

Brazil: students resist attacks by shock troops at University of Sao Paulo

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On June 9, the University of Sao Paulo (USP), the largest university in Brazil, with nearly 80,000 students, was the scene of events that have not taken place in the country in 30 years, since the darkest days of the military dictatorship.

Dozens of military riot police tried to break up a demonstration and drove students, professors and staff members from the gates of the university, chasing them for more than one kilometer to the History and Geography building. All the while, they attacked the demonstrators with tear gas and concussion grenades, rubber bullets, pepper spray and batons. A number of people were wounded, at least one student was hospitalized and three demonstrators were arbitrarily arrested.

One week before this confrontation, the USP rector, Suely Vilela, had called in military shock troops to repress a picket line mounted by university workers, who had been on strike for more than 30 days. Since the end of the military dictatorship nearly a quarter of a century ago, the police have not intervened on Brazilian university campuses, and traditionally can enter universities only upon the request of the university administration.

The presence of the Military Police Tactical Force, which had kept USP under siege by more than 150 armed men for nearly one month, and the aggression carried out against hundreds of students, professors and university workers on the campus, provoked explosive resistance by the students and unleashed a strike not only at USP but at universities throughout the state of Sao Paulo.

USP's return to dictatorship

The June 9 protest followed a week in which the university

had been occupied by military police in a manner not seen since the military dictatorship. Students and university workers at USP, with the support of students and staff members at two other state universities—Unesp (State University of Sao Paulo) and Unicamp (University of Campinas), carried out the action, shutting the main gate of the university city.

After more than an hour blocking the gate and the avenue running in front of the campus, the demonstrators reentered the campus, heading back to the administration building to end the protest. They were pursued by a small group of military police, who provoked and harassed them. The students turned on the police and advanced chanting “police out!” The police fell back and called for reinforcements. Despite there having been no violence on the part of the students, in short order the riot squad arrived and immediately launched its attack.

When some professors attempted to mediate the conflict and tried to speak to the police, they too were attacked with grenades and pepper spray. At this point, the university was covered in smoke, with police everywhere and helicopters flying over the campus.

The assault did not come out of the blue. For some years, students' rights have been under attack, with the administration prohibiting demonstrations and cultural activities. Students have been tried and punished, and leaders of university unions have been fired. All of this has been carried out in the name of the “smooth functioning of the university.”

The last time that anything like this had happened at USP was the invasion of the university by army tanks in 1968, at the height of the dictatorship. In the name of the “smooth functioning of the university,” the administration is promoting its return to conditions of dictatorship.

Even more shameful is the fact that this entire action was directed by the governor of the state of Sao Paulo, Jose Serra of the PSDB (Party of Brazilian Social Democracy), who is an ex-president of the National Union of Students and was a political exile under the military dictatorship.

Serra, like President Inacio Luis Lula da Silva of the PT (Workers Party), rules in open contempt of democratic rights

and against the interests of the youth and the working class. Serra and Lula have steadily deepened the repressive character of the state in order to contain the growing revolt against the political and economic crisis, and are thereby preparing a return of dictatorship on a national scale.

Students resist police attack

The immediate result of the police invasion of USP was a rebellion by the students, a reaction that had been contained for more than a month by the leadership of the student movement. After the police occupation and repression, an assembly of more than a thousand students decided by a nearly unanimous vote to carry out an immediate strike.

After the attack of June 9, the students shut down one of the main avenues on the campus and held an assembly of close to 2,000. On the following day, some 400 USP professors met and voted unanimously to demand the resignation of the rector.

Professors and students at Unicamp decided to go on strike until the military police withdrew from USP, and the same thing happened at Unesp in Marilia and Assis. On June 18, 7,000 students marched through the center of Sao Paulo, denouncing the police aggression and demanding the resignation of the rector.

After turning the campus into a battlefield, the rector, Suely Vilela, wrote articles in various newspapers attempting to justify herself, saying, "We must recognize that we have still not found the adequate means to confront this grave problem." The movement demanding her ouster had grown so large that she was forced to state a number of times to the media that she would not resign.

The role of the leaderships

Despite the willingness of the students to fight, the movement has been contained by the traditional leaderships of the students and by the Forum of the Six, composed of the unions of the professors and employees of three universities, under the influence of bourgeois and centrist parties like the PT and PSOL (Party of Socialism and Liberty, a split-off from the Workers Party).

The DCE (Central Directorate of Students) at USP, led by the Morenoite PSTU (Unified Socialist Workers Party) blocked a student strike until the police intervention on the campus, when the movement grew rapidly and it became impossible to oppose a strike.

After the police attack on the students, the DCE worked together with the unions to postpone for more than a week the protest demonstration, which had originally been called for the following day. Led by the unions, despite the fact that the great majority of the participants were students, the demonstration was held only on the 18th of June, outside the university in order to prevent a new conflict.

The demonstration ended in front of the Law School (which is outside the university city). Fearing an occupation, the reactionary director of the school João Grandino Rodas shut it down, but this time there was no need for the police to attack. The unions prevented opposition groups from speaking from the sound truck, and the PSTU went so far as to position its members in front of the doors to the Law School to physically prevent any attempt to occupy it.

Despite the arbitrary character of the police attack and the complete demoralization of the administration in the face of hostility from the university community and the whole of society, the unions as well as the DCE agreed to negotiate with the rector, Vilela.

The MNN (Movimento Negação da Negação, a socialist group which identifies itself with Trotskyism in Brazil) participated actively in the assemblies, pickets and demonstrations, defending the continuation of the strike without any negotiation with the rector Suely Vilela.

The result of the betrayal of this movement and the maintenance of the rector in her post could prove catastrophic for the student movement and for the working class throughout the country. A grave precedent has been set. The military police were deployed to repress picket lines of striking workers, and a week later, the shock troops violently attacked students, professors and employees at the USP as they carried out a political demonstration within the campus. Leaving the rector to continue directing USP means legitimizing her repressive actions, which can become routine throughout Brazil.



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