IPS

INTERVIEWS 14.10.2019

'It revives the slave-owner mentality'

Trade unionist Carmen Foro on the increasing resistance to the aggressive policies of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro

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In August, the fires in the Amazon have drawn worldwide attention to Brazil. In the meantime, the topic is no longer present in the media – have the fires been defused or has attention simply dropped?

Despite a decline in media coverage, the problem has not been solved. There have always been fires in the Amazon region, but now the Brazilian government has declared war on the international public and the climate protectors, which makes the whole thing so difficult. In the past, measures were taken to contain the fires. Today we have a government that dumps oil on the fire and seeks salvation in seeing enemies everywhere and antagonising the rest of the world.

The Bolsonaro government has rejected the international debate about protecting the Amazon as colonialist interference. What's the attitude in the progressive camp?

We do not see the world's concern as imperialist. We must all realise that environmental issues are global issues and that the Amazon must of course be in everyone's sights. The Brazilian government wants to leave the Amazon to the United States and multinationals for exploitation. Instead, the government should act anti-imperialist and be aware of its obligations. But it has clearly taken one side – it represents the interests of the agribusiness and the corporations that act like predators in the Amazon. Indigenous people are being murdered, farm workers and other peoples in the Amazon region, because the companies want to convert their land into pastureland. We want more than an end to the fires. We need a new development model for the Amazon.

Bolsonaro is homophobic, rants against women and minorities. Do

you, as an activist, as a trade unionist, perceive a growing threat in daily life?

This does affect me several times over. I'm a woman, Afro-Brazilian, come from the countryside and the Amazon region, so I fulfil Bolsonaro's image of an enemy perfectly. I'm the real stereotype of his rejection. Racism and misogyny put us in a very difficult position: we have to remember that the President is taking action against the majority in our country. Bolsonaro is even offering Brazilian women by saying that anyone who wants to come to Brazil and have sex with a woman is welcome. We women, we Afro-Brazilians, make up the majority of the population. To stir up such prejudices, that brings society apart, it revives the slave-owner mentality.

Recently, protests against the government have been increasing in Brazil, for example coming from the women's movement, from schoolchildren and students and also from trade unions. What are people protesting against?

Much has been destroyed in the nine months since Bolsonaro took office. Budget funds have been cut, especially in the area of education and training, but also the labour law reform and the pension reform mean that we can expect setbacks across the board. Of course, it would be good if resistance were even greater than it is today. But progress has been made. In recent months we have managed to attract indigenous women to Brasília. They took to the streets there. The agricultural workers also protested with the "marcha das margaridas".

In 2000, three out of four Brazilians living in rural areas were poor. This situation had improved significantly under the presidents of the Workers' Party PT, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. We were no longer known as the land of hunger.

Nowm the setbacks are considerable and we must take to the streets again. We are fighting for democracy, for national sovereignty, for individual and individual freedom and against violence against women. This year alone, the murder rate of women has risen by 84 per cent. We attribute this, among other things, to the President declaring an absolute "laissez-faire" policy – everything is permitted, do whatever you want with women.

Already the previous right-wing administration under Michel Temer carried out reforms that led to painful financial cuts in the trade unions. What's the situation of unions today?

Under Bolsonaro, the attack on the unions has intensified. A constitutional amendment is currently being negotiated in the back

rooms of the Brazilian National Congress. They want to overturn Article 8 of the Brazilian constitution, which enshrines freedom of association and the freedom to form trade unions. So not only has Bolsonaro cut off our funding, but now he wants to take away the opportunity to organise ourselves and represent working people. For him, trade unions are simply not necessary. We're very concerned about this.

At the forthcoming trade union conference, we will fight to ensure that we can organise and unite freely, that's a fundamental right of trade unions. We have to ensure that we can withstand this pressure. We don't want to be pampered by the state, as it was the case in the past under the corporatist constitution. But we demand the right to freedom of association. We have now been partially ousted from collective bargaining. Previously, we had also been involved in numerous councils, bodies and forums and have had a dialogue with the government. That wasn't only the case for us, but also for other social actors. Today, the government doesn't listen to society anymore, there are no more spaces where civil society can express itself.

Which support can the international level provide, the European Left and the trade unions, for example?

After the coup against Dilma Rousseff, the second act took place when Lula was prevented from standing for election. Now we are suffering from the third act, the dismantling of workers' rights and the fomenting of hatred. Politicians have already gone into exile because they have been threatened. In the face of this persecution, we need not only declarations of solidarity, of course, but all kinds of help, including in the campaign for the release of Lula. It will not work without international solidarity for society and trade unions.

The free trade agreement between the European Union and Mercosur is a critical issue. We can see that the chapters on social clauses, workers' rights and environmental issues are certainly interesting, but they are not sanction-proof, so breaches of these clauses have no consequences for the perpetrators.

Bolsonaro's success also had to do with the fragmentation of the left-wing camp and the loss of confidence that Lula's and Dilma's Workers' Party faced. Are the progressive forces now joining forces in their protest against the right-wing government?

First of all, Bolsonaro's victory has certainly not only to do with the problems of the Left or the Workers' Party. I think society was discontent, so Bolsonaro won the election. How can we expect Lula and Dilma to solve problems that have existed in Brazil for 500 years?

They faced an economic crisis and a conspiracy of those who finally wanted to regain power. These were parts of Congress, but also the Supreme Court. The right-wing camp has flocked together to regain power and has used all means to win.

How did Bolsonaro then manage to win against the left-wing camp?

Well, the media mobilised and Bolsonaro himself stirred up hatred against the Workers' Party with the aim of destroying it. Bolsonaro should not be allowed to do that: he has played with the media, social media in particular, in a way that we've never been able to – especially among the poorest, in other words those who have benefited most from Lula's and Dilma's policies. That's where his manipulative manner worked and led them to vote for him.

But we don't give up and we try turn the game around. I think we can do that by joining forces. With us, they've tried to set a warning example and see if they can't destroy the left all at once. We survived this tsunami, this right-wing and media attack. We represent the largest group in the House of Representatives and also have many state governors. The Workers' Party is far from done. Did the fragmentation of the left make Bolsonaro's election victory possible? I would say no. We have, of course, made tactical mistakes. We're reflecting on these mistakes and gathering new strength. We can turn the game around, I'm quite sure of that.

What are the consequences of the government's neoliberal economic and social policy?

The constitutional amendment alone that was still implement under Temer is fatal – it freezes the funds for public services, in other words for health, education, sewage treatment and so on for 20 years. In the next 20 years, then, as laid down in the constitution, not a single cent may be invested in these areas – only inflation will be offset. People are already feeling the consequences. They no longer have a chance to be cared for in the health centre of the community or to be properly trained. In the end, the Brazilian future will be sold off and an army of cheap workers created. Philosophy lessons have been abolished, physical education lessons have been abolished. As long as people can still do simple work, that's fine with the government.

The pension reform, with the cancellation of the farm worker pensions that were a big achievement in the last years, will have dramatic consequences and let the people wake up. If in rural areas, the pensions of farm workers are abolished, then a large part of the purchasing power will be lacking and the communities will be existentially affected.

Recently, a new alliance against Bolsonaro was formed in Brazil. What are the intentions of this group?

> This alliance against Bolsonaro is difficult to assess. They are forces from the centre and from the conservative camp. It seems to me that they want to only get rid of Bolsonaro, as to replace one face with another. Perhaps they might use someone who is a little less harsh and a little more educated, someone where they don't need to be worried about his state of mind or whether he's behaving in otherwise disturbing way. They could help us, but I think that the project of this new alliance is as much about privatisation, loss of national sovereignty and democratic rights as Bolsonaro's. If we are really talking about a new project, we can talk to them. If only one head is exchanged for the other, then I see that rather sceptically.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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