

Repression in Brazil: University students sentenced for protest against Lula government

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The sentencing of two students from the University of Sao Paulo (USP) to prison for political activity is a stark indication of the escalation of repression on Brazil's university campuses. Similar actions have been carried out at various universities recently, but the court decision handed down last December against the USP students is distinguished by its arbitrary character and the fact that it involves the most important university in the country, where until just a few years ago the military police did not dare to intervene.

In August of 2005, Daniel Sene and Ilana Tschiptschin, both students of architecture, were arrested by the University Guard for painting on the pavement in front of the School of Philosophy the slogan "Brasilia 17," a call for participation in a demonstration against the government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva that had been called in the Brazilian capital of Brasilia on August 17 of that year. As if it were not enough to detain the students, university security immediately took them to a police stationhouse, where they were interrogated and held in a cell overnight.

Daniel and Ilana were subsequently sentenced to three months in prison. Their defense attorney appealed the decision to a higher court, but on December 18, 2006, the Sao Paulo Court of Justice upheld the sentence. Ibdal Pivetta, the students' lawyer, said he would appeal the decision once again.

Pivetta, a well-known lawyer for political prisoners, was president of the National Union of Students in 1958. Under the military dictatorship (1964-1985) he defended hundreds of prisoners against the terrible repression of that epoch of state terror. The majority of those he defended were then students, some of whom now occupy significant posts in Brazilian political life.

In numerous public statements, Pivetta has charged that the university's decision to bring the students to a police station represented a major "aberration of justice," and that the case recalled in a frightening way the dark days of the

dictatorship.

"The recent case of Daniel and Ilana, from 2005, is one that I consider an aberration of justice, as well as an ethical and moral aberration," said Pivetta. Specifically, as to the action by the university security, he added, "What happened in their case, as well as in various other cases, is that this internal police did not act socially or culturally; it acted arbitrarily."

Asked how the security guards should have acted, Pivetta stated, "What should have been done in their case was to talk to the accused, ask these two persons—or invite them—to go before the university government and there, the whole body or those responsible for campus security would take or not take appropriate measures, assuring them total, broad and unrestricted right of defense, as is normal in other civilized universities.

"But instead, the security guards at USP violently arrested the two and dragged them to the police station. This is an assault on all principles of university autonomy, on the right of the university to govern itself."

A political demonstration within the university should be treated as a legitimate social act by the University Guard and not as a common crime. This becomes even more arbitrary given the fact that the students had only painted the pavement. If they had painted the slogan on the wall of a USP building, Daniel and Ilana could have been charged with "destruction of property," but in this case they were accused of committing an "esthetic-environmental" crime. That is, the only possible juridical pretext for convicting the two was that they had made the university more "ugly." However, this is a clear restriction on the right of political speech and amounts to saying that to speak out politically on the university is a crime!

In his argument before the court and in statements to the Brazilian press, attorney Pivetta seriously compared the case with the repression introduced on the universities under the military dictatorship in the late 1960s. "The attitude of USP

of wanting to have police power makes the university regress to the period of the military dictatorship,” he said. “For a case such as this with such a low level of damage to be brought before the courts is something that I saw only in the epoch of military repression,” he told the press, adding, “It is the University of Sao Paulo that should have been in the dock!”

Speaking at a recent event honoring former political prisoners from the period of the military dictatorship—in which other speakers treated the repression as a bad memory—Pivetta took advantage of the occasion to call attention, in a note of protest, to “the youngest political prisoners,” Daniel and Ilana.

In reality, even under the military dictatorship, the presence of the police on the USP campus was never institutionalized. Their presence was only sporadic, even minimal when compared with the permanent patrols that exist today.

Such was the case that, when the military police entered the university, it was classified as an “invasion.” As Pivetta said in an interview with students: “In the time of the dictatorship itself, there were rarely invasions. There were invasions in the case of the CRUSP (student housing) or the university restaurant, but it was more difficult for the political police to go making arrests within the university itself. This case is one of complete arbitrariness. It has shocked all of the lawyers in Sao Paulo and public opinion to the extent that it has become known.

The other fact that cannot be ignored is that the graffiti painted by Daniel e Ilana was a call for a protest against the Lula government. The incident occurred at a moment of profound political crisis in Brazil, soon after the revelations surrounding the *mensalão* scandal (in which the ruling Workers Party-PT was paying monthly stipends to deputies of other parties in exchange for their votes in Congress), which implicated the principal figures in the PT government in the diversion of public money and the bribing of legislators.

According to a number of students at USP, during this period (August 2005) protests related to national politics were severely repressed on the campus. “There was a campaign by the university bureaucracy to tear down protest signs against the corruption and against the Lula government. These posters were torn down rapidly, while others were allowed to remain,” one student said.

The conviction and sentencing to prison of Daniel and Ilana do not represent an isolated incident. Throughout 2006, an ever-more repressive process has taken hold at USP, something that had already been developing in recent years. Various restrictions have been imposed on student activities, principally affecting political demonstrations, and various

“security” measures have been put in place, which together are putting an end to the traditional and historic freedom of students within the campus.

The constant presence of the Military Police is the most serious of these changes, but at the same time, various other attacks carried out by the university bureaucracy have combined over recent years to drastically curtail student life at USP. Entrance to the campus has become ever-more rigorously controlled; hours are being restricted; security cameras have been installed; the handing out of leaflets and the placing of “political” posters are frequently repressed; parties have been prohibited; the free spaces given to student organizations are being taken back and punishment of students for “infractions” is becoming ever more frequent.

This repressive wave, which is more severe in some universities and less in others, affects all students in Brazil. It is directly bound up with the destruction of education by the Lula government. This is being carried out through the privatization of the public universities by means of partnerships with the big corporations and banks, the transfer of public resources to the private universities through government programs, the mass layoffs of professors and initiatives such as “long-distance learning,” which leave no doubt about where education is heading—into the chaos of the capitalist market.

Reducing the universities to the mere training of new workers for the labor market and totally linking research to the immediate interests of big business is the form taken by capitalist barbarism in culture and in the university. Police repression, the billy-club and the stationhouse serve to guarantee the smooth implementation of the project of the banks and big business in carrying out the generalized privatization of culture and science, against the interests of both the vast majority of students and Brazilian working people.



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