

Travel Notes - Impressions of the Left in Rio de Janeiro

May 3, 2016

I was invited to speak here in Rio de Janeiro by the Socialism and Freedom Party (*Partido Socialismo e Liberdade*, PSOL) and spoke last night to an enthusiastic and very well informed crowd of about 200 students at the university (UFRJ). I also sat down to talk with PSOL leaders and activists here about the local political situation and the social movements. So here are my impression, though they are just impressions of the political situation, of the teachers' strike, and of the school occupations.



Brazil is in the midst of an enormous political crisis, the result of corruption involving all of the political parties, as well as an expression of the severe economic downturn. The right wing—including all of the conservative parties and politicians, the media, and mass demonstrations of over one million people—are demanding the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (PT). The man leading the fight for impeachment is Eduardo Cunha, a rightwinger who is himself implicated in the corruption investigations.

While there is not yet a call for new elections, which would require a constitutional amendment and a new law, such elections could be on the horizon. Dilma could not run again herself, but her mentor and PT founder and longtime leader Ignácio “Lula” da Silva could stand for president—if he is not indicted first.

The country’s leftists hesitate to defend Dilma or the PT that has been involved both in the corruption and in the implementation of policies of austerity. The far left takes a position against impeachment and opposing austerity, but not defending Dilma or the PT. Yet there are tremendous pressures for the far left, such as the PSOL, to enter into an alliance with the PT, to defend the PT from the right-wing attack.

Teachers Strike and School Occupations

At the same time, there is a major struggle take place over education. Teachers and other public employees in Rio de Janeiro have been on strike over wages and the education budget. Alongside the teacher strike, but organizationally independent, is the month-long occupation of 70 public primary and secondary schools by students and their supporters. As one person told me, this is “an entirely spontaneous and self-organized movement.” The occupiers are supporting the teachers strike, but they are also protesting the problems of the schools’ physical plant and the lack of teachers and educational resources. The occupiers have formed a network of public school activists throughout the state of Rio de Janeiro. I’ll be back in Rio in a week and hope to interview some teachers and students then.

Well, I go on tonight to Vitoria, the capital of the state of Espiritu Santo. I’ll see what’s happening there and send along my impressions.