

# Hundreds of thousands protest throughout Brazil

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On Monday, June 17 Brazil saw its largest protests in at least 20 years. Hundreds of thousands marched in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Brasilia, the country's leading cities, while smaller demonstrations occurred in other cities around the country.

Estimates of the numbers who took to the streets nationwide ranged as high as nearly 1 million. In Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city and commercial capital, an estimated 250,000 demonstrated, and in Rio de Janeiro another 150,000 filled Avenida Rio Branco and much of the city's downtown. In the capital of Brasilia, some 5,000 youth occupied the lobby of the National Congress, while hundreds of others climbed onto the building's roof. There were also protests in Fortaleza, Vitoria, Maceio, Belem, Salvador, Curitiba, Porto Alegre and Recife.

Monday's mass protests broadened and deepened a wave of smaller protests that were initially launched in response to transit fare hikes implemented by various city governments across the country, most notably in São Paulo.

These first demonstrations were staged in reaction to seemingly small price increases for use of public transportation, averaging between 5 and 10 cents (in US dollars) per ticket.

Much as in the events surrounding the protests in Turkey's Taksim square, the brutal repression unleashed against these initial demonstrators by Brazil's military police helped trigger nationwide anger. As a result the greatest number took to the streets since at least the 1992 demonstrations demanding the impeachment of then-President Fernando Collor de Mello and possibly since the 1984 mass movement demanding direct elections at the end of the military dictatorship.

The protests on Monday expressed far more general grievances, decrying rampant government corruption, lack of adequate basic services, widespread poverty and the squandering of billions in state funds on the construction of lavish stadiums for the Confederations Cup and World Cup soccer tournaments instead of investing in education and healthcare. At the heart of these grievances lies the immense

gulf between the wealthy ruling class and the working population in this country of 200 million, which is one of the most socially polarized in the world.

Slogans in Monday's protests expressed the profound divide which exists between the Brazilian working class and the political representatives of its corrupt ruling elite. One sign read, "You do not represent me." Another much publicized slogan said: "We don't need the world cup. We need money for hospitals and education."

Brazil's Military Police brutally cracked down on the first protests in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, firing rubber bullets and tear gas at demonstrators. Hundreds were arrested in last week's demonstrations and at least 100 injured.

There were also violent police attacks on journalists in São Paulo. At least 15 journalists were injured by rubber bullets, police batons, tear gas and pepper spray over the weekend. They charged that they had been deliberately targeted by the Military Police. One journalist was reportedly hit by a police car, and another was blinded in one eye by a rubber bullet.

After it became clear that the police violence was helping fuel the growth of the protest movement, the police in both cities attempted a more hands-off approach to Monday's mass demonstrations. Demonstrators took up the chant, "What a coincidence, no police, no violence."

In Belo Horizonte, however, police Monday formed a blockade on a road leading to the Mineirão soccer stadium, where a match was in progress between Tahiti and Nigeria. Despite a pledge in advance not to use violence, the police used teargas and rubber bullets when protesters crossed the blockade. Before the police crackdown, the demonstration had gone on for five hours with no violence on the part of protesters.

The Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) government which has run the country for the past ten years, first under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and now with Dilma Rousseff, who took office as president in January 2011, has sought to cover over Brazil's sharp social tensions with minimal social assistance for the country's poorest and the promise that the rise of

Brazilian capitalism on the world stage would bring general prosperity to the population.

This myth has been dramatically undermined over the past year by economic stagnation combined with rampant inflation. With the country's economic growth falling to 0.6 percent in the first quarter, industrial production has fallen, triggering layoffs. The official inflation rate has hit 6.5 percent, with many charging that the real increase in prices is double that. Interest rates are rising, and spending freezes are being put into place by state and local governments. There is a growing sense that the so-called Brazilian economic miracle is grinding to a halt.

The convening of the Confederations Cup, widely seen as something of a dry run for next year's World Cup, which was meant to symbolize Brazil's arrival as a "21st century power," has brought the gulf between the self-serving narrative of the political establishment and the harsh reality of poverty, inadequate social services and a generally dysfunctional infrastructure which Brazilian youth and workers confront on a daily basis into sharp relief.

President Dilma Rousseff sought to project the image of a popular leader firmly in the saddle responding to dissent in a rational way by stating: "Brazil has woken up a stronger country. The size of [Monday's] marches is evidence of the strength of our democracy." In reality, the Brazilian ruling class and its political servants are terrified at the prospect of a mass movement from below expressing the genuine aspirations of Brazil's working class.

This found expression Tuesday night. As tens of thousands of young demonstrators again took to the streets of Sao Paulo, laying siege to city hall, Rousseff was meeting at the nearby Congonhas airport with her predecessor, Lula da Silva, her principal political adviser, education minister Aloizio Mercadante, and Sao Paulo's PT Mayor Fernando Haddad. There were unconfirmed reports that the well-known political consultant João Santana was also in attendance in what apparently were crisis talks over how to deal with the growing popular revolt.

The panic atmosphere within the ruling establishment finds reflection in the government's confused reaction to the escalation of the demonstrations. While the city leaders responsible for fare hikes initially claimed the increases were non-negotiable and labeled the protesters as "vandals," the federal government has since stepped in, with congress proposing a piece of legislation which would reduce public transportation fees across the country with the clear aim of diffusing popular anger.

As with other mass protest movements which have emerged over the past few years, the one in Brazil is at present without a political leadership or program. Initially the protests were called by the Movement for Free Fares,

which advocates providing public transportation as a free public service and had organized demonstrations over the past several years with little public turnout. This year, however, intersecting with fare hikes and mounting discontent, it erupted into a massive spontaneous movement.

It is noteworthy that Brazil's unions, which work to subordinate the working class to the PT government, have played no significant role in the mass protests.

There are already those who are seeking to make a virtue of the initial political confusion, calling for a movement "without a party."

As Brazilian workers and youth come increasingly into struggle, it is inevitable that they turn with hostility against the corrupt ruling PT, which has falsely claimed to represent the working class, as well as the other right-wing parties in state and local governments, such as the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira) and Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro), and the various pseudo-left forces that orbit around the PT.

However, a mass movement with no revolutionary political perspective and program will ultimately face only dispersion, co-option and defeat.

For the mass movement in Brazil to avoid such a fate requires the building of a new revolutionary leadership mobilizing the working class independently in the struggle for socialism. The entry of the Brazilian working class into struggle posed by these mass demonstrations carries with it profoundly revolutionary implications, whose reverberations will be felt not only throughout Latin America, but around the world.



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