

A “Red” Government in the South of Brazil

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A “Red” Government in the South of Brazil - Brazilian Workers Party wins gubernatorial election in state of Rio Grande do Sul; includes article on productivity of crime

For ten years, the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) has run city hall in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul state (on the border with Uruguay) and one of the main cities in the country. The PT is quite an original party, founded in 1980 by unionists, leftist Christians, and Marxist militants, all convinced that the emancipation of the workers will be the task of the workers themselves and stirred by the desire to invent a different, radical, democratic, libertarian socialism that breaks with the old models of Stalinism and social democracy. The current mayor, Raul Pont, a former director of the teachers’ union, belongs to the PT’s most radical current, the Socialist Democracy tendency, which bases itself on the Fourth International.

The PT’s “reds” (the color of the party’s flag) have won city hall three times because their management of municipal affairs is radically different from that of the various bourgeois politicians: no corruption, no nepotism, a priority for the needs of poor and working-class neighborhoods and, above all, an inspiring experiment with direct democracy called the participatory budget.

This is a system that lets local populations in each neighborhood of Porto Alegre decide, in assemblies that are open to the entire population, the priorities for the public budget allocated to their locality. In other words, it is the population itself which determines, in an original demonstration of direct democracy, if the budget’s funds should be used to build a road, a school, or a medical center. Subsequent assemblies let the population monitor the implementation of the chosen projects, while a City Council of the Participatory Budget, made up of delegates elected by the assemblies, manages the distribution of the budget to the different neighborhoods, following criteria decided on in common.

Admittedly, it is only a minority of the population—some tens of thousands of people in Porto Alegre—that participate in the participatory budget assemblies, but since the assemblies are open to the whole population, the system enjoys a great legitimacy and popularity. The participatory budget is, without a doubt, one of the main reasons for the PT’s electoral victories in the Porto Alegre municipal races and, more recently, the elections for the Rio Grande do Sul state government.

This state is one of the most important in the country in terms of population and economic development. The majority of its population is made up of descendants of European immigrants, notably Italian and German. It is traditionally oriented to the left but, for some time, the dominant tendency was the “workerist” populism of President Vargas and his political heir, Leonel Brizola. It is only since the end of the 1980s that the hegemonic force on the left has become, in the state capital, the Workers Party. Significantly, Rio Grande do Sul is one of the main bases of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), now Brazil’s most important social movement. The MST is not just the organized expression of the struggle of the poor for a radical agrarian reform, but also the central reference point for all the forces in Brazil’s “civil society” (which includes unions, churches, leftist parties, professional associations, and university teachers) that are struggling against

neoliberalism.

A few months ago, PT candidate Olivio Dutra won the gubernatorial elections. For the first time in Brazil's history, one of the country's most important states is administered by a team that bases itself on socialism and the interests of working people. Olivio Dutra is a former bankworkers union director and a well-known figure on the PT's left; he defines himself, according to a conversation we had a few months ago, as a "Christian Marxist." The elected vice-governor, Miguel Rossetto, belongs, like the mayor of the state capital, to the Socialist Democracy tendency.

One of the first initiatives of the new government has been to keep its promise to launch the participatory budget on a statewide level. Grassroots assemblies have been held in all the state's municipalities and in the neighborhoods of the larger cities. The success of this initiative has infuriated the rightwing opposition, which controls the state legislature. (Legislative elections in Brazil traditionally favor the right, because of the way the electoral system works, but also because of the weight of "clientelism" and of voter apathy toward this type of election.) One of the leaders of the right has tried to use the courts to block the process of direct democracy. After a number of legal adventures, this attempt has failed and the assemblies have been held as anticipated.

The main problem of the new Rio Grande do Sul government is the gigantic debt to the federal government that was left by the previous governor, Antonio Britto, a politician of neoliberal orientation. Britto promised to pay this debt . . . by privatizing the state's main public services, like electricity and transportation! Olivio Dutra and his comrades, who are resolutely hostile to the neoliberal policies of dismantling and privatizing public services, absolutely rejected this solution, which was advocated both by the local right and by the federal government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a former leftist sociologist who was converted to the religion of the market and turned into a fanatic for neoliberal globalization.

So a real tug-of-war has begun between the new Rio Grande do Sul government, which would rather not go on paying this absurd debt (for which it isn't responsible) and the federal government, which is threatening not to turn over to the state the part of the national revenue assigned to it. Beyond its complex technical and legal aspects, this is a political battle between the neoliberalism of the dominant classes and an attempt (which the elite considers "heretical" and highly dangerous) to provide an example of an alternative politics in service of the needs of the working class. This is a difficult fight and it is by no means certain that Olivio Dutra and his Workers Party comrades can win. Indeed, the outcome of the confrontation will depend on what happens in the other regions of Brazil and the attitude taken by the other governors elected by the opposition, who are generally more moderate than the one from the "red South."

The new government has initiated an interesting environmental program as well. For years, environmental defense movements and the MST have struggled against the genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that North American agro-industrial monopolies like Monsanto are tying at all costs to introduce into Brazil, with the discreet support of President Cardoso and the federal government. At stake is the protection of the environment, the health of consumers, and the autonomy of peasants, threatened by monster seeds of the Terminator variety—genetically modified to keep farmers from being able to use part of their yield to sow the land for the next season and forcing them to buy their seeds from Monsanto over again each year.

Now Olivio Dutra and his secretary of agriculture, who is close to the MST, have decided to forbid all imports of transgenetic seeds. To the great dismay of Monsanto and Co., they have proclaimed the state of Rio Grande do Sul "free from transgenetic products" and have started to set up a certification system allowing them to ensure an internationally recognized label for local products such as soy. Several European distribution companies, alarmed by consumers' refusal to buy

products containing GMOs, are beginning to get interested in the “traditional” production of Rio Grande do Sul. The Agricultural Association, controlled by the big capitalists and landowners, is in favor of the GMOs and charges that the government’s initiative is a “Machiavellian conspiracy to impose, along with the MST, agrarian reform....”

We know, of course, that it’s not possible to have socialism in one country, still less in one state. These experiments are still new and fragile; they are taking place in a county devastated by neoliberal policies, strangled by international debt, and dominated by a voracious and parasitic oligarchy; a county whose level of social inequality is one of the highest in the world, taking the form of a real social apartheid. But for those who refuse to accept capitalism as the horizon of human history beyond which we cannot pass, who refuse to accept neoliberalism as the only possible form of modernity, the innovative endeavors of the socialist, environmentalist, and democratic Brazilian left represent a hope for the future.

P.S.

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