

Domingos Passos – the Brazilian Bakunin

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2001

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A union militant, carpenter by trade, and renowned orator and agitator, Domingo Passos stands out as a figure of early 20th century anarchism in Brazil. While a more detailed profile of Passos, yet alone a contemporary and comprehensive account of Brazilian anarchism, has yet to be published in English we do recommend the 1973 “Anarchists and Communists in Brazil 1900–1935” by John W. F. Dulles. Read a short overview here and find more references in the Wikipedia entry on anarchism in Brazil. This piece on Domingo Passos was published as part of the Black Anarchism reader.

‘I woke at 5.00 am. Passos, who had been up and about for hours, was sitting on his bed reading *Determinism and Responsibility* by Hamon. I grabbed a towel and went downstairs to wash my face. When I came back from the yard, after drying off, I saw two individuals. It was a moment or two before I realized who they were. With revolvers drawn they spoke to me and asked me harshly:

“Where’s Domingos Passos?”

Anticipating another of the attacks that our comrade had been through so often before, I was keen to cover for him and said that he was not around. I told them:

“There’s no Domingos Passos living here!”

A Young Anarchist Militant

This brief extract from a 16 March 1923 declaration by the workman Orlando Simoneck, carried in the newspaper *A Patria*, clearly reflects a few features of the situation sampled by the Black youngster, carpenter by trade, anarchist and active member of the Civil Construction Workers’ Union (UOCC): by 1923 ‘Comrade Passos’ had become a special target for the Rio police as well as one of the best loved and respected worker militants in the (then) Federal District. Another feature of this comrade, rightly identified by Simoneck, was his relentless self-educational drive, his thirst for learning and culture, which found him spending his mornings poring over books in the little collection belonging to Florentino de Carvalho who lived in the same house in the Rua Barão in São Félix, only a couple of paces from the union local.

We do not know the precise year of Passos’s birth (it was probably towards the end of the 19th century), but, from the books of Edgar Rodrigues, we know that he was born in Rio de Janeiro state. We find his first appearance in social struggles of the time as a UOCC delegate at the 3rd Brazilian Workers’ Congress (1920) at which he was elected as travel secretary for the Brazilian Workers’ Confederation (COB). Passos had been selected for that post because he stood out in the ranks of the organised proletariat on account of his intellect and oratorical gifts which he had honed in the day to day struggles of his trade. In 1920 Passos worked with the Rio de Janeiro Workers’ Federation (FORJ) which had a daily newspaper in *A Voz do Povo*. Under the Epitácio Pessoa government, there was a severe crackdown with countless anarchist militants being jailed, tortured and murdered, trades unions shut down and labor newspapers pulped. In October 1920, the police dispersed a workers’ parade down the Avenida Rio Branco with gunfire and, not content with that, stormed the UOCC headquarters, wounding 5 workers and rounding up a further 30.

High Hopes and Political Shifts

The labor movement was reeling from the onslaught and went into a decline from 1921 on. The 'yellow' unions expanded rapidly and came to contest hegemony in several trades with the revolutionary unions. Among anarchists, the high hopes vested in the Russian revolution were evaporating as news percolated through of the Bolsheviks' repressiveness.

On 16 March 1922, nine days ahead of the launching of the Communist Party of Brazil, the UOCC carried a document entitled 'Refuting the False Claims of the Communist Group' and declaring its repudiation of the state communists, the 'Bolshevists'. It was assuredly written by Domingos Passos. Throughout the 1920s Civil Construction workers were the steeliest and least compromising opponents of the Bolshevik doctrine. They were the very embodiment of critical awareness and in a number of regards took their toll of the communist cadres.

In July 1922, in the wake of the failure of the revolt by the lieutenants from the Copacabana Fort, the repression slapped a ban on the UOCC paper *O Trabalho*, to which Passos was a regular contributor. A new anarchist bastion in the press was under the charge of another UOCC militant, Marques da Costa, editor of the Labour Section with the newspaper *A Patria*.

A Driving Force

In 1923, with the police crackdown hot on his heels, Domingos Passos stepped down from the UOCC Executive Commission and turned his attention to propaganda and union organizing, travelling twice to Paraná to assist the local organisations. Like the intellectuals José Oiticica, Carlos Dias and Fabio Luz, Passos was frequently invited to give talks at union locals. He was also actively involved with workers' festivals, acting in plays, giving poetry-readings and talks on social themes. Such events certainly accounted for some of the few moments of pleasure that Passos enjoyed during his life as a laborer and political activist.

During the first half of 1923 he was one of the driving forces behind the relaunching of the Rio de Janeiro Workers' Federation (FORJ), the rival FTRJorganisation having been set up under communist control. When the FORJ resurfaced on 19 August 1923, Passos was elected on to its Federal Committee. Refloated by 6 unions (civil construction, the shoemakers, the coopers, the ships' carpenters, the 'gastronomics' and the Marechal Hermes General Trades Union) by mid-1924 the FORJ had recruited a further 5 significant trades: foundry-workers, brickworkers, ironworkers, steelworkers and stone-workers. In spite of state repression and underhanded communist tricks, revolutionary syndicalism grew in strength under the auspices of the FORJ which was at that time working on the organisation of an inter-union conference in Rio and planning the 4th Brazilian Workers' Congress. In July 1924, all of this organisation effort was wiped out by the crackdown following a junior officers' revolt, in São Paulo this time. Union locals were attacked and shut down, and hundreds of anarchists were jailed. Domingos Passos was one of the first to be arrested and after 20 days of suffering at Police Headquarters he was held in the prison ship 'Campos' in Guanabara Bay. The months that he served on board were characterised by severe privation and restrictions. With other anarchists and hundreds of 'outlaws', he was to be moved to the 'Green Hell' of Oiapoque, the 'Siberia of the Tropics,' where ill-treatment and disease claimed over a thousand lives. Passos managed to escape to Saint-Georges in French Guyana. Meanwhile, fever drove him to seek medical treatment in Cayenne where he received

a warm welcome from a Creole who helped him regain his strength. From Guyana he moved on to Belém where he remained for a time as a guest of the organised proletariat in the city.

São Paulo and Imprisonment

Domingos Passos was one of those who returned to the Federal District after the state of siege enforced by the Artur Bernardes government for nearly four full years (1922–1926). On reaching Rio de Janeiro at the start of 1927, he returned to union activity, but he was dogged by the after-effects of malaria. That year he moved to São Paulo, where he helped reorganize the local Workers' Federation (FOSP). He took part in the 4th Rio Grande do Sul Workers' Congress held in Porto Alegre. He was to the fore in the organizing of several pro-Sacco and Vanzetti meetings and rallies organised by the FOSP and its affiliates. In August he was jailed in the feared 'Cambuci Bastille' where he spent three months, subject to all manner of ill-treatment.

According to Pedro Catallo, his cell-mate, Passos left prison with his body covered in ulcers and half-naked and was sent to the jungles of Sengés in the still untamed interior of São Paulo state, to die. A short while later he managed to write to some comrades, asking for money, which he received through an go-between. So ended the career of a man who had been one of the most influential and respected of the anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist activists of his day. Nothing more was ever heard of him, aside from the occasional, unconfirmed rumor. Not for nothing was Domingos Passos known to his contemporaries as the 'Brazilian Bakunin.' Few were as committed as he was to his ideals and suffered so much as a result. He put his all into the fight to emancipate men and women. He spent nearly a decade in prison and in tropical jungle conditions. Passos became a great beacon for libertarian and social activists in his day and in our own!

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Retrieved on 25th February 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
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