

Contemporary Challenges for the Working Class and Peasantry in Brazil

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Protest against (former president) Michel Temer in São Paulo, Brazil (August 2016). Rovená Rosa/Agência Brasil [CC BY 3.0 br], via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Capitalist Crisis of Organizing Production and Society

We are living through a very complex moment of global reality and human history. In the last decade, various profound crises have unfolded that affect the lives of every person, as well as the very survival of our planet.

First, there is an economic crisis that is not just cyclical or sectoral, but is characterized by calling into question the essence of the capitalist mode of production, now hegemonized by financial capital and the large international corporations that control production and the global market. This is not just a crisis of accumulation or production of wealth. It is a crisis that reveals that the current way of organizing production can no longer ensure work, income, and the production of goods to meet the needs of the entire global population. Its essence is only to create profit, which is fulfilled in the sphere of financial capital. Thus, capitalism is no longer progressive and no longer represents a solution for the vast majority of humankind. Capitalists cannot find solutions that continue the accumulation and production of wealth while satisfying the needs of the world's population. Millions of human beings, workers, and producers of goods were marginalized in this system of production. They cannot find work, labor, income, or ways to survive.

Second, there is a crisis in the nature of the bourgeois state. Industrial capitalism, with its bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century, created the republic, the three powers, and the guarantee that all citizens would be equal before the law, including that the state would guarantee everyone the same rights to public services (health, education, transportation, and so on), as well as the right to fight for political power. This model has failed. Financial capital manipulates laws and governments through other mechanisms, mainly the judiciary—not democratic or republican at all. Through the manipulation of the means of mass communication, financial capital has created a new state—the state of exception. It ensures the accumulation of capital by charging collective taxes via the state or consumers, privatizes the goods produced by nature, takes over public heritages, and despises the rights of the population ensured by the state.

The consequence of all of this is that the people no longer believe in politicians or in formal democracy. Elections do not effectively guarantee that the people can exert their will. This has been happening all over the world and, here in Brazil, there were two parliamentary coups against the Workers' Party (PT) and in favor of banks and corporations. Dilma Rousseff was impeached in 2016 and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was prevented from running for president, sequestered, and imprisoned. We are thus experiencing a serious social crisis in which the state and the capitalist mode of production no longer ensure social progress or the well-being of most of the population. The rates of unemployment, starvation, violence, femicide, attacks on historical rights, and the despair of impoverished youth have been rising all over the world and in Brazil too.

Third, there is an increasing environmental crisis. Capital, in its desire to get back to rapid accumulation, knows that the private appropriation of goods from nature, which should be in service of all, constitutes an extraordinary source of income for companies seeking to increase the rate of accumulation.

The goods produced by nature, as they are not fruits of human labor, have no inherent economic value. However, they can be privatized and sold at fantastic prices, ensuring extraordinary profits for capitalists. In the automobile or mobile-phone production industries, which are the spearheads of industrial capitalism, the average annual profit rate is 13 percent. However, whoever manages to appropriate petroleum can obtain a 200 percent profit; water, as another example, can have profits reaching 700 percent; electric energy from natural sources, such as hydroelectric and wind, produces profits up to 300 percent—and so on for mining and other commodities coming directly from nature.

Capital is assaulting nature. And the last reserves of the planet are to be found primarily in the periphery of the system, especially in the southern hemisphere: Latin America and Africa. From climate change to water contamination and decreased rainfall in various regions, the consequence of this extreme privatization of natural wealth is the

unlimited exploitation of these countries. It has provoked environmental crimes of all types against their populations, such as the Brazilian dam disasters in Mariana and Brumadinho, and water contamination by toxic metal waste in Barcarena.

Fourth, there is a crisis in the values that guide behavior in society. Many philosophers, sociologists, and theologians have reflected on and analyzed the so-called civilization crisis in which we are involved, provoked by a permanent ideological campaign through our means of communication and their bourgeois cultural apparatuses that constantly defend false social values, such as consumerism, egoism, and individualism. These conceptions are deeply antisocial. No society in human civilization has progressed through individualism or individual progress. Much to the contrary: humankind's historical values are solidarity, social justice, and the unrelenting pursuit of equality for all people. There is no biological or racial distinction between human beings. There are only cultural differences, differences in perceptions and experiences, determined by the territory where we live and our social relationships.

Fifth, there is a crisis related to the working class and its emancipatory project. Workers have always fought against exploitation, humiliation, and all sorts of social injustices. And in their image of socialism, they have constantly promoted the ideal of a postcapitalist or anticapitalist society. However, left-wing parties have recently suffered ideological as well as political defeats and have been unable to maintain the hegemony of revolutionary, postcapitalist, emancipatory ideas within the working class.

Facing such a complex scenario of crisis, and without knowing the needed ways out, it is vital to reflect on and debate the future of the working class in the world and in Brazil.

Talking and thinking about social revolution means thinking about structural changes to our society, economy, the state's political regime, social classes, and values. And its construction essentially depends on a new hegemony of the working class, the majority of society that is alienated and fights only for survival.

What we can be sure of is that the capitalist way of organizing society is no longer the future, it is just the past. But the emancipatory future of the people, an egalitarian and just society, will depend not on desires or convictions, but on social resistance and struggles, as well as the time the masses will take to fight for a new society.

The Situation in Brazil

Capitalism is globalized, with five hundred corporations and banks controlling the worldwide economy. Political power and the dominant classes are now internationalized. This means that the problems of the Brazilian people and their way forward are bound with the world system and international political forces.

Class struggle has unfolded in the context of a profound crisis of capital, intensifying the dynamics at play. Geopolitics points to the widening of inequality, conflicts, expropriation, and the increasing barbarization of human relationships. The current

Brazilian government is the result of a coup that manipulated the electoral intentions of the people and represents a new phase in the U.S. imperial plan for Brazil and the whole of Latin America. The *program of capital* is in effect, giving continuity to measures taken by the illegitimate government of Michel Temer, but this time, with the legitimacy of the ballot box. The plan to roll back rights (through neoliberal labor reforms, pension reforms, and so on), take away people's sovereignty, privatize everything, and further restrict freedom of expression and organization tends to be ever more aggressive in its rhythm and scale.

The electoral coup resulted in a government without a social base in most of Brazilian society. It does not have a project for the majority or for the nation. It is just a project for international capital, dominated by banks and global corporations. This has led to a government made up of many nuclei of power that, despite internal contradictions, remain in agreement as a unit with regard to the project of capital.

The Economic Nucleus

The centralized economic interests are the hard nucleus of the government—its members are bankers and finance workers, dubbed *Chicago boys* due to their time spent as students at the Chicago school of economics. The Chicago boys first acted in a South American government and earned their nickname during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. The core of their extremely neoliberal politics is the so-called free market and the belief that the government must interfere as little as possible, with the exception of using funds to keep inflation low. This includes keeping the Central Bank of Brazil autonomous, to let the market and the “free competition” of corporations adjust the economy independently. This is why they defend the total openness of trade (without protecting national industries, for example), privatization of practically all areas of society, vouchers instead of public education, and personal-savings schemes instead of pensions. This package of proposals and measures was promoted during the Chilean dictatorship and is being pushed now. Precisely because it is antipopular and antinational, it can only be implemented by an authoritarian government. Ideologically, the Chicago boys do not believe in and are against the idea of equality.

The Nucleus of Judicial Power

The coup and the neoliberal proposal for a state of exception also have their judicial expressions. In this case, they are represented by judges and ministers of the Public Prosecutor's Office, trained in German doctrines and U.S. laws, who received foreign, mainly U.S. imperial, support starting with the electoral victories of progressive governments in Latin America. Their connections with the U.S. Department of Justice and North American intelligence services are public—exposed, for example, by President Jair Bolsonaro and Minister of Justice and Public Security Sérgio Moro's visit to the CIA and FBI headquarters during their first trip to the United States since assuming power.

These judges and prosecutors are operators of a *permanent state of exception*, as, ideologically, they too do not believe in the idea of equality. As such, there is a formal law that can be applied to so-called good citizens and a law of exception based not on the constitution, but on the opinion of the operator of the law. This operator can consider when the defendant in question must be treated as an enemy or less than a person, as occurred, for example, in the cruel episode of the tactical refusal to allow Lula to bury his older brother. It is important to highlight that this judicial nucleus, beyond being against the idea of equality, creates *public enemies* who are subjected to extrajudicial legislation, because where there is an enemy, there cannot be a human being. This is the work of Moro's team, the man who convicted Lula without evidence and currently serves as the Minister of Justice and Public Security for Bolsonaro's new far-right government.

These two sectors, guided by international financial capital, have used the shock doctrine, as described and analyzed by Naomi Klein. They recognize that the best way to impose radical free-market ideas is to do so in the wake of a big shock to society. This shock can be an economic catastrophe or a natural disaster, a terrorist attack or an imminent war, all which usually disorient people. In Brazil, the idea that the PT broke Brazil was propagated to unleash what we call a hybrid war—the current U.S. imperialist strategy of fighting enemy governments indirectly, relying not on regular troops but instead right-wing nongovernmental organizations, such as the Free Brazil Movement, Millennium Institute, Mises Institute, and the Liberal Institute, which were created with international funds from sources such as the Atlas Network. They work around generic political slogans (such as fighting corruption) and present themselves as a spontaneous movement. In the Brazilian case, we can affirm that one of the factors that put us on the path of hybrid wars was the discovery of the pre-salt layers, oil and natural gas offshore reserves trapped below thousands of meters of salt and post-salt sediments.

The Military Nucleus

Generals, colonels, admirals, and high-ranking military officials are occupying more than 130 strategic positions in the new government, prominently the vice presidency, occupied by General Hamilton Mourão. Not even the military-corporate dictatorship (1964–84) had so many military people in high positions. According to sociologist Henrique Costa, the military is well “aware of the economic crisis and the devastation of the world of labor that is turning into violence, via social media as well as in isolated episodes around the country.” He remarks: “The military was at the height of its visibility during the [2018] truck drivers’ strike. Evidently, they recovered their old resentment of intellectualism, viewed as the artistic class, public university students, and, above all, LGBT militants, seen as the winners of the war over the best positions in contemporary capitalism and, therefore, adversaries to be slaughtered.” We can affirm that the current government is one with strong military involvement, with recent experiments in places such as Haiti, exerting its territorial control over the popular classes during the military occupation—control that was then reproduced in the favelas

of Rio de Janeiro in an even more violent fashion. They believe that there should not be equality, but instead a hierarchy in which the Brazilian state guarantees rights to those who are deserving.

The Neo-Pentecostal Nucleus

The other sector of society that makes up the political base of Bolsonaro is a group of political professionals from the lower ranks, formed by the give-and-take of Congress, especially the Evangelical Christian lobbies and ruralist lobbies. This is the less qualified, less educated group and yet, ideologically, like the others, they too put alleged merit above equality and harshly criticize other parties and so-called representative democracy. They believe that some people should be (or rather, remain) second-class citizens—particularly women, LGBT people, and, implicitly, poor people—and they bet on aggressive ways out of the social and economic crisis. They accuse other parties of misusing the system, which is the reason they negotiate with individuals and lobbies. Their ideological agenda seeks to fight science, the secular state, and what they call *gender ideology*.

For this section of the right, an ideological-moral crisis is occurring, brought about by the abandonment of traditional values that have supposedly governed society since the beginning of civilization in the name of an egalitarianism artificially created by state intervention. In the view of the neoconservatives, class, gender, and even racial differences have always been part of the social order; to abandon these differences in favor of an illusory classless (or postclass) society would lead to an unprecedented cultural degradation. They thus oppose all movements for equality. The neoconservative agenda is basically the restoration of the authority of the law, the reestablishment of order, and the implementation of a night-watchman state. According to this vision, the state to be dismantled is the one that would concede *too many* rights—or even *any*—to people or groups considered innately unworthy.

Is this a fascist government? Fascism was capital's way out of the twentieth-century crisis in Europe, based on an authoritarian conception that there was an enemy responsible for the crisis. Motivated by the frustration of the middle class, fascism directs its energy into conservative slogans, rejecting debate and rationality and betting on fear. However, even if the base is middle class, the political direction favors financial capital. All that can be said at this point is that the Bolsonaro government does not fit squarely as a classic fascist government, but it undoubtedly carries fascist inspirations (and aspirations) and we cannot discard the possibility that it may come to be a government with more explicit fascist measures.

Contradictions of the Bolsonaro Government

- In a certain way, Bolsonaro and his cronies even embarrass the classic bourgeoisie that helped him secure his electoral win. But even Bolsonaro's downfall would not in itself stop the ongoing right-wing project. It may be in the interests of the elite that he does not finish his mandate. The ones effectively opposing him are sections of the military, the ashamed right, and Globo, Brazil's main mass media group. The working class and the left are still paralyzed, although they are rebuilding unity to resist this period.
- The schemes of the Bolsonaro family, his intellectual unpreparedness, and the nonsense that multiplies every day through Twitter, especially about his involvement with militias, heavily strain Moro's reputation, allowing the government's main political slogan—fighting corruption and ensuring public safety—to fall apart. The Supreme Federal Court has already shown that this project will find opposition in the judiciary, especially from Gilmar Mendes, Celso de Melo, and Marco Aurélio.
- The project imposed by capital imposes losses for workers, especially for those who are poorer. It imposes the continuity of the unemployment crisis. The measures of the current government severely worsen the life of many workers and it will be difficult to continue pushing programs that increase social inequality and increase the privileges of the ruling class without triggering any social conflicts.
- What is more, the measures the government has taken to privatize its main state-owned industries and shamefully surrender our natural wealth under the direction of the United States are a direct affront to national interests.

The Situation of the Brazilian Working Class

The changes in the working world are all part of capital's response to its crisis, promoting a productive restructuring that seeks to destroy the organization of workers. During this process, the antagonisms between the forces of labor and of capital, reaffirming the present class struggle, are made ever starker, as there is no other way capital can widen its margins of accumulation (that rapidly retract) at the cost of labor.

The aim is increasingly the reorganization of the state so it may intervene to help guarantee the possibility of brutal levels of exploitation. The indiscriminate dissemination of fear requires an overwhelming force, that is, the brute force of state intervention.

The crisis of capital has worldwide effects, but these effects are not felt the same way everywhere. In peripheral countries like Brazil, the effects are even worse and more profound, and while we have always had precarious and unsafe jobs, they have gone alongside a certain margin of workers' rights. The discourse of the current government is that "the worker will have to choose between a job or rights," which is proof enough of the current situation.

Historically, we have thought of *precarity* as the *informal worker*, but the latest labor reform has altered this condition, as it normalizes jobs with less rights and less security. In other words, what is precarious is now formal work.

The main characteristics of the current configuration of the workforce can be summarized as follows:

1. The reduction of the industrial proletariat, while at the same time deepening the process of precarization of what is left of this group of workers.
2. The repressive feminization of the job market through a strategy of precarization relying on the unequal gendered division of labor, allowing for the mobilization of a labor force that is more available and adequate to the needs of capital.
3. The process of deregulation of the service sector that, at first, absorbs some of the workers who have lost their factory jobs, but later finds that there are limits. This sector is also affected by the privatization of public services, which is a way of implementing deregulation.
4. The systematic exclusion of youth, the group most affected by unemployment, from the processes of labor. The result has been an increase in suicide among young people—with suicide now being the fourth leading cause of death in Brazil. The data reveal a 40 percent increase in suicides between ages 12 and 25 over the last five years in the country.
5. The increase in unemployment among the elderly, spreading the idea of undesirable generations: the useless young and the useless elderly.
6. The return of the use of child labor.
7. The significant increase of work in the home, which for women is intertwined with domestic labor. With labor in the home, capital gives up centralized control and skillfully transfers it to the self-control of the desperate worker.
8. The increase in pay based directly on units of production generated (piece work, according with Karl Marx), in contrast with the decrease in wages based on working time. In piece work, workers tend to increase the rhythm of work on their own accord and at their own risk, rendering workdays even more exhausting.
9. The rise in legal entities in which workers relate to the labor process as if they were independent contractors and not individual workers, increasing the exposure to precarious labor.
10. The structural rise of unemployment that cannot be resolved with compensation for requalification, retraining, or higher education. This has led to a brutal expansion of the reserve army of labor. The idea of *being your own boss* as something positive and freeing has spread, especially attracting young people because of the apparent lack of rules, regular working hours, and rigid expectations. This idea of entrepreneurship and working on your own accord has led to the creation of a type of subjective autonomy that allows for the exploitation of workers by the workers themselves.

11. A large-scale increase of proletarianization, understood as a loss of autonomy over the labor process. In the words of Marx, the radical separation of workers from the means of production. Even for those who own part of the means of production, such as settlers and their territories, the pressure of proletarianization and the loss of autonomy are also present.

In this conjuncture, the *working class faces severe challenges*, including the need to create a new strategic project of society, new organizational forms, and new forms of counterhegemony in the ideological struggle.

The Agrarian Question in Brazil

Since the 1990s, the Brazilian agrarian question has been constituted by the hegemony of agribusiness as a model of domination over agriculture, controlled by transnational companies and financial capital in alliance with large proprietors of local land. The historical trend of this productivist model in the global context points to a decrease in average productivity and rentability, especially in the production of food. The model is focused on monocultures of some agrarian commodities, intensely relying on mechanization and agrottoxins, the use of genetically modified seeds as private property belonging to companies, and the removal of the workforce from the fields. This model causes many problems, such as the increase in social inequality, unemployment, the transfer of agrarian income to the centers of financial capital, the depopulation of huge regions, the increase of diseases caused by agrottoxins, and the proliferation of environmental crimes. Thus, on one hand, we have maximum profit for some companies and a few farmers, and, on the other, the failure to create a sustainable model for the future.

Companies continue centralizing and enlarging their control over the entire productive sector on a global scale. But this is not a social solution. In the case of seeds, for example, around twenty years ago, smaller companies dominated the market. In the current period, there have been two hundred acquisitions and the market is monopolized by four companies that control 68 percent of sales, the majority of which are of genetically modified seeds. In the case of agrottoxins, four companies currently dominate 71 percent of the market. Furthermore, seed, agrottoxin, and fertilizer companies have been merging, further increasing the monopolization of the sector.

In Brazil, the agricultural expropriation model—exploiting nature and labor to increase the concentration of riches—dates back to the colonial era, during which slave labor was used for four hundred years in order to accumulate capital. Since then, the right to access to land has been denied to the working class, indigenous peoples, former slaves, and landless peasants. After that, in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, the country experienced a technical modernization of agriculture, especially during the military dictatorship, which did not alter the agrarian structure of the country. Since then, agribusiness has

gained strength with the support of the Brazilian state, resulting in widening inequality in rural areas and a decrease in the rural population, which is now at less than 15 percent of the total population.

The preliminary data given by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics' agricultural census reveal that, in ten years, there has been an almost 10 percent decrease in the number of people employed in agriculture. The census also shows that the number of establishments has fallen, but the area they occupy has increased. Establishments with over one thousand acres are 1 percent of the total, but take up 47.5 percent of the total corresponding area. Cattle farming still occupies a central part, but there has been an increase in cultivation of temporary crops, to the detriment of permanent crops. In this sense, food sovereignty is compromised, as when crops such as beans, rice, cassava, and potatoes stagnated or had their plantation area reduced, and commodities such as soy, corn, and sugarcane saw an increase. In this same period, there was a 17 percent increase in establishments that use agrottoxins, and a 50 percent increase in those that utilize tractors, though still not the majority.

In the face of these conditions, how has the Brazilian agrarian bourgeoisie behaved? Farming has its origin in the colonial period, with the *sesmarias* of the seventeenth century. The agrarian bourgeoisie is an archaic one, equating land ownership with power. The agrarian bourgeoisie has always controlled power in the country and can be divided into two large groups: (1) entrepreneurial, controlling over three hundred million acres of land and the production of commodities; and (2) traditional landowners with unproductive land that is used for speculation. This second group is backward, violent, archaic, and characterized by the use of physical and psychological violence, to the point of employing gunmen. If we backtrack to the 1980s, this second group won hegemony within the agrarian bourgeoisie under the command of the Democratic Union of Ruralists, National Movement of Producers, Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives, and other similar organizations. Nowadays, the rural landowners lobby exerts its influence within the government, presenting itself as the most organized front in Congress, and is thus able to unify its interests.

It is then possible to see the significant presence of the agrarian bourgeoisie in the current Bolsonaro government. This has been the case from the very beginning, as exemplified by the Chief of Staff Onyx Lorenzoni, who is part of the ruralist lobby, and the Minister of Agriculture, Livestock, and Supply, Tereza Cristina. The bourgeoisie's priorities are to open the market for export; modernize the legislation on agrottoxins, facilitating their use; ease rural labor legislation; ensure judicial security for investments in agriculture—that is, ensure the absolute right to property; and make environmental licensing more flexible.

Steps and Tactics for Future Struggles

We are living through an adverse moment for the rural working class, but it is favorable to rebuilding based on new tactics, relying on innovative political and social practices. Such historical moments have always been faced and overcome thanks to the capacity of classes to build unity through democratic centralism and collective guidance. We have always found answers by organizing the people, always seeking society as an ally on a national and international level. Through our bonds with the base, we can inspire new activists and adopt new tactics for resistance and the organization of classes.

It is in these hard times that we will find the best ways to build our project for the autonomy of the working class. The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and peasant movements around the world have reflected, debated, and built new popular programs for the organization of agricultural production and for the use of nature's goods. In each country, these programs acquire a terminology according to the local political culture. In Brazil, the MST adopted a Program for Popular Agrarian Reform. Other peasant movements in Brazil adopted other forms, always retaining the same essential content.

However, it is vital to consider what is happening around the world—a collective working-class process of updating the agrarian program. What is in question is no longer just classic agrarian reform summarized by the democratization of land ownership, guaranteeing the right to land for those who work it. The development of capitalism, globalization, the agribusiness model, and class conflict in general have put in place new paradigms that we must confront in our general program.

The following constitutes a new agrarian contemporary program to guide the struggle of the rural working class, in its various social compositions, according to country and region.

1. The right to access to land and control over territory

In thinking about the conquest of land and its redistribution during processes of agrarian reform put into effect by governments associated with peasant movements, we must now also consider that land is more than just for laboring. Land reproduces life, biodiversity, and above all the cultures of its inhabitants. Therefore, we must make a broader analysis, a more holistic one, of what it means to guarantee land and territory for these populations.

2. Peasants and the people in rural areas as keepers of the collective goods of nature

The lives of all human beings depend on cohabitating with millions of other living beings, such as plants, animals, and bacteria. Our future depends on the survival of this biodiversity, which is under threat every day due to capital's greed. Because of this, peasants, those who live on the land under different forms of social organization, must make a commitment to protect all of nature's wealth, biodiversity, water, forests, rivers, animals, flora, and fauna as part of our living and future.

3. The production of healthy food

The social function of agriculture, the act of cultivating and tending to the earth, is to produce the necessary energy for beings to survive. Due to this, we must commit to producing healthy foods. Capital, with its agribusiness model, cannot produce healthy foodstuffs except for a small, privileged minority, as its logic is aimed solely at making the most profit in the shortest amount of time.

4. The adoption of agroecology

Capital uses the productivist method in order to attain the maximum amount of profit, adopting techniques that only harm nature, increasing the maximum productivity of human labor and physical production per acre. However, this destroys nature, the future base of the production of food. This method also can no longer produce healthy food. We must take on the challenge of building agroecology as a model that represents a set of techniques for agricultural production, which will increase the productivity of work, the physical productivity per acre, and also decrease the physical labor of workers, maintaining equilibrium with nature. It is only with agroecology that we will be able to produce healthy food for the general population.

5. The adoption of mechanization that is compatible with nature and rural labor

The model used by capital relies intensively on agricultural mechanization, seeking only profit. Unmanned and driverless machines are already being used. We must mechanize work in agriculture, seeking to decrease human labor, but operating on a scale and with characteristics that are compatible with rural family units and are respectful toward the environment.

6. The adoption of cooperative agribusiness

Agribusiness is a necessity for the development of productive forces. However, it must ensure the quality of food, avoiding the use of preservatives and agrotoxins, and on a scale that is compatible with communities. The income generated by agribusiness must be used for the benefit of workers, those who produce food, and cooperatives must be formed and controlled by peasants and agricultural workers.

7. Education

The democratization of access to formal education at all levels, from primary school to higher education, must be part of any program of agrarian reform. Only knowledge can help develop productive agricultural forces and truly free people.