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Brazil Senate vote ousts Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff

By Bill Van Auken

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After a twenty-hour debate that ended only at 5:45 AM in Brasilia, the Brazilian Senate voted to initiate impeachment proceedings against President Dilma Rousseff, suspending her from office. While only a simple majority was needed to start a trial of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores--PT) president, her opponents mustered 55 votes in favor, one more than a two-thirds majority, with only 22 against.

The move effectively ends more than 13 years of Workers Party rule in Brazil and ushers in an extremely right-wing government that will redouble the attacks on the living standards and basic rights of Brazilian workers that had already begun under the Rousseff administration.

Scattered demonstrations broke out both for and against impeachment in Brasilia and across the country as the Senate debate unfolded.

In Washington, White House spokesman Josh Earnest affirmed the Obama administration's "confidence in the mature, durable, democratic institutions in Brazil to withstand the challenge."

In legal terms, the Senate vote only initiates a trial process that must conclude within 180 days with a decision on whether or not to impeach Rousseff, removing her permanently from office, which requires a two-thirds majority. Her suspension in the meantime, however, has cleared the

way for her successor, Vice President Michel Temer, to carry out a wholesale purge of government officials.

A last-ditch attempt Tuesday by the country's attorney general to win a Supreme Court order halting the impeachment proceedings was rebuffed. Another appeal on Wednesday for the court to bar Temer from sacking government ministers and naming his own cabinet was also rejected by the court.

While the entire political establishment in Brazil, along with some of the country's wealthiest businessmen, are implicated in a massive bribes and kickbacks scandal involving contracts with the state-run energy giant Petrobras, Rousseff is to be tried on charges of improperly transferring funds from public banks to sustain government programs and, allegedly, to conceal fiscal realities in during her 2014 reelection bid. The president and her supporters point out that such budgetary practices were nothing new, having been employed by each of her recent predecessors.

Sixty percent of the members of the Senate that voted for an impeachment trial are themselves facing charges of one character or another, the great majority involving money laundering and corruption. Thirteen are facing trial before the Supreme Court in connection with the Petrobras scandal, while others are implicated in charges ranging from murder to rape and even the exploitation of slave labor.

While both Rousseff—who chaired the Petrobras board when the kickback scheme siphoned off some \$2 billion in assets—and her predecessor as president, Workers Party founder Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, are also facing investigations, there has been no evidence directly linking her to criminal activity.

Rather, the impeachment process is being carried out on the basis of a transparent pretext with the objective of effecting a radical change in government policy demanded by the financial markets.

Brazil faces its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, with the economy expected to contract for the second year in a row by at least 4 percent. Layoffs have taken place at the rate of 100,000 a month, while inflation has eaten into the living standards of the population.

The Workers Party government had already begun implementing harsh austerity measures. Rousseff and other PT leaders had argued that they alone could claim “legitimacy” in carrying through such attacks, while counting on the collaboration of the CUT union federation. Decisive sections of the Brazilian ruling class as well as foreign investors, however, made it clear that they wanted regime change.

During the protracted Senate debate, some of those backing impeachment made it clear that this was the real reason for ousting Rousseff, not alleged fiscal misdeeds. Senator Raimundo Lira of the PMDB, who led the special commission on impeachment, told the body, “We are living through a moment of crisis that will only begin to be resolved” with Rousseff's ouster.

While Rousseff and her supporters have denounced her impeachment as a “coup,” the inconvenient truth is that the collection of right-wing parties and corrupt politicians who have pushed her out of the presidency are in most cases the erstwhile running mates, allies and partners of the PT and its government.

The 13 years of Workers Party rule served to further the growth of the right wing, which was awarded with government positions and payoffs for political support. Meanwhile, the corruption and pro-capitalist policies of the PT in power served to erode whatever base the party once had in the Brazilian working class.

Vice President Temer is to assume his new position as provisional president at 11 a.m. on Thursday. *Folha de S.Paulo* reported Wednesday that he had already prepared a speech in which he will tell the Brazilian people that the country’s economic situation is critical and that the population must unite in support of sweeping emergency measures.

Temer’s party, the PMDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party), has cast the program of the incoming administration as a “bridge to the future.” In reality, it is a bridge to the past, an attempt to wipe out social rights that were written into the 1988 constitution adopted three years after the end of Brazil’s more than 20-year-long military dictatorship.

Temer is to announce a new cabinet which will also be sworn in Thursday, making virtually a clean sweep of the ministers who had served under Rousseff. Most of their replacements have already been named. A PMDB legislator explained that it was necessary to avoid a “vacuum of power.”

Among the most significant appointments involve economic portfolios. Named as the new head of the Central Bank is Ilan Goldfajn, chief economist and partner at Itaú Unibanco, Brazil’s largest private bank. Goldfajn, who served in the same post under the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003), has called for the scrapping of Brazil’s constitutional requirements to fund health care, retirement programs and aid to the poor, suggested that wages are too high and that the growth of unemployment is required to bring down inflation. Former Bank of Boston CEO and central bank President Henrique Meirelles has been tapped as minister of economy, entrusted with defending the interest of Brazilian and international capital.

To head the Ministry of Defense, Temer has apparently chosen Newton Cardoso, Jr., a 36-year-old PMDB deputy from the state of Minas Gerais. According to *Folha*, the choice has prompted protests within the military’s uniformed command, which sees him as too young and politically inexperienced to oversee the armed forces under conditions of intense political crisis. Not helping matters, he and his father, the former governor of Minas Gerais, were named in the Panama Papers as having opened an offshore account to purchase a \$1.9 million helicopter and a flat in London valued at 1.2 million pounds.

And as justice minister, Temer has named Alexandre de Moraes, the right-wing Sao Paulo public safety secretary, who has presided over a Military Police force that kills more people each year than all of the US police departments combined.

While recent polls have put Rousseff's approval rating at roughly 10 percent and indicated 60 percent support for impeachment, Temer's popularity is if anything lower and a similar majority has called for his removal.

The assumption of power by Temer, who himself faces potential impeachment as well an investigation in connection with the Petrobras scandal, will hardly stem the political crisis. Rather, it signals a sharp intensification of the class struggle in Brazil under the rule of an illegitimate government.