workers Party (PT) government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva made every effort to deny the historical and political relevance of the 1964 coup and suppress the memory of the victims of the military dictatorship. His undisguised aim is to disassociate the image of the Armed Forces from both the bloody dictatorial regime that lasted from 1964 into the mid-1980s and the present coup plots that continue regardless of the personal fate of Bolsonaro.

Ten years ago, then Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff, also from the PT, spoke on national television, highlighting the memory of the coup and ordering an apology to its victims on behalf of the Brazilian state. It was the height of Latin America's "Pink Tide," the rule of so-called "progressive" bourgeois governments led by parties associated with the political opposition to the region's dictatorships of the 1960s-1980s.

This year, by contrast, the main headlines related to the historic anniversary focused on Lula's orders banning any official mention of the events of 60 years ago.

In an interview with journalist Kennedy Alencar on February 27, the Brazilian president declared that the coup "is part of history." The current generals, he explained, "weren't even born" in 1964. For Lula, there is nothing left to discuss, because "the people have already won the right to democratize this country" and must "know how to move history forward, [instead of] always dwelling on it, always dwelling on it."

A few days later, the PT government made public its cancellation of ceremonies in memory of the coup and the quashing of a plan to found a museum of "memory and democracy," proposed by former justice minister Flávio Dino.

Lula's statements are remarkable in light of recent events. The bourgeois PT government's nervousness about the issue is directly proportional to the renewed relevance of the lessons of the 1964 coup for the Brazilian and international working class.

The reemergence of the military along with political forces associated with the 1964 regime in official Brazilian politics debunks the reactionary promises of the PT's founders that, with the fall of the military junta in 1985, it was possible to establish a stable democracy and a welfare state in Brazil without smashing capitalism and the bourgeois state.

The same fundamental political process is developing throughout Latin America. In the countries where the demoralized parties of the "Pink Tide" have returned to power in recent years, they have implemented the harshest capitalist attacks and paved the way for the rise of fascistic forces to political power.

This was notoriously the case in Peru, where President Pedro Castillo's anti-working class attacks prepared his downfall and the imposition of Dina Boluarte's police state regime, and in Argentina, where the revolt against the Peronist austerity government gave way to the election of the fascist Javier Milei.

The rapid demoralization of the coalition of the pseudo-left Gabriel Boric and the Stalinists in Chile, elected by promising reforms to pacify the explosion of mass opposition against social inequality, only strengthened the fascist Republican Party and supporters of the dictator Augusto Pinochet in the recent constitutional elections.

The Lula government, whose main electoral banner was the unification of the bankrupt parties of the bourgeois establishment against Bolsonaro, depicted as a political aberration within an otherwise healthy democratic regime, is unable to explain how Brazil found itself facing a new dictatorial threat.

The March 31, 1964 military coup in Brazil

The overthrow of President João Goulart, of the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB), was the culmination of the prolonged crisis of the so-called Fourth Republic, rooted in the deep contradictions of Brazilian capitalism in the post-war period.

Two years into a turbulent mandate, Goulart, who presented himself as a nationalist reformer of capitalism, had implemented timid controls on the remittance of profits abroad by multinational companies, and promised a series of so-called "basic reforms," which included agrarian reform and a program of "urban reform" to enable mass access to housing. Goulart also pursued a "non-aligned" foreign policy, opposing US sanctions against Cuba and promising to legalize the Brazilian Communist Party.

The 1964 coup consolidated a fascist military dictatorship in Brazil after a series of authoritarian interventions by the military in the country's politics. The post-war presidential regime itself had been established by a military coup in 1945, which ousted Getúlio Vargas' dictatorial *Estado Novo* and elected the anti-communist Gen. Eurico Gaspar Dutra as president.

In 1955, the military tried to prevent the inauguration of the Juscelino Kubitschek government, when Goulart was elected vice-president for the first time, amid the crisis triggered by Vargas' suicide. In 1961, a second military coup attempt took place after the resignation of President Jânio Quadros. Goulart, once again elected as vice-president, was on a diplomatic mission to China and was only sworn in after accepting a semi-presidential system that stripped him of powers. On his return to Brazil, military rebels tried to shoot down Goulart's plane as it entered national air space.

Full presidential powers were restored by plebiscite in 1962, rekindling the coup plots. The nationalists led by Goulart paved the way for the coming military coup by fostering illusions in the support of the government by the military and in the "democratic doctrine" of US imperialism's foreign policy. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Determined to prevent other Latin American countries from following the path of Fidel Castro's radical petty-bourgeois nationalist regime in Cuba, which responded to a US blockade by aligning itself with the USSR, Washington had been systematically planning a political intervention in Brazil since at least 1961, under the Kennedy administration.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson's administration launched "Operation Brother Sam," dispatching a naval strike group to the Brazilian coast and gathering military supplies to support the coup troops in Brazil who, in coordination with the CIA, seized Rio de Janeiro and other major cities beginning on the night of March 31. The US military apparatus had been mobilized in anticipation of a "bloodbath" and a "civil war," predicted by the US ambassador to the country, Lincoln Gordon.

President João Goulart, who believed he had the loyalty of enough generals to resist, was evacuated by a small group of officers to his home state of Rio Grande do Sul and then to Uruguay, where he was assassinated by Brazilian intelligence in 1976. Two governors allied to Goulart—out of 20—tried to organize resistance based on the police, but were also forced into exile.

The coup was welcomed by the press and the political opposition to Goulart, which would also be purged in the following years. The regime established under the leadership of Marshal Castelo Branco, a veteran of Brazil's intervention in the Second World War, promised elections for the following year, before gradually suppressing democratic freedoms until their complete abolition with the infamous Institutional Act Number 5 (AI-5) imposed in May 1968.

Combative workers, peasant leaders and radicalized youth were massively persecuted, tortured and murdered by the CIA-backed terror regime over the following decades. The Brazilian dictatorial regime also established the foundation for US intervention throughout Latin America, organizing military coups and exporting its systems of repression and torture to Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina and Peru.

Neither unforeseen nor inevitable

In its political essence, the 1964 military coup in Brazil was a negative confirmation of Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which established the inability of the bourgeoisie in backward capitalist countries to play any progressive historical role in the epoch of imperialism.

Emerging on the political scene already confronted by the social opposition of the working class, the national bourgeoisie in such countries cannot consistently confront the land-owning aristocracy and imperialism, instead relying directly upon their counterrevolutionary services. The completion of unfinished democratic tasks, such as the agrarian reform

promised by Goulart, requires the initiation of socialist measures and the seizure of political power by the working class.

This program, drawn up by Trotsky 60 years before the 1964 coup, had been decisively confirmed in the course of the successful Russian Revolution of 1917. Its laws had also been proven in the negative by the catastrophic defeats orchestrated by the Stalinist bureaucracy in following decades based on the imposition of the Menshevik theory of the "two-stage" revolution.

The modest social and political reforms implemented by the Brazilian bourgeoisie between 1945 and 1964 were the product of a set of particular conditions generated by the stabilization of post-war world capitalism. On the basis of the still existing potential of the US capitalist economy and, above all, the Stalinist bureaucracy's criminal disarming of the revolutionary uprisings of the working class, particularly in Europe, the imperialist bourgeoisie was able to re-establish its political domination.

For a brief period, the influx of foreign investment and the leveraging of diplomatic relations with the USSR to strike bargains with imperialism allowed the Brazilian bourgeoisie to foster illusions in an independent national economic development.

These conditions, temporary by their very nature, did not alter the fundamental contradictions of imperialist capitalism diagnosed at the founding of the Fourth International, which were gestating a new wave of world revolution.

In Brazil, the post-war years witnessed the massive expansion of the industrial working class and its growing clash with the capitalist system and the corporatist union apparatus bequeathed by Vargas' *Estado Novo*.

The decisive political task was to build a revolutionary Trotskyist party that would fight for the political independence of the Brazilian working class from the bourgeoisie and its agents and prepare it for the seizure of political power. This required, in the first place, an uncompromising fight against the political influence of Stalinism, represented by the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB).

Stalinism disarms Brazilian working class

In the midst of the political unrest in the Brazilian population at the end of the Second World War, the PCB, still illegal and with its leaders imprisoned, worked systematically to prevent the massive opposition to the Vargas dictatorship from threatening the integrity of the bourgeois state.

Announcing the political framework that would underpin the PCB's counterrevolutionary actions over the following decades, the party's historic leader, Luís Carlos Prestes, declared in an emblematic interview in 1944:

After the terrible and long fascist night and so many years of war, pain and misery, the peoples want peace and for the most advanced and conscious proletariat, for the communists in a word, what is needed is the definitive consolidation of the democratic conquests under a republican, progressive and popular regime.

Such a republic, if it is to be established without major clashes and struggles, within the framework of order and the law, can in no way be a Soviet republic, that is, a socialist one, but a capitalist one, resulting from the common action of all the social, democratic and progressive classes, from the proletariat to the great national bourgeoisie, with the sole exception of its most reactionary elements, which are numerically insignificant.

Explaining its perspective, based on the Stalinist doctrine of “peaceful coexistence” with imperialism, the PCB wrote, also in 1944:

In fact, the positive element about the post-war period are the principles of international collaboration and solidarity established in Tehran by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, which created possibilities of each people for its peaceful development.

The following year, the PCB was declared legal and its leaders were granted amnesty. On the basis of the prestige acquired by the Soviet workers’ state with the military defeat of Nazism and the crisis of the Brazilian bourgeois parties in the face of a resurgent working class, the PCB was suddenly transformed into a mass party and Prestes, recently freed, was elected with the most votes of any senator in the country.

But the criminal illusions fostered by the Stalinists in the progressive character of the national bourgeoisie and imperialism and in the rise of a new democratic era quickly clashed with reality. The Dutra government, aligning itself with Washington, outlawed the PCB in 1947 and broke relations with the USSR.

Instead of imperialism allowing for the “peaceful development” of “each people,” particularly in Latin America, it only confirmed the prediction of the 1940 “Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War and Proletarian Revolution”: that the monstrous armament of US imperialism prepared the replacement of the “good neighbor” policy with an iron-fist domination of the Western Hemisphere.

Despite the PCB making a political shift, beginning to denounce US imperialism and its local agents, the Stalinists fully preserved their orientation toward the national bourgeoisie and their determination to prevent the Brazilian working class from taking the path of socialist revolution. Their future dissidents, such as the Communist Party of Brazil (PcdoB), which broke with the PCB in 1962 to orient itself toward Maoism and peasant guerrilla warfare, would also remain loyal to its bankrupt “two-stage” doctrine.

On the eve of the 1964 coup, the PCB defended the reactionary guidelines of its infamous Declaration of March 1958, which announced a new phase of economic, political and social development of Brazilian capitalism, led by “growing nationalist, progressive and democratic forces” in conflict with “American imperialism and the *entreguistas* [sellouts] who support it.”

The corollary of this policy, which led to the crushing of the Brazilian working class, was the promotion of the military as an anti-imperialist and democratic force. In 1961, in the midst of attempts to prevent Jango’s inauguration, the PCB declared that the “reactionary coup-plotting group” was “driven into isolation by the powerful movement in defense of democratic legality which, in the face of fascist repression... is gaining increasing support from important sectors of the armed forces.”

In January 1964, while the Army was preparing its bloody coup, Prestes made a statement that summed up the Stalinists’ criminal capitulation to the bourgeoisie:

The Armed Forces in Brazil have very particular characteristics, very different from other Latin American countries. One of the specific issues of the Brazilian Revolution is the democratic character, the democratic tradition of the Armed Forces, particularly the Army.

Nine years later, Prestes’ Chilean Stalinists counterparts would make similar dubious claims about the unique democratic characteristics of

Chile’s military—“the people in uniform”—with the same disastrous consequences.

Renegades from Trotskyism sabotage building of revolutionary leadership

There was immense potential for building a Trotskyist party within the Brazilian working class, which would have been able to prevent the betrayal by the Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist leaderships and arm workers against the fascist reaction through the methods of socialist revolution.

Since the 1920s, during the years of the International Left Opposition, the Trotskyist movement had great political appeal in Brazil, particularly among the working class and students in São Paulo, the most industrialized region of the country.

But despite the favorable objective conditions, the construction of a section of the Fourth International in Brazil was systematically undermined by the action of petty-bourgeois liquidationist tendencies that expressed the powerful pressures of post-war stabilization upon the international revolutionary vanguard.

In 1940, the founding leader of the Brazilian Left Opposition, Mario Pedrosa, broke with the Fourth International, joining the petty-bourgeois opposition led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham in the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Pedrosa sowed immense political confusion in Brazil, using his prestige as a former leader of the Trotskyist movement to popularize anti-Marxist theories equating Stalinism with fascism and to support different reactionary and pro-imperialist factions of the Brazilian bourgeoisie in the name of fighting for “democracy.”

Despite Pedrosa’s political capitulation, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) continued the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the Brazilian working class based on the Fourth International through the harsh years of the Second World War. In a vile but representative expression of the Stalinists’ distress over the influence of Trotskyism during this period, the famous novelist and PCB member Jorge Amado wrote:

[The] Trotskyists, disconnected the national problem from the international one, preached violence, the coup, were ignorant of war, fought against National Unity which was the Party’s watchword. They divided many honest men, dragging them into the “resistance” movements ...

The center, the very heart, of all this rot, this miserable collusion against the Brazilian people, was in São Paulo, where ... a Trotskyist prestige was born that soiled the literary and student milieu, that alarmed the proletariat. The battle of São Paulo was the decisive battle for the Party.

The leader of the Trotskyist movement in Brazil at the time was Hermínio Sacchetta, who succumbed in the post-war years to the same pressures of the political demoralization of the petty bourgeoisie that had previously precipitated Pedrosa’s break with Trotskyism. In the 1950s, Sacchetta openly disowned Bolshevism and prompted the dissolution of the PSR.

Although he never clarified the reasons for his break, Sacchetta’s close associates reported that he became deeply disillusioned after attending the Third Congress of the Fourth International in 1951, in which Michel Pablo presented his liquidationist line that rehabilitated the Stalinist bureaucracy

as a revolutionary force and preached the dissolution of the Trotskyist parties into the “mass movements” in their existing forms in each country.

This frontal attack on the fundamental perspectives of the Fourth International was confronted by the advocates of orthodox Trotskyism with a political war against Pabloite revisionism consolidated with the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953.

Sacchetta, on the other hand, as reports indicate, saw Pablo’s theses as the disappointing but inevitable result of the development of Trotskyism. His capitulation opened the way for the Latin American ultra-Pabloite Juan Posadas to establish the so-called Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers’ Party (POR-T) in the void left by the PSR and fraudulently present it as the representative of Trotskyism in Brazil.

The POR-T was built up from 1954 by defending “total entryism” into the PCB with the aim of constituting a “left-wing” faction of the Stalinist bureaucracy. After a decade, the Pabloites abandoned this spurious policy only to defend, in 1963, an even more degrading form of dissolution into Leonel Brizola’s laborite movement, characterized by Posadas as “interior entryism,” i.e., acting as mere advisers to its bourgeois leadership.

The struggle against Pabloite revisionism, which proved to be an absolute priority for establishing the political independence of the working class in Brazil, was significantly compromised by the betrayal of the SWP and the Latin American sections of the International Committee led by the Argentinian Nahuel Moreno. Claiming the Pabloite analysis that the Cuban Revolution proved that a socialist revolution could be carried out in the absence of a Marxist party and without the mobilization of the working class, they reunited their parties with the Pabloite International Secretariat in 1963.

In his efforts to liquidate the ICFI and destroy Trotskyism as a distinct political tendency, SWP leader Joseph Hansen embarked upon a four-month journalistic tour of South America between 1962 and 1963. Seeking to prove that the “Cuban example” was spreading across the continent, making it the new epicenter of world revolution, Hansen visited northeastern Brazil to interview the leader of the Ligas Camponesas (Peasant Leagues), the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) member Francisco Julião.

Praising the reactionary anti-Marxist perspectives of Peasant Leagues, Hansen wrote in the article published on January 15 in *The Militant*: “What the *Ligas* seek is to lift the movement of the *camponesos* [sic] to a political level so as to give this sector of the populace the political representation that is its rightful due.”

Presenting the petty-bourgeois reformist Julião as the undisputed leader of the socialist movement in Brazil, he concluded: “Our best way of responding and helping them in their battles is to intensify our own struggle for socialism. For that we could do with a few North-American Julião’s.”

The criminal political role played by Hansen and the SWP is graphically exposed by the contrast between this fawning interview and the editorial in the *Militant*’s previous issue.

While having reported being met upon his arrival in Sao Paulo with an “indefinite general strike” of the workers in “Latin America’s most industrialized area,” the SWP leader never raised either the need nor the ability of the Trotskyist movement to fight for the leadership of the working class movement and arm it against the clear fascist threat. The ICFI’s later revelation that Hansen was an undercover agent of the US state within the Trotskyist movement explains the direct motivations of his actions of political sabotage.

But Hansen’s politics appealed to definite class sentiments that found support among broad layers of the petty bourgeoisie and gave the strength to the Pabloite reaction that undermined the Fourth International’s ability

to resolve the crisis of proletarian leadership over the following decades.

During the years of the military regime’s brutal repression, hundreds of young people and workers in Brazil faced torture and were murdered as they fought for what they believed to be genuine Trotskyism.

The destructive role of Pabloism was most fully exposed with the explosion of the massive workers’ strikes at the end of the 1970s which brought down the Brazilian dictatorship. With the absolute demoralization of the PCB, which served as the main instrument of containment of workers’ opposition in the previous period, the Brazilian bourgeoisie counted upon the counterrevolutionary services of the renegades from Trotskyism.

From Mário Pedrosa, to the Pabloite Unified Secretariat, and the Morenoite and Lambertite currents, they all served as the political midwives of Lula’s pro-capitalist Workers Party in the 1980s that permitted the stabilization of bourgeois rule in Brazil.

On the 60th anniversary of the 1964 coup, as the Lula government seeks to expunge the very memory of this political catastrophe, the Socialist Equality Group in Brazil appeals to the working class and youth to study its critical lessons. You cannot allow yourselves to be betrayed again. The developing crisis of global capitalism, which is prompting the collapse of the reactionary bourgeois order in Brazil, must lead to the victory of international socialism.

This time a genuine revolutionary leadership must be built in time; this means constructing a Brazilian section of the ICFI!



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