



Brazil: Bolsonaro's pension reform - Resiste Brazil!

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Jair Bolsonaro has been President of Brazil since the beginning of the year. He was previously considered a right-wing outsider in Brazilian politics, known for his extreme right-wing slogans against women's rights, gender politics and the non-white poorer classes, who had supporters ready to use violence and admired the "anti-Communist" terror of the former military dictatorship. A year ago, hardly anyone would have thought that he could become president. In the absence of other potential candidates who were not accused of corruption, however, the elites and the military finally decided to bet precisely on this card.

Shaken by a severe economic crisis and unable to force any "reforms" through the cumbersome political system, Brazil's ruling class chose a candidate who openly stood for the attack on the left and the organised labour movement. In the end, Bolsonaro won with his promise to "clean up" the corrupt system and revive the economy. Nothing better sums up Bolsonaro's attitude to the workers' movement than his constant repetition, even after the election, of his slogan: "Brazilian workers must make up their minds: Have work or have rights". In short, he sees trade unions as the biggest threat to a "healthy economy".

Groupings within the regime

In addition to reactionary educational, cultural, women's and environmental measures, Bolsonaro's social and labour market policies also bear clear elements of fascist politics. Nor is Bolsonaro "alone at home" in Brasilia. A large part of his cabinet consists of (ex-)generals who are closely linked to the "elite" of industry and agro-business. In addition, economic policy is determined by Paulo Guedes and his ultra-liberal bankers. These two forces, which do not always work together harmoniously, mean that Bolsonaro has relatively little room for manoeuvre. There are many rumours that he could quickly be replaced by his vice-president, one of the generals in the government, should that become necessary. In addition, Bolsonaro has also brought the ultra-fundamentalist evangelicals into the government, which has led to a reactionary turn in family and education policy in particular, and this has triggered protests among the liberal public. The tightening of the already very restrictive abortion law has led in recent months to a strong wave of protest, and not only from the women's movement.

Despite his own election, Bolsonaro lacks a definitive majority in Congress, which consists of a large number of parties. Like any government, he has to organise majorities through protracted negotiations, and has failed miserably on many of his projects so far. This is most evident in the case of pension reform, which is regarded as the most important priority for any neoliberal turn in Brazil. The country's high indebtedness leads to high interest rates, which, together with the slump in exports, means there is no sign yet of the economic turnaround promised by "Messiah Bolsonaro". Since the ineffective pension system accounts for about a third of public spending, pension reform is seen as the be-all and end-all of any government's success. As the government spokesman said this week, "We have two alternatives: either approve the pension reform or this government falls".

Guedes' reform is the usual neo-liberal solution to the problem at the expense of the socially disadvantaged, who have not benefited from the system. On the one hand, the system is to be privatised and converted into a funded pension. On the other, the minimum retirement age is to be raised to such an extent that the minimum pension is paid out, which would lead to low-income earners working up to the age of 70. In Chile, such a pension scheme was the "showpiece" of the neoliberal junta policy, and is now being abolished there precisely because of the problems with lower incomes.

Massive attack

It is clear that the planned reform embodies a massive attack on the livelihoods of millions of poorer Brazilians. Nor is it what Bolsonaro and his party were elected for (pension reform was not a campaign issue for him). Even in Congress, a larger part of the conservative deputies do not want to "burden" themselves with this unpopular topic. Since the constitutional law requires a four-fifths majority in Congress, just a few votes beyond the "left" in Parliament will block the reform. This explains the concern of the government spokesman and the big "bustle" that reigns in Congress to somehow organise a majority after all.

More important than these parliamentary obstacles, however, is the growing resistance on the streets. The disappointment of even the misled voters is growing: there is no sign of economic recovery; the new government is again involved in corruption cases with the Bolsonaro clan apparently involved in a recently uncovered criminal network within the Rio police force that organised the assassination of left-wing city councillor Marielle Franco. The new "law for the financing of the trade unions" (MP873) will turn off the money tap, and there is still this massive social attack in the form of the pension reform! Many of the various strands of protest against the new Bolsonaro regime are therefore now joining forces to protest against them.

After the proclamation of the reform law, all the major trade union confederations, which often compete against each other, have agreed on common resistance. On March 22, the first major protest took place with hundreds of thousands throughout the country taking to the streets against Bolsonaro's plans. Even the trade union federations were surprised at the high level of participation. In many cases, local "resistance committees" have been formed, representing a united front of trade unions, the MST (landless movement), MTST (homeless movement), left-wing parties and various social movements. The largest trade union confederation, the CUT, is now talking about preparing the general strike against pension reform. Whether there will be further days of action or strike action, however, will depend strongly on the development of the basic organs of the resistance.

Resistance Congress!

Our comrades from the Liga Socialista call for cooperation by all left organisations and the trade unions in these resistance committees and a fight within them for the unlimited general strike. They criticise both the plans to limit the actions to one or two-day strikes and the sectarian behaviour of certain left groups in leaving the committees because the CUT and the Workers' Party, PT, include the release of Lula as a central demand. Even though we criticise the politics of the PT, especially during its time in government, we see the imprisonment of ex-president Lula da Silva as a clearly political arbitrary act that affects the whole political left. We therefore consider the "Lula Livre" campaign to be worthy of support. Even social democratic ex-presidents can become political prisoners, and we must stand for their release.

In view of the concentrated attacks on social rights and on the existence of trade unions, we consider it necessary for the workers' movement to organise itself in a united resistance. As at the end of the military dictatorship, it is again necessary to organise a comprehensive resistance congress of the whole class. In 1983, the CUT itself was founded at the "Congresso Nacional de Classe Trabalhadora - CONCLAT", the "national congress of the working class". It is clear that today a CONCLAT is needed again, as many in the CUT are already discussing. A political programme of the working class has to be discussed as a response to the inhuman politics of the Brazilian elites. For us, it is clear that such a programme must begin with the struggle against the existing attacks and be extended to socialist revolution on the basis of the democratically controlled organs of struggle of the working class and the oppressed that are emerging in it.

Internationally, we must support this resistance process in Brazil with all our strength. Brazil, along with Venezuela, is today a focal point of the international class struggle in Latin America, its outcome could play a decisive role internationally.