

Brazilian government represses Sao Paulo fare hike protests

Armando Cruz
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Since the December 30 announcement by the Sao Paulo government that public transit fares are to be increased by 30 cents, there have been four protests in the city against the hike, all of them violently repressed by the state and city administrations of Governor Geraldo Alckmin and Mayor Fernando Haddad.

These protests follow the ones led by secondary students in opposition to the planned shutdown of 100 schools, many of which were occupied for weeks. Students who participated in these protests and sit-downs have now taken part in the movement against the fare hikes.

The official explanation for the new hike is that it will help to maintain subsidies for free fares for students, the disabled and elderly, and will contribute to reducing the city's deficit.

Folha de Sao Paulo reported that Alckmin and Haddad were in a “partnership” in forcing through the fare hikes. This alliance underscores the lack of major policy differences between Alckmin's right-wing PSDB (Brazilian Social Democracy Party, the largest opposition party) and Haddad's ruling PT (the Workers Party of President Dilma Rousseff).

Following the S&P downgrading of Brazil's debt to junk status in September, the fare hikes are part of a year-long attack on the living standards of the population designed to send a signal to the international banks that the government will readjust the country's economy for the benefit of the multinationals and the country's financial creditors.

The fare hikes come on top of the already high inflation levels that have ravaged the standard of living of the Brazilian population. With a monthly minimum wage of 880 reais (USD 214.9), the 30-cent fare increase is significant to a population forced to commute by bus and subway at least twice daily.

“What the government needs to realize is that every time they raise the fare it affects the lives of many families, with more and more people stopping the use of public transport, [which] should stop being treated as a commodity,” said Erica de Oliveira, a spokesperson of the Free Pass Movement (Movimento Passe Livre, MPL).

MPL has been the organization coordinating protests against fare hikes imposed all across the country in recent years. In the context of the general discrediting of establishment parties, the movement has been able to draw support for its call for protest action.

Steeped in the middle class, pseudo-left policies of the World Social Forum (where it was founded), the group declares on its website that it has no “end in itself” but aspires to be “a medium for the construction of another society.” This is the “no-politics”, “anti-party” outlook that pervades movements set out to put “pressure” unto capitalist governments in order to bring about minimal change to society. Their tactic of protest through marches and roadblocks (*travamento*), which acquired momentum during the 2013 protests, couldn't stop the fare hikes in 2015, when a similar movement lasted for a month. The fares, which in 2013 were 3 reais, have gone up to 3.80 in 2016.

The four protests, which took place on the 8th, 12th, 14th and 19th of this month, followed a pattern of peaceful marches through the streets of Sao Paulo, the blocking of a main road (or the attempt to do so) and the triggering of violent police response due to the activities of the “Black Bloc” groups, which use violent tactics—garbage burning, stone throwing and attacks on public property—providing the perfect pretext for the state to repress the protests as a whole and label them as dangerous.

According to the online journal *GI* the first three

protests led to 38 people being detained and 24 wounded, along with 12 vehicles attacked and two metro stations vandalized.

Public Security secretary Alexandre de Moraes justified the repression against the third protest because the protesters rejected the route established by the Military Police (Polícia Militar, PM). MPL activist Luíze Tavares declared that this route was in reality an “ambush” set up by the police.

The NGO National Movement for Human Rights condemned the detention of four people “detained without search warrant” for the mere crime of stealing the cell phone of an infiltrated PM agent provocateur.

A video of the protest shows the military policeman, Eriverton Pereira, getting into a fight with the protesters after being recognized as an undercover cop, apparently losing his cellphone afterwards. Four people recognized in the video were the ones later detained and given “temporary imprisonment.”

“This is the kind of thing that happened during the [1964-1985 military] dictatorship,” said NGO lawyer Ariel de Castro Alves.

Last September, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Rita Izsák, in a visit to Brazil, asked for the disbanding of the PM, and investigation into the deaths related to resistance to police. In 2012, the UN Human Rights Commission called for an end to both the PM’s “death squads” and police impunity in extrajudicial executions.



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