

Brazil's public workers end strike

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The majority of Brazil's federal unions have called off a nearly four-month strike that pitted as many as 400,000 workers against the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) government of President Dilma Rousseff.

The decision to end the walkout followed an ultimatum by Rousseff to accept the government's offer of a pay raise averaging 15.8 percent over three years—barely covering the rate of inflation—or receive no increase at all.

While the main federal workers' union, CONDSEF (Confederation of Workers in the Federal Public Service), reported that 80 percent of the workforce would be returning to their jobs on the government's terms, some sectors rejected the ultimatum, including the civilian Federal Police as well as tax inspectors and Central Bank employees.

CONDSEF Secretary General Josemilton Costa sought to justify the capitulation to the government by declaring, "It is less than we wanted, but it is not a bad deal seeing as how we were forced to begin negotiations at zero—no increase at all."

The strike was begun on May 17 by the teaching and administrative staff at federally run universities, which were shut down throughout the country. It spread to some 30 federal agencies, involving health and safety inspectors, highway and rail police, immigration and customs agents, and employees of the ministries of Health, Planning, Environment and Justice, as well as various institutions dealing with land reform and other issues.

In the end, the federal strike became one of the largest and longest labor struggles in the country's history.

The government set the deadline for reaching an overall settlement to coincide with the August 31 deadline for submitting to the Brazilian congress amendments to next year's budget proposal, including authorization for federal pay.

The Rousseff government from the beginning took a confrontational approach, vowing to cut the pay of striking workers—normally done in Brazil only when the strike is deemed illegal—and issuing an executive decree allowing the use of provincial and municipal workers as strike-breakers.

The strike saw bitter confrontations, including clashes between striking civilian police and their counterparts in the Military Police (PM) outside government buildings in Brasilia.

The government, along with the media, sought to demonize the federal workers as privileged, greedy and irresponsible, attempting to pose their demands as inimical to the living standards and job opportunities of the masses of impoverished working people.

In reality, the wage increases for public employees have in the past provided a benchmark for the demands made by workers in the private sector, including in automobile production, the oil sector and other basic industries. Reflecting the interests of the banks and big business, Brazil's Central Bank cited demands for increased wages as "an important risk" to containing inflation.

The cynical propaganda against the public workers was aimed at justifying the PT government's "stimulus" policy, which is directed almost entirely at providing tax breaks, preferential interest rates and privatization deals for foreign and domestic capital. Officials claim that this policy will spur investment and therefore create jobs under conditions in which the world capitalist crisis has slashed the country's growth rate from 7.5 percent in 2010 to what is projected as less than 2 percent for this year.

These policies only underscore the class nature of the PT, which came into being with the active support of a whole range of pseudo-socialist organizations in Brazil. Today, it constitutes the principal political representative of Brazilian financial and industrial

capital, prepared to defend their interests against those of the working class.

Rousseff's hard line against the federal workers won her substantial praise from the big business media and its commentators. Typical was an editorial in the daily *O Estado de Sao Paulo*, which stated: "The long, truculent and costly strike by functionaries accustomed to ordering, demanding and grabbing generous raises from the PT government was the hardest test that President Dilma Rousseff has confronted so far. She resisted, affirmed her authority and finally achieved, without backing off her proposal, an agreement with almost all of the workforce."

The editorial lauded Rousseff for "changing the game and going on the attack." It added, "In confronting the strikers and resisting their excessive pretensions," Rousseff had given "the first signal of a change" from the policies of the previous PT government, headed by president and former metalworkers union leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, which cultivated the public sector workers as an important base of support for the PT, expanding their ranks and granting them increases in real wages.

The editorial also backed the reported move by the Rousseff government to seek the implementation of a new law sharply restricting the right to strike for public sector workers. The law would impose such restrictions on public employees for the first time since the end of Brazil's two-decade-long dictatorship and the drafting of the 1988 constitution that followed the end of military rule.

Rousseff's predecessor, Lula, had attempted to introduce such legislation in 2007, but backed off of the proposal.

The military seized power in 1964 in large measure to suppress the wave of workers' struggles that had swept Brazil in the early 1960s. In power, it treated strikes as criminal disruptions of order throughout. The PT itself emerged largely on the back of a strike wave launched in defiance of military rule in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Given this history, Rousseff's turn toward such measures has unmistakable significance.

The intensification of the world capitalist economic crisis is finding its expression in Brazil in the growth of class tensions that are exposing before ever larger sections of the working class the role played by the Workers Party and the unions that support it in

defending capitalism.



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