

200 dead in Brazil air disaster: Lula government shows gross indifference

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The following article was sent in Portuguese by a Brazilian correspondent for the WSWS on July 22. In the meantime, the crisis of the Brazilian government has deepened, with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva forced to fire his defense minister, Waldir Pires, the official in overall charge of the country's precarious aviation system. In an evident attempt to quell criticism from the right, Lula selected as his replacement Nelson Azevedo Jobim, a politician of the opposition PMDB and former justice minister in the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

Over the weekend, a failure of the radar system over the Amazon region compelled at least a dozen international flights to change course and triggered a massive round of flight cancellations and delays, leaving passengers stranded at airports throughout Brazil. Initial government suggestions that the failure had been caused by sabotage provoked sharp protests by air traffic controllers, who told the press that they were being made scapegoats for the crisis and insisted, "We are not terrorists." These delays came on top of those already caused by the closure of the main runway at Congonhas because of the crash investigation. In response to the crisis, Brazil's civil aviation agency ordered a halt to the sale of tickets for flights departing from Congonhas. The agency indicated this suspension could be extended to other airports.

The catastrophic July 17 airplane disaster that claimed the lives of 200 people at São Paulo's Congonhas airport has further deepened the crisis of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's government. It has underscored the political reality that broad sections of the population, most sharply the urban working class and the youth, but also growing layers of the middle class, are moving sharply into opposition against a government that has proven itself repeatedly to be incompetent, corrupt, repressive and criminal.

On the eve of the spectacular airline crash, Lula was booed so badly at the opening ceremony of the Pan American games at Rio de Janeiro's Maracanã stadium that he was forced to give up the plan to deliver a short speech. In the aftermath of the disaster, the Brazilian president had considered a show of solidarity by going to the crash site, but was counseled by his advisors to stay away for fear of an even more hostile public reaction.

The crash of the TAM Airbus 320 was a tragedy foretold. The jetliner, bound from the southern city of Porto Alegre, skidded off the rain-slicked runway as it attempted to land at Congonhas, crossing a major highway and slamming into a gas station and

TAM warehouse. All 187 passengers and crew were killed together with at least 12 people on the ground.

The crash, the worst air disaster in Brazil's history, came less than a year after the crash of a Gol airliner, which went down in the Amazon jungle after a midair collision with another aircraft, killing all 154 people aboard.

Moreover, it took place in the midst of a widely publicized and bitterly debated crisis gripping the Brazilian aviation system. The country's air traffic controllers, subject to military discipline, had publicly denounced the abysmal conditions of work and safety and had warned that a new accident was likely at any moment. Their leaders were jailed over work actions aimed at calling attention to the safety crisis, while prominent PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores/Workers Party) politicians accused them of "mutiny" for calling for an end to military control. The Lula government, which had claimed to support demilitarization, caved in to the pressure of the military, which is determined to keep what power remains from its two-decade dictatorship.

Tragically, the warnings issued by the controllers proved prescient, and the entire Brazilian aviation system has been exposed as bankrupt. The permanent chaos in the country's airports, where cancellations and hour after hour of delays are the norm, is only one feature of an air system that is totally disorganized, in which the airlines, the civil agencies, the military, the controllers and the politicians are in continuous conflict, while the basic infrastructure is left in a state of disrepair that invites new accidents.

The repetition of a crash like that of the Gol airliner was totally predictable. It occurred, in an even more tragic form, with a passenger jet falling this time not in the jungle, but in the very center of South America's largest city, São Paulo.

In addition to the 200 lives lost in the crash, dozens of buildings and houses in the area were also damaged, some destroyed and others catching fire.

In the face of these alarming facts, and under conditions of mass shock and indignation over this preventable loss of life, the Lula government has had the same reaction as it has shown to the many other scandals and crises it has confronted: The greatest concern of the president and the government is to prove that they knew nothing of the conditions that led to this disaster and, above all, that they bear no responsibility.

It was the same reaction as in the exposure of the *mensalão* (the secret monthly payoffs to members of Congress), in the case of the

caretaker whose bank account was illegally investigated after he exposed the corrupt practices of PT ministers and their associates, in the case of the suitcases full of money found in possession of the government and leading politicians and in the case of the PT leader stopped at an airport with dollars stuffed in his underwear. In each and every case, Lula and his closest advisors have sought to persuade the public that they knew nothing and had nothing to do with it. As has become the norm, others were named as scapegoats or the guilty parties presumably could not be found.

A measure of the political and moral degeneration in the top circles of the PT and the government is their increasing resort to sarcasm and even obscenity when confronted with these exposures. Already, in the case of the air traffic crisis and the growing desperation of passengers confronted with multiple and protracted flight delays, with many compelled to sleep in the airports, Minister of Tourism Marta Suplicy had sardonically urged the traveling public to “relax and enjoy it.”

In the case of the TAM crash, the behavior was even worse. Marco Aurélio Garcia, special advisor to the president on international relations, was caught by a TV camera reacting to a news broadcast reporting a possible mechanical problem on the plane. He used an obscene gesture—roughly equivalent to the extended third-finger hand sign—which was presumably directed at the government’s critics. Bruno Gaspar, another presidential advisor watching the news broadcast with him, was filmed making a similarly grotesque gesture.

As *Folha Online* reported: “At the moment in which the news [of TV Globo] went on the air...Garcia, special advisor to the presidency on international affairs, three times made the gesture in which the open palm of the extended hand is hit against the other hand, which is closed. At his side, the adviser Bruno Gaspar was more effusive, extending both arms in front and then repeatedly pulling his elbows back towards his hips. The image was transmitted on the *Jornal da Globo* [television broadcast].”

These grotesque scenes demonstrate that this is a government whose only concern is to remain in power, continuing to benefit from the generalized corruption, and—which is worse—a government capable of doing anything to keep its power, even if it involves the killing of hundreds of people.

The Lula government increasingly resembles the US administration of George W. Bush, with its war in Iraq and its reaction to Hurricane Katrina, when through its irresponsibility and indifference it allowed the deaths of hundreds of civilians and wholesale destruction of their homes. Similarly, Lula has sent Brazilian troops into Haiti, attacked occupied factories, closed his eyes to wholesale corruption and allowed the aviation crisis to deepen to the point where more than 350 people have been killed in less than a year. The shame is even greater for the Brazilian regime. At least Bush’s advisors weren’t filmed giving obscene gestures to the American people.

On Friday, July 20, Lula finally spoke to the country about the TAM disaster. The five measures announced by Lula, together with his condolences and his hypocritical claim that he is “heartbroken,” are hardly enough to cover up the real attitude of the government, so graphically displayed by the two presidential advisors.

The measures proposed are both ineffective and demagogic. As always, “it is still too early to know the causes, but everything will be investigated with the greatest rigor,” according to Lula. One of the steps he announced is the building of a new airport, which will undoubtedly open up a whole new opportunity for the contractors and their politician friends to enrich themselves.

The reality is that the aviation crisis is inseparable from the generalized crisis that touches every institution in Brazil and every facet of Brazilian society, in which the investment in basic economic and social infrastructure upon which millions depend is entirely subordinated to the pursuit of short-term profit by a tiny elite.

Once again, the periodic disasters and the generalized misery confronting the bulk of the population is inseparable from the piling up of wealth by the corporations and the financial elite, above all in this case the profits of the airline companies and the contractors, who buy up the politicians, including a large part of the national congress.

It is hardly coincidental that, less than two weeks before the crash, a leading Brazilian senator was forced to resign after being implicated in an embezzlement scheme in which he was caught divvying up 2.2 million reais (more than US\$1 million) with a former president of the Bank of Brasilia in the office of the chairman of the board of Gol Airlines, a company that has enjoyed a massive—one might say miraculous—growth in recent years.

The unfinished repair of the Congonhas airport runway, which cost some 19 million reais (more than US\$9 million) and left the slick surface without the groovings used to allow the runoff of water, may have been one of the causes of the disaster. On the same rainy day, other airplanes skidded on the runway—which is considered dangerously short by modern standards—managing to stop only on the grass.

While the runway remained unfinished, millions were invested in refurbishing the part of Congonhas that generates immediate profits—its stores, bars and waiting rooms—all completed by the same contractors who have bought up the support of Brazil’s politicians.



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