



Brazil: Lula falters as left makes a breakthrough

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The Brazilian presidential elections on 1 October saw the surprise failure of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to win outright. Lula, an ex-car worker, is the historic leader of the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores -Workers? Party), the reformist party that has the support of the mass of the Brazilian working class. That he will win the second round on 29 October is now far from certain.

An equal shock was the level of support for the far left candidate, Heloísa Helena, who gained a national average of 6.8% and reached double digits in some of the PT?s working class strongholds. This demonstrates that, after just one four-year term in office, the PT?s broken promises have radicalised an important section of the Brazilian workers and landless poor. This opens an enormous opportunity for the left to help transcend reformist politics - but the programme Helena stood on was far from promoting such a break.

Helena stood as the candidate of the Left Front, and came third with over 6.5 million votes. The Left Front was made up of three left parties: P-Sol, PSTU and PCB. The P-Sol (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade, Party of Socialism and Freedom) was founded in 2004 after Helena, a senator, was expelled from the Workers? Party, along with three parliamentary deputies, for opposing Lula?s neoliberal attack on pensions.

The Left Front includes significant groups that claim adherence to Trotskyism but in practice vacillate between revolutionary and reformist politics. The Brazilian section of the Fourth International, loyal to the Paris-based international committee/executive bureau, dominates p-Sol. The party has also attracted large numbers of disillusioned PT militants in the old strongholds of the party. Thus the P-Sol represents a unification of the supposedly revolutionary and the openly reformist left, on a non-revolutionary programme. Another supposedly Trotskyist party in the Front is the PSTU (Partido Socialista dos Trabalhadores Unificado, Unified Socialist Workers Party), the largest section of the ?Morenoist? LIT-CI. The third component - the PCB - is the now small, formerly pro-Moscow, Brazilian Communist Party.

The reasons behind the electoral success of the Left Front lie in the deep disappointment the Lula government has aroused amongst the vanguard of the working class movement - the rank and file militants of the CUT (the Brazilian trade union confederation), and the landless peasants of the MST, who together formed the core of his support. Lula?s programme was already a severely pruned-down version of the militant reformism advanced by the PT in the 1980s and ?90s.

But the PT government did promise serious measures to address poverty, increase literacy and improve health care. Indeed, addressing the crowds after his 61% victory in the second round of the 2003 elections, Lula declared, ?We are the ones who can guarantee an agrarian reform and that people can eat three times a day.? In fact, this has turned out to be empty demagogy. The agrarian reform has been pathetically minimal - provoking sharp criticism from the MST. The CUT bureaucracy has proved more loyal, but at the cost of losing or expelling sections of the most militant and well-organised workers. As a result, in Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo provinces - the PT?s working class heartland - Lula?s vote slumped. In Rio, Helena won 17.13% of the vote. In contrast, Lula?s vote in the hitherto conservative-influenced but poverty stricken North East, increased.

Lula?s social programme, centring on the Bolsa Familia (family grant) has provided the most impoverished families with a small monthly payment in return for sending their children to school, to health clinics and so on. A recent survey showed that 37% of the population were able to spend a little more on food than in 2002. But three meals a day?

Certainly not. The reason for this is plain enough. Together with this modest reform, the PT has carried out strictly orthodox neoliberal economic policies. These do not reduce poverty - they make the rich richer and the poor even poorer.

The Bolsa Familia is actually a consolidation of four pre-existing cash payments to the very poor. The number of families covered has increased substantially, from over three million in 2003 to nine million today - a total of 36 million people in a country of 186 million. But the Bolsa is set at only 6% of the country's minimum wage - US \$24 for a family of four, or 19% of the income the World Bank considers the poverty line. The cost of the whole scheme represents only 0.5% of Brazil's GDP.

In short, though the very poor are undoubtedly glad to receive anything which improves their lot, the idea that such measures will abolish poverty, or even seriously ameliorate it, is nothing more than a sick joke. The Bolsa is a typical 'social liberal' measure, a fig leaf for neoliberal macroeconomic policies which, meanwhile, are increasing inequality on a massive scale. Lula is the Gordon Brown of Latin America. No wonder he was so warmly received in Downing Street.

It is a tight clique of US-trained, hardline neoliberal, bankers in the finance ministry who run the economy. Lula claims that their orthodox deflationary policies are absolutely essential to maintaining 'foreign confidence' in the Brazilian economy. The consequence is that the country has one of the highest domestic interest rates in the world - 17 to 18%. It also has a huge and steadily expanding public debt of around R\$1 trillion (£250 billion). To pay the interest, the government has to issue high yield public bonds, snapped up by the 20,000 families of the super-rich, enabling them to get even richer.

Carlos Lessa, president of Brazil's main development bank, BNDES, who was dismissed by Lula, has attacked this policy: 'This means that R\$100 billion of public money goes to this tiny group of very rich people, compared with the R\$7 billion going to the very poor. So the government is practising the most brutal policy of wealth and income concentration on the planet.'

Nor has this neoliberal medicine led to serious economic growth, even in a period of a cyclical upswing in the world economy. During the four years of Lula's presidency, GDP per capita has risen by 1.4% annually, slightly less than it did under his predecessor right-winger Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1.6% a year). Indeed, in Lula's presidency real wages have actually fallen by 9%.

Lula has continued to follow the IMF's policies loyally, paying the external debt and carrying out marketising reforms, including attacks on public sector workers' pensions. Another factor leading to disillusionment has been the corruption charges that have dogged the government. It appears that ministers were operating an illegal slush fund, largely bribes from private companies in return for government contracts, to buy the votes of federal deputies in Congress and, most recently, funding a dirty tricks campaign against Lula's main electoral rival. Lula's choice for a vice-presidential running mate in 2006, as in 2002, was José Alencar, the country's wealthiest textile magnate and the leader of both a small right-wing party and an evangelical church.

Heloísa Helena of P-Sol is a powerful and popular speaker who concentrated heavily on condemning Lula's betrayal of his promises, denouncing his neoliberalism and his toleration and cover ups of corruption. A long term supporter of the Fourth International, she is nevertheless a devout catholic who does not hide her opposition to abortion. Despite the powerful presence of those who call themselves revolutionaries and Trotskyists in the Left Front, its programme was reformist.

Nevertheless, it started with a bold declaration: 'The Left Front wants to liberate the country from the clutches of finance capital and imperialism.'

It then went on to outline a series of radical reforms: suspension (though not cancellation) of the payment of the foreign debt, rejection of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (ALCA), doubling of the minimum wage, a 'substantial' reduction of working hours without loss of pay and a programme of public works to reduce unemployment, placing oil,

telecommunications, energy and steel under the control of the Brazilian people.

But on the democratic and social rights of women it was vague, perhaps for obvious reasons given a candidate who accepts the teachings of the Catholic church on abortion: 'In defence of the working woman, we demand the creation of crèches for children from 0 to 6 years. We fight against all forms of racial or sexual discrimination.'

As to the 'property question', the acid test of any programme claiming to be socialist, there was no mention of expropriating the property of the big corporations and the super-rich or establishing a real socialist alternative to the madness of the market economy. The P-Sol manifesto was limited to measures of redistribution and control, not expropriation and a planned economy.

'We recommend severe taxation of the big fortunes and profits of the banks and big companies. The public control by workers and consumers of the production of essential goods is a necessity so that the redistribution of wealth is a reality and to put an end to the enormous inequalities which are the shame of our country.'

In fact, the Left Front Manifesto was a programme for a government brought to power solely and exclusively by means of an election, not by the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses, which found no mention within it. It accepted - tacitly - the framework of a capitalist economy and made no call for the forcible smashing of the capitalist state and its permanent repressive apparatus of police and army set up against the people.

In the elections to the lower house of parliament, the 'far left' did less well than in the poll for the presidency. As a measure, the PT got 13,989,859 votes - 15.0% and 83 deputies. Left Front parties gained 1,315,692 votes in total. The P-Sol was by far the strongest of the parties within the Front. It got 1,149,619 votes (1.2% of the poll) and three deputies. The PSTU got 101,307 votes (0.1%) and the PCB 64,766 votes. Neither elected any deputies.

The distribution of votes is revealing. Lula won in 16 states, and kept his support among the poor in Brazil's deprived north and northeast. But voters, including many trade unionists in the large working class centres, are abandoning the PT and even moving to the P-Sol.

Thus the Brazilian 'far left' has an enormous opportunity and responsibility: to break the militant Brazilian working class, the landless rural workers and the urban poor of the favelas away from the PT and from reformism. At the moment, the strategy of the P-Sol does not accord with this. Whilst we in the League for the Fifth International would certainly give critical support to Helena in the first round of the presidential elections and to the PSol and PSTU candidates in the parliamentary elections, and would also refuse to back the Lula-Alencar ticket in the second round, we believe it is urgent to create a revolutionary party of the Brazilian working class committed to the class struggle, not primarily to electoralism, and to the revolutionary overthrow of the Brazilian state.

Elections are important arenas for revolutionary propaganda and agitation, but winning the maximum number of votes must never be the determinant of the content of a party's programme or election manifesto.

Can a revolutionary party emerge within the framework of the P-Sol? Possibly, but only on two conditions. The first is that the party remains democratic, open to hearing all pro-working class views. And the second is the existence within its ranks of an organised current fighting openly and honestly for the party to adopt a revolutionary programme and become a Leninist combat party capable of leading a revolution. The League for the Fifth International campaigns for the formation of such a political current on the Brazilian left.

For more on the PT origins and development go to [Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores: what kind of a workers' party?](#)

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