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JAMES N. GREEN

The Brazilian Workers' Party and the Challenges of the Left

Over the past half-century, NACLA's coverage of Brazil, from the magazine's founding in the heat of the Brazilian dictatorship to the rise and fall of the Workers' Party, has encouraged solidarity and critical analysis of the country's Left.

Soon after NACLA's founding in late 1966, 85 activists and specialists on Latin America met for a day-long conference to discuss the nature and direction of the new organization in New York. Among the participants was Brady Tyson, a Methodist missionary and pastor, who had been expelled from Brazil the previous year for his criticism of the U.S. government's intervention in the Dominican Republic. In subsequent years, Tyson became a leading figure in the first systematic human rights campaign regarding Latin America that focused on denouncing the practice of torture in Brazil. Also in attendance was Paulo Singer, a prominent Brazilian social scientist who two years later would be expelled from the University of São Paulo.

At the end of the conference, Tyson wrote a detailed description summing up the diversity of opinions and strategies about how to most effectively report about and engage in solidarity with popular struggles in Latin America. That evening, participants attended a talk by Brazilian archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara. Câmara had become a leading voice in the opposition to the military regime, but Brazil's ruling generals had labeled him a communist because of his focus on solving the problems of the poor. The presence of these Brazilianists, as well as at the evening presentation by Câmara, represents three key elements embedded in NACLA's founding mission: to educate people in the United States about Latin America and the Caribbean, to encourage solidarity with progressive movements throughout the continent, and to promote close collaborations among scholars and social change advocates in the Americas.

Over the last 50 years, this has been especially the case in NACLA's relationship to Brazil. NACLA was founded just two and a half years after the Brazilian military came to power. The April 1, 1964 coup d'état marked the beginning of a wave of authoritarian regimes that took control of the state throughout the region in the 1960s and 1970s.

NACLA's West Coast Office offered vital support for the *Brazilian Information Bulletin*, published by exiles and their allies

between 1971 and 1976. It also provided extensive coverage of the military regime, the slow-motion transition to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the subsequent three tumultuous decades, as rancorous disputes between proponents of neoliberal economic and social reforms and advocates of left-wing social democratic policies, as represented by the Workers' Party, have taken center stage.

It is impossible to address all of the important issues related to this complex, continent-sized country covered in NACLA's reporting, such as debates about evolving Brazilian notions of race, the successes of affirmative action programs, the challenges of protecting the Amazon, the status of the Indigenous population, social problems derived from drug trafficking, ongoing police violence, the expansion of LGBTTT rights, persistent socio-economic inequality, and the legacies of the dictatorship. This essay focuses on NACLA's analysis of the resurgence of the labor movement in the late 1970s, the role that the Workers' Party has played in expanding Brazilian democracy and carrying out socio-economic change, and the rise of neo-conservative and semi-fascist forces in recent years.

But first I must note that I am eternally grateful for the fact that NACLA gave me my first literary break. I lived in Brazil from 1976 to 1981, where I was a founding member of the LGBTTT movement, a participant in anti-dictatorship activities, and a graduate student at the University of São Paulo. Although I now cringe at my neophyte writing style, my first piece for NACLA, written in 1979, offers a solid historical overview of the labor movement and its problematic links to the state [excerpted below]. It documents the rise of a new set of activist leaders, personified by future president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whose ability to understand and articulate the sentiments of ordinary workers is one of the many reasons he still maintains tremendous popularity despite being sentenced this year to 12 years in prison based on dubious charges that he received an apartment in exchange for providing benefits to a construction company. To the best of my knowledge, the article is the first reference in English to discuss the proposal to

class, along with large sectors of the middle class, supported Rousseff's impeachment and applauded Lula's imprisonment is a complex one. Ben Cowan unpacks some of the elements at the core of the right-wing assault on the Workers Party in his 2016 analysis of the "bullets, beef, and bibles" coalition in NACLA. The moderate social programs that made a substantial difference in many poor people's lives and gave them greater access to higher education, among other social changes under the leadership of the Workers' Party, caused tremendous unease among sectors of Brazilian society who now look to the far right and the military as the forces that might return Brazil to a time when traditional social hierarchies prevailed and favored lighter-skinned middle and upper-class people over the vast majority of poor people of color. As Cowan points out, many of the religious, moral, and political sentiments articulated by the Right are similar to ones that conservative forces defended prior to the 1964 takeover.

Today, Brazil is politically polarized in ways familiar to those living in the United States. At the time of this writing, even while in prison, Lula still has 30 percent support in his candidacy for the presidency, although it is likely that the Federal Electoral Courts will deny him the right to run. His popularity is far ahead of Congressman Jair Bolsonaro, the right-wing, semi-fascist candidate and the other five major presidential contenders. The Pandora's Box that the pro-impeachment forces opened up in 2016 with Rousseff's ouster has created political instability and widespread disillusionment with politicians and the electoral system. Although all of this may lead middle and upper-classes sectors to seriously consider the radical Right as the solution to the problems that the country is facing, the Workers' Party has shown exceptional resilience, especially in the population's electoral support for Lula even while in prison. Should the Workers' Party come to presidential power again in the immediate or the new future, it will face the challenge of building a strong coalition that can carry out social reforms while holding back conservative forces resistant to the social changes necessary to resolve the country's chronic problems of socioeconomic inequality. As one sign stated in the 2013 demonstrations against the 20 cent increase in bus fares: "It's not about 20 cents. It's about 500 years." ■

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JAMES N. GREEN

Liberalization on Trial: The Workers' Movement

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The owners of Brazil's automobile and other metal-related industries were caught off guard May 12, 1978, when 3,000 workers at the Swedish Saab-Scania plant returned from lunch and refused to start up their machines. One worker, asked by a supervisor why he wasn't working, replied: "I am working, I marked my time card." "Why haven't you started your machine?" his boss asked. "Oh, to start the machine I want 20 percent more."

Legal strikes have been abolished since 1964, except in cases where an employer has refused to pay back wages. The penalty for organizing an illegal strike is four to ten years in jail. Brazilian unions, moreover, are prohibited from negotiating directly with employers. Instead, they are symbolic participants in the annual ritual of court procedures which determine wage increases according to indices computed by the government. Despite this, the Saab-Scania strike spread to other multinationals in Greater São Paulo. More than 275,000 workers brought production to a halt at plants owned by Ford, Pirelli, Mercedes-Benz, and Fiat, ending what had been hailed as a decade of "labor peace" in Brazil.

Not since the 1968 factory takeovers and strikes in Osasco and Contagem had workers gone out in force, defying the government ban. In 1968, the government's response had been swift and severe. The wildcat strikes were crushed militarily, hundreds of metalworkers arrested and their leadership deposed by the Ministry of Labor.

By 1978, conditions had changed. President Geisel's Administration was committed to a policy of slow "democratization," and elections, though a crude formality, were only months away. Conditions were ripe for the reemergence of the Brazilian working class as an active element of political opposition to the regime.

In last May's action, the metalworkers struck for wages 20 percent above the government approved limits and demanded both that strike time not be deducted from their paychecks and strike leaders not be punished.