We will continue to fight for our rights!

Interview with Rachel Silva (Liga Socialista, Brazil) Tue, 12/03/2019 - 13:58
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Rachel Silva is a founding member of the "Liga Socialista" (LS, https://www.ligasocialista.com/), the Brazilian section of the League for the Fifth International, and a long-time activist of the teachers' union in Juiz de Fora; a city with a population of over 560,000 in south-eastern Brazil. Together with the comrades of the LS, she took part in the preparation of the demonstration on 8 March and in the establishment of a committee against the pension "reform" of the government of Brazil's far right president Jair Bolsonaro.

Question: How did the coup against President Dilma Rousseff of the PT (Workers Party) affect the situation of women and the sexually oppressed?

Since the 2016 coup, attacks on women and LGBT people have increased as the anti-PT wave moved to oust Dilma. She herself was the target of many machismo attacks throughout her presidency, ranging from the vilifications at the Maracanã stadium at the opening of the 2014 FIFA World Cup to the infamous pornographic stickers for cars that attacked women's dignity in general.

After the coup, the conservative anti-PT wave increased. Moral conservatism gained importance, especially when Veja magazine, one of the country's biggest magazines and representative of the bourgeoisie and the organisers of the coup, published an article about the new First Lady, Marcela Temer, wife of the then president Michel Temer, which praised her qualities of being "beautiful, modest and domestic".

During Temer's government, the National Secretariat for Women's Policy was transferred to the Ministry of Human Rights and removed from the group of government offices. This was already an attack as it annulled an achievement that represented a conquest of the women's struggles before the 2016 coup.

Question: What role do the conservative right and the churches play? What role did sexism play in the election campaign and what resistance was there?

This conservative wave, which was very strongly taken up and promoted by the Evangelical churches, gained more ground during the election campaign for the President of the Republic. The attacks were directed against public schools and teachers accused of spreading left-wing ideology, and even of paedophilia. In order to beat the PT, fake news of ideological indoctrination was produced and disseminated, using the term "gender ideology" and denouncing the PT government's educational policy as an attempt to teach children to be "gay". Lies about gay costumes in schools were spread through social networks and WhatsApp. Brazilian conservatism has launched a violent homophobic discourse.

In the fight back against this attack, against the candidacy of Bolsonaro, the movement #elenão, "Not Him", started on Facebook and brought together feminist fighters, independents, housewives, and men in Brazil and around the world. Millions of people have taken to the streets to say #elenão! It was the largest women's movement in Brazil's history. The reaction to the movement was a series of new attacks on
feminists. Violence against militants, women and gays increased during the election period, especially between the first and second rounds.

Question: What deterioration, what attacks, are threatening women and LGBT+ people under Bolsonaro compared to the previous situation?

After taking office in January 2019, Jair Bolsonaro appointed a majority of men ministers. Of the 22 ministries, only two are headed by women: Agriculture, led by a right-wing extremist agribusiness representative from the DEM party (Democratas, Democrats), and the newly founded Ministry for Women, Family and Human Rights, whose Evangelical minister conducts a fundamentalist discourse against abortion and causes great controversy in the political scene with absurd statements, especially against schools and teachers.

With speeches that border on the deranged, she sets reactionary and ultra-conservative goals, does not accept gender issues and wants to make Sara Winter the head of the Women's Secretariat. Sara Winter, who says she is an ex-feminist, broke with feminism and founded the group FEMEN in Brazil, which operated separately from the other women's movement. She led harsh attacks on feminist movements with groundless accusations and defended ultra-conservative positions in women's politics.

We live at a time of attacks on several fronts. In Congress, we are attacked by attempts to eliminate rights such as the abortion guaranteed since 1945 in cases of anencephaly, the absence of a large part of the foetal brain, skull and scalp, rape and dangerous pregnancies. In the past, we were repeatedly put on alert, as in the case of a bill by the former deputy Eduardo Cunha of the Party of the Democratic Movement of Brazil, PdMDB.

At the beginning of February this year, Congressman Marcio Lambre of Bolsonaro's own Social Liberal Party, PSL, presented two laws that directly attack our rights. One bill provides for a ban on abortion in all circumstances and throughout the pregnancy, except where there is a high risk for the pregnant woman, with penalties for doctors including the withdrawal of their license to practice.

The other project provides for a ban on the marketing and distribution of contraceptives, the morning after pill and the coil, with penalties for users and manufacturers. After harsh criticism, the MEP withdrew the contraceptive project after being informed that abortion for rape, risk of death and anencephaly is provided for in the Criminal Code by order of the Federal Court of Justice. He will amend his proposal accordingly, but his goal will remain the reversal of the progress of abortion provision in Brazil.

The Bolsonaro government has also just submitted to Congress the proposal to "reform social security", that is, the social pension insurance system. This proposal is not only a harsh attack on the "workers" in general, but it also means greater losses for women, especially women farm workers.

Question: Has violence against women continued to increase?

Violence against women in Brazil reaches absurdly high levels: 606 assaults, 135 rapes and 12 murders per day. Every 2 minutes, 5 women are beaten in Brazil. These are current figures, but they do not show the reality because many women do not report violence to the police.

In Brazil, a country with a high degree of macho culture, we now have a semi-fascist president who has always made violent speeches against women, classified them as inferior and argued that women should earn less than men because he says "they will become pregnant". Bolsonaro was sentenced to pay compensation to Congressman Maria do Rosário Nunes of PT for verbally abusing her in the corridors of the House of Representatives. He had said that he would not rape her because she did not deserve it.
because she was too ugly.

Question: How has the women's movement developed in recent years?

The women's movement grew during the PT governments. Collectives related to the "World March of Women", the march of the Marguerites, the movement of peasant women working in farming, forestry and fishing, collectives of left-wing parties like the United Socialist Workers' Party, PSTU, the Party for Socialism and Freedom, PSOL, and the Brazilian Communist Party, PCB loyal to Moscow after 1956 all grew. This period also saw increased discussion of women's issues and the organisation of women in the trade union federation, CUT, and the Workers' Party, PT. Campaigns to defend the legalisation of abortion gained support from male workers and youth. Feminism gained strength and grew on the streets. With the election of Trump, the feminist movement in Brazil followed the worldwide call launched in the march against Trump. Trade union demands were raised on International Women's Day. The women's movement and its organisations have become an obstacle for conservatives and opponents of the macho society.

The women's movement came under attack with the coup that overthrew Dilma Rousseff. The attacks grew, the discourse against feminism took over the social networks and the evangelical groups, together with other churches, contributed even more to this attack.

Question: How can resistance be successful? What policy is necessary?

As for women's struggles against these attacks, we have not seen much mobilisation since the elections. The expectation is that after Carnival, which begins on March 1, the movement will grow. The International Women's Strike, which several groups have focussed against the "reform" of the social security system, is being prepared for March 8. However, the mobilisation in our region is weak. March 8 coincides with Carnival Week this year, which makes it very difficult to organise action. Here in Juiz de Fora, the collectives came together to organise a militant March 8, but there was a split. The PCB, PSOL and PSTU broke with the collectives associated with the "World March of Women" and the PT. They are organising separate actions.

At this moment of heavy attacks on the working class, especially women, we must organise ourselves with an antisexist and class-oriented agenda to strengthen the actions against the reform of social security and to counter this illegitimate and semifascist government.

We will continue to fight for our rights, against the reform of social security, for the decriminalisation of abortion and to put an end to violence against women and femicide.

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