

Brazil's Party of Socialism and Freedom, PSOL: Another Way of Doing Politics

November 11, 2014

Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (PT) won Brazil's presidential election on October 26, meaning that when her term ends her party will have held the nation's top office for a remarkable sixteen years, longer than any party in Brazilian history. Rousseff began as part of an armed revolutionary guerrilla organization during the dictatorship from 1964-1985, then helped found the Democratic Workers Party (PDT), and only joined the PT in 2001. The PT of the 1980s and 1990s represented the political expression of militant labor and social movements tending toward socialism, yet today the PT is the establishment. And now others are attempting to build a new revolutionary movement to its left.

Tremendous opposition to Brazil's PT establishment has come from both left and right, as seen in the June 2013 demonstrations that swept the country. And in the October 2014 elections, both the left and especially the right grew as a result. The more conservative Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) succeeded in harvesting much of the discontent that expressed itself in the tremendous demonstrations of June 2013, other rightwing parties have also grown and a number of far right candidates have been elected. Thus we see a polarization of Brazilian society with gains for both the far right and the far left.

On the left, the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) proved most successful, especially in Rio de Janeiro where it emerged as a real electoral force to the left of the PT. There are also at least two other important far left parties, the United Socialist Workers Party (PSTU) and the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), though they are both less significant electoral forces, the former having received 188,473 votes and the latter 66,615 votes in the recent national election. The PSTU is a more important force in the labor unions, while PSOL has deeper roots in other social movements. There have been proposals for electoral fronts of all three parties in the past, but in 2010 and 2014 PSOL was not an attractive electoral ally because it was too weak, so PSTU ran its own candidates. With PSOL's strength in this election, a left electoral front is more likely, as has already happened in some states.

This article is a companion to another that analyzes the Brazilian elections which will appear in the January issue of New Politics. We look here at PSOL through the experiences of some of its leaders and activists.

The Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL), a leftwing breakaway from the Workers Party (PT) that has governed Brazil since 2003, did quite well in the October 2014 election, especially in the State of Rio de Janeiro. The PSOL increased its Congressional representatives nationally from 2 to 3 and state representatives from 3 to 5. The PT's candidate for governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro, Tarciscio Motta, won almost 10 percent of all votes cast. Running for Congress, Chico Alencar was victorious with nearly 200,000 votes as was Marcelo Freixo who received almost 350,000. Luciana Genro, PSOL's presidential candidate won 1,745,470 votes, compared to the party's candidate in 2010 who won 1,144,216. The election results make PSOL the most electorally significant party of the far left. Even more important, however, PSOL used the elections to organize and win new activists to its project.

PSOL represents a different way of doing politics on the far left in Brazil. Unlike most other organizations on the far left, PSOL does not see itself as a party in the Leninist mold, but is rather a

pluralistic organization that contains several different political tendencies with different histories. While PSOL has its own clear organization and political program, its members strongly identify with the labor and social movements and feel a strong loyalty to them. It is this melding with the movements that allowed PSOL to have greater success in the spontaneous upheavals of June 2013 and to make a strong showing in the October 2014 elections. While in Brazil in August, we had an opportunity to talk with PSOL leaders activists in the enormous metropolis of São Paulo, in the magnificently beautiful city of Rio de Janeiro, and in the historic capital of African Brazil, Salvador. Their biographies help to illustrate the pluralistic, multi-tendency character of PSOL.

João Machado - The Trotskyists in PSOL



To better understand PSOL, we asked several of PSOL's leaders and activists to talk with us about their personal histories, their work in the party and in the movement. We start with João Machado of São Paulo, who for decades has been in the leadership of the Trotskyist, Fourth International tendency in Brazil, because he and his comrades were so influential in both the PT and then in the creation of PSOL. Machado, one of the central leaders of Insurgência, a tendency within PSOL, was born in 1951 in the state of Minas Gerais. He first became politically active in 1965 at the age of 14 during the period of the military dictatorship as part of Catholic youth group led by priest who organized political discussions. When he was 18 in 1969 Machado had entered the university where he became a Marxist and got involved with a group of people who formed the group Democracia Socialista.

"We had the idea that we in Democracia Socialista could fight for the leadership of the PT until the early 1990s," says Machado. "The PT was moving to the left throughout that period." Then Lula and the PT began to turn in a more conservative direction. "Lula's government never broke with the bourgeoisie. They wanted to get along with the bourgeoisie while introducing some improvements in the social situation. For example, Lula's Finance Minister, Antonio Palocci, adopted neoliberal programs, while the government also increased social programs."

Machado explains how the DS could in the 1990s have had such hopes of possibility winning leadership in the PT and transforming it into a revolutionary party. "We had an alliance between Articulação Esquerda [Lula's tendency] and the DS which gave us a majority in the leadership of the PT. Lula wanted to base the party on a broader multi-class coalition and he was in favor of more conservative programs. He was very shrewd would have others present his ideas and when he lost, it didn't hurt him. During that period Lula often lost votes. We on the left were often able to defeat him up until the early 2000s." But by 2003 when it was clear that Lula had moved to the right, the situation could no longer be maintained. DS militants and others on the left criticized and voted against Lula and his allies, and were eventually expelled to found PSOL.

Why, we asked Machado, has the Brazilian capitalist class now become so hostile to Lula, Rousseff and the Workers Party even though they adopted the pro-capitalist neoliberal model? "Under Lula

and under Dilma there was an attempt to increase the power of the state in its dealings with big capital, and it was this that led the bourgeoisie to decide to stop collaborating with the PT. They have never felt that the PT was theirs. Now they feel that they could have a president and political party which directly represented their interests.”

Returning to PSOL, Machado says, “We are aware that back in the 1980s the Workers Party was founded by grassroots movement, rank-and-file movements of workers, of people on the left, and of Christian groups, both Catholic and Protestant—while PSOL was formed in the early 2000s by an expelled senator and expelled deputies. That is, it began with a parliamentary orientation and with positions which were not as far left as those of PT at the time of its founding. PSOL faced a greater parliamentary temptation. Its virtue is PSOL has not been consolidated, it can improve.”

Machado is optimistic about PSOL’s future. “We believe that the left opposition is well positioned to be able to dispute power with the PT. We have better politics on environmentalism, and we are anti-bureaucratic, opposed to the bureaucracy not only of the PT and other parties, but also to the bureaucracy of the labor unions.”

Leo Lince - From the Communist Party to PSOL



Others came to the PSOL by other paths. Leo Lince, a leading figure in PSOL’s large Rio da Janeiro organization, is a close advisor to Chico Alencar, a PSOL Congressman. Lince told us, “I was born in Goiás, Brazil in 1947. I became a student activist in the university in Goiás, joining the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) in 1964—the year the military took power—and was involved in clandestine activity during the period of the military dictatorship. The PCB was a small, illegal party, a party that didn’t have even one congressman. I was arrested in 1968 at the age of 21 and spent one year in prison. I then went into exile and from 1970 to 1972 lived in the Soviet Union. In Moscow I studied at the university but also attended a Communist training school. When I returned to Brazil there were only two legal political powers in the country: the military and the Party of the Democratic Movement of Brazil (PMBD) that had been established by the dictatorship in 1966. While still a Communist, I became active in the PMBD as a way of doing politics.

“I became part of a group within the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB), a group of about 200 Communists who left the PCB and entered the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT) in 1989. The group was led by Leandro Konder, a noted intellectual, and Carlos Nelson Coutinho, a longtime PCB leader. That same group, which formed a tendency within the Workers Party (PT), later left to join in the foundation of the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) in 2004, participating in gathering the 500,000 petition signatures needed to create an official, electoral party. I became part of the national leadership of the PSOL.”

Asked why he and his comrades left the PT, Lince explains, “In 2002 the Lula government began to move away from the PT’s positions, for example on the question of social security. When they spoke out on this issue, a number of PT leaders and activists—such as Luciana Genro, who was the party’s presidential candidate in October 2014,—were expelled. There were waves of expulsions. We left and formed the PSOL in 2004. Within PSOL there are groups that have come out of the armed organizations, the Trotskyists, various Marxist-Leninists, Luxemburgists, and the believers in the Theology of Liberation.” Lince does not belong to any of the PSOL’s internal tendencies; he is an independent.

Brazil today, says Lince, is in a transition period that requires a different way of doing politics. “Hannah Arendt once said, ‘We are between “no more” and “not yet”.’ We are in a time of movement, of dislocation, not just a time of change, but a change of time. The events of 2013 were an expression of this transition period.”

“We saw in the protests of 2013” says Lince, “a complete rejection of parties, though interestingly not of PSOL, and in particular not a rejection of Chico Alencar . One of the reasons for this was that PSOL didn’t try to put itself forward as the leader of the movement, with huge banners with its name on them, but rather entered modestly as part of the movement. In the book that Chico has just written—*A Rua, A Nação, e o Sonho: uma reflexão as novas gerações* (The Street, the Nation, and the Dream: A Reflection of the New Generations)—there is a programmatic section. He takes the terms for this section directly from the signs carried by protestors in June 2013.”

From the Morenistas to PSOL - Ana Carvalhaes



Ana Carvalhaes was born in São Paulo and became active at the age of 17 during the last years of the military dictatorship. She became a journalist working for several important Brazilian newspapers while also earning a master’s degree in political economy. She joined the organization of the followers of the Argentine Trotskyist Nahuel Moreno, the group today called the United Socialist Workers Party (PSTU), and worked with them for many years. Through her journalism and her political work she spent five years living in the mining region of Bolivia (in Oruro and Llallagua), a year in Peru, and six months living in Argentina, and as a result of her journalistic and political work speaks not only Portuguese, but also Spanish and English fluently. A group from the Morenista Trotskyists of which she was formerly a member broke away from the main body in 2002 and became some of the founders of PSOL.

We asked Carvalhaes about the relationship between Insurgência and PSOL. “Insurgência is the result of a merger between several different groups and is affiliated with the Fourth International. We are nearly 700 strong in Rio de Janeiro and play an important role in the Party of Socialism and

Freedom (PSOL). We have a representative in the city government. We also have influence in northeastern Brazil, in the city of Fortaleza where we also have a representative in government there, João Alfredo.”

When asked about PSOL’s internal life, Carvalhaes explained, “We have in PSOL three tendencies. The first is on the right is called Popular Socialist Action (APS) and they are Stalinists. They are at the moment the leaders of the coalition that dominates the party as a result of a 51/49 vote at our last convention. The second is on the left and includes Insurgência. The third is MES, the Movement of the Socialist Left which is also affiliated with the FI as an observer. Our presidential candidate in 2014, Luciana Genro, comes from that tendency which is strong in the South.”

What does Carvalhaes think about being a member of a pluralistic, multi-tendency party like PSOL? “With all its problems,” says Carvalhaes, “PSOL is richer than any centralized or vertical party. Reaching any decision or taking any action is difficult. We have to negotiate constantly with all the other groups. But this is a far more interesting and richer process.”

We asked Carvalhaes how she saw the enormous social explosion of the June Days of 2013. “The movement,” said Carvalhaes, “was the result of discontent as a result of economic conditions. The government of Lula and of Dilma, that PT government, had succeeded in improving conditions a little, a very little. But now the people said, ‘We want more.’ We have jobs and we have wages, but we don’t want to pay the high bus fare. One of the slogans of the movement was, ‘It’s not about the 20 cents.’ But it was about the 20 cents. People said FIFA (the World Cup) needs us, but we have needs too, we need health care and education.

“We should be clear that the PT has not overcome the national scandal of inequality. Brazil has a long history going back to the Portuguese conquest of violence, oppression, and inequality, and those issues continue. And inequality is racial as well. We can say that Brazil has a history of ‘negotiated oppression’ that arose from the Portuguese conquerors’ dealings with the women that they took to bed with them. We have a history of oppression that is based on class, race, and gender violence.

“So we had this social explosion against everything: against the government, the politicians, the labor unions, against all parties, against us. But, interestingly when Chico Alencar or Marcelo Freixo went to the demonstrations, they were embraced. People loved them because they were known and they were there.

“People who are not on the left think that it was just a youth movement, but it was also a workers movement. At the end of June, a lot of middle class people pulled out of the movement and only the working class was left.

“It’s important to understand that in addition to the broad movement in June there were also several strikes. The primary teachers went on strike for months. It was a strike against the mayor of Rio that involved about 10,000 teachers. All of the left groups became involved in it. It was the first such strike in thirty years. There were many demonstrations of thousands of teachers and their supporters and there was solidarity from teachers all over the country. The strike resulted in a draw, but there had been a very large movement.

“Then there was the strike of the garis, that is, the garbage collectors. That strike took place in February during Carnival and the garbage was piled high in the streets, and the wealthy were surprised that the general population supported the strikers.

“This was followed in May by a strike in the subway system that moves three million people each

day. When you shut down the subway, you shut down Rio. The movement was severely repressed with 70 workers being fired and fines against the union.”

Anarchists represented a significant current during the June Days. We asked Carvalhaes how Insurgência and PSOL related to the anarchists. “We defend the anarchists who have been criminalized by the government. There are 23 anarchists who were arrested and put on trial. We believe it is wrong to criminalize them and we participate in the movement in their defense. But, we don’t agree with their way of behaving. They go to a movement meeting, but they don’t feel any sense of responsibility to the collective. They leave and do whatever they want.”

In June 2013 there were eight million people in the streets—today Brazil is quiet. What, we asked Carvalhaes, happened to that movement? “The movement in general retreated,” she told us. “A part of the movement went to the ultra-left, to the anarchists and the black bloc. A small part went to the socialist left, to groups like the Unified Socialist Workers Party (PTSU) and to Insurgência. The June events and the rise in the class struggle are what made it possible for the various groups to come together to form Insurgência. At one point we had a youth camp (Rua campamento) with over 700 young people.”

Asked about the state of social movements today, Carvalhaes told us, “The LGBT movement is the largest and the most important social movement in Brazil and it is really impressive. The environmental movement and the women’s movement are both quite small. Though it’s interesting that the young women who were involved the June movement are, we might say, unconscious feminists. For example, they don’t allow men to take advantage of them, and if a man does something inappropriate, they push back.”

From the Brazilian Socialist Party to PSOL - Claudio Serricchio



Claudio Serricchio, who works for the national oil company Petrobras and is also an environmental activist. He was a member of the Partido Socialista Brasileira (PSB), then led by Eduardo Campos, before becoming involved in PSOL. We asked him about the Workers Party environmental policies. “When Lula first became president, he appointed a wonderful group of socialist environmentalists, but within a year the group was paralyzed because of the power of economic interests,” said Serricchio.

“The Lula government dealt with the problems of drought on northeast region, imposing a very expensive and questionable watershed transference project from the San Francisco River. There

were many investigations and billions were spent, but they did not deal with the issues. The Lula government permitted the introduction of transgenic soy beans and corn for the agro-export business. We see the use of pesticides and insecticides on an enormous scale. Lula permitted the expansion of the nuclear program and the planning of construction of five new nuclear plants and that was only stopped because of Fukushima. The PT has gone backwards on environmental issues,” he said.

Serricchio gave expression to the frustration felt by so many in Brazil. “As we saw in the demonstrations of 2013, one of the fundamental slogans was ‘Não nos representam.’ The legislators don’t represent us. We are at a complete impasse. They pass laws only for themselves. They don’t pass laws to advance social welfare, health, or education. The big agricultural and pharmaceutical interests are against measures to improve the environmental health of society. We see no solutions at present. People talk about new majorities, but at the moment the people see no way to advance their interests through politics.

We also have the problem of environmental groups that get money from corporations, so that they are more concerned with the money they get from the corporation than they are with the environment. Today it is interesting that the public prosecutors and the environmental courts are more powerful than the environmental movement.

Guilherme Moreira da Silva - A Young, Afro-Brazilian Oil Worker Leader



Guilherme Moreira da Silva at the age of 31 is the leader of a local oil workers union, part of the national petroleum works union (SINDEPETRO), in Salvador, Bahia. His father worked at the airport and his mother was a homemaker. He was born in Fortaleza where he went to school and met his wife Lidianny in high school. Later Guilherme went to college and studied mechanical engineering and then got a job for the state oil company (Petrobras).

Moreira’s union represents eighty technical workers in the State of Bahia where they work in the construction of refineries in the petro-chemical industry.

Moreira told us, “The Brazilian labor movement is very fragmented. It is divided into several centrais (labor federations) and many of these federations have a negative impact on the workers. The most important federation is the Sole Confederation of Workers (CUT) which is affiliated with the Workers Party (PT), but it has become very bureaucratized. Then there is the Confederation of Brazilian Workers (CTB) which is affiliated with the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). The different groups on the left are involved in these federations, especially the more leftwing federations, and in their affiliated unions.

"First, there is CONLUTAS in which the Unified Socialist Worker Party (PSTU) affiliated with the Morenista international (LIT) is involved as is the Left Socialist Movement (MES), a faction of the PSOL. Second, there is the Intersindical which has about 40 affiliated unions in which the Insurgência faction of PSOL is involved. Third, there is the Corriente Nacional de Trabahlo or CONAT." While there have been attempts over the last five years to merge the leftwing federations, but they have failed. Still Moreira believes it's important to promote unity in the labor left. "In my own Petrobras union, the left—PSOL, PSTU and the CUT left—put up a common chapa or slate. We believe that we can only develop mutual trust and confidence when those on the labor left work together."

Asked about the state of class struggle in Brazil, Moreira told us, "The level of class struggle was very low until last June 2013, then the level of struggle increased but it has been very uneven. The older industrial groups—metal workers and bank workers, for example—have found it harder to mobilize. They have been slow to act. Transportation workers, teachers and others have been more active, fighting both against their employers and their union leaders who have failed to take up their issues.

"In my union and in others, the government's tactic has been to draw the workers into negotiations, offering them a small raise together with a one-time-only bonus, in our case a bonus of BR\$5,000. The bank workers were offered something similar, though as a profit-sharing scheme, a small percentage of the bank's profits. Union members are reluctant to be drawn into fights because they have no confidence in their leaders."

Moreira is also involved in Brazil's Movimento Negro, the Black Movement, which is strong in the state of Bahia where he lives. "Bahia is the state with the greatest black population and Salvador the city with the greatest percentage of black population," Moreira told us. "I work in the Instituto Búzios which brings together the black movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement. We identify with the Salvador Revolt [also known as the Malê Revolt or Great Revolt] of 1835 that was an expression of the influence of the French Revolution on the African descent population of Bahia.

"Color has an impact. Brazil has an ideology of 'racial democracy,' though in practice such a democracy doesn't exist. For example, in many of the 'shoppings' they do not employ black or brown workers, so we have protests to demand that they hire brown and black workers. The PT government has a Ministry for Racial Equality and they have appointed a very famous and well known black person to head that, but the ministry does not have a very large budget or strong administration. We mostly see photo-ops not action.

"There are racial quotas in the schools and in competition for public employment. When those quotas first went into effect about ten years ago, suddenly many more people said that they were black.

"The areas where the black movement is strongest are Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul, and Sao Paulo. There was a black movement in the 1960s and 1970s that created the Movimento Negro Unificado, the Unified Black Movement, and, while that still exists, it is not as strong as it once was. Five years ago there was a National Congress of the Black Movement that brought together many organizations including religious organizations that practice the candomblé religion and black women's groups. Unfortunately the administration succeeded in dividing that group, winning some to work with the government.

"The Movimento Negro is an organization for formação política, that is, political education and training. We educate about history and current issues of the black movement. We are currently

planning to participate in the Second International March against the Genocide of Black People. Our movement has been influenced by the Black Panthers in the United States and by other experiences in other countries.

“The Movimento Negro is made up of diverse groups. Most are not socialists and some believe that one can abolish racism without abolishing capitalism. We socialist believe that we must abolish capitalism in order to abolish racism.”

PSOL, as we noted, represents a new way of doing politics in Brazil, one based on political pluralism. We might end by remembering Ana Carvalhaes’ words: “With all its problems, PSOL is richer than any centralized or vertical party. Reaching any decision or taking any action is difficult. We have to negotiate constantly with all the other groups. But this is a far more interesting and richer process.” The question is whether this richer and more interesting process can also be more effective.