

Thousands of Brazilian workers and youth protest against Temer's pension reform

Our reporters
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With the expectation that the lower house of the Brazilian Congress will vote in favor of the pension reform proposed by President Michel Temer (PMDB) within the next few weeks, on March 15, one million workers and youth protested across all of the country's 26 states. It was the largest demonstration in Brazil since the impeachment of Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff last August.

The demonstrations were organized by the popular fronts "Brasil Popular" (Popular Brazil) and "Povo sem medo" (People without fear). Created in the end of 2015 by the unions federations, social movements and pseudo-left parties like the PT, PSOL (Socialism and Liberty Party) and PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil), the fronts initially diverged in their politics: while "Povo sem medo" insisted on the struggle against Dilma's austerity measures, "Brasil Popular," of which PT is part, focused strictly on an anti-impeachment campaign.

With the initiation of the impeachment procedures and Dilma Rousseff's suspension from office last May, the two fronts joined efforts against Temer's government and his austerity measures, of which the pension reform is the latest example. Today in Brazil, the struggle of the two popular fronts represents the "unity of the left" against Temer's attacks. This unity has been built upon the "protagonism of the social movements" to "radicalize our democracy", defending "taxation of large fortunes and profit," according to the "Povo sem medo" program. There is not a hint, therefore, of a socialist and internationalist perspective in their struggle, which certainly will be coopted and defeated.

The March 15 demonstrations were called by the slogans "Pensions stay, Temer out!" and "Elections now!" The call "Fora Temer" (Temer out) has united all the pseudo-left organizations since the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, not preparing the working class against Temer's attacks and ignoring the Workers Party's responsibility for attacks on the working class and in paving the way to Rousseff's impeachment.

After the impeachment, as Temer's government sent congress a constitutional amendment limiting social spending for the next 20 years and a pro-corporate high school reform, no effective resistance was mounted by the unions and social movements orbiting around the popular fronts "Brasil Popular" and "Povo sem medo." Instead, they have raised the slogan "Elections now!," trying to rebuild the 1984 mass movement for presidential elections after 20 years of Brazilian military dictatorship. The popular fronts are attempting to channel the growing social

discontent with the Temer government's anti-working class measures towards the 2018 elections.

On the day before the March 15 demonstrations, the PT-aligned media announced Lula's plan to be present at the São Paulo rally. After touring a series of workers congresses linked to the CUT, the national union controlled by the PT, such as the education workers, in January, and the rural workers days before the demonstration, it was the first time Lula took part in a public workers' demonstration after Rousseff's impeachment. A February electoral poll on the 2018 election showed Lula ahead of his rivals in all possible scenarios.

The demonstrations of the March 15 were also a call for a "general strike" of workers after three failed attempts between September and November of last year to organize such an action. This time, besides the major union federations that are taking part in the popular fronts, the CUT and the CTB (Brazilian Workers Confederation, controlled by PCdoB), the ultra-right Força Sindical, which was linked to the military dictatorship, joined the protest against Temer's pension reform.

On the March 15 demonstration, there were strikes of metallurgical and chemical workers, bus and metro workers, post office workers, bank workers, teachers and public sector workers, with protests beginning in the early morning, along with road and street blockades.

In São Paulo, around 200,000 people took part in the demonstration. Before the rally of the popular fronts in Paulista Avenue, Brazil's financial center, 50,000 state public school teachers and 30,000 municipal teachers held their assembly in the city center as part of a one-day national education strike. Then, they walked up to Paulista Avenue to join the others at the rally, where WWSW reporters talked to the demonstrators.

All of them expressed strong opposition not only to Temer's pension reform, but to his whole austerity agenda. Luis, an architect, said, "A government that is not democratically elected has no commitment to the people's interests. This government is trying to use the time it has until the 2018 elections to push through the interests of the market against those of the people."

The harsh austerity measures Temer's government is trying to implement following the impeachment of Rousseff on trumped-up charges led many demonstrators to call Temer's government "golpista" (putschist).

Rachel, a biology teacher from the rural town of Valinhos, said, "The impeachment of Dilma was not legitimate, there was no

crime that justified the ouster of a president elected by the popular vote. A government that has taken power in an illegitimate way can't realize such deep changes in Brazilian society."

Talking particularly about the pension reform and its harsh measures led two demonstrators to associate it with Brazil's slavery period. Neueli, a public school teacher from São Paulo, said, "If we do not unify ourselves to bar the reform, we will come back to total slavery, without any rights." Gabriel, an architect, also said, "Temer's pension reform is something that reminds us of the sexagenarian law (a pre-slavery abolition law of 1885 which freed slaves over 65 years of age); no one will be able to retire with this proposal."

Among workers and youth, there was a broad solidarity with the most vulnerable layers of the working class in Brazil. Ulisses, a public school teacher, said, "I believe that this reform will harm the whole Brazilian working class, but especially the poor and the rural workers."

Leila, a 35-year-old teacher at a private school in São Paulo, said, "I'm not going to work 49 years of my life in a classroom with the same health of today. Imagine others categories whose work is extremely exhausting." Her friend Tiago, also a teacher, completed her thought, saying, "considering the periods of unemployment, there is a high chance of working until you are 75 or 80 years old."

The demonstrators also didn't believe in the alleged pension deficit Temer's government is using to justify its reform. Eduardo, a post office worker, said, "I don't believe that this deficit is real, they only want to put it on the workers' account." The architect Luis explained, "the deficit the government has been attributing to the pension system is only to guarantee the debt payment."

The demonstrators also expressed their disbelief that the pension reform will do anything to help Brazil overcome its economic crisis. "The solution they are adopting to say we are coming out of the crisis is taking everything away from workers, taking away from the retirees," said Diego, another postal worker who attended the demonstration.

The architect Luis also complained about the major impact that Operation Car Wash (the criminal probe into the massive bribes and kickbacks scandal surrounding the state-run energy conglomerate Petrobras) is having on the Brazilian economy: "Operation Car Wash has stopped the Brazilian economy. We who work in civil construction are seeing a lot of good professionals becoming unemployed, with major architectural firms being closed."

Bruna, a book editor also attending the demonstration, said, "there were few perspectives last year, and this year, that things seemed to be getting better, but there have already been layoffs in the book publishing industry." She complained that, "publishers *terceirizam* (outsource) the editing work, paying less." Leonardo, Bruna's editor colleague, said, "the number of freelancers is growing every day over the CLT (formally registered) workers."

The situation facing Bruna and Leonardo is the same as that of almost 13 million *terceirizados* (informal) workers in Brazil, a figure that increased three times since the beginning of the Worker Party government of Lula, in 2003. One of the consequences of a three-decade-long deindustrialization in Brazil, and acting mainly

in the services sector, the *terceirizados* earn 75 percent of what their counterparts in the formal sector make, and work three more hours per week. Continuing and intensifying the Workers Party's attacks on jobs, Temer's labor reform, also to be voted on by the Brazilian Congress in the coming weeks, is expected to expand the *terceirizados* to all categories of labor.

When asked if Rousseff would have carried on the reforms Temer is pushing through, most of the interviewees said yes, but not as harshly as Temer. "Dilma was already implementing neoliberal measures to save her government, but she would not go that far", Gabriel said. Bruna agreed: "If Dilma would have continued, maybe the *golpe* (coup) would not have been so deep, but we were already making our way to this situation, including with Dilma's pension reform, which was not as horrible as Temer's, but was bad."

Bruna referred to Dilma's intention last year to implement a pension reform, with the increase of the minimum retirement age. "It is not possible that the average retirement age in Brazil is 55 years old," she said in January 2016.

Despite the demonstration being the largest held against Temer's attacks, many of those who participated were skeptical that such mobilizations would be able to halt the pension reform. Marlei, a history teacher at a public school in São Paulo, said she hoped the mobilization would stop the pension reform, but added that "today, we know that the unions are as much involved in corruption as the politicians."

Rachel also said, that "lately, I can't say for sure that this kind of mobilization could be enough to turn into a real struggle. I haven't seen such a thing in the last two years, when the people took the streets to protest and it did not work."

The distrustfulness of demonstrators in such mobilizations was also caused by Lula's presence. Wesley, Rachel's colleague and a geography teacher, said, "Lula's presence doesn't help the mobilization, a lot of people don't see him as a way out of crisis, but what divides the mobilization."

About Lula and PT, the architect Luis said, "after so many years in power, PT has entered in the 'realpolitik', and it is difficult to support either PT or Lula." Bruna also said that "Lula's comeback is far from being the right way, and it is sad that the left did not break from him. He wasn't left even in his best days."

She also compared Lula's possible candidature in the 2018 election with the experience with Syriza in Greece, "which was not a very positive one, and I think that it is what PT represents. It channels the left forces against the attacks of the right, but those attacks were also implemented by Syriza, and will be implemented with Lula if he wins the next election."



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