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Brazilians go to the polls on October 2nd to elect their new president

Kevin Creagh writes about the candidates and the left/right divide between the front runners

Brazilians will go to the polls this coming Sunday, Oct 2nd, in the first round of the Presidential Elections. There are also elections for state Senators, the Federal Chamber of Deputies, State Governors and state legislatures which will decide the make up of the State Senates, the Governorships and the Federal Parliament, but this article will focus on the the race for the Presidency.

While there is a slate of 11 candidates, the big battle is between incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro of the right wing Liberal Party and former President Lula Da Silva of the soft left Workers Party.

This is arguably the most polarizing election ever held in Brazil with both candidates firmly on the Left/Right divide. Lula, a two time former President and seasoned political campaigner (this is his eight Presidential campaign) draws most of his support from the industrial working class and the lower middle classes in the big cities, as well as poorer people in the North and a large proportion of the Afro-Brazilian population.

Bolsonaro, on the other hand, much like any fascist, draws his support mainly from the upper middle class of small business owners and professionals, as well as the very wealthy and the growing, largely white, Evangelical movement. There is also a layer of the poorest, most reactionary people from slums and poor communities who are avid Bolsonaro supporters. They are what socialist Karl Marx called “the lumpen proletariat”. While the above is not absolute, these are largely the lines in which support for both candidates is divided.

At the time of writing, it seems that Lula could win the election in the first round. He is currently 10 points ahead of Bolsonaro. Should Lula receive 50% of all total votes in the first round, plus one vote, he will win outright and there will be no need for a second round. As things stand, this is very likely.

Bolsonaro, being the incumbent, managed to win the Presidential elections of 2018 on the back of the Car Wash scandal, the imprisonment of Lula on corruption charges, which barred him from running at the time (but was since overturned), and the impeachment of Lula’s Presidential successor in Dilma Rousseff, an impeachment that has since been annulled.

As the political Centre ground crumbled in Brazil and elsewhere, there was a political vacuum which led to the rise of populist Far-Right politics.

Brazil had seen the failure of the Workers Party overseeing a devastating economic downturn while being mired in different corruption scandals. This was Bolsonaro’s opportunity to claim to be something different, a cut above the rest. Much like Trump, he tried to pass himself off as some sort of “everyman” who was

outside the elite circle of political corruption. This self assessment proved popular as many voters turned away from the mainstream candidates and chose him instead.

Whenever the left runs capitalism the far right can pose as an alternative.

Bolsonaro's outlandish, dangerous, sexist and homophobic rhetoric was either ignored by his supporters or played down as something that shouldn't be taken seriously. Of course, as a long time Federal deputy who had switched party allegiances 9 times in his almost 30 years, being a former Military Officer and multimillionaire with a habit of saying disgusting and insulting things to others, he is anything but a man of the people. Much like Trump, his promises of radical change fell well short. He has been an open supporter of the former military dictatorship stating that they didn't torture enough people, he once told a female Deputy that she was "too ugly to be raped" and said that if one of his sons was gay couldn't love him. The Bolsonaro family is a political dynasty in Brazil with his three sons in high profile positions in Brazilian politics. They make the Healy-Rae's look like amateurs.

Bolsonaro's time in power has not gone smoothly. Economically, after a small upturn in the economy, things have gone downward. Environmentally, his plan to destroy the Amazon rainforest for the purpose of cattle farming has had serious repercussions in the region. Huge forest fires in the Amazon have shocked the world, as has his denial of these fires and his pathetic and dangerous conspiracy led response to COVID-19 has seen more than a half a million people die.

All of these factors have led to his approval rating plummeting. He's also been accused of nepotism and favouritism in selecting his cabinet. A far cry from his promises of "change". He still has his hardcore and wealthy supporters but the electorate have largely abandoned him as he looks more and more isolated. Even his threat of a post election coup d'etat looks less and less likely as he knows the game is up, despite spending much of the last 2 years trying to undermine Brazil's electronic voting system, which is one of the most secure in the world. Former allies in parliament are now abandoning Bolsonaro, choosing to endorse Lula as they leave what can only be seen now as a sinking ship.

Lula's rise to power is an interesting one. A militant Trade Unionist who rose to prominence just as the dictatorship was nearing it's end, he helped lead workers and joined other militant Trade Unionists, artists and workers in the newly formed PT, Partido dos Trabalhadores – the Workers Party.

The Workers Party began, initially as a party committed to Trade Union militancy, separate and apart from the mainstream Trade Union movement. The party then became a revolutionary Trotskyist organisation and grew rapidly. As they grew, their desire to become the ruling party also grew. Quite quickly the politics of the party moved towards the Centre as their support and voter base rose. What could be viewed as "political necessity" within capitalism, dictated that if they wanted hold the parliament and the Presidency, they needed to shift their message.

In Lula's earlier, unsuccessful Presidential campaigns in the 90's, his message was radical. He spoke of helping workers, helping the poor and fighting the system. By the time of his successful election in 2002 during a period in South America know as the "Pink Wave", Lula and the Workers Party's conveyed a message of helping businesses and the middle classes, as well as the poor. The transformation of the Workers Party from radical revolutionaries to an electable populist party for all, was complete. They had shifted the politics of the party for a chance at running capitalism in Brazil. They became the biggest party in Brazil and once had the highest ever approval rating.

While in government they did make some radical changes. They tackled literacy, health, hunger and general poverty. They set up the Bolsa Família which enable poor children to get a proper education. Children from slums now had a way to go to university. Universal Healthcare was also introduced and their campaign to end hunger was a huge success.

In reality though, the Workers Party were never a threat to the system. They created pacts with the centre-right parties and had coalition governments with parties equivalent to Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil. This was their downfall as they allowed themselves to get caught up the toxicity of the corruptible Brazilian political system. This led to the Workers Party exposing themselves to the corruption they had once spoke out

against. This is the danger of a radical party looking to manage a system that is inherently corrupt. Not only were their hands tied by the forces of capital, particularly when economic crises hit, but they needed to play the game to ensure they could keep power.

While Lula was cleared of any wrong doing after his release from prison and Dilma Rousseff was very evidently stitched up, the Workers Party are undoubtedly a party of the status quo. Lula is considered to be right-wing in his own party, being part of the faction 'Articulação', within the party. As mentioned above, they are not a threat to the system, however, they are certainly more progressive than most other mainstream parties. That being said, there have been plenty of splits in the Workers Party over the years, most significantly, the PSOL split in 2004. They are the largest radical left party in parliament and are made up of many disillusioned former Workers Party members.

Despite past scandals and legitimate political attacks from the Left, as well as illegitimate attacks from the Right and Far-Right, the Workers Party are still arguably the most popular party in Brazil. Lula is seen by supporters of the Workers Party as almost Christ-like, he is infallible and the devotion to him can be viewed as borderline religious fanaticism at times. Of course, this must be understood in relative terms. The political landscape in Brazil differs completely from Ireland and such things are not so common here.

It is almost a foregone conclusion that, whether it be in the first or second round, Lula will win and become President of Brazil again.

Now is not the time for the left to sit back and take it easy. Those in power must continue to be held accountable and as long as a party that claims to represent workers and the poor is managing capitalism, they can't be given a free reign.

Every failure of the soft left in power embolden the far right.

The results of this election will have significant consequences but the working class in Brazil must keep fighting for a better, more equal country.

Helpful links here:

<https://oi.ie/en/number-of-brazilians-in-ireland-increases-fivefold-in-six-years/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/28/brazilian-voters-jair-bolsonaro>

<https://www.as-coa.org/articles/poll-tracker-brazils-2022-presidential-election>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35810578>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/09/brazil-dilma-rousseff-impeachment-vote-annulled>

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/29/brazil-election-jair-bolsonaros-most-controversial-quotes.html>

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/brazil-more-isolated-after-four-years-of-bolsonaro/>

The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.

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