Left Advances in Brazil Bring Repression and Dirty Tricks

written by Aaron Amaral, Aldo Cordeiro Sauda | November 28, 2020

The movement to defeat Brazil's right-wing authoritarian President Jair Bolsonaro made significant advances in the first round of local elections on Sunday, November 15, 2020. In São Paulo, by far the largest city in Brazil, the mayoral candidate of the Socialism and Liberty Party ("PSOL") came in a strong second place, forcing a run-off election on Sunday, November 29, against the center-right incumbent Mayor Bruno Covas. The candidate supported by Bolsonaro was relegated to fourth place, widely seen as a significant popular rebuke.

The PSOL candidate is Guilherme Boulos, a central leader of the Homeless Workers' Movement ("MTST"), who has established himself as one of the most important social movement leaders in Brazil and Latin America. The MTST has been at the forefront of fighting homelessness and austerity, through a combination of direct action land occupations, popular mobilizations, and electoral activity. Victory by Boulos in the second round would represent a significant advance by the left in the struggle to defeat Bolsonaro and the right-wing movement which has been on the ascendancy in Brazil since the arrest of Workers' Party leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) and the coup against his successor, Dilma Rousseff in August 2016.

This first round result has intensified violence by the Brazilian state against social movements in São Paulo, including against the MTST, and represents a use of the state to politically attack PSOL, the MTST and its leadership, and Boulos.

In the days leading up to the first-round vote a cynical police operation was undertaken to tarnish and criminalize MTST by painting the matter as targeting alleged crime and drug dealing in New Palestine (Vila Nova Palestina), a shantytown (favela) closely associated with MTST and where the MTST has led important occupations. Also of importance, a number of the leaders of the community, are also leaders of the MTST and ran as part of a ticket – for local council positions – with Boulos.

The headline in Folha do São Paulo, read in part, "São Paulo police move against the MTST." Notably, the head of the police, João Dória, is a fellow member of the party of Boulos' electoral opponent, Bruno Covas, and is seen as his political godfather.

In a scathing repudiation of the police action and the press coverage, the MTST noted that:

The action carried out on Thursday was not carried out during the occupation of Vila Nova Palestina, but in a neighboring [community]…The area where the occupation exists is about 1 million

square meters and crosses five neighborhoods, of which only 300 thousand square meters are in the ZEIS (Special Social Interest Area) area effectively occupied by MTST.

It is also important to remember that the movement's own statute reinforces Brazilian legislation and strictly prohibits the use of narcotics in occupied areas.

Finally, MTST strongly rejects the defamatory attempt to link a legitimate social movement – which has already secured housing for more than 20,000 people – to criminal practices.

We also strongly reject the political use of the Civil Police of the State of São Paulo to try to interfere, 10 days before the second round, in this year's municipal elections.

The international left should similarly repudiate the illegitimate attacks against Boulos, the MTST and its leadership, and the people of the Vila Nova Palestina. Whatever our respective positions on the coming elections, a basic defense of democratic rights should lead us to condemn this improper use of the forces of the state.