

Brazilian Spring: a general panorama and some perspectives

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[Mass protests have been taking place in all the major cities of Brazil for the past week, beginning with a demand to reduce bus fares and expanding into a mass movement that demands improvements in all public services, health, education, and working peoples' rights. While initiated in many cases by left activists—anarchists and socialists—and by students, the protests were soon joined by many middle class people, and most recently by the Movement of the Landless (MST), the United Confederation of Labor (CUT), and organizations of the favelas, the urban slums. At the same time, in what has now become an enormous, swirling national movement rightwing and even fascist groups have insinuated themselves into the movement.]

The protests are taking place against a left-wing government of the Workers Party headed by Dilma Rousseff, a former leftist guerrilla leader who was tortured in the early 1970s while imprisoned under the then-ruling military dictatorship. She is the successor to Inacio “Lula” da Silva, the leader of the Metal Workers Union whose strikes in the 1970s helped to bring down the military dictatorship that ended in 1985. It was Lula—the enormously popular union leader, a founder of the CUT labor federation, and founder and outstanding leader of the Workers Party—who first brought the party to presidential power in 2003. He remained president through two terms until 2011, when Rousseff succeeded him.

Under Lula, the Workers Party, which had only a minority in the legislatures, began making cash payments to legislators in other parties in order to win their support. As president, Lula's policies enriched the banks and the construction industry in particular, while he also extended services and economic support to low-income families, transforming neoliberalism into what has been called social liberalism. The Workers party, formed by the Metal Workers Union and the CUT in the heat of the struggle against the dictatorship, now had not only the continued back of the unions, but also the industrial employers and the country's political elite as its institutionalized supporters. The history of the degeneration of the Workers Party is told in some detail in Perry Anderson's excellent article, “Lula's Brazil.”

Rodrigo Santaella, the author of the article, lives in Fortaleza, the country's fifth largest city with 2.4 million inhabitants. The events he describes there are characteristic of developments taking place across the country, as citizens protest the enormous amounts spent—as the Romans would have said—on “circuses” such the Confederation Cup, the World Cup, and the Olympics, rather than on schools, hospitals, and public transportation.—Dan La Botz]

Brazil is living through a period of intense social mobilization, such as the youth of this country has never seen. Despite government claims to the contrary, our society is characterized by structural inequality, racism, sexism, homophobia, as well as many other injustices and forms of oppression. In addition, public services and access to social rights such as health, education, and culture, are absolutely restricted and of poor quality. Our development model serves the concentration of wealth, the destruction of the environment, the increasing exploitation of the poor and the expulsion of indigenous and the maroon [descendants of escaped slaves]. All this happens in an environment of corruption, constant inversion of values and priorities, increasing empowerment of those who always had power, such as the media barons and the landlords. In addition, the economic downturn begins to show its effects here, with huge cuts in social budgets of more than US\$50 billion in 2011 and 2012, together with rising inflation.

There is a latent dissatisfaction in Brazil, which has always manifested itself in different ways, more sporadic than massive. The wave of protests that took the country today started with the fight against the increase in bus fares in several places, like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre and others. Police repression, violent and absolutely disproportionate, turned massive and the demonstrations spread throughout the country and continue. This, coupled with the realization of the Confederations Cup, set the stage for the wave of national mobilizations. The initial guidelines were linked to public transportation, police repression, and spending absurd amount of money for major events, and then later expanded greatly to include other issues. What began as a protest about bus fares became an amalgam of mixed agendas, all linked to this latent dissatisfaction, and centered around the struggle for rights and improvements in social programs.

At this moment, the Brazilian rightwing organizations, the depoliticized part of the middle class and mostly mainstream media have attempted to isolate and criminalize the movement as a whole. Especially after Thursday, June 13, when the strength of police repression—including against journalists—led to the huge mass movement, the thing became unmanageable, and the media and Brazilian right discourses changed radically. The first concrete victories were won with setbacks for the government on the issue of bus fares. The movement, instead of being characterized as violent and criminal, suddenly became a legitimate protest in the eyes of the media. This caused the depoliticized middle class, as well as many other sectors, including some fascist elements, to go into the streets. The right's tactic became to differentiate the so-called legitimate, non-violent, peaceful, and nationalist actions, fundamentally against corruption, from the "vandals and troublemakers." Today, the context is a broad and national movement, related to a diffuse indignation and without a clear program. Fundamentally, it is a movement about grievances that can develop strength anywhere.

Now, people are in the street. The Free Pass Movement (MPL), which began all these mobilizations somehow, and many other social movements, including leftist political parties that were always together with them, didn't capitulate like the government parties, though governing parties too joined the protests, if only half-heartedly. There are also anarchist groups that have also always been involved in our social struggles. And huge numbers of unorganized people, from the poor parts of the country, disgusted with their life situation, came out as well. The middle class, concerned about corruption and maintenance of some privileges, now make up a large part of this movement, though smaller groups with fascist tendencies are also involved and mingle among the masses, inciting violence against the organized Left, especially against political parties.

In this context, it is worth noting the antiparty feeling. Always present in the anarchist groups, it has also appeared among the middle class sectors and the media in particular have encouraged this feeling and this verbal attack on left parties, which the fascist groups take advantage of as they carry out violent attacks against leftist militants. The antiparty feeling is understandable if we observe the trajectories of concessions, endless setbacks and betrayals of the two major "left" parties of Brazil, the Workers Party and the Communist Party of Brazil. But the negative feeling is generalized to other leftist parties, the organized youth collectives, trade unions, and to whatever kinds of associations workers and students organized, and this is very dangerous. This discourse is supported and encouraged daily by the media, to the point that violent attacks have left many party activists seriously injured.

Currently, this is the general scenario. A broad mass movement, with a concrete political agenda yet to be defined, but that is already pressuring Brazilian politicians, as became clear in the last two statements of the president, Dilma Rousseff, including the possibility of convoking the Constituent Assembly Process to "improve" some parts of the constitution for the country. Regarding the social movements, there is no doubt that direct action has also fulfilled an important role in putting pressure on the federal and state governments. Peaceful walks of 100,000 people wouldn't have the

same effect if there weren't those who were there prepared to engage in confrontation and direct action. What is lacking among those who do and those who don't engage in direct action are clear and defined objectives. We lack a common political platform for the movement. Anyone able to give this movement a political platform that connects all the sectors will surely help Brazilian society advance.

In Fortaleza, the first major actions occurred as a reaction to the repression in São Paulo. On Monday, June 17, we had an action against the police crackdown, in which more than 2,500 people participated. This was organized by anarchist groups in the city, and it was a large walk, with moments of tension inside the movement itself about the route that the walk would take. On Wednesday, June 19, the largest demonstration in the city so far took place, with 100,000 people protesting before and during the Brazilian football match outside the Castelão Stadium. Organized using Facebook, the protest took unexpected proportions and won the support of the entire population of the city. Everybody knew this would happen, and we had 5% of the city's two million people there.

We had managed to organize three days earlier in a large plenary safety, communication and agitation committees, which worked relatively well and ensured that the demonstration had some uniformity in its demands and behavior. The idea was to march as close as possible to the stadium and to draw attention to the contradiction of holding the Confederations Cup in the fifth most unequal city in the world. Police repression was absolutely disproportionate, with tear gas bombs, rubber bullets, bombs dropped from helicopters, assaults and arrests for no known reason, and the demonstration became a matter of international politics, putting Fortaleza definitely on the map of the national demonstrations. It was a historical demonstration, possibly the greatest of all time in the city.

The next day, more than 30,000 people came to the financial heart of the city to demand the reduction of bus fares and the immediate delivery of student ID cards, delayed for months by the city. This also ended with repression and police violence in front of the Governor's Palace. This protest was quite confusing since it gradually lost the focus of the initial agenda and was poorly organized in terms of the route. It became clear that the movement needed to get organized. There have been other protests in recent days also with a great deal of repression and with arrests. The next demonstrations, which will take place on the National Days of Struggle—June 26 against homophobia; June 28 for a reduction of working hours; and June 27 at the Confederation Cup game against the World Cup and its contradictions—promises to be the biggest in the history of Fortaleza.

The major challenges of mobilization in the city are the same as the rest of the country: the movement needs to organize a clear political platform around which we struggle, more specifically to list priorities and seek uniformity in the guidelines for demonstrations. Undoubtedly, the movement may decrease slightly in size (but not cease to be a mass movement) or it may divide into two or three movements, but the ones with a clear program will become more powerful and less amorphous. The anti-party debate should be thorough and should seek dialogue among the activists, with or without a party, with or without an organized social movement. We must also seek a common interpretation of our direct actions, since it is inconceivable that protesters will criminalize their fellow protestors and denounce them to the police. Finally, we need to describe and differentiate to some extent the composition of the movement: while there are sectors who just want to change parts of the political game to maintain or increase their privileges, there are others who seek a radical transformation of society, from the perception that their own condition of life is unsustainable.

In order to establish a concrete agenda it is critical to channel all of this mass action for a radical transformation of society. To think about 10% of GDP going to public education immediately and 10% of GDP going to public health, both with resources from the non-payment of the public debt

(and an audit of the debt itself). An immediate reduction in bus fares towards free passes and zero carfare across the country. Tax Policy Reform. Land Reform. A forceful rejection of major events such as the World Cup and the Olympics, and the inversion of the priorities they reflect. A rejection of the proposal to lower the age at which youth can be tried for criminal activity. A correct and fair demarcation of indigenous lands. A rejection of the proposal to treat sexual orientation as a disease. The advancement of women's rights. And many other points... To put those all on the political platform of the movement is more than urgent, because it is a way to politicize it and use the historical moment to transform our city and our country. With this large inclusive platform, the tactic would focus fire on specific issues and immediate ones, and go forward in concrete victories.

Even with all the limitations and uncertainties, there is no doubt that what has been called the Brazilian Spring marks a new historical moment for us. Going to the streets, suffering police repression, acting collectively and participating personally in the demonstrations is very educational for a generation that had never experienced even one mass mobilization in the country. One of the most common expressions used to describe the moment is that "the giant woke up." It may be true, but a huge part of the poor sectors in Brazil never slept, and maybe they are the background to these mobilizations. If there's a Spring, there were those who were very alert during the Winter. It seems that the course of this process will be defined by the dialogue that those who never slept are able to establish with the still sleepy giant.

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