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57 years after the 1964 coup, Brazil again confronts specter of dictatorship

President Jair Bolsonaro's sudden firing of his defense minister and the entire command of the armed forces has unleashed an unprecedented military and political crisis in Brazil.

That the fascistic Brazilian president's action coincided with the anniversary of the 1964 US-backed military coup was no coincidence. Bolsonaro is an unabashed defender of the military overthrow of President Joao Goulart, which ushered in two decades of blood-soaked dictatorship against the working class and the youth in Brazil and a wave of similar coups across South America.



President Jair Bolsonao and sacked Army commander Gen. Edson Pujol (Credit: AgênciaBrasil)

Today, 57 years after that terrible historical event, the Brazilian working class once again confronts imminent dictatorial threats and the reemergence of the military at the center of political power.

Bolsonaro's efforts to consolidate authoritarian rule, which he has advanced since assuming the presidency, have escalated sharply since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brazil has now passed the grim milestone of 350,000 COVID-19 deaths, and the pandemic remains absolutely out of control. Each week the country breaks new terrible records, with the daily death toll rising above 4,100 twice in the last week

An unprecedented social crisis is ravaging working class homes. Unemployment has reached record levels, and tens of millions of Brazilians have been thrown into poverty since the pandemic began. Recent studies indicate that half of Brazil's population is suffering from food insecurity.

But from the point of view of the capitalist class, we live in a golden age. The number of billionaires in Brazil has increased from 45 to 65 over the last year of mass death, according to the new *Forbes* list. The wealth accumulated by this parasitic oligarchy had an extraordinary growth, from \$127 billion in 2020 to \$219 billion in 2021.

Such grotesque levels of social inequality, as well as the imposition of mass killing by COVID-19, are radically incompatible with democratic forms of government. These objective trends are behind the remarkable political events of recent weeks.

The unprecedented replacement of the military command—traditionally changed only in the transition between governments—was carried out by Bolsonaro amid demands that the armed forces subordinate themselves fully to his government's political agenda, in particular his declared war on coronavirus lockdowns.

Bolsonaro's most immediate goal is to establish total control over the repressive apparatus and to nullify the power of local authorities. Acting in coordination toward this end, Bolsonaro's closest allies (including his son Eduardo Bolsonaro) have openly incited uprisings by the Military Police against orders by state governors to restrict social

movement. In the House of Representatives, Bolsonaro's allies tried to push through a law allowing the president to mobilize local police during a pandemic.

This conspiracy to establish a de facto presidential dictatorship in Brazil is still in full swing.

Bolsonaro made this clear in a speech against shutting down economic activities during an event in Santa Catarina on April 7. Pointing to the imminent threat of a nationwide social explosion, he stated that he is already asking the armed forces: "If this breaks out across Brazil what are we going to do? Do we have the manpower to contain the amount of problems we may have ahead?"



Bolsonaro reviewing Brazilian paratroopers (Credit:Fernando Frazão/Agência Brasil)

Bolsonaro's speech exposes the real dilemma of the armed forces and the Brazilian ruling class. Even though they are aware of the explosive social situation, the fired commanders and the bourgeois opposition consider Bolsonaro's coup incitement itself to be a contributing factor for social instability, which may precipitate an uncontrollable reaction by the working class. The president, for his part, warns that if the military does not support his preventive authoritarian measures today, it may not have the strength to repress a mass uprising tomorrow.

A fraudulent bourgeois opposition

Although growing sectors of the Brazilian ruling class are seeking to distance themselves from the Bolsonaro government, they are incapable of offering any alternative perspective to its policy of mass misery and death and the drive toward authoritarian rule in Brazil

This corrupted capitalist opposition presented itself in a letter signed last month by five hundred economists and businessmen, including bank directors and CEOs of large corporations, in opposition to the catastrophic pandemic policy adopted by Bolsonaro.

The dissident factions of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, as well as its counterparts and governments internationally, see the explosive spread of COVID-19 in Brazil as a threat to their profits. This is reflected in worried editorials about the Brazilian crisis published by leading newspapers around the world.

World-renowned Brazilian physician and neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis has defined the situation in the country as a “biological Fukushima”: the uncontrolled contagion provokes a chain reaction in that it increases the potential for the emergence of new variants, which are themselves more contagious. Such uncontrolled spread is a direct threat to Brazil’s impoverished neighbors in South America, and has the potential to bring the already insufficient global efforts against the pandemic back to square one.

Unable to adopt effective measures against the pandemic, and supporting Bolsonaro’s criminal herd immunity policy, the dissident factions within the Brazilian bourgeoisie limit themselves to pleading with the government for the acceleration of vaccinations, adoption of low-cost measures by the state to contain the transmission of the virus, and the forging of a coalition of bourgeois parties to face the health crisis. This cowardly program finds political expression in the unified “opposition” to Bolsonaro by the governors of the Workers Party (PT) and the traditional parties of the Brazilian right, such as the PSDB. In every case, the social distancing measures adopted in their states are absolutely insufficient to put an end to the COVID-19 nightmare.

At the same time, these forces of the bourgeois political establishment, especially the PT, work tirelessly to dispel the concerns of workers and youth about the sword that is

hanging over their heads. They are unanimous in pointing to the generals (those who wield this sword!) as the main guarantor against the threat of another dictatorship in Brazil.

Bolsonaro's sacking of his defense minister and the entire high command is portrayed by the PT-led "opposition" not as a serious threat to democracy in Brazil, but as its opposite: a sign that everything remains in place. "It is a message that the armed forces are not at the service of a coup attempt," said Bohn Gass, the PT leader in the House.

A note signed by all the parties that falsely pose as a "left" opposition to the government—among them the PT, the pseudo-left PSOL, and the Maoist PCdoB—characterized the president's actions as "authoritarian delusions." Opposing Bolsonaro to the military, the note stated that while the former still "has not overcome" the 1964 coup, "the armed forces and their main leaderships have stuck to the institutional role that the Federal Constitution assigned to them."

The fraudulent—and insistent—promotion of the military as Bolsonaro's "constitutionalist" opponents inevitably fuels sympathy for a deposition of the president by the armed forces themselves. Advocating a transfer of power to the vice president, Gen. Hamilton Mourão, PCdoB leader and Maranhão governor Flávio Dino declared, "Mourão in Bolsonaro's place is exchanging barbarism for civilization."

The fact that the military has once again been elevated to the role of the arbiter of the nation's political future is proof of the profound deterioration of democratic forms of rule in Brazil, far beyond the "authoritarian delusions" of the fascist Jair Bolsonaro. Only 35 years since the launching of its "re-democratization" process, how is it possible that Brazil has sunk so deeply into this crisis?

The military's path to power

The immense dangers that the Brazilian working class confronts today have their roots in the historical betrayals by its trade unionist, Pabloite and Stalinist leaderships in the 1980s. When the downfall of the Brazilian military regime, in the face of mass strikes and student protests threatened capitalism itself, these political forces, unified in the treacherous project of building the Workers Party, acted to divert a revolutionary uprising of the Brazilian working class behind illusions in a bourgeois-democratic regime.

These treacherous leaderships promoted the lie that it was possible to guarantee the political and social rights of the Brazilian working class without abolishing the capitalist state itself, and without settling accounts with the military and civilian politicians who commanded that brutal regime of torture and mass murder. With the support of the PT, the criminals of the ruling class were granted amnesty and were able to keep their positions behind the façade of the new regime.

During the 14 years that it ruled Brazil, the PT defended the interests of the ruling class while presiding over the highest levels of social inequality among the major economies of the world. At the same time, it more and more consistently brought the military back to the center of the national political arena.

In the initial years of his administration, former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva sent the armed forces into a criminal “peace-keeping” operation in Haiti, while fostering public confidence in a series of reactionary generals who became the advisers of Bolsonaro’s coup plots. Chief among them is Gen. Augusto Heleno, the commander of the Haiti intervention, who is now Bolsonaro’s intelligence chief.

The PT governments also made increasing use of the armed forces in “Guarantee Law and Order” operations against the Brazilian working class. In 2010, Lula celebrated the military occupation of the Alemão favela complex in Rio de Janeiro. In the face of a wave of violence against Alemão’s poor residents, he said, “The people saw the armed forces serving the Brazilian people.” His hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff, turned the military’s apparatus of repression ever more openly against political protests.

Bolsonaro’s coming to power was not a political accident. It was the direct product of the historical betrayals of the Brazilian working class committed by the PT and its promoters among the pseudo-left.

For the independent political mobilization of the working class

Just as in the coup 57 years ago, the dictatorial turn by the Brazilian ruling class today has profound international implications. The 1964 coup in Brazil was used as a model and operational platform for even more brutal coups against the working class in countries like Chile, Uruguay and Argentina. The Brazilian dictatorship acted as an instrument for

organizing counterrevolution throughout the continent, in close coordination with US imperialism.

Bolsonaro's coup threats unfold as US imperialism is struggling to reestablish its hegemony over Latin America and transform the region into a front line in its "great power conflict" with China.

These efforts, which involve reckless and desperate regime change operations in countries like Venezuela, continue in full swing under Democratic President Joe Biden. Those who claim that the fact that Bolsonaro's ally Donald Trump has left the White House is a further guarantee against a coup in Brazil are criminally misleading the working class, promoting illusions in the "democratic" role of US imperialism.

The lessons of history show that the only progressive way out of the current political crisis is to build a mass political movement of the Brazilian working class, unified with its class brothers in Latin America and internationally in the fight for socialism.

All the fundamental problems faced by Brazilian workers—the threats against democracy, the COVID-19 pandemic and spiraling social inequality—have a universal character: They can only be solved by expropriating the capitalist elite and destroying its state, and establishing the political power of the working class.

The first step in this direction is the construction of an internationalist and socialist political leadership in the Brazilian working class, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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