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The ouster of Brazil's Workers Party government

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With a 61 to 20 vote in the Brazilian Senate Wednesday, the protracted drive to impeach Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff has culminated in her removal from power and the installation of an unelected president, Michel Temer of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), along with the country's most right-wing government since the end of the US-backed military dictatorship three decades ago.

In his first public statement after being sworn in, Temer, formerly Rousseff's vice president and close political ally, declared that he would no longer tolerate being called a *golpista* (putschist) and insisted that the government would have to be "very firm" with its critics.

This directive was swiftly put into practice in the repression unleashed by military police and shock troops against the scattered protests held in repudiation of the impeachment. In Sao Paulo police violently attacked demonstrators, using tear gas and stun grenades that left several people wounded, including a 19-year-old university student blinded by an explosion that pierced her eye.

The country's leading daily newspaper *Folha de S.P.* responded to these events by demanding an even harsher crackdown and warning darkly in an editorial: "Democracies incapable of repressing the fanatics of violence are candidates for repeating the [experience of] Germany's

Weimar Republic of the 1930s, engulfed by street violence until giving way to the worst dictatorship there ever was.”

This is the language of a capitalist ruling class that is determined to utilize the change in government to impose a sweeping program of austerity measures aimed at placing the full burden of Brazil’s deepest economic crisis in a century onto the backs of the working class. It is demanding a vast transfer of wealth from the income of the broad masses of the population and from spending on vital social services to bolster the profits of both Brazilian and international capital.

As the *Folha* editorial indicates, to achieve these aims Brazil’s financial oligarchy is prepared to go well beyond the crimes committed by the military juntas that ruled the country following the CIA-backed coup of 1964.

Temer has already spelled out the first steps in his reactionary agenda, which include drastic cuts to social security pension benefits; a 20-year freeze on spending for healthcare, education and other vital social services; the gutting of labor laws; and the wholesale privatization of state enterprises and infrastructure. Proposals are in the works to, for the first time, allow foreign corporations to buy Brazilian land and for foreign oil conglomerates to begin the direct exploitation of the vast “pre-salt” underwater oil fields off the country’s southeast coast.

Rousseff, the PT and their supporters have denounced the installation of Temer as a “coup.” In terms of the change of government’s implications for the working class, there is no question that the use of such dramatic terms is justified. But if it were to be called a coup, it would be necessary to add that the PT was a direct and indispensable co-conspirator.

Rousseff’s popularity collapsed to single digits before her ouster. The objective basis for her vast unpopularity was the crisis of Brazilian capitalism, which is now deeper than that of the 1930s, with nearly 12 million unemployed, falling real wages and poverty and social inequality once again on the rise.

Within the working class, the anger against Rousseff mounted steadily in the wake of her presidential campaign in 2014. She campaigned vowing to take measures to assure jobs and improve conditions for working people, only to embark, once reelected, on the kind of “fiscal adjustment” program that she claimed to oppose, and which is now being accelerated under Temer.

Among more privileged sections of the middle class, the anger against Rousseff was whipped up into a right-wing frenzy based on conceptions that the Workers Party was responsible for halting Brazil’s rise to “first world” status and for diverting wealth into minimal social assistance programs for the poor that these egotistical layers believe is rightfully theirs.

Among all layers of the population, disgust for the entire political setup has been fueled by the continuing revelations of the Operation Car Wash (Lava Jato) investigation into the multi-billion-dollar bribes for contracts scandal at Petrobras, the state-run energy giant. While virtually every political party has been implicated, the scandal unfolded under the presidencies of

Rousseff, who had chaired the firm, and her predecessor, former metalworkers union leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who is himself charged with obstruction of justice in relation to the kickbacks scandal.

Rousseff and the PT were neither able nor willing to appeal to the working class against the impeachment drive. The Workers Party, its name notwithstanding, is not based upon the working class. It is a bourgeois party with its principal base among upper middle class elements, including academics, union bureaucrats and political and state functionaries.

It sought to remain in power by appeals to its erstwhile political allies, the collection of corrupt and right-wing bourgeois politicians who organized the impeachment. It argued that by virtue of its connections to the PT-affiliated CUT union federation and the state-sponsored “social movements” it would be in a better position to contain the class struggle as draconian austerity measures were imposed. In the end both the Brazilian ruling establishment and Wall Street decided that a more dramatic change in regime was required.

If the PT has paved the way to the present situation, it must also be said that the collection of pseudo-left organizations that played a pivotal role in founding and promoting the PT themselves bear political responsibility for the sharp dangers now confronting the Brazilian working class.

The leading role in this political project was played by organizations that had broken with the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International. In the 1960s, these groups based themselves on the theory that Castroism and petty-bourgeois guerrillaism had presented a new road to socialism that rendered unnecessary the struggle to build revolutionary Marxist parties in the working class. Throughout Latin America, this theory contributed to disastrous defeats for the working class, culminating in decades of military dictatorship.

In the waning days of the Brazilian military regime, under conditions of massive strikes and militant struggles by students, these same elements joined with sections of the union leadership, the Catholic church and left academics to found the Workers Party. Once again, they had found a substitute for the building of a revolutionary party and the fight for socialist consciousness in the working class. The PT was to provide a unique Brazilian parliamentary road to socialism. The dead end of that road has now been reached.

None of these organizations have even sought to draw the lessons of this strategic political experience, much less offer a revolutionary alternative today. Instead, they are all being driven to the right and into crisis by the shipwreck of the PT.

The Morenoite PSTU (Unified Socialist Workers Party) has lost half of its members in a split over the group’s reactionary political line of “throw them all out,” which effectively supported the impeachment drive and adapted to the right-wing middle class protests. Those who split are seeking a “unity of the left” based on the subordination of the working class to the PT and its allies.

The Pabloite revisionists are split between those who remained within the PT and those who followed a parliamentary faction in forming the PSOL (Socialism and Liberty Party) based on

the bankrupt perspective of returning to PT's "original" principles. Also joining this party are the Brazilian followers of the Argentine Morenoites of the PTS (Socialist Workers Party). Oblivious to the implications of the coup, these elements are dedicating themselves to campaigning for municipal elections next month in which PSOL's leading candidate is Luiza Erundina, a former mayor of Sao Paulo who has passed through a series of right-wing bourgeois parties before agreeing to join the PSOL slate.

With the thorough discrediting of the Workers Party, all of these groups are dedicated to erecting a new political trap for the working class along the lines of such "left" bourgeois parties as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain.

Their efforts notwithstanding, an explosive development of the class struggle is on the agenda. The confrontation that is emerging pits finance capital against the working class not only in Brazil, but throughout Latin America. As the region's largest economy, with extensive investments and trade links with every neighboring country, the policies pursued in Brazil will rapidly spill over its borders and accelerate the ongoing shift to the right and assault on the working class across the continent.

Just as the assault on Brazilian workers is part of a continent-wide and, indeed, global attack, so too a successful struggle against this attack requires the independent political mobilization of the working class throughout Latin America and internationally.

The Brazilian working class can defend itself only by fighting for the building of a unified mass movement of the Latin American working class together with the workers of North America in a common struggle against finance capital and the transnational corporations that exploit them all.

The fight for such a program requires a definitive political break with the Workers Party and all of its pseudo-left satellites that have propped up bourgeois rule in Brazil and throughout Latin America. The urgent question remains that of developing revolutionary leadership and political perspective. This requires the assimilation of the long history of struggle for Trotskyism embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International.