

Massive protests sweep Brazil after transit fare rollback

Rafael Azul
21 June 2013

Hundreds of thousands of protesters filled the main avenues of Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and dozens of other state capitals and smaller cities across Brazil in a June 20 national day of protest originally triggered by an increase in bus fares.

The governments of Brazil's largest cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, acting in coordination with the Workers Party (PT) federal government of President Dilma Rousseff, suspended transit fare increases in an attempt to defuse the seething popular anger. A number of smaller cities that had also raised transit fares for the most part had rolled them back completely or partially the day before.

Nonetheless, the numbers in the streets Thursday were the largest since the demonstrations began two weeks ago, with protesters denouncing social inequality, spending on the World Cup and other sporting extravaganzas, rather than health and education, and political corruption.

Military police estimated the crowd in Rio at 300,000, and it was undoubtedly even larger than that, with protesters filling both sides of the divided central artery of Avenida Presidente Vargas leading into the Candelaria plaza and city hall, which was blocked off by Military Police Shock Troops.

In Rio, the Military Police unleashed violent repression against the demonstrators, firing tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets and sending in Military Police cavalry. There were also confrontations in the capital of Brasilia, where army troops were brought in to surround the Palácio do Planalto, the official offices of the president, and heavy police deployments protected other buildings as at least 30,000 protested. Clashes took place when demonstrators briefly entered Itamaraty, the offices of Brazil's foreign ministry.

There were also clashes in Sao Paulo, Campinas—in the interior of the state of Sao Paulo—and in Salvador in the northeastern state of Bahia.

The Brazilian daily *Estado de São Paulo* revealed that the PT federal government ordered the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) to mount a major operation to monitor

Internet communications and social media in an attempt to find out who was involved in the organization of the protests and what direction they would take.

On Wednesday June 19, some 80,000 workers and youth protested outside the football stadium in the city of Fortaleza, a coastal city in Northeast Brazil, three hours before the Mexico-Brazil match in the Confederations Cup (CONCACAF), which is in effect a dry run for next year's World Cup.

The games have become a focus of the demonstrations, with large segments of Brazilian society angry over the estimated \$12.6 billion being spent on new stadiums and other infrastructure that has nothing to do with the pressing needs of average people. Many have carried signs reading “More bread, less circuses!,” “When your child gets sick, take him to a stadium,” and “We want hospitals and schools at FIFA [international soccer's governing body] standards.”

A confrontation with local police and National Security Forces ensued in Fortaleza as protesters broke through the two-kilometer perimeter line set up in accordance with the “Law of the Cup” (*a Lei Geral da Copa*), which grants FIFA officials control over the movement of people near stadiums.

Sports minister Aldo Rebelo warned that the government would not tolerate protests that disrupt the CONCACAF games. Rebelo—a member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Brazil, which backs the PT government—indicated that Rio's Maracanã Stadium would be surrounded with a security perimeter that will be monitored by the Brazilian Armed Forces. “It will not be possible to have any protests near the stadium,” said Rebelo; “there are people that want to take advantage of these events to present their grievances.”

The initial protests had been called by the Movement for a Free Fare, which is composed of barely a few dozen members and has called small demonstrations annually since 2005. This year, however, intersecting with the bus fare hikes and rising discontent over a sharp uptick in inflation and the stalling of economic growth that has led to layoffs

and few decent jobs for young people, it exploded into a mass outpouring.

The lack of any worked-out program or revolutionary leadership and the predominance of middle class layers has left this movement open to various influences, including those of the political right. Slogans opposing all political parties and denouncing corruption and high taxes have become increasingly common, and organized groups of thugs have attacked those carrying signs and banners of left-wing parties.

In Rio on Thursday, a group of a few dozen members of the CUT (Unified Workers Central), the union confederation that is closest to the ruling Workers Party (PT), was set upon, its members beaten up and its banners torn to pieces.

In Sao Paulo, elements referred to by the media as “nationalists” attacked members of left-wing parties, seizing their flags and banners and burning them in the streets.

The political confusion and the ability of right-wing elements to exploit it is the byproduct of a decade of rule by the Workers Party, a corrupt political machine that falsely claimed to represent the working class, and of the unions’ integration into the state apparatus and betrayal of the struggles of the working class. The unions have played no significant role in the mass protests.

The rollback of the transit fare hikes is aimed at removing the issue that sparked the massive protests across the country. The rollbacks will not ameliorate social conditions. São Paulo and Río de Janeiro authorities made it clear that the profit interests of the private contractors that run the system—and contributed substantially to all the major political parties—are to be protected. In lieu of fare increases, there will be cuts in other programs, including health and education, which benefit workers and the poor.

“We will have to tighten our belts,” declared São Paulo State governor Geraldo Alckmin of the right-wing opposition Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB). “This is a gesture, an opening,” said a more tightlipped São Paulo’s PT Mayor Fernando Haddad. Haddad threatened to cut education and health care in a city that is home to 21 billionaires. At no time did any of these officials even suggest making the rich pay for these essential services.

According to press reports, the São Paulo mayor, considered a rising figure in the Workers Party, was pressured by Rousseff to suspend the fare increases and had resisted until the last minute. For his part, Río de Janeiro’s mayor Eduardo Paes of the PMDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party) warned that the lower transit fares would force the city to cut spending in other areas by \$200 million.

Even before the increase in fares, a minimum wage worker in São Paulo or Río was paying over 20 percent of his or her pay just getting back and forth to work each day, in poorly

maintained and overcrowded buses and trains, as private operators squeezed millions of reals in profits through cost-cutting and postponed maintenance.

In dollar terms, São Paulo transit fares are the highest in Latin America, even higher than in some US cities. In Los Angeles, California, for instance, with average wages that are five times higher than in São Paulo, transit fares (\$1.35 per trip) are equal to those in the Brazilian city. Additionally, in this sprawling city of 20 million inhabitants, even better off workers are forced every day to spend hours on public buses and trains, and many pay four fares a day.

The empty concession on transit fares will prove futile. The causes of the anger of Brazilian youth and workers, extreme social inequality combined with an exploding cost of living and an economic slump, have only found their initial and limited expression in the mass protests of the past week. Behind these conditions is the global economic crisis of capitalism which is driving social and political upheavals around the world, from Athens to Cairo, to Istanbul to Madrid, and now to Río and São Paulo and other Brazilian cities.

Rousseff has tried to portray the protests as a symptom of the successes of Workers Party rule. Expectations had risen because “we changed Brazil,” she said. Rousseff added that “citizens were formed that want more and have a right to more.” This claim, echoed in the press, cannot hide the fact that the limited gains made in ameliorating the worst poverty in Brazil have been accompanied by a widening gap between the ruling capitalist layer and the masses of working people.

There is palpable shock within all sections of the ruling establishment and its political representatives over the resulting explosion. The daily *Folha de São Paulo* declared: “Everything was going so well and suddenly we are replaying Tahrir Square, suddenly, with no warning, no crescendo.”

It was reported Thursday that Rousseff cancelled a scheduled trip to Japan and convened an emergency meeting of her ministers Friday morning to discuss measures to deal with the continuing protests.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact