The Brazilian Spring: Still Under Construction

written by Rodrigo Santaella | September 10, 2013

Brazil went to the streets in June this year with crowds never before seen in the history of the country. There were young workers and students who were demonstrating for the first time, but also sectors of the middle class and union members as well as social movement and left party activists who protested about a wide diversity of issues. The demands raised in the posters and the crowds' slogans were varied: access to quality public services for the entire population; health care and quality education; good public transportation and a reduction of bus fares; decent housing for all; an end to corruption and police repression All this against the backdrop of the Confederations Cup–a caricature of the priorities of the Brazilian State—spending millions on an event for a small elite, while removing thousands of families from their homes—and doing so while so many in the country still need basic services and while structural inequality is the major feature of our society.

The demonstrations of June with their size and intensity surprised everyone—including left organizations, political parties and social movements. The protests lasted about a month, with many confrontations and some violence, gradually becoming less frequent and cooling down, but never stopping.

On July 11, the unions, from government supporters to the leftwing, as well as some political parties seeking to regain their legitimacy, "put the working class in the street," with united, national demonstrations. Despite the positive assessment made by some organizations and the participation of social movements like the Movement of the Landless (MST), in most places the demonstration didn't fulfill their goals. The July demonstrations didn't attract the young workers who had gone to the streets in June. And they didn't have a great impact on society in general, largely because by holding such traditional labor demonstration they kept away the groups that had been the protagonists in June. It was much more of the same old thing.

Though the number of people on the streets has declined and the unions' demonstrations haven't been as successful as they might have been, the mobilizations continue across the country, and are increasingly more political. There have been occupations of public places and state legislatures—and there continue to be—in dozens of cities. We have also had demonstrations directly against the state and municipal governments, including occupations of the streets in front of the rulers' houses, especially in Rio and São Paulo almost weekly.

In Fortaleza an occupation of the main green park of the city to protest the construction of an overpass, together with the fight for more urban mobility and better public transportation, has already lasted nearly two months and has put into question the state and municipal governments. If the number of people in these occupations and demonstrations is lower than in June, the legacy of those struggles is very much alive. Occupations resist much more than before, even with few people, and they gain more support from the population; governments insist on using violence, but they are increasingly losing legitimacy in society, and instability is spreading in some major cities of the country.

An interesting situation has developed among the sectors that remained mobilized, involving those who use Black Bloc tactics and give a dynamic character to the demonstrations through their direct actions. Some leftist parties seek to enter into polemics with the Black Bloc groups, while others

seek to enter into dialogue and exchange of experiences with them, understanding the differences and the peculiarities of this sector in Brazil. The most active and most militant youth on the streets in June—from the Black Bloc groups to the party and social movement's activists, to the anarchists and to the many who found out about the demonstration on Facebook and for whom this was their first experience of social protest—are today the protagonists of the current occupations and continuous demonstrations, sometimes with some of the unions.

In São Paulo some of the protests in August were pulled off by the subway workers' union, after the discovery of corruption in procurement by the subway management, an issue that connected directly with struggles for reducing the bus fares that erupted in June. In Rio after the large demonstrations in June, the main demand has been "Go Away Cabral," calling for the ouster of the state governor and the repeal of several privatizations, as well as changes in construction plans for the World Cup.

The disappearance of the bricklayer Amarildo Dias de Souza, seized by the police without explanation and probably one more poor black person murdered by the state arbitrarily, has also led to demonstrations in the city and across the country. The struggle against the extermination and the criminalization of the poor and black people in Brazil is also growing: "Where is Amarildo?" is a watchword throughout the country. In northeastern Brazil, the demonstrations are challenging the historical dominance of the oligarchs, for example in Maranhão, Pernambuco and in Ceará where there is a struggle over Cocó Park.

To reverse the failure of the July 11, another national demonstration was called by the unions for August 30, again with both pro-government and opposition unions, with the classical workers' demands and in some places also with the participation of other social movements such as the MST. All of these demonstrations, from the more spontaneously to the more organized, have a greater legitimacy and support than before June. One of the biggest challenges of the left is to understand and deal with this new historical moment.

Therefore, it's necessary for every social fighter to understand June's legacies. In terms of the concrete political victories, the government's response so far has been: the reduction in bus fares in some cities, free-pass to buses in a very few others, an insufficient Federal program that will bring foreign doctors to help solve the demands for health care within the country, and some very faint signs of political reform.. In some places, such as Rio de Janeiro some very important victories were, such as the decision not to demolish schools and museums to make way for the World Cup constructions.

Overall, given the size of the demonstrations and the feeling in the country, what we have seen are very modest advances. On the other hand, if we see June and this moment as part of an open and ongoing process, then we recognize that some legacies are very important and that they offer good prospects for radical social change in Brazil. The first is that social demonstrations have become more legitimate and that improves things a great deal, even when we have a smaller number of people. We need to think now of more daring ways of fighting and of raising increasingly more advanced demands, even if there are only five hundred or a thousand people on the street in every city, and not always eighty, ninety or a hundred thousand as we had on the streets in June.

Moreover, one of the main conclusions that must be drawn regarding this process up until now is that we have experienced an important encounter between different political and organizational cultures through the mass demonstrations. Young people who organized in new ways, often with associative forms of social networking, without a culture of meetings or the formation of commissions and without a culture of developing deeper formulations of a political agenda—but, at the same time, without any kind of bureaucratic tendency in the organization and with many radical actions—came together with political party activists educated in a more traditional leftist

organizational culture. Many problems came from this encounter, but the continuation of the demonstrations and the process—in which both sectors have a lot to learn and a lot to contribute—could make possible new syntheses.

The challenges for the socialist left are many. Perhaps the most important thing at this time is to be open to learn from the processes and for the political party activists to be capable of self-criticism. The anti-party feeling and the rejection of old forms of organization in Brazil are directly related to the trajectories of the Brazilian traditional left parties (the Workers Party as well as the Communist Party of Brazil) and also the capitulation of union federation such as the CUT and the CTB. At the same time, we cannot ignore the authoritarian practices and the tendency toward to bureaucratization of parties, unions, and movements that make up the revolutionary left, such as the Party of Socialism and Liberation (PSOL). So we need to pay growing attention to bureaucratic trends and to engage in an increasingly stronger criticism of the bourgeois parliament and its representative system, even when we are involved in them. We can't let elections or the parliament be our guide, but must rather take direction from the streets and direct mass movements and actions, letting them set the direction for our work in the bourgeois political system. For PSOL this is the greatest challenge to be faced in our Fourth National Congress to be held in November this year.

To dispute the directions of this historical process we need to learn from it and to be conscious of our size. We aren't capable of directing the process and we won't be in the next period either, and we must have the humility to understand that, and realize that this is not necessarily so bad. On the other hand, we must increasingly be an important part of the process. For this we don't need to cling to the classical forms (many party flags on the demonstrations, sound cars controlled by the unions, that is, the traditional forms of Brazilian worker's class demonstrations). We need to come together to influence the content. The best way to influence these movements is to be inside them and respect their dynamics and their pace. We need to be part of horizontal discussions and to seek to politicize them while acting in concert with the whole of the movement, even when we believe their ways of working aren't necessarily that functional for the struggle. The best way to improve and contribute to this process is to be—as socialist activists—an honest part of it. Our role should be to be daring in form and to deeply influence the content.

At least some core issues, the results of the June Days, should be taken up and strengthened by the left through discussion in order to enrich and enhance these movements. We need to take up these demands: the demilitarization of the police; 10% of GDP to public education and 10 % of GDP to public health; free-pass for all domestic public transportation; democratization of the media; against all the sexist and homophobic projects being debated in parliament; as well as the classic working-class agendas in urban areas and in the countryside such as the reduction of the working day and land reform.

The prospects of the process are positive. September 7, Brazilian Independence Day, was marked by protests across the country organized through Facebook as the "September Seventh Operation." There were activists from different organizational traditions. The demonstrations included the "Shout of the Excluded," raised by Theology of Liberation activists and supported by the MST, the housing movements, and others. Despite the differences between the two demonstrations, the agenda was similar in some locations. Though there was a great deal of repression, it was one more meeting on the streets helping to provide synthesis and advances throughout the process.

In 2014, with the BRIC meeting in Brazil in March and the World Cup, surely the masses will go to the streets again, this time in a more organized and politicized way, and probably with increasingly common channels of synthesis and formulation among the left parties that are opened to learn from the process, as well as the unions and consolidated movements in the country and this new

protagonist, youth, that took to the streets in June and somehow continues organizing actions.. The Brazilian Spring keeps developing, but it is still under construction, and its direction is in dispute. If the Brazilian left activists from parties and movements are open to dialogue and collective construction with working class youth who are organizing itself in different forms, then it is very likely that left will be able to influence and increasingly politicize the process, and then the results will then be closer and closer to creating the conditions for a radical and deep transition to another form of society.