

Brazil Impeachment & Left Media

Howard Besser

As Bill Weinberg points out (see page 14, this issue), much of the left media shamefully supports odious forces simply because they oppose the U.S. A contemporary example of a significant skewing the facts can be seen in its overwhelmingly biased coverage of the 2016 impeachment of Brazil's president, Dilma Rouseff.

Politics and corruption

Journalists from *The Nation*, *The Intercept*, and *Democracy Now!* have a history of supporting the Workers' Party (PT — Partido dos Trabalhadores) under both President Lula Inácio da Silva who came to power in 2003 and President Dilma (both are generally referred to in the media by their first names) who succeeded him in 2011. The PT embraced social democratic politics, and in Lula's first term in office, the party instituted many welfare reforms raising millions of people from poverty into the working class. But the programs made no real attempt to empower them.

Instead of enabling the poor to take control over their lives, the PT instituted a system of dependence, where the poor and working class were encouraged to support the PT and rely upon them to provide for their needs. Because of this, many were willing to overlook the vast looting of the treasury orchestrated by PT officials.

Since gaining power, the PT has been notably pro-development. This follows a model of leftist regimes in other countries that justify industrialization and deforestation as legitimate methods for driving an economy that will generate surpluses used to help the underclasses. Particularly under Dilma, the PT has repeatedly clashed with environmental and indigenous groups, striking workers, and those fighting against homophobia.

Reading North American left media coverage of Brazil, one would know nothing about Dilma championing the fourth largest dam in the world, flooding indigenous villages, killing populations of near-extinct species; increasing oil production and exploration; halting the distribution of "anti-homophobia kits" in high schools claiming they are "inappropriate for children;" taking a hard line against public employee strikes; and deploying military troops to end dam construction strikes.

For a decade before coming to power, the PT supported Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST — Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra), and the Party promised to institute much of the agrarian reform promoted by the MST. Consequently, many in the MST felt betrayed when Lula turned over only about the same amount of land to collective settlements as had his conservative predecessor. Dilma turned over far less.

In recent years, most in the MST no longer expect help from the government in their struggle, but many of them still vote for the PT fearing that conservative politicians might crack down on them more harshly, as the newest Brazilian President Michel Temer has started to do.

Padding government contracts that require kick-backs from contractors to politicians was perfected by the PT, resulting in the country's two largest corruption scandals in the past 30 years. The PT created the Mensalão bribery scandal where public funds were funneled through government contracts to pay legislators \$12,000 per month for their votes. About \$43 million was looted from the national treasury by the Workers Party.

In an even larger money-laundering scandal known as the “Car Wash” because it originated in a gas station, the state-controlled oil company, Petrobras, grossly overpaid large construction contractors who kept part of the extra funds and kicked back the rest to politicians. \$3 billion was looted from the state-controlled oil company as part of this scheme.

Some PT leaders and legislators are already serving jail time for these scandals. More than one hundred current members of Congress have been either indicted or convicted of receiving kick-backs from these schemes.

The PT also has a long, sordid history of marginalizing independent voices, and trying to represent itself as the only possible alternative to the right. They have repeatedly labeled their opponents on the left as tools of conservatives, and many activists have been forced to leave the Party, or have endured PT smear campaigns.

Left Media Coverage

Leftist journalists repeatedly refer to the impeachment of Dilma as a “coup” overturning the “will of the people.” U.S. journalist Glenn Greenwald appearing on the Democracy Now! TV program (August 29, 2016) called it “a complete reversal of democracy.” He asserted that those judging her are super-corrupt while she is not the least bit tainted. Greenwald said the impeachment would result in a radical change of policy because Temer and Dilma come from different parties, but failed to mention that they were elected together on a coalition ticket. He and other journalists also neglect to mention that Dilma chose Temer as her running mate, with full knowledge of his conservative views, because the PT needed a coalition partner in order to develop enough support within the legislature to pass legislation.

Indeed, the left media casts Dilma’s impeachment by Congress with her as an innocent victim of the far right. The man who replaced her as president, Michel Temer, of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), is odious, but that doesn’t make Dilma a victim who should be supported. One way of characterizing them is by comparing Temer to Donald Trump and Dilma to Hillary Clinton.

In a later segment of the same Democracy Now! broadcast, Greenwald castigated the media for being so afraid of a Trump victory that they are letting Hillary Clinton “waltz into the White House free of challenge or questioning.” Yet in the earlier segment, his fear of the Brazilian right had him doing exactly the same thing with Dilma. But in some ways this is not surprising; he is well-known in Brazil as an apologist for Dilma.

Conclusion

Most left media coverage of Brazil has been emphatically binary. Powerful forces (in the form of the PT) opposing a threat from the right receive uncritical support, while less powerful voices (like environmental, indigenous, anti-homophobic, and climate activists) receive no coverage at all when they oppose or clash with the PT.

Little or nothing from activist voices make it into the left media except on rare occasions when they are not opposed by the PT. The U.S. left media has painted Dilma and her party as innocent victims of a right-wing power grab. But while the right has certainly tried to grab power, Dilma and her party are far from innocent victims.

No mention is made of the key role played by the PT in creating the most recent corruption scandals, and they are only discussed when highlighting the right-wing figures who are caught up in them, without noting that it was the PT that initiated the scandals that benefited these right-wing politicians.

These elements of the left media have turned disgusting politicians into admirable martyrs by purposely hiding contextual facts. This shameful binary division of the world into “good guys” and “bad guys” is reminiscent of U.S. leftist apologists for Stalin. As many of us learned through previous struggles, one can oppose one evil without having to support another lesser evil. To oppose Temer and his conservative policies doesn’t mean that we need to support Dilma and her corrupt, pro-development party.

With two bad choices, the real answer is a third alternative.

Howard Besser has been involved with activist anti-authoritarian politics for 50 years. He has Brazilian family and spends two months per year in Brazil.

fifth Estate

Howard Besser
Brazil Impeachment & Left Media

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/397-winter-2017/brazil-impeachment-left-media>
Fifth Estate #397, Winter, 2017

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net