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Brazil:

Organizing for Socialism and Freedom in Brazil: an interview with PSOL activist Rodrigo Santaella

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Against the Current [1] interviewed Rodrigo Santaella, a member of the revolutionary socialist organization Enlace and an activist in the Brazilian Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). We met him at the Fourth International's Ecosocialism School in Amsterdam in December 2012. This annual, three-week school serves as an intensive Marxist political education for FI members and allies. Readings and audio of presentations from the school can be found [here](#).

PSOL emerged out of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) in 2004. The PT was originally a radical left party which the FI section in Brazil was instrumental in building. With the election of Lula da Silva in 2002, however, the party took a decisive turn to the right and began implementing a neoliberal program. A section of the party's left-wing exited the PT and eventually founded PSOL, in an effort to create an anti-capitalist alternative to the PT. Rodrigo discusses this process and the state of PSOL and the Brazilian left today. For a more detailed discussion of the PT's political trajectory, see João Machado's article "The Experience of Building the DS and PT, from 1979 to the first Lula government."

ATC: What is your organization and tell us about its activities.

Rodrigo Santaella: Our organization is called Enlace, and is currently an internal tendency inside the broad left party called the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). We have a little more than 300 activists spread throughout the country. Enlace is a revolutionary organization, with deep traditions and seeks a renewal of democratic socialism. Enlace came mainly from another tendency, called Democracia Socialista (DS). DS was – and still is – an internal tendency of Partido dos Trabalhadores [Worker's Party/PT, currently the ruling party of Brazil], and it's possible to say that the majority of DS stayed with the PT in its process of degeneration. After the former Brazilian president, Lula of PT, was elected, the contradictions within the PT began to really emerge. Inside the DS, the debate was, "should we be part of the government or stay inside the party but outside the government?". When the Lula government began implementing neoliberal policies, especially the pension reform in 2003, it became clear to a section of tendency that we could not participate in the PT government and the party was undergoing a process of degeneration. Even so, some of our most important militants were invited, and accepted, various posts inside the government, and this – among other things – caused the split. We left PT, and with other organizations founded Enlace and began the process of constructing PSOL.

Enlace, as an organization by itself, is not a section of the Fourth International, but an observer, as is another tendency inside PSOL called CSOL [Coletivo Socialismo e Liberdade]. We retain this relationship with the Fourth International as a result of Enlaces' origins and traditions. But though the organization itself is an observer, all the members of the Fourth International in Brazil are inside Enlace, and we consider the Brazilian section to be formed by "all the militants inside Enlace who assume the tradition and the organization of the IV International." Currently, we are going through an important process of approximation with other organizations inside PSOL, especially the CSOL, and that's a big chance for our section to grow over the next year.

We're actively organizing in a variety of sectors of Brazilian society. First of all, in the students movement, especially at the universities, we are part of a collective called Levante, which organizes more than 300 students around the country. Levante has considerable social influence as a result of heading some important student unions in a number of universities in the Brazil. We also organize secondary students, especially in Rio de Janeiro, but we are starting to spread this organizing nationally. We're playing increasingly important role in the union movement, mostly in Rio de Janeiro and in the sector of teachers, but also in some other sectors and regions of the country. We also have an important presence in the Brazilian anti-racist and LGBTQ movements in many parts of the country, organizing campaigns and collectives, being part of major organizations, etc. and we have a huge participation on the ecological

movement, being the sector that pushes this most vigorously pushes this debate inside the party. We also play a role in the women's movement, formulating and organizing campaigns, struggling for equality inside and outside PSOL, and supporting all kinds of self-organization initiatives inside Brazilian society. We have a website and a magazine, which still has regularity due to a lack of resources, but we are organizing ourselves to publish it more regularly in 2013. After the October's 2012 elections, we now have three municipal councilor mandates, in 3 different cities: Fortaleza, Rio de Janeiro and Niterói. Although we have no illusions that an electoral strategy is the best or only way of constructing a new society, we consider it important to be inside institutions to denounce and highlight their contradictions, and on the other hand to support any struggles coming from the social movements (whether we participate in them or not), from where the real possibilities of change can emerge.

Last but not least, we also spend an important part of our energies on the internal disputes of PSOL, which we consider to be an important political alternative in Brazil, as long as we don't let some tendencies of bureaucratization and degeneration – especially characterized by the priority to the institutional disputes (such as favoring elections over movement organizing), which opens space to private financing of campaigns and alliances with right wing parties, for instance – grow.

ATC: What is PSOL? Why was it formed and what is your section's role within it?

RS: PSOL is the result of an attempt to build a broad anti-capitalist party in Brazil, after the degeneration of PT. It was formed to be a political alternative to Brazilian left forces. The Brazilian left was, since the end of the 70's, all focused on building PT as an alternative political tool for the working class and social movements in the country. After Lula took power in 2002 and embarked on the road of neoliberal reforms, like the pension reform I mentioned, it was clear that the course of PT was looking more and more dire. Some parliamentarians were expelled from the party for opposing such reforms, and the idea of forming a new broad left party started at that point and PSOL was founded in 2005. Currently, after 7 years of this, the course of PSOL is still in dispute, some sectors want to repeat the same strategies of PT, trying to avoid some mistakes, and others – like us – think the mistakes resulted precisely from such a strategy of giving priority to the disputing power within institutions, and adapting to the logic of private financing and alliances with right wing forces to win elections.

Now, Enlace has representatives in the national leadership of the party, and play a very important role in building unity of the left sector of the party to dispute its course. Beyond that, we try to organize party's branches in all the sectors and regions we act, and also try to support all the initiatives of democratization and smooth functioning of PSOL's internal structures, which is still a very difficult task.

ATC: What was the section's role in the PT? How did the PT turn towards neoliberalism?

RS: To summarize, I can say that Democracia Socialista (DS, the name of our FI section at that time) played a central role in organizing the political and legal process of founding the PT in two of the most important states in Brazil: Rio Grande do Sul and Minas Gerais. Beyond that, DS was able to develop and strengthen, both inside and outside the party, the debates about different kinds of oppressions: women's, LGBTQ and anti-racist struggle. Also, our section was important in "holding" PT to the left in a lot of situations. A good example is the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where most of the militants of DS were located and where, on one hand, PT had its major participation in institutions (for example, the PT state government until 2002) and on the other hand was the expression of radical politics in the country. This happened, in large part, because of the participation of DS's militants.

Regarding PT's turn to neoliberalism, it all starts with the international situation and its changes after 1989, with a big crisis of left forces all around the world after the demise of the Eastern Bloc countries and the USSR. Around 1988, PT had begun to grow inside the state's institutions and this started to increase the pressure to adapt to the bourgeois social order, with the same process happening also in the labor movement. After PT's defeat in the 1989

elections, in which the party still had a very radical program and also an activist-centered form of organization, the central part of its leadership, with Lula at its head, proposed that it was necessary to moderate the program in order to achieve electoral power. A right-wing of PT, which papered over the class struggle and sought broad alliances with moderate and right-wing forces, slowly gained dominance within the party. This also started to change the internal organization of PT, and since the 90's it turned from a militant party with the priority of organizing branches to a party organized around elections, with professionalized campaigns, private financing, etc.

This sharpened the internal differences inside the party, especially when the more electorally centered sections of the party began using resources from "state machines" to finance factional struggles inside the party. The tendency of moderating in order to win elections accelerated, and in 2002, with a big businessman as his vice-presidential candidate, Lula was finally elected. At that point, the compromises and alliances that PT had would leave a definitive mark on its public policies, reforms and government programs that came later. This showed that the party was completely adapted to the neoliberal global order, though with some peculiar characteristics, such as the increase of the social compensation programs like the Zero Hunger campaign.

ATC: How has the crisis affected Brazil? And what is the general political situation in the country?

RS: The most important effect of the crisis in Brazil was the cut in the budget of important sectors like health and education, and also in the government social programs. In 2012, we had \$26 billion in cuts to those areas. Brazil followed the same recipes for helping the bank sector, but with some important differences. The most important one was the encouragement of consumption. Freeing credits and reducing some taxes, the government encouraged the population to consume more and more, and the effects of the crisis were kind of hidden behind this consumption boom we had on the country. Obviously, this is not sustainable in long terms, but until now it has diminished the impact of the crisis on Brazilians.

About the general political situation, we have a very popular government with Dilma Rousseff (Lula's successor and current President of Brazil) from PT. According to the statistics, she may be even more popular than Lula was. So it's a difficult moment to be in the opposition, especially on the left of the opposition. Most of the most important social movements in Brazil are coopted by the government. On the other hand, the big investments and contradictions of the high-profile sporting events we will have in the country over the next couple of years (the Olympics and the World Cup), and the delayed effects of the crisis that are still likely to come, will create a situation where the PT's development project will start to falter. Some splits in social movements are already happening because of the cooptation process, and some social uprisings have erupted in the past 2 years, such as important strikes involving teachers and postal workers, so there's some light at the end of the tunnel, as we say here.

In this difficult context, PSOL with its own contradictions, is attempting to raise a left alternative in Brazilian politics. We have a difficult situation for the left, but also perspectives on navigating the objective conditions of a social uprising in the country, and in this context PSOL is building itself as a left political alternative to PT.

ATC: What is PSOL's social base? What movements is the party most deeply involved in?

RS: PSOL has a very diverse social base, which includes university students, workers in the public sector, human rights movements, health workers, and also urban popular movements. In the places the party is bigger and has more influence, some classical sectors of the working class and a lot of informal workers, especially the youth, form the social basis of the party's organizing. We also emphasize work in the ecological, anti-racist, women's and LGBTQ movements. We have relations with the MST (Landless Workers Movement), one of the biggest peasant movements in the world, but there are difficulties because of the MST leadership's contradictory relationship with the government.

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PSOL currently has more than 35,000 thousand affiliates, but most of them are not very active. We are still in the process of building the party, and in very difficult conditions, so we influence a lot of sectors and people, but we cannot talk about PSOL's "consolidated social basis" yet.

ATC: How did you become radicalized?

RS: I don't really know how to describe my own process of radicalization. I think as any process it doesn't have a unique turning point or a start and an end.

When I was younger, because of some readings about students movement, politics in general, etc, and through talking with my parents, who were not activists, but were politically conscious with a progressive orientation, I participated indirectly on campaigns supporting PT's candidates and on some international campaigns. So my interest in politics started when I was at school, but I wasn't even close to becoming a revolutionary at that time. When I got to the university, I started getting involved in the student movement, and then I had contact with a collective of students, organized in part by militants of the FI section there, but also with other organizations and a lot of independents, called *Amar e Mudar as Coisas* ["To Love and Change Things"]. The experience of trying to struggle, inside the university, for a more democratic, public and quality education for the people, started to show me the contradictions of the system itself, the class interests that anchored politics both inside and outside the university. Whenever we started engaging in real struggles, such as fights to democratize access to the university, we could feel the power of the institutions and the interests they represented. So, in the process of real struggle inside the university and the formation process inside that collective, I started becoming radicalized. Then, from our own place of struggle we started having contact with other social movements in Brazil, like the MST, as well as some urban movements. Those experiences also contributed to my process of radicalization. I was an "independent" militant for about four years and then I joined PSOL in 2010 and the FI section within Enlace in 2011.

I think my experience inside Enalce, inside PSOL and inside the Fourth International, together with the real struggles I have been a part of in Brazil these few last years are still factors in my on-going radicalization. The issues we have to deal in society, our problems, are more and more radical ones. So I think the process of radicalization of socialist activists has also to follow those issues, that's why, in the end, I think I'm still becoming more and more radicalized.

ATC: What can comrades in other parts of the world do to support your work and learn from your experiences in building broad left parties?

RS: I think the first challenge we have to deal with is the creation of more organic relations between our sections inside the Fourth International. The first step to support or learn of any experience is knowing about, being familiar with the major issues, with a little bit of its history and with the people that are presently part of it. As internationalists, I think this is our first task: build more organic relationships between our organizations all over the world. Even small things like translations of articles, reserving sections of our websites or magazines for international contributions from comrades, invitations to meetings or activities whenever finances allow for it, virtual meetings of some branches in different countries to think about common issues, and a lot of other simple initiatives like that can help in this task. This first step is the most important and urgent one, and could create conditions for more possibilities.

I think the best way comrades can aid our work in Brazil is initiating or participating in international campaigns on issues, for instance the struggle against the privatization of the universities or public services, against racist violence, against sexist violence, etc. If we could articulate these actions better, it would probably have more impact in the different countries in which we organize.

To learn from our experiences in building broad left parties, the best way is to stay constantly in touch. It could be

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helpful to also send U.S. comrades to our party's congresses. A congress of a broad left party is always a very interesting experience and deepens one's understanding of the most important issues inside the party and its relations with the struggles in the society. In 2013 we will have our fourth national congress of PSOL, probably near the end of the year, and the comrades of Solidarity are, of course, invited to send some representatives to observe and participate of it. It would be, undoubtedly, a very good interchange between such different – but also in some ways, so similar – realities.

[1] *Against the Current* is the journal of the US organisation Solidarity, sympathising organisation of the Fourth International. This article on its website [here](#).