

Counter-Revolution in Brazil and United States Imperialism. The Impeachment of Dilma Rousseff

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President Dilma Rousseff of the Brazil Worker's Party (PT) was suspended from office on May 12, 2016 amid an impeachment proceeding in the national parliament. Rousseff is the first woman president of this vast and heavily populated South American country where a legacy of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and military dictatorship has characterized its history for several centuries.

At present the population of Brazil is estimated to be 209 million people ranking as the fifth most populated state in the world. According to [worldometers.info](#), "The population density in Brazil is 25 per Km² (65 people per mi²). The total land area is 8,349,320 Km² (3,223,689 sq. miles) 84 % of the population is urban (176,361,649 people in 2016). The median age in Brazil is 31.7 years."

Consequently, a country of this size would of course be a major cause of concern by the United States in particular, as well as other imperialist states and their allies in the region. Brazil has been labelled as one of the "emerging economies" and a leftist government, although maintaining trade and other bilateral relations with Washington, is not considered to be in the best interests of the State Department, the Pentagon and Wall Street.

Rousseff along with many others maintain that her removal represented a political coup against a constitutional government elected by the people. She has stated that those engineering her ouster are targets of investigations themselves for corruption.

The president has been charged with utilizing state-controlled banks to fund social programs which benefit the workers and the poor. Her enemies are suggesting that her financing of social programs were not disclosed to the members of parliament.

One of the programs implemented by Rousseff's government is called the Bolsa Familia, or Family Allowance - where the states distributes cash to Brazilian households along with guarantees to provide for their children to attend schools and received vaccinations.

The Brazilian government turns over money to a bank where it is distributed to families. State bank officials began saying in 2013 that it was not receiving regular payments from the government. They complained about having to use its "own money" to make the payments.

Rousseff's detractors began to say that her spending patterns were tantamount to running up large overdrafts. In 2014, as the fallout from the decline in export commodity prices

began to have a negative impact on the economy, the accusations escalated. Opposition figures claimed there were tens of billions of dollars in delinquent payments for social programs that the banks were forced to paying for.

Nonetheless, an even more widespread investigation into corruption in Brazil has involved the U.S. Justice Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Several state-owned energy corporations including Petrobras, the oil firm, are subjects of the probe.

Bloomberg said of the inquiry that “The intensified scrutiny of companies linked to Petrobras inserts the U.S. more heavily in investigating the scandal known as Operation Carwash, which Brazilian prosecutors have tracked across four continents. It has toppled construction chiefs, helped tip the country into recession and ensnared key members of President Dilma Rousseff’s inner circle, including members of her Workers’ Party.” (May 13)

The same article goes on to note that

“Rousseff, who was chairwoman of Petrobras when some of the kickbacks occurred but hasn’t been accused of any wrongdoing in the scandal, was suspended from office in a Senate vote Thursday (May 12) on allegations she doctored fiscal accounts to mask the size of a budget deficit..... A case against public companies such as Petrobras could be brought in Virginia because filings with the SEC are sent to a server located in the state, said Charles Connolly, a former federal prosecutor. That nexus has allowed prosecutors to bring cases against non-U.S. companies under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, such as one against French oil company Total SA in 2013, said Connolly, who isn’t involved in the Petrobras matter. Total SA (a French oil firm) paid \$398 million in penalties to settle bribery allegations.”

Placing these allegations which surfaced two years ago in some political context, 2014 was an election year in Brazil and the attacks against Rousseff reached fever pitch. The worsening economy amid inflationary pressures and problems with transportation inside the country drew thousands into the streets.

Charges of widespread corruption in the construction of facilities associated with the World Cup soccer games which were scheduled to be held inside the country that year. Allegations that the government was spending billions on the preparations for the games, while Brazilians were facing poor conditions in transportation services along with a declining standard of living, were utilized as a pretext for the attempts to cancel the World Cup.

These demonstrations appeared to be organized by political forces from the wealthy and petty-bourgeois classes with the expressed intent of destabilizing the government. The fact that the protests were held the same year that the World Cup Soccer games took place in Brazil served to tarnish what was viewed as a major accomplishment for the country.

Trade unions representing the subway workers engaged in industrial actions leading up the World Cup. Physical efforts were made to stop the games by blocking the entry points where some fires were set.

Rousseff’s Legal Defense

The ousted president is in the process of preparing a legal defense to the impeachment trial scheduled to begin on July 28 in the Brazil Senate. This process is a formidable challenge

considering how the system appears to be rigged against the former president.

Her legal team has filed four petitions questioning the senatorial process saying that they were limited in their responses to approximately 80 charges. The charges requires more than a few seconds provided by the senate judicial panel to adequately address.

In a recent article published by the Chinese-based Xinhua news agency: “The head of the defense team, Jose Eduardo Cardozo, said in a press conference that these petitions would be filed to Ricardo Lewandowski, chief justice of the Supreme Federal Court. The petitions mainly focus on the unfair treatment Rouseff and her supporters received in the impeachment process, including insufficient time for her defense team to address all the filings against her and appointing a biased Senator as the rapporteur who, supposedly, should be impartial.” (June 3)

This same report also reveals that another important petition “is asking the Supreme Federal Court to allow the inclusion of new evidence, including recently leaked recordings made by a former Petrobras executive. In the recordings, several senators who have been pushing for Rouseff’s impeachment seemed to say that doing so is the best way to shut down a high-profile corruption investigation involving members of Brazil’s political class.”

Resistance to the Coup

There have been demonstrations against the forced removal of Rouseff among various segments of the population mainly centered in the African, women’s and working class movements. Not only was Rouseff the first woman president but she identified with the African, indigenous and non-European legacy of the country.



Brazil Black Population in Solidarity With President Rouseff

Several ministries were abolished in the immediate aftermath of the coup. These portfolios included racial equality, women’s affairs and culture.

In response to the dissolution of the ministry of culture, artists and their supporters began an occupation of the government building demanding it be reinstated.

An article published by Art Forum said

“In the aftermath of Temer’s decision to ax the culture ministry, which he announced on May 12, artists quickly organized demonstrations with people occupying ministries in eleven regional capitals. Erasmo Carlos and Caetano Veloso, Brazilian music legends, gave a concert in Rio de Janeiro on May 20 during one of the protests. When Temer asked singer Daniela Mercury and actress Bruna Lombardi to head up the reduced culture portfolio after it merged with the education ministry, both women said no.”

Brazil with its history of slavery, colonialism and racism, the questions of cultural identity and artistic production take on a political character. Any semblance of a commitment on the state level to promote racial equality is contingent upon a policy of cultural representation that encompasses the Indigenous, African and immigrant heritage of the 500-year-old

country.

Continuing this same article reveals that

“Temer was put in charge of Brazil, Latin America’s most robust economy despite being in the midst of a terrible recession and numerous corruption scandals, after leftist president Dilma Rousseff was put on trial and removed from her post for breaking rules regarding the country’s budget. Temer says that he will put into action a series of business-friendly reforms to try and strengthen Brazil’s economy. The interim government plans intends to reveal more austerity measures, Planning Minister Romero Jucá said on his Twitter account after a meeting with Temer and the finance minister on May 21.” (artforum.com)

Michel Temer, the former vice-president of Brazil, was appointed to temporarily succeed Rousseff. Temer is not a member of the Worker’s Party but the Brazil Democratic Movement Party (PMDB) which has a myriad of social forces including conservatives. The political system in Brazil is such that it provides for coalition governments.

The Worker’s Party only represented 14 percent of the parliament although Rousseff won the presidency with substantial majorities in 2010 and 2014. Temer revealed his right-wing orientation when he appointed an all-male white cabinet in the aftermath of Rousseff’s removal. Temer’s party has the largest bloc of votes within the parliament.

Coups in South America in past decades were carried out by the military. Today such actions by the defense and security apparatus are not as acceptable in world opinion. However, elements within the military and police have been associated with coups and attempted overthrowing of South and Central American governments in recent years.

This was the case in the coup in Honduras in 2009 against Manuel Zelaya; an attempted coup led by the police against Ecuadoran Rafael Correa in 2010; another political coup through impeachment took place in Paraguay in 2012 against Fernando Lugo; and a right-wing regime was elected late last year in Argentina reversing the left-of-center policies of former President Christina Fernandez de Kircher.

In Venezuela, the United Socialist Party government headed by President Nicholas Maduro lost the parliamentary elections during 2015, where a right-wing legislative body is poised to oust the Bolivarian Revolution through an impeachment process, an election, or force of arms backed up by the U.S. These developments since 2015 are clearly related to the economic crisis impacting many emerging economies such as Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Russia, China and South Africa, among others.

These states despite monumental gains in the areas of self-determination, equality, social and economic justice, remain firmly within the world capitalist system. The imperialists triggered the current world crisis and have attempted to mask its own contradictions by unloading economic and political instability within the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

There have been numerous attempts to establish regional and international organizations explicitly designed to enhance the economic and political independence of these emerging states. Over the last decade the world has witnessed the founding of the Africa-South

America Summit; the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) Summit; ALBA; Caricom; UNASUR; a renewal in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and additional organizations representing countries in the so-called Global South.

The Japan Times reported prior to the coup in Brazil that an appeal to regional organizations would be a key aspect of Rousseff's defense stressing that the president "said both the Mercosur and Unasur trade blocs have democracy clauses that she will invoke if there should be what she charged would be 'a rupture in democracy' in her country. She warned her opponents that her impeachment would have 'serious consequences for the Brazilian political process.' 'There is no judicial basis for this process of impeachment,' Rousseff said. 'I am not accused of crimes of corruption, diversion of public funds, nor do I have accounts abroad or any accusations of money laundering.'" (April 23)

These developments involving the formation of regional organizations are perceived as a threat to U.S. imperialist hegemony in South and Central America along with the Caribbean region. On an international level the other organizations have no real use as far as Washington and Wall Street are concerned.

Slavery and Independence

Brazil was a major focus of the expansion of the world imperialist system beginning in the 15th century. Millions of Africans were brought to this area of South America starting in the early 16th century where today the country of Brazil represents the largest concentration of people of African descent in any one state outside of the continent.



Africans combined with the indigenous people of the hemisphere constitute the majority of people within the working class and peasantry. The legacy of slavery and colonialism by the Portuguese still defines in many respects the social class structures inside the country in relationship to race and social status.

A website called "Black Women in Brazil" reports that

"The first slave ships were brought by the Portuguese Martim Afonso de Sousa in 1532. The official account estimates that between that date and 1850, something like 5 million black slaves entered Brazil. However, some historians estimate that there could have been twice that number. The slave ships that brought slaves from Africa to Brazil were called "tumbeiros" due to the death of thousands of Africans during the crossing. These deaths were due to abuse suffered by slaves, the poor hygienic conditions and diseases caused by lack of vitamins as in the case of scurvy."

The slave system in Brazil was based on the cultivation and export of agricultural commodities, principally sugar. Later gold and diamonds were discovered which revitalized the Portuguese economy that was rapidly being overtaken by the rising dominance of western European states such as the Netherlands, France and Britain by the concluding decades of the 18th century.

During the 19th century coffee production became the dominant export crop. The role of

Brazil in the world market for coffee fueled the demand for slaves and consequently the Atlantic Slave Trade. Even after the British ostensibly banned the transatlantic trade, the practice continued right through the period of the early to the late 19th century.



Slave migration to Brazil

The website worldeconomy.org (OECD) wrote in an essay on the history of Brazil that the South American state by

“the end of the colonial period had half of the population as slaves. They were worked to death after a few years of service, and fed on a crude diet of beans and jerked beef. A privileged fraction of the white population enjoyed high incomes but the rest of the population (free blacks, mulattos, Indians and large numbers of the whites) were poor. Landownership was concentrated on slave owners, thus a very unequal distribution of property buttressed a highly unequal distribution of income. There was substantial regional inequality. The poorest area was the Northeast. Minas Gerais had also passed its peak. The most prosperous area was around the new capital, Rio de Janeiro.”

This same essay continues emphasizing that

“Independence came to Brazil very smoothly by Latin American standards. In 1808, the Portuguese Queen and the Regent fled to Rio to escape the French invasion of the motherland. They brought about 10 000 of the mainland establishment with them — the aristocracy, bureaucracy, and some of the military who set up government and court in Rio and Petropolis running Brazil and Portugal as a joint kingdom (both parts by then being about equal in terms of population). After the Napoleonic wars, the two countries split without too much enmity. Brazil became independent with an Emperor who was the son of the Portuguese monarch.”

The country was declared independent of Lisbon in 1822 but slavery remained. Brazil was the last state in the western hemisphere to abolish slavery in 1888 some twenty-three years after the U.S. Civil War ended the system in America. By this time there were at least four million Africans still enslaved. There were free Africans as well but they continued to suffer national discrimination and oppression.

Numerous rebellions against slavery took place over the centuries. An independent African nation was established during the early 17th in the northern region of Brazil.

Encyclopedia Brittanica described this community by noting that it was called

“Palmares, autonomous republic within Alagoas state in northeastern Brazil during the period 1630-94; it was formed by the coalescence of as many as 10 separate communities (called quilombos, or mocambos) of fugitive black slaves that had sprung up in the locality from 1605. The state owed its prosperity to abundant irrigated agricultural lands and to the abduction of slaves from Portuguese plantations. (In Palmares, captured slaves remained in bondage, but runaways became free citizens.)”

By the 1690s Palmares numbered 20,000 inhabitants, ruled according to a melange of Central African norms by an elected chief called Ganga Zumba (“Great Lord”) who allocated landholdings, appointed officials (usually his own relatives), and resided in a fortified royal enclave called Macoco. Between 1680 and 1686, six Portuguese expeditions attempted to conquer Palmares and failed. Finally the governor of Pernambuco engaged an army of bandeirantes under the command of Domingos Jorge Velho, who defeated a palmarista force led by a nephew of the last of Palmares’ five rulers, on Feb. 6, 1694, putting an end to the republic.”

Rebellions during the 19th century contributed to the decline of profitability of slave labor in the coffee sector. Immigration was encouraged from Europe and other territories in South America.

After the Haitian Revolution of 1804, many African Brazilians who were serving in the national army began to identify with Jean Jacques Dessalines, the leader of the newly-liberated Caribbean nation, the first successful slave insurrection in history. The destruction of the sugar industry in Haiti during the course of the armed rebellions of 1791-1803 created greater demand for the agricultural product from Brazil.

African enslaved by the Portuguese and later an “independent” European-dominated empire, continued to be brought into the country and forced into agriculture work in the northeastern region of Bahia. This region was known for its highly exploitative sugar plantations.

Africans imported to Brazil in the proceeding decades of the 19th century were unwilling to accept their condition creating an atmosphere of militancy and rebellion. From 1807 to 1835, Africans led numerous slave revolts in Bahia resulting in violence against their masters that reached unprecedented levels.

The country of Brazil remained an independent state after 1822 under a Portuguese monarchy or empire for over sixty years. Dom Pedro I and II ruled the agricultural and resource-rich state with the backing of the landed and moneyed elites. Conservative political and economic interests declared that Brazil could not survive without the slave system.

Other voices were heard urging modernization and a reliance on free labor as opposed to what they considered an antiquated and non-productive economic system. Calls for the dissolution of slavery in Brazil started in the early nineteenth century. In 1825, José Bonifácio Andrada e Silva, a political architect of Brazil’s independence trajectory from Portugal, wrote essays advocating a gradual emancipation from slavery.

Britain was Brazil’s principle trading partner and provider of finance. London urged the elimination of human bondage as early as 1850 and theoretically the slave trade was abolished. Additional legislation based on the gradual abolition of slavery prompted the 1871 “Law of the Free Womb,” which guaranteed emancipation to children of slaves born after the law was passed. Then an 1885 Sexagenarian Law was enacted freeing Africans over sixty years of age. Lastly the total emancipation Golden Law was adopted in 1888.

The Left in Brazil

Beginning in the early 1920s a communist party was formed in Brazil. This party underwent

numerous transformations throughout the decades to the present.

Three decades earlier after the removal of the monarchy and the abolition of slavery the country made its first attempt to form a republican democracy. A mixture of a dominant royalist system and a parliament had been in existence since the 1820s even during the slave era.

These contradictions would continue during the 1890s when there was a civil war involving monarchists, republicans and the military. The U.S. intervened in Brazil during 1893 in an attempt to resolve the internal war.

Although slavery had ended in 1888, by the conclusion of the 19th century Brazil remained an agricultural state producing coffee, sugar and natural resources for shipment to Europe and North America. The country exported 75 percent of the world's coffee maintaining the highly repressive and exploitative conditions for the majority of the population still tied to the plantations.

Countrystudies.us points out that "With competition increasing, however, prices fell continually, causing the government to devalue the currency against the British pound. This devaluation forced up the price of imported goods, thus lowering consumption and government tax revenues from imports. Those shortfalls led to suspension of payments on the foreign debt, and the generally poor economy caused half of the banks to collapse. The oligarchy responded to the situation by attempting to preserve its own position and by limiting national industry and infrastructure to that necessary to support the agricultural economy. The society that the economy underlay was one in which the elites regarded the majority of the people merely as cheap labor. The elites encouraged immigration to keep labor plentiful and inexpensive, although they also wanted to 'whiten' the population. They considered public education of little use and potentially subversive."

These developments leading into the 1920s when the world economic system collapsed at the end of the decade, created the conditions for the beginning of the second republic in 1930 largely under military control. Fresh efforts were undertaken to modernize Brazil and move it away from strict reliance on agricultural exports.

The same source cited above countrystudies.us notes

"The federal and state government subsidized immigration from Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany, and Japan to provide workers for the coffee plantations. However, many immigrants soon fled the rough conditions in the countryside for better opportunities in the cities. They flooded the labor pools, making it difficult for unions to force factory owners to pay better wages. Women, who were the majority of workers in the textile and clothing industries, were frequently active in organizing factory commissions to agitate for improved conditions, freedom from sexual abuse, and higher pay. Strikes had occurred in 1903, 1906, and 1912, and in 1917 general strikes broke out in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Recife, Santos, and Porto Alegre. [Because] The mentality of the industrialists was rooted in the slavery era and emphasized their well-being over that of the commonwealth and because they functioned on a thin profit margin, they tended to fire workers for striking or joining unions. The industrialists also blacklisted troublemakers, employed armed thugs to keep control inside and outside the factories, and called on the government to repress any sign of labor organization. There were no large massacres of strikers, as occurred in Mexico and Chile, but the physical violence was

marked.”

The class struggle intensified during the early years of the 1930s. Clashes between leftist and rightist forces led to the rise of corporatism as a form of governmental control. Getulio Darneles Vargas was the leader of the second republic who established import-substitution industries amid growing political discord.

In 1937, Vargas dismissed the parliament and ruled as a dictator until 1945. A subsequent period during 1945-64 is cited for its multiparty democratic political participation where four presidents were elected freely in 1945, 1950, 1955, and 1960. Nonetheless, by the early 1960s, an explosive mixture of stagnate economic growth, rising inflation, populism, and nationalism created political instability and mass discontent. The majority political parties saw their hegemony declining while labor unions exerted greater political power over the government of João Goulart (president, 1961-64).

By the 1960s, particularly after a military coup in 1964, an armed guerrilla movement was formed by the Communist Party of Brazil, a Maoist-oriented party which advocated revolutionary struggle against the dictatorship in order to bring about its overthrow.

The Araguaia guerrilla movement was an armed struggle in Brazil against its military dictatorship, active during 1967-1974 in the Araguaia river basin. It was initiated by cadres of the Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B), the then Maoist counterpart to the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), which aimed at establishing bases in the countryside from where they would broaden the War of National Liberation against the Brazilian military government, which had maintained state control since the 1964 coup d'état. Its ideological and military strategies were based on the successful revolutions led by the 26th of July Movement in the Cuban Revolution, and by the Communist Party of China during the Chinese Civil War.

Dilma Rousseff participated in the guerrilla war and was captured and tortured in the process. She later entered politics and rose to the leadership of the Workers Party administration after the two-term presidency of Lula da Silva.

The Worker's Party (PT) grew out of the independent labor and popular struggles of the 1970s and 1980s against political repression and economic exploitation. The party maintained an alliance with the reformed Brazil Communist Party even within the parliament and government of both Lula and Rousseff.

The Need for Solidarity

These historical and contemporary developments in Brazil illustrates clearly that U.S. imperialism is bent on reversing the progressive social gains and regional alliances which have emerged over the last two decades. This sentiment played a pivotal role in breaking the attempted isolation of Cuba by the U.S. ruling class forcing the Obama administration to recognize Cuba a year-and-a-half ago in December 2014.

Venezuela has been subjected to renewed threats of direct military intervention by the U.S. Cuba is still not free of the occupation of Guantanamo Bay where the Pentagon has maintained a naval base and prison for over a century.

In expressing our solidarity we must refuse to recognize the coup regime headed by Temer

and demand the reinstatement of President Rousseff. We must consistently condemn the ongoing U.S. imperialist policy of destabilizing South and Central America as well as the Caribbean where Cuba is located.

Finally the best form of solidarity we can pursue with the oppressed peoples of this hemisphere and others across the world is to build a well-organized movement here in the “belly of beast” aimed at national liberation and social justice. The realization of this revolutionary objective will provide the necessary space for revolutionaries and oppressed people internationally to free themselves from the yoke of capitalism and imperialism.

Author’s Note: *These remarks were delivered on Sat. June 4, 2016 at a public meeting sponsored by Workers World Party Detroit branch. Another speaker, Cheryl LaBash, Co-chair of the National Network on Cuba (NNOC), discussed the current situation in Venezuela and its impact of United States-Cuban relations. The meeting was chaired by Martha Grevatt, a contributing editor for Workers World newspaper.*

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