

“**Bolsonarismo**” after **Bolsonaro: What Lula’s Electoral Victory Means for Antifascist Organizing in Brazil**

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Lula da Silva narrowly won the Brazilian presidential elections against Jair Bolsonaro on October 30 (51-49%). Yet, *Bolsonarismo*—the far-right ideology punctuated by fascist traits and enthusiastically supported by the higher ranks of the Armed Forces—continues as strong as ever. The left won this electoral battle, but not yet the war against the most destructive right-wing threat against democracy, human and social rights, and the environment in the world.

Forty-nine percent of eligible electors—fifty-eight million people—in the second-largest democracy in the Americas voted for a candidate whose chief campaign slogan was “God, Fatherland, Family and Freedom,” literally copied from Brazilian Integralism, the homegrown fascist movement in the 1930s, and from German Nazi and Italian fascist rhetoric. Bolsonaro’s Liberal Party (PL) and smaller, allied parties will control up to half the seats in the upper and lower houses of Congress while fourteen of twenty-seven state governors support Bolsonaro. The three largest states—São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais—will be governed by fierce Bolsonaro allies.

Voting is compulsory in Brazil resulting in a relatively low twenty-percent abstention rate. Lula won handily among the poor, women, Blacks and Indigenous peoples, as well as in many large cities such as São Paulo and Belo Horizonte and in the entire Northeast region of the country. Bolsonaro won a large majority in the southern and midwestern states and narrowly took the remaining regions of the country, including his home base in the city of Rio de Janeiro where allied paramilitary militias control large swaths of the poor urban periphery. His main supporters were middle-to-upper-class men and older voters in mid-sized cities and rural areas, but a significant proportion of the working class also voted for Bolsonaro in all regions of the country. Small wonder that on election day, the Federal Highway Police, headed by a family friend of Bolsonaro, actively tried to prevent voters in the Lula-dominated Northeast from arriving at the polling booths.

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disruptive, anti-democratic force. They are ably assisted by the “Hate Cabinet”—composed of hand-picked operators from Bolsonaro’s inner circle—who bombard social media with horrendous fake news. The most hard-core Bolsonaro supporters, including independent owner truckers and bosses of large trucking firms (some of whom forced their employees to participate) organized over five hundred blockades of highways around the country in the first three days after the elections, calling for military intervention against the election results. They were denounced by several truckers’ unions and roundly condemned by politicians and the media but received formal support from many Bolsonaro cronies. The media have reported numerous cases of the Federal Highway Police assisting the blockaders and Bolsonaro himself, who only tacitly accepted defeat two days after the election, declared that he completely understood his supporters’ frustration with “electoral irregularities.” He only slapped them on the wrist for their “methods” insisting that these were characteristic of the left. Three full days after the election there are still almost two hundred highway blockades.

Popular resistance against the anti-democratic blockades and the lack of formal actions by the PT, allied parties, the trade unions and established social movements are portents of the conflicts to come between the top-down parliamentary approach and radical, grass-roots mobilizations. Reluctant state police have broken up most of the highway obstructions after they were ordered to by the Supreme Court. Yet at least seven barricades in four states were taken down by concerted mobilizations of dock workers, poor local residents and left-wing football fan clubs, including two blockades in São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil. Initially calling on its members to forcibly unblock the highways, the Homeless Workers’ Movement ended up signing an accord with other PT-supporting social movements and all the main trade union federations to merely “accompany” the actions of Bolsonaro’s shock troops, but not to intervene to rout them.

Bolsonaro has already adopted Donald Trump’s playbook after the latter’s defeat in 2020: 1) Despite being widely debunked, every possible lie about the electronic voting system has been regurgitated to argue that the election was fraudulent; 2) His delayed recognition of defeat speech was a mere two and half minutes and only very timidly accepted the results of the election; 3) He and his supporters have continued to attack democratic institutions such as the Judiciary, alleging that they were victims of political persecution by a supposedly left-wing establishment; 4) Amply using fake news on social media, he has already mobilized his supporters to cause public turmoil to intimidate and threaten, including through physical violence, the left and other democratic forces; 5) He will enlist supporters both at home and abroad—from Trump and Bannon in the US to Orban in Hungary—to bolster his wild conspiracy theory. Racism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism will run rampant.

All this amounts to a fascist-inspired attack on the fledgling liberal capitalist democracy in Brazil. This anti-democratic assault has been tried and tested since Bolsonaro won the fraudulent elections in 2018 through massive fake news and a wave of anti-Workers’s Party (PT) sentiment. Bolsonaro encourages his shock troops from below to do his nasty bidding as a complement to his formal, authoritarian politics from above.

There are no better examples of this than the appalling violence during the election campaign. At least four PT activists were murdered in September and October and hundreds of left-wingers were physically assaulted, including one young pregnant woman pamphleting who lost her baby. There were almost two thousand denunciations of electoral coercion by bosses in thirteen hundred different companies threatening their employees to vote for Bolsonaro or face dismissal.

The last week of the election campaign witnessed two bizarre, brutal yet unsurprising episodes by leading Bolsonaro supporters. On October 23, the ex-federal deputy and ferocious Bolsonarista, anti-semitic and convicted thief, Roberto Jefferson, attacked the federal police who arrived at his house to arrest him for a vicious and misogynist video against Supreme Court Justice, Carmen Lucia. He fired

more than seventy rounds and threw three grenades, wounding two police officers. While his indictment for homicide was officially endorsed by the Bolsonaro government, he received a huge outpouring of support from the Bolsonaro ranks.

And at noon hour the day before the election on a crowded city center street in São Paulo, the reelected federal deputy, Carla Zambelli, one of Bolsonaro's chief precinct captains in the state, pulled out her gun and pursued two young unarmed black men, supporters of Lula, who had argued with her outside a restaurant. Political commentators repeated that this was another shot in the foot for Bolsonaro but ignore the fact that the support she received for her blatantly criminal and racist behavior not only from rank and file Bolsonaristas, but from leading government figures, including the President's sons, reflects what we face in the next months and years from the far right.

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It's abundantly clear that the left (not only the PT but smaller allied social democratic parties such as the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) underestimated in the last four years the depth of support for Bolsonarismo. Despite the lack of realism of Bolsonaro's program, it has struck a deep chord with many people, especially, but not exclusively, among the white, male lower middle class and evangelical Christians who comprise one third of the population. Feeling threatened by recent gains by workers, women, Blacks and the LGBT+ community—won through valiant struggle that forced left-wing parties to act—they have transferred their social economic insecurity and hate towards the oppressed, gambling on economic and social progress through top-down favors of the elite. As several innovative ethnographers of the far right such as Esther Solano and Rosana Pinheiro-Machado have shown, this has resulted in unconditional support for Bolsonaro by at least one-third of the population who have passionately welcomed authoritarian neoliberalism and attacks against the oppressed.

A vital component of this ideology is a gut hatred of the PT and the left—fed by outright lies—aggressively cultivated since the parliamentary coup against PT President Dilma in 2016. It is not at all clear yet how to fully explain this, but it seems worthwhile to revisit classic Marxist studies by Wilhelm Reich and Theodore Adorno on mass consciousness during the Nazi years and recent studies of Trump's support among the American working class.

Yet it's also breathtakingly clear that left-wing forces need to rethink how to organize and mobilize the working class and social movements. As in the rest of the world during the global capitalist crisis, the left (not to mention traditional centrist and right-wing parties) has been inept in providing solutions to basic problems such as a poor standard of living, food security, lousy working conditions, environmental disaster and the persistence of structures of oppression.

In the Brazilian case, the PT has accepted key tenets of neoliberalism such as fiscal responsibility, kowtowing to the banks and agrobusiness and vacillating on the need for massive social investment to ameliorate one of the most unequal societies in the world. During the PT governments from 2003-2016, Lula and Dilma were temporarily fortunate in having a booming agricultural export

sector which facilitated important but limited reforms in the welfare state, education and healthcare. But there was no transformation of the inherently unequal structure of Brazilian society and the state. And when economic winds shifted around 2014, the PT embraced neoliberal remedies for the crisis: reducing pensions and labor rights, slashing social programs and crafting alliances with dubious centrist parties. All this undermined the gains achieved, alienated the party's very base among the working class and paved the way for the right-wing backlash from 2016 to the present.

Send the fascists scurrying back to the gutter.

The PT's presidential platform is brimming with meek promises to reverse the policies of Bolsonaro, but there is little in the way of proposals for economic and social transformation. And it is yet unclear whether Lula will be able to implement even modest reforms in the context of a hostile Congress and the coup plots of Bolsonaro. No doubt, the PT will forge parliamentary alliances with huckster politicians to pass moderate legislation that will gradually dilute left-wing proposals and demobilize left-wing forces. Lula's acceptance speech on election night already floated moderation and the necessity to "unite" the divergent forces in the country.

The Lula-led left coalition certainly improved during the second-round campaign. The first round witnessed a top-down, bureaucratic marketing conception of politics with few combative street mobilizations. In the last few weeks before the second round, however, Lula came out swinging in the televised debates and the left coalition organized numerous massive street rallies and marches in almost all capital cities. Offering a distinct alternative to neoliberalism, frontally denouncing the violent authoritarianism of Bolsonaro and mobilizing workers and social movements in the streets was always the best option and will continue to be so.

In the coming months and years, the left will not only need to confront the coup plots of Bolsonaro, but ensure that he, his family and key supporters be punished for their many crimes, including the criminal mismanagement of the pandemic that left seven hundred thousand Brazilians dead and widespread corruption and theft from the public purse. This will also be a critical form of combatting the far right.

Another danger is the incorporation of social movement and union activists into the Lula government, watering down the potential for independent and radical mobilizations from below while boosting the business-as-usual cretinism of parliamentary politics. This shift transformed the PT during the 1990s and 2000s into a party no longer against the capitalist order, but as an accomplice to the system. The inaction of the PT-allied trade unions and social movements to the highway blockades is already a worrying sign.

Continued mobilizations from below for social and economic gains (and, if necessary, against the Lula government) will be the first order of business. There are remarkable national homeless workers' and landless workers' movements, the unions are down but not yet out, and in the last years grass-roots organizations of secondary and university students, anti-racist, LGBT+ and feminist groups have proliferated.

We need to learn from our history, too. In October 1934, a planned march by the burgeoning Brazilian fascist movement in Sé Square in São Paulo was fantastically routed by a grass-roots counter demonstration of communists, Trotskyists, anarchists, social democrats and unionists who sent the fascists scurrying back to the gutter. It is popularly known in Brazil as the Flock of the Green Chickens since the fascists fleeing the square threw off their green shirts in their desperate attempt to anonymously flee. We need to be prepared to do the same with the green and yellow national football jerseys favored by the Bolsonaristas.

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P.S.

- Spectre. November 4, 2022:
<https://spectrejournal.com/bolsonarismo-after-bolsonaro/>