

Who is responsible for the rise of Flávio Bolsonaro and the far right in Brazil?

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The first round of Brazil's general elections on Sunday produced a political earthquake. Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, son and political heir of former President Jair Bolsonaro—who is serving a 27-year prison sentence for leading the 2022–23 coup conspiracy—finished first with 47.0 percent of the valid votes, against 45.2 percent for incumbent President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers Party (PT).

Defying the final polls, which had placed Lula ahead, Flávio received 56.1 million votes, 2.25 million more than the incumbent, and enters the October 25 runoff as the favorite.

This result was not confined to the presidential race. Bolsonaro's Liberal Party (PL) elected 121 federal deputies, up from 99 in 2022, the largest delegation won by any single party since the 1988 Constitution. In the Senate, it won 19 of the 54 seats in contention and will hold 28 of the 81 seats—more than a third of the chamber. In the states, the right consolidated its hold, winning in the first round the governorships of most of the South and Southeast, the country's economic heartland.

A verdict on the Broad Front

Sunday's results are, above all, a devastating verdict on the perspective advanced by the PT and the pseudo-left organizations that support it: that fascism could be defeated through an alliance with the rotten bourgeois political establishment. Far from defeating the threat of fascism, the "Broad Front" promoted by the PT has only strengthened it.

The election was held amid the open intervention of US imperialism, which has used punitive tariffs, sanctions and the designation of Brazilian criminal gangs as "terrorist organizations" to tip the scales in favor of the fascist candidate. The PT's pseudo-left apologists will surely blame the result centrally on Washington's meddling. But the success of Washington's strategy has depended at every turn on the PT's hated record, and on the party's inability, as a defender of Brazil's dependent national bourgeoisie, to mount any consistent or principled opposition to imperialism.

There should be no illusions about what Flávio Bolsonaro intends to do. His program combines Milei-style social shock therapy—spending cuts, privatization and the destruction of labor rights—with police-state measures directed against the working class.

On Monday, finance capital gave its own verdict: the real rose 5 percent against the dollar, the Ibovespa stock index surged about 8 percent and shares in the state-controlled Banco do Brasil jumped 12 percent, as investors bet, in the words of the *Financial Times*, that Flávio Bolsonaro would "mount rapid spending cuts" and "push through market-friendly reforms."

Bolsonaro proposes to integrate Brazil into Washington's "Shield of the Americas," the coalition of far-right governments through which the

Trump administration is converting Latin America into a neocolonial protectorate and a staging ground for war against China.

Moreover, he has pledged amnesty for his father and for those convicted in connection with the January 8, 2023 assault on Brasília, legitimizing the coup conspiracy and preparing its continuation. Less than four years after the coup, the heir of its leader stands at the threshold of the presidency. Who is responsible?

The key to understanding these results was supplied by Lula himself. Speaking in Barcelona on April 18, at the first meeting of the "Global Progressive Mobilization," he offered a calculated self-criticism: "Left-wing governments win elections with a left-wing discourse and practice austerity. They give up public policies in the name of governability. We have become the system. That is why it comes as no surprise that the other side now presents itself as anti-system."

This was an admission of political bankruptcy. Elected in 2022 at the head of a Broad Front with the bankers, agribusiness and the parties of the traditional right, the PT government imposed austerity and privatizations dictated by the financial markets, while raising military spending to historic levels and rehabilitating the armed forces that had backed the coup.

Along with its pseudo-left and union satellites, the PT handed the far right a monopoly over opposition to a political system that the masses despise.

The clearest expression of this outcome came in São Paulo, the country's richest and most industrialized state and the historic center of the working-class movement from which the PT emerged. There, Governor Tarcísio de Freitas, a former Bolsonaro minister, crushed Fernando Haddad, Lula's former finance minister and the architect of his government's economic policy and austerity program, by a margin of nearly 63 percent against just over 36 percent.

The PT doubles down

The PT's response has been to deepen this reactionary course and was aptly summarized by the pro-PT website *Brasil 247*, which wrote that Lula "will have to reduce abstention and win over those who voted for Flávio but prefer Alckmin." Geraldo Alckmin, Lula's vice president, is a veteran figure of the Brazilian right and a former governor of São Paulo. The website also reports that Lula is considering naming Alckmin finance minister and giving him a bigger role. The PT's apparent strategy for the second round contest is to make Alckmin the right-wing face of its campaign.

At the same time, the PT is seeking to stitch together alliances with two defeated right-wing presidential candidates, Augusto Cury and Ronaldo Caiado. Both ostentatiously championed amnesty for those involved in the

coup attempt. Caiado promised that his first act in office would be a “broad, general and unrestricted amnesty” for Jair Bolsonaro and all those convicted for the acts of January 8, 2023. That the party claiming to defend democracy against fascism is courting a politician who pledged to free the coup plotters exposes the fraud of the entire “democratic front.”

The notion that Lula can win by presenting himself as a diluted version of Flávio Bolsonaro’s right-wing politics is reactionary and politically bankrupt. It is the very recipe that produced Sunday’s result.

The masses have not turned right

Underlying this strategy is the claim, promoted by the PT, the pseudo-left and the corporate media alike, that the rise of the far right expresses a rightward shift of the masses themselves. This is false. Its function is to place responsibility for the catastrophe on the working class, rather than on those who have betrayed it.

Brazilian workers do not support a program of social attacks and subordination to American imperialism. Lula’s government left 80.9 percent of families in debt and interest rates at 13.75 percent. Demagogically, Flávio “was in a supermarket” while Lula spoke of “sovereignty and rare earths,” in the words of a CNN analyst, and was able to turn widespread anger over prices and crime into votes for the far right.

Abstention reached its highest level since 1998 and, together with blank and spoiled ballots, accounted for 24.6 percent of the electorate—39.1 million of the 158.7 million registered voters. This expresses a thoroughly justified rejection of the political system as a whole, and of a government that offers nothing but the continuation of austerity and reactionary nationalism.

Particularly significant is the hostility toward Lula among young people, who have grown up under PT governments. Disapproval of Lula rose 9 percent among young people aged 16 to 34, reaching 55 percent in September, according to a Quaest poll.

The election, moreover, took place amid a growing wave of strikes—by bank workers, postal workers, teachers and metalworkers—that clashed directly with the Lula government and with the trade union federations campaigning for its reelection. CUT leader Sérgio Nobre explicitly told Lula: “President, here is your army... You are our general.”

While the entire bourgeois establishment moves to the right, the working class is moving to the left. It is this contradiction, which finds no expression within the official political system, that the far right exploits. What is on the agenda is open class war, whose signs are visible across the continent, from the general strikes in Bolivia and Argentina to the mass protests in Chile.

Four decades, not just four years

The PT’s debacle is, in essence, a repudiation of not merely the policies of the past four years, but of the past four decades. In 2018, when Jair Bolsonaro was elected, the *World Socialist Web Site* answered the question of how this had been possible:

It is the outcome of the thorough-going degeneration, under the impact of economic crisis and boiling social tensions, of the bourgeois democratic order established 30 years ago this month

with the adoption of the 1988 constitution. The process of transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule was touted by its stewards as “slow, gradual and secure.” It assured a blanket amnesty to the assassins and torturers of the Brazilian military and a defense of the property and profits of the capitalists who had supported the dictatorship.

The pivotal role in this transition was played by the Workers Party, which served to divert the mass strikes and revolutionary militancy of the Brazilian working class that shook the dictatorship at the end of the 1970s back under the domination of the bourgeois state.

The same perspective recalled that the PT was founded with the decisive participation of the Pabloite revisionists: the followers of Pierre Lambert’s French OCI, the Argentine tendency of Nahuel Moreno and Ernest Mandel’s United Secretariat:

Crucial to the formation of this party were the political activities of groups that had broken with the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and rejected the revolutionary role of the working class. Some of them had previously promoted Castroism and petty-bourgeois guerrillaism as a substitute for the development of a mass revolutionary socialist workers’ movement, with disastrous consequences throughout Latin America. In the founding of the PT, they swung over to the conception that a bourgeois reformist party with ties to the unions could provide a unique Brazilian parliamentary road to socialism.

That “parliamentary road” led the PT to become the preferred party of national and international finance capital, and its corporatist union apparatus the principal instrument for suppressing the class struggle. The political heirs of those revisionist tendencies, grouped today in and around the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) and the Morenito organizations, have spent the past four years tying the working class to the PT and its Broad Front in the name of “fighting fascism.” From 2018 to 2026, this same mechanism has produced the same outcome, now under conditions of a far deeper crisis.

An international process

The Brazilian election is part of an international process. Across Europe, in the United States and throughout Latin America, the electoral rise of fascist parties and figures has been prepared by the bankruptcy and rot of what passes for the official “left.” In Latin America, Lula’s crisis is bound up with the collapse of the entire “Pink Tide,” whose governments came to power on the back of mass struggles, delivered austerity, and gave way to far-right regimes from Argentina and Chile to Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. It is bound up, too, with the debacle of Chavismo, which now administers the plunder of Venezuela as Washington’s puppet, and of Castroism, which has put Cuba’s economy on offer under pressure of a US blockade and threat of invasion—movements long hailed by the pseudo-left as anti-imperialist and socialist alternatives.

Yet in all these countries, Europe and the United States included, the masses are moving to the left, and a confrontation of revolutionary dimensions is developing.

The perspective of the ICFI

The events in Brazil substantiate the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which the Socialist Equality Group has defended alone against the entire pseudo-left: that the working class cannot fight fascism, dictatorship and war by subordinating itself to any faction of the bourgeoisie, and that the PT is not a workers' party with mistaken policies, but a bourgeois party that has served for four decades to contain the class struggle.

The debacle of the PT and of the Broad Front supported by the pseudo-left, together with the bankruptcy of Chavismo and Castroism, is a crucial political experience. It is profoundly affecting mass consciousness in Brazil and internationally, and it is generating a search for serious political and programmatic answers that only the world Trotskyist movement can provide.

This requires a break with the PT, the union federations and the pseudo-left that orbits them; the building of rank-and-file committees, linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees; the unification of workers across the Americas against imperialism and dictatorship; and, above all, the building of the Brazilian section of the ICFI.

Sunday's results are no cause for pessimism. Our optimism, however, does not rest on the illusion that things will sort themselves out, or that a Flávio Bolsonaro government would be too weak to carry out its program. It rests on an understanding of both the necessity and the potential of the independent intervention of the working class. Only that intervention, armed with an internationalist socialist program, can halt the reactionary degeneration of bourgeois society—and the objective conditions for it are rapidly maturing. The task is to give it conscious leadership.



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