

Tensions deepen as Brazil federal strike grows

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Tensions between the government of Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff and hundreds of thousands of striking federal workers deepened as federal police and other sectors of the public workforce joined the walkout.

The police strike has spread to all 26 states in Brazil as well as the federal district in Brasilia. While police unions have left 30 percent of their members on the job to deal with emergencies, in a number of sectors they have launched work-to-rule actions, leading to increasing delays at the country's ports, airports, borders, highways and railroads.

The strike has developed into the biggest action by any section of the Brazilian working class since the coming to power of the Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) with the inauguration of the former metalworkers leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as president in 2003. Some 350,000 workers, nearly half of them employed by the country's federally run universities, are participating in the strike, impeding operations at 27 separate federal agencies.

Workers at Brazil's Central Bank staged their first walkout in five years Wednesday to press their demand for a 23 percent pay rise to compensate for inflation since 2008. The bank workers' union restricted the action to a one-day strike but indicated that it could call a longer strike later this month.

The past two days have seen scattered clashes between strikers and members of the Military Police (*Policia Militar -- PM*), including some that saw the PM using clubs and pepper spray against civilian police, as they tried to march on government ministries and Planalto, the presidential palace.

Police also demonstrated at Sao Paulo's Guarulhos Airport, the largest in Latin America, where those still on the job have vowed to conduct a work-to-rule, translating into long delays for passengers seeking to enter or leave the country. Similar actions at the Triple

Frontier area have led to severe backups for those seeking to enter from or go into Argentina and Paraguay.

Mass demonstrations of federal workers and their supporters have paralyzed traffic in the country's main cities, shutting down the central Avenida Rio Branco in Rio de Janeiro with a march on Thursday. Workers have said that they will maintain a permanent occupation of Cinelândia, the main public square in Rio's center.

Demands for increased salaries and more rapid rise in pay grades has placed them in direct confrontation with the economic policy of the Rousseff government—providing tax breaks, preferential loans and other concessions to big business, while demonstrating fiscal discipline to international and domestic finance capital.

The government has demagogically tried to cast the federal workers as a privileged sector, claiming that their demands are jeopardizing policies aimed at creating jobs for those without stable employment. There has been no indication, however, that concessions to the corporations have led to any increased investment in production.

Gilberto Carvalho, Dilma's chief of staff, attempted to make this argument Wednesday, speaking at an employment conference. "In this moment of great international instability, crisis in the economy, we have to take care of employment for those who do not have stability, those who at any moment could be fired," he said. He claimed that the government would not refuse to negotiate with the federal workers, adding, "But the priority is to take care of the country as a whole, and I insist on the rights of those who were historically marginalized."

Much of Carvalho's speech was drowned out by striking workers shouting "traitor" and "scab" at the PT leader. Some carried hand-lettered signs, including

one that said “Just call me the World Cup and invest in me,” calling attention to the lavishing of government funds on preparations for the upcoming football World Cup and Olympic games.

Dilma, as the president is universally known in Brazil, has taken a far harder line against the striking federal workers than her predecessor, Lula, cutting off workers pay and benefits. She passed a sweeping decree allowing federal agencies to take whatever measures necessary, including bringing in state and municipal workers as strike-breakers, to maintain operations.

The actions have led demonstrating strikers to chant derisively, “Dilmadura,” joining the president’s name with the word “ditadura,” or dictatorship.

The Brazilian daily *Folha de Sao Paulo* carried a column on Thursday entitled “Call out the Army.” It pointed to a recently announced plan to use the military for the protection of strategic installations and government centers. Dubbed “Protection System,” it is to receive funding totaling nearly \$5 billion.

Columnist Eliane Cantanhêde pointed out that such funding is readily available to the country’s security forces, “despite Dilma’s argument that the international crisis and a lack of resources makes it impossible to give raises in the public sector.”

While the “Protection” plan covers over 13,000 facilities, with priority given to refineries, hydroelectric dams, telecommunications systems and transportation hubs, the top priority is given to the government institutions in Brasilia, the center of the federal workers’ strike.

The plan, *Folha* warns, shows that “Dilma isn’t playing ...If democracy provides the right to strike, it also provides a guarantee for public buildings and of essential services to the population. In case of danger, the military will move in.”

Sections of big business have called for the government to take action to break the strike. The grain exporters association, Anec, for example issued a statement Wednesday warning that the walkout by food inspectors threatens to hold up exports of food commodities, particularly corn and soy crops.

As the strike confrontation with the government continues to build, the PT faces another crisis with the trial begun last week of former top party leaders and elected officials in the so-called “*mensalão*” scandal.

This first surfaced more than six years ago, when it was revealed that the PT had organized a system of monthly payments to legislators of other parties to ensure that they voted with the government. Among those in the dock are Jose Dirceu, the principal figure in organizing Lula’s election victories, who served as the former president’s chief of staff until he was forced out by the scandal and replaced by Dilma. He now works as a lobbyist for billionaire clients.

The PT’s right-wing opponents have attempted in previous elections to capitalize on the affair, but the bid to cast themselves as the guardians of honesty and decency has fallen flat with the public. The PT itself has tried to dismiss the charges as much ado about nothing, claiming that it is all a matter of a dirty tricks campaign to undermine the ruling party and its “progressive” agenda.

In reality, the “*mensalão*” scandal and other episodes of grotesque corruption that have characterized the rule of this party—once dubbed “socialist” and even “revolutionary” by various sections of Brazil’s pseudo-left—are only symptomatic. Having transformed itself into the leading party of the Brazilian bourgeoisie and turned violently against the working class, it has adopted all of the corrupt habits that have traditionally characterized capitalist politics in Brazil.



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