

# Brazil's unions, "left" parties and the July 11 "general strike"

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On July 11, thousands of trade unionists and their supporters marched across Brazil as part of a national strike and day of protest called by the country's trade union federations.

The stated purpose of the July 11 protest was to press for a 40-hour work week (down from the current 44) against the increasing imposition of part-time, temporary labor, and the defense of pensions, education and other social programs.

Protests took place in major cities, with workers carrying picket signs and banners that reflected the political outlook of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) and the CUT (Unified Workers Central), the pro-PT union federation. Metal workers, dockers, teachers, bank workers and other unionized sectors struck for the day.

In Rio de Janeiro, workers confronted an attack by riot police, who were allegedly responding to the violence of anarchist elements among the demonstrators, which was widely believed to be the work of police *agent provocateurs*.

The riot police employed predictable brutality with beatings and barrages of tear gas grenades. As the battle took place, union leaders on the protest platform played the national anthem and appealed for calm.

Like so many one-day national strikes that have taken place across Europe in this period, the real purpose of the strike in Brazil was to provide a safety valve for workers' anger at the attacks on their living standards, the increasingly substandard conditions that they are forced to live under, and ever-widening social inequality.

The turnout represented a small fraction of the many millions who took to the streets across the country in June in largely spontaneous demonstrations that were triggered by bus fare hikes and were directed against the corrupt and pro-capitalist PT government of President Dilma Rousseff.

The organizers of the protests claimed that 100,000 workers marched in 150 cities, with 35,000 marching in São Paulo alone. Other estimates put the turnout at less than 10,000 in Rio and São Paulo.

The contrast with the June protests exposes the inability

and unwillingness of the nation's trade unions and pseudo-left parties to mobilize masses of people. These forces have been discredited among wide layers of the population because of their association with PT governments that have ruled the country for the last decade in coalition with both right-wing parties and pseudo-left groups such as the ex-Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (known by its Portuguese acronym PCdoB).

All of the union federations associated with the strike agreed with the CUT that the protest would be "neither against Dilma [PT president Dilma Rousseff], nor in her favor." Even that mealy-mouthed phrase obscures the fact that the organizers of the strike and protest—and their pseudo-left supporters—fully intend to suffocate the independent mobilization of workers and subordinate it to the PT's capitalist free market policies. The July 11 "day of action," was in fact backed by the PT as a means of diverting popular unrest into safer channels that would not challenge the PT government and the profit interests it represents.

Paulo Pereira de Silva, the president of the right-wing union federation *Força Sindical*, spoke for all the major trade unions when he made it clear days before that a genuine general strike was out of the question. Instead, de Silva had called for demonstrations to protest the government's economic policy and inflation.

Both the CUT and *Força Sindical* have a long history of collaboration with the free enterprise policies of the Rouseff administration, with that of former president and ex-metal workers' union leader Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva and with the right-wing regimes that preceded them.

The labor federations' feign of concern was to preserve whatever credibility they have with their membership and protect their position as defenders of bourgeois order in the working class, in preparation for new sell-out agreements.

Also involved in July 11 were the *UGT* (General Union of Workers), the *CGTB* (General Federation of Brazilian Workers,) and the *CSP-Conlutas* (Peoples' United Trade Union -National Coordination of Conflicts.)

The latter is associated with the PSTU-LIT (United

Socialist Workers Party-International Workers' League,) a pseudo-left tendency that traces its political origins to the politics of Nahuel Moreno, the Argentine centrist who in the 1960s broke with the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist party, to promote the subordination of the working class to Peronism and Castroism.

The PSTU and other pseudo-left groups in Brazil were politically unprepared for and stunned by the mass spontaneous upheavals that broke out last month.

They were even more staggered by the ability of right-wing elements operating within these mass protests to mount attacks against the pseudo-left organizations and the small number of union members who participated, employing the slogan of “no political parties” as a cover for their reactionary operations. In São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and a number of other cities, these groups were attacked and their banners torn down.

The response of the PSTU and other organizations claiming to be socialist was revealing. In São Paulo, Rio, Belo Horizonte and elsewhere, they joined in meetings to organize a united campaign of the “left,” the unions and the “social organizations.” Participating in these meetings were representatives of the Workers Party, the ruling party that was responsible for unleashing violent police repression against the protests as well as for the policies that gave rise to them.

The politics of the July 11 day of protest were very much the product of this “unity of the left” campaign, which in fact signaled a uniting of the pseudo-left with the PT government.

While newspapers in Río and São Paulo pointed out that participation in the national strike had been spotty at best, and *Folha de São Paulo* categorized the mobilization as a failure, the PSTU hailed July 11 as a “historic day in which the working class entered the wave of protests,” a back-handed recognition that the unions played no role whatsoever in June’s mass actions. It described the one-day protest as “the greatest strike wave in 23 years.”

This reference to the last general strikes carried out against the right-wing governments of Jose Sarney in 1989 and Fernando Collor in 1990 only underscores the toothless character of the July 11 protest action. In 1989, the country was paralyzed as some 20 million people struck for two days. And 1990 saw a similarly massive action.

The PSTU was not alone in its praise for the protests; the LER-QI (League for Revolutionary Strategy-Fourth International) echoed the PSTU statements. A “new stage has been reached of workers and youth struggles” that neither the PT nor the CUT will be able to contain, declared the LER-QI.

The statement from the LER-QI—another branch of Morenoism, affiliated to the Argentine PTS (Socialist Workers Party)—appeals to all “anti-government organizations to prepare a national democratic congress” that would debate and create a common plan of struggle. It called for the creation of “an anti-bureaucratic and combative pole” of the Brazilian labor movement to prepare for August mobilizations and for the negotiation of wage agreement later on this year.

This slightly more “left” version of the politics of “left unity” serves the same essential purpose. It is directed at diverting the mass social unrest of the recent period back into the safer channels of trade unionism and peaceful coexistence with the PT government.

The PSTU-LIT and LER-QI exaggerate the impact of July 11 to create illusions in the PT and the trade unions and to prevent the workers and youth from taking the path of political independence, internationalism and socialist revolution; indeed, the word “revolution” is distinctly absent from their assessments of July 11.

The politics of Morenoism, which veered from placing itself under the “discipline” of the bourgeois nationalist regime of Gen. Juan Peron in the 1940s and 1950s, to glorifying Cuba’s Fidel Castro and promoting the dead-end strategy of guerrillaism in the 1960s and 1970s, played a significant role in paving the way to disastrous defeat for the Argentine working class, leading in 1976 to a military dictatorship that murdered, tortured, imprisoned and exiled hundreds of thousands.

In its current-day Brazilian incarnation, which largely consists of hanging onto the coattails of the PT and the trade union bureaucracy, Morenoism offers no better prospects for the millions of Brazilian workers and youth who have come into struggle over the past two months. Rather, it serves as an adjunct to the existing political setup in seeking to head off a genuinely independent movement of the working class.



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