

One-day protest strike in Brazil

Rafael Azul
4 September 2013

On August 30 Brazilian trade unions carried out a 24-hour national day of mobilization and paralysis—“*Dia Nacional de Mobilização e Paralisação*”—to demand more social spending, a shorter workweek, and to protest a proposed labor law. This Friday’s strike was meant as a follow up to the *Dia Nacional de Luta*—National Day of Struggle—of July 11. A subsequent day of protest took place on August 6.

Reports in the Brazilian press indicate that tens of thousands of workers participated in street marches and demonstrations in Fortaleza, Porto Alegre, Recife, Salvador, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The demonstrations were sponsored by the Brazilian trade unions, including the *Central Unica dos Trabalhadores* (CUT,) linked to the ruling Workers’ Party (PT,) the *Sindical Force* (*Força Sindical*, FS,) The General Brazilian Labor Center (CGBT) and the “left” National Struggle Coordinator (CONLUTAS,) associated with the Unified Socialist Workers Party (PSTU,) a pseudo-left tendency.

Spokespersons for the CUT, FS and CONLUTAS all expressed satisfaction with the protest, indicating that participation had exceeded expectations. CONLUTAS leader José Francisco Almeida indicated that in addition to the participation of bus drivers and mass transit employees, autoworkers and metal workers also participated in high numbers.

However the “mobilizations” and “struggle” that did take place on both days were relatively modest even among trade union members, and dwarfed by the mass protests that began last June in response to bus fare hikes—from which the unions, predominantly led by a bureaucracy integrated into the ruling PT, abstained. And the numbers mobilized in these latest union-led protests represent a small fraction of those who struck in 1989 and 1990—the most recent period of mass working class struggles before now.

The largest protests took place in São Paulo, where students and professors protested at the campus of the University of São Paulo, demanding democracy at the university. The trade union bureaucracy made no attempt to involve non-union members, who comprise the vast majority of the Brazilian proletariat.

As in the July mobilization, the aim of bureaucracies that control the CUT and its sister labor federations was to divert the growing anger in the working class into safer channels that would neither challenge the PT government nor disrupt the unions’ collaboration with it.

By creating the illusion in the Brazilian working class that through these one-day actions the PT government will feel pressured to provide jobs, reduce the working week and defend social programs, the trade unions and their pseudo left supporters manipulate workers and affirm the bureaucracy’s role as a bourgeois agency for disciplining the working class.

In truth, the protest strikes have only served to lend stability and credibility to the Rousseff administration, which at every turn acknowledges the workers’ demands and declares itself on the workers’ side, while at all times acting in accordance with the demands of the ruling class.

Opposition to a labor law that would deregulate as-needed labor was a big part of the protests on August 6 and August 30.

Currently, the as-needed labor force is younger, more often female and poorly paid. As-needed workers have few benefits and no job security. These workers are super-exploited on the factory floor, forced to work till exhaustion under dangerous conditions. Exhausted and injured workers are merely replaced with another *trabalhador terceirizado* from a labor temp agency. Since the 2003 when president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva took office, workplace injuries have more than doubled across Brazil.

One example is the national oil company Petrobras, where 300,000 part time temporary workers work along side 70,000 regular full time workers, contract workers account for 9 out of every 10 on the job fatalities.

In 2003, the trade unions collaborated in the imposition of as-needed labor. They are now poised to negotiate its expansion.

The mobilization was timed only three days before four-party negotiations were set to begin in Brasilia, Brazil’s capital city, over this legislation. Participating in the talks are CUT officials, businessmen, legislators and representatives of the executive branch.

This draft legislation—*Lei 4330*—aims to deregulate as-needed “contract labor” a process known in Brazil as *terceirização*. The law aims to expand the current number of temporary and part-time workers. Regulations are being eliminated that limit firms’ use of temporary labor as a supplement to their regular work force in response to changes in demand.

Under the terms of this draft, outsource workers would no longer work at the margins of the productive process, but at its very core; in effect, companies will have the ability to operate with a work force of zero full-time, zero permanent workers,

relying instead on a reserve pool of workers provided by “contact centers”—labor brokers and temporary hiring agencies.

The expectation is that workers under contract with contact centers are on-call and guaranteed zero hours, zero benefits, and zero wages. Proponents of 4330 make no secret that their goal is the “total flexibility” of labor.

Lei 4330 is a deliberate response by the Dilma administration to on-going demands from contact centers and international call-centers for lower labor costs and more outsourcing opportunities. The new legislation will enable contact centers to move to the provision of higher-skilled, trilingual, and technical contract workers, who represent, for them, a source of higher profits relative to low skilled, low wage employees.

In turn, employers would be freed of the costs involved in the hiring and sacking of workers. Brazil already competes with countries with lower labor costs such as India, the Philippines and other nations in the provision of as-needed workers. In Latin America, it is the biggest source of outsourced labor services for foreign investors.

Since 2003, across Brazil, there has been an explosion in the informal sector, which is still ongoing, particularly in retail sales and in services. It is also becoming increasingly common in telecommunications, construction, auto, steel and other metal industries. In construction, the process has further devolved: It is now common for general contractors to outsource each stage of a project; in turn the sub contractors also outsource for specific services.

Fearful of being left out in the cold, at the same time that the CUT and the other labor federations publicly denounce 4330, they are actively engaged in horse-trading with Rousseff and the PT for a piece of the outsourcing pie. On Monday September 2, CUT officials began taking part in the four-party talks to hammer out a deal on outsourced labor; “to arrive at a consensus”, in the words of a CUT official.

The CUT represents its role in the negotiating table as a defender of *terceirização* workers, protector of their wages, and working conditions. Its real concern is that outsourced employees be dues-paying union members to reverse the thinning out—*enfraquecimento*—of union membership, a big issue for the trade union bureaucracy.

Whereas one in three Brazilian workers were union members in the 1990s—in the wake of massive strike struggles—only one in six belongs to a union today. This is part a global phenomenon. In Brazil it has gone hand in hand with deindustrialization in textiles and consumer goods, and with an increase in primary industries, such as agriculture, mining, and oil production. Central to the decline in union membership has been an explosion of informal sector workers.

According to a 2011 study by Brazilian labor statistics agency DIEESE, there were already in that year 10-million *terceirizados*, over 9 percent of the labor force. On average these workers earn 73 percent of their counterparts and work

longer hours.

The Brazilian trade unions greatly facilitated outsourcing under the PT government of former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva beginning in 2003. They negotiated the use of as-needed labor in auto and metallurgical plants in southern Brazil, first big wave of *terceirização*.

Since then, Brazilian trade unions, including the CUT, have continued to facilitate the use of as-needed labor and to promote policies that integrate the interests of the national bourgeoisie with those of global financial capital, buffering working class opposition with empty protest such as those of July 11 and August 30.

The CUT and the union federations are fully supported by the organizations of the pseudo left. A recent PSTU statement, claims that the labor protests are “scaring governments; the prospects for victory are greater today than they were before June.”

“On August 30, the trade union federations will have another national day of paralysis that will possibly fuse with mass demonstrations of young people; August could become a combination of June and July,” declared the PSTU.

The weak turnout for these phony 24-hour mobilizations has exposed the bankruptcy of this assessment. Far from providing a way forward for the immense popular anger expressed in the spontaneous protests of last June, they are in reality a political instrument for its suppression.

The enthusiasm of pseudo-left organizations like the PSTU only exposes their integration into the union bureaucracies and their hostility to the elaboration of a genuine strategy of mass struggles to defend jobs, employment security and living standards and the building of a revolutionary party in the working class to lead them.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact