Chronicles from Brazil

Although the next presidential election will only occur in six months, the situation in Brazil is deeply affected by it. Many contradictions are expressing and could be summarized in terms of a definitely explosive situation, both politically and socially, due to the accumulation of counter-reforms, budget cuts-down and brutal measures taken against the masses since the beginning of the putsch process with the impeachment¹, the first vote dating from April 2016.

All this has occurred most rapidly, as if the Brazilian bourgeoisie’s timing should match the imperialism’s programme and its measures already implemented in other countries in the world and in those in South America that have not experienced the so-called progressive governments - progressive in the sense of policies responding the working class’s interests.

Yet, in Brazil, these counter-reforms had been put on hold – although some were more or less carried out – finally causing the country’s rollback in its relationships with the world trade. It is the need to make up for this delay that makes the situation so explosive today. For the problem actually is concentrating on a key issue: the counter-reform dismantling the public healthcare system, the architecture of which started being built in the 1940s.

Actually, the present bill has not yet been adopted by the Chamber of deputies, although the government struggles to have it voted. In fact, the internal situation keeps marked by the fights back against this counter-reform, as they were recently expressed in the strong participation in the general strike, called by the CUT, the national unified federation of trade-unions, with other trade-union federations in April 2017.

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It is an attempt to put class struggle on hold, to put the ongoing social, political and economic processes on hold, at the very moment when the nation, the aspirations, the world context do not allow for waiting for the end of the electoral process. Would it be regarding the situation in the USA who have just announced, at the beginning of March, the taxing of steel and aluminium imports. This measure, which destabilizes the relationships with Europe and China, will also have brutal effects, in a short term, on Brazil’s industrial core, which rests on metallurgy - Brazil being moreover the USA’s second supplier. And, no initiative whatsoever can be expected from the Brazilian government to resist it.

Yet, resistance does exist in the people’s conscience. It expresses itself currently in the support to Luís Ignacio da Silva’s candidacy on the Workers’ Party (PT) ticket, Lula being ahead in all polls for over a year, as anyone knows.

Yet the more intensive are the judicial persecutions against Lula to prevent him from running for presidency, the more he is ahead in the polls. On the contrary, the rate of support for the judicial power decreases, as it is seen more and more as the instrument of the establishment against the people, as well as - in the case of Brazil - a key institution of the historical submission to imperialism forever.

Why has the situation become unpredictable?

Before answering the question, we need to review the situation within the PT. Although the party is ahead in the polls for the next presidential election, the effects of the PT’s double defeat in 2016 are still felt. The first defeat was President Dilma’s ouster from power in August 2016, which occurred quite rapidly.

The second one happened two months later, in October, with the sanction of the 10 million votes lost at the municipal elections. The effects of these two defeats have not disappeared, even if, indeed, there is some internal re-composition always going on.

On our side, in the framework of the grouping PTist Dialogue and Action (DAP)² – a grouping existing for many years now -, we address the issue of political representation. At the last congress in June 2017, a new leadership was elected on the base of breaking points – precisely those given up 25 years ago – expressed in a platform, the major ones being : for a Constitutional assembly
which will decide new institutions to get over with the putschists’ measures, and will particularly open the way for the popular reforms left aside - such as the land law, the social rights, the issue of political representation -, the end of the primary budget surplus mechanism, the demilitarization of the military police, etc.. That is in brief the whole of the PT’s historic programme, abandoned along the years, but revived by the last congress.

Nevertheless, neither the outcome of this congress with the election of a leadership in which the relative majority is composed of a bloc consisting 48% of Lula’s historic current – the CNB3 – and a bit more than 2% of the DAP, nor the election of the new leadership will resolve the issue of the construction of a workers’ party defending an independent orientation.

In reality, the political assessment of the previous period has not been drawn up, which makes its effects still persistent today. It is the case of the old pension reform, for example. In its last version – the bill Tremer is trying to pass – it is actually what a fraction of Dilma’s government attempted to put on the agenda.

In the same vein, the opening to private investors of the pre-salt layer exploitation had started being negotiated at the end of Dilma’s government, even if Temer’s government has later deeply aggravates it.

The practical assessment drawn up by some PT-ists is thus far from being realized, even if the situation is favourable. Regarding Brazil’s history, the current situation can reasonably be compared with that prevailing at the time of the 1964 coup, when the Brazilian working class was somehow under the influence of the Brazilian Communist party (PCB), although it did not annihilate a centralized and organized resistance. On the contrary, today, the PT has still a base on which Lula’s candidacy can rely on. This also requires us to seek, together with the masses, the ways to overcome the obstacles raised to popular will.

The fact that the internal situation is not totally settled expresses itself also in a discussion, in reciprocating motion, concerning the famous plan B. The phrase has become popular in the press and proposes a substitute candidacy to Lula’s. The discussion leads to complex legal considerations about the possible options, including extreme ones, such as Lula’s candidacy even if imprisoned. This possibility really exists and could occur in the coming weeks.

Another legal solution exists: The Federal Supreme court (TSF) can decide Lula’s ineligibility, who then could not run for presidency. Except that on this issue, the Brazilian law is ambiguous and has been interpreted very differently in very different periods.

Faced to this uncertainty – which is the real situation – substitute candidacies may raise, either from inside the PT – leaders, prefects, former ministers, etc. – or from outside the PT – candidacies linked with the nationalist circle, for instance, or from sectors of the extreme left-wing who would try to dispute Lula’s and the PT’s places.

The PT’s official and unanimous position on this issue is that “the election without Lula would be a fraud”. It concentrates the current orientation and we have supported it since the beginning. This official position of the PT’s leadership thus washes out any other hypothesis. Yet it runs alongside the speculations about a plan B. Moreover, Lula’s statements on the matter are sometimes not very clear. He declares, for instance, that he will not accept his condemnation and will fight to the end. He also declared, in a recent interview, that he is not in favour of boycotting the election. It must be made clear that it means the presidential election, for it would not have necessarily the same repercussions – this is a discussion to have – in the case of the general, senatorial and State governors’ elections, which will take place the same day.

In view of these factors, the PT’s unanimous position is thus not guaranteed on the election field. The context of the elections also raises the question of power on a scale unprecedented in the last period. The working class has thus seized a name to face all the attacks and strokes, without being guaranteed that, in the election, the name could appear on a ballot paper nor even be submitted to their vote. Some may be tempted moreover to commit unprecedented electoral fraud.

These various scenarios also lead to the possibility that the “second one” in the votes could then accede to power without having won the election nevertheless. This would totally delegitimize the regime and leave the situation open to a masses’ uprising or to a more organized movement fighting for the Constituent assembly, with all the results involved.

On the other side, we must be aware that the situation is very uncomfortable for imperialism. It brings to light the fact that, two years after the putsch, imperialism does not yet have a candidate competitive in the polls. This concern was expressed, for instance, in the columns of the Financial Times. Voicing a sector of the international finance capital, the paper considered last month that the judicial power’s intrigues would hurry the cancellation of Lula’s candidacy, which, according to the paper’s words, “would lead the country into a dangerous situation”. So, one sector of the capital expresses these concern, while the others, representing mainly entrepreneurs, spoke mouths of bosses’ unions, banks, etc. demand that Lula be sent to jail... even if all of them are objectively frightened by the fact that, according to the polls, Lula would be ahead since the first turn. All these factors make the situation very unpredictable.

Another element reinforces the situation uncertainty. Temer keeps in office with only a 3 to 4 % standing in
the polls. He has now become a character that has to be removed.

We could see it recently. When it came to submitting the healthcare reform to the vote, Temer lacked the majority, which urged him to trigger the manoeuvre of the militarization of the State of Rio de Janeiro. He thus intervened in the field of public security while leaving the State governor formally in office and condemning him to a state of living death!

This intervention comes in addition with other measures that, as we see it, move towards a process of militarization of the country, a slow but steadily growing militarization. One week before the intervention in Rio de Janeiro, the battalion of the country’s northern border, stationed in the State of Roraima neighbouring Venezuela, was ordered to take control of civil affairs, under the pretext of an influx of migrants from Venezuela. This decision was concomitant with the tour of the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. Indeed, he did not come to Brazil in order to avoid liaising with the putsch authorities, but he collaborates with them – and the other neighbouring countries – in his policy of sealing off Venezuela. Besides, the situation in Venezuela is entangled with the Brazilian one, notably through the reinforced border control.

There is thus a direct link between the militarization of Rio and the military reinforcement of the border. A process we have experienced before, including under Lula’s government at the time of his support to the military intervention in Haiti. The statements of the then-Minister of Justice justified the Brazilian soldiers’ participation as military training for their possible deployment in the favelas. Ten years later, a decree by Lula’s government to “guarantee law and order” was put forward to commit the army. Even if in the previous period, limited and punctual operations were concerned, this decree had nevertheless legitimized the handling by military forces of tasks assigned to the police.

Today, for a ten-month period, all the decisions concerning the security in the State of Rio are under a general’s command. A Ministry of Public security has also been created. It means a strong tendency towards the centralization of police forces, in a Federal state like Brazil where every federated State normally runs its state police. So now, these forces are all centralized under the authority of the new Ministry of National security, the Minister of Defence having appointed the general to this task. This has not been done for 20 years. In the country’s memory, such an act is a step forward towards the military dictatorship. It is no contingency or vote-catching modification, as some claim in the press, including some PT leaders. In reality, it is an attempt to save the putschists who do not succeed in having their main reforms voted any longer. On the social ground, they are demoralized and isolated, and the intervention of the armed forces is aimed at trying to restore some legitimacy.

Analytically, the bonapartism already underway - the centre of which having been the judicial power - calls now on the armed forces to strengthen itself. We must underline that the judicial power’s action combined with the armed forces is the classical scheme of dictatorship in Brazil. In other South American countries, the combination was different: the military dictatorships dissolved the Parliaments and even suspended the Supreme courts, like in Chile. In Brazil, the dictatorship maintained a mock Parliament, the operating one being shared between the judicial power and the armed forces, in a proportion today indeed different to that of the 1960s–1970s. Besides, we must also consider the whole set of measures taken in the cultural and educational fields in the last weeks, which participate in the ongoing process towards dictatorship and in which the defence of liberties takes therefore centre stage.

Yet, there are other key issues for the class struggle in Brazil. For instance, the labour code reform. Although passed, it has not been implemented yet due to legal contradictions that are none other than the result of the masses’ flight back to the reform. The greatest attention must be paid to the fact that the implementation of the reform has been devoted to each sector and filed of activity, which generates union-by-union fights back. We can notice it particularly in the private sector, where the fights back tend to centralize, and this in the midst of the electoral period.

It is what Lula refers to when he explains, directly or indirectly, that the measures taken by the putschist government must be repealed, specifically the labour code reform. This is the very significance of the Constituent assembly that should be convened. The word “should” must actually be used for this issue is far from being certain.

**The setting-up of committees**

The “Popular committees in defence of democracy and of Lula’s right to run for presidency", we have started to set up since January, are committees gathering the PT, unions, associations, religious sectors, other left parties, and even parties wider than just the left, particularly in the States located in the country’s interior. It is very conceivable that these committees in defence of democracy and of Lula’s right to run for presidency could turn into “Committees for the release of Lula”.

Obviously, this issue would have a more important international impact than today. At the Algiers conference, the International Liaison Committee of workers and peoples (EIT-ILC) decided to bear the defence of Lula’s right to run for presidency. It has been registered by the PT, and the issue is expected to play a major role in the coming period, notably if Lula is held in prison. In such a case, we will need to organise a worldwide campaign for his release, under forms appropriate to every country. It is a
possible scenario, then in an extremely difficult context, but it could be decisive to help overcome other obstacles of another nature.

Beyond the “military” regime – in quotes – and beyond the internal confusion within the PT on the yes or no to a plan B, there are also political forces trying to influence the PT from the outside with an argument, initially leftist, on an alleged exhaustion of the institutional “strategy”, and that on the scale of South America. For these arguments put the electoral outcomes in Ecuador or Argentina, the sealing-off of Venezuela, the impeachment in Brazil on the same level, and thus draw the conclusion of the failure of the electoral and institutional strategy on the continent.

This kind of assessment is defended not by traditional leftism, but by forces under Castro influence. The leftism that I name “traditional” – of Morenist origin or of other currents of this type -, has now reached a deep impasse. These currents have gone through successive crises of division because they have not fought the coup. In certain cases, some still deny there has been one. This at the very moment when precisely the masses’ movement, in their fights back, seeks a leadership that could confront the coup and its social and economic involvements.

These types of organisations are therefore weakening, including on the continent scale. Political positions from the 1960s-1970s, such as civil disobedience, exemplary actions, need for a “people’s congress” etc. are resurfacing as alternatives to the institutional path.

They sow confusion about the ways and aims of the working class in its fight for democracy, in order to impede the proletariat’s endeavour to achieve the programme of revolutionary democracy. Those are old songs sought to be revamped and to sow confusion. They must be fought.

For our part, faced to the forthcoming clash, whatever may occur (Lula’s candidacy, Lula’s non-candidacy, cancellation of the election, Lula’s victory and inauguration, Lula winning the election but not inaugurated), we know that a new qualitative shock will occur in Brazil.

To prepare this major shock, we must reinforce, more than ever, the grouping we have set up with the PT, PTist Dialogue and Action (DAP), as a fulcrum for the establishment of the committees for democracy in a process echoing, on an international level, the composition of the Brazilian delegation who participated in the 9th Open world conference in Algiers promoted by the EIT-ILC.

These are two dimensions combining our tasks to carry out their implementation. Lastly, our internal plan includes the preparation of the coming congress of the PT’s current O Trabalho, the Brazilian section of the Fourth International.

Markus Sokol, O Trabalho,
Member of the PT’s national leadership,
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1. Dilma Roussef’s impeachment in 2016.
2. A political grouping within the PT - in which the current O Trabalho participates - defending an independent policy on the slogan “Act as the PT used to act”.
3. Construindo um novo Brasil (CNB), Building a new Brazil, the PT’s majority current.
4. The term “pre-salt layer” denotes a type of rock in the earth’s crust formed exclusively of petrified salt, coating the seabed. This type of rock may contain oil. In Brazil, all the oil fields recently discovered in the pre-salt layers are located between depths of 1000-2000 m for the submerged part and of 4000-6000 m under the salt layer. These new oil fields stretch along a stripe of around 800 km along the Brazilian shore, between the State of Espirito Santo and that of Santa Catarina.
5. In reference to Nahuel Moreno (1924-1987), an Argentinean labour militant who claimed to be a Trotskyist.
In the demonstration, January 24, 2018, in Porto Alegre: “The election without Lula would be a fraud”