

Largest general strike since 1989 hits 185 cities in Brazil

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Friday, April 28, saw Brazilian workers walk off their jobs in every major city against proposed historic attacks on the country's pension system and labor laws. The changes being discussed in Congress will allow for widespread casualization, opening up every economic sector to "gig economy" conditions, while raising the retirement age to 65 and imposing private pension plans on workers.

The general strike call, made by major union federations covering activities employing some 40 million workers, saw a militant response from workers in industry, banking, transport, schools and universities, and public service. The retail sector did not participate, however, leaving other dozens of millions of workers out of the demonstrations.

The unions reported that an estimated 35 million workers went on strike, with walkouts spreading to the major industrial centers outside the largest state capitals. These included northeastern Salvador, home to a Ford auto plant, and Recife, a shipbuilding center and major port, as well the Amazonian capital of Manaus, where a special economic zone containing electronics factories lies deep in the jungle side by side with major military facilities.

In Curitiba—home to Renault and Bosch—and Porto Alegre in the far south, workers also struck, as did those in the industrial corridor connecting the country's two main cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where industrial towns dot the banks of the Paraíba river with auto plants, steelworks, oil refining and chemical, pharmaceutical, arms and aerospace industries, including Volkswagen, General Motors, Chery, Johnson & Johnson, Volvo, Mercedes-Benz, Basf, Ericsson and the national aviation giant Embraer.

Oil refining and extraction was halted nationwide, even at the deep-sea extraction platforms, some of them located hundreds of kilometers from the continent. The port of

Santos, the country's largest, serving São Paulo's industrial belt, was blocked in the early hours before being reopened by riot police.

Workers also tried to block the Guarulhos and Santos Dumont airports serving São Paulo and Rio before being chased away by riot police. Roads serving industrial regions were also blocked by burning barricades in the early morning, with small roadblocks also going up in working class neighborhoods and shantytowns in many cities. Even roads cutting through two indigenous reservations near São Paulo were blocked in continuing protests over the government's rolling back of indigenous social rights.

At the end of the day, an estimated 2 million people took part in demonstrations nationwide, with more than 100,000 in both São Paulo and Rio alone. Brutal repression followed both demonstrations, with Rio's pacific rally in downtown ending in a police riot. Videos show riot police deploying stun grenades and tear gas against people listening to a speech by state MP Flávio Serafini (Socialism and Liberty Party, PSOL) before tear gas canisters are thrown into the crowd and over the podium.

In São Paulo, the demonstration was addressed by Workers Party (PT) senators and supporters. It was held some 3 kilometers from the personal home of President Michel Temer, who was born in the city and served as state representative in Congress for five terms. Riot police then chased demonstrators for some 2 kilometers after demonstration leaders confirmed plans to march into the upscale neighborhood where Temer's home is located. The area had previously been placed under a lockdown, under the pretext of property destruction by so-called black bloc anarchists and provocateurs.

The general strike was held against the backdrop of record unemployment, with official figures released on Thursday placing the official number out of work at 14

million. Joblessness was the main threat used, unsuccessfully, by bosses to try to dissuade workers from striking. Revenue losses due to the strike have been estimated at US\$600 million in São Paulo alone, even without the direct stoppage of the retail sector.

Despite the widespread show of militancy, Brazilian workers face grave dangers as they enter into major struggles. Nationwide action was possible due to an agreement between the PT-aligned CUT trade union federation and the arch-reactionary Força Sindical federation, controlled by São Paulo congressman Paulinho da Força, who has been cited in an plea-bargain agreement in the context of the Lava-jato corruption scandal centered on massive bribes and kickbacks at the state-run oil giant, Petrobras. The union leader was accused of taking more than US\$300,000 to break strikes in the northern region in 2012 alone. Lower CUT officials were also cited, specifically for taking bribes to stop workers' riots in flagship Workers Party infrastructure projects in the Amazon.

Also, the demonstrations were open to PT officials, even though new Lava-jato plea-bargain revelations indicate the personal responsibility of ousted President Dilma Rousseff and former PT President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in corruption schemes connected to favoring national monopolies for infrastructure projects. Both politicians are now being investigated, together with eight current ministers, 39 representatives and a third of the Senate, after a Supreme Court justice accepted the plea-bargain agreements of 78 indicted executives at the Odebrecht construction conglomerate.

Moreover, the demonstrations were also promoted by organized sections of the Catholic Church, with the National Bishops Confederation (CNBB) stepping into the debate on April 19, saying in a press release that the proposed reforms were “rushed,” and supporting demonstrations against them. Later, on April 25, Olinda and Recife Archbishop Dom Fernando Saburido went to the extent of calling on the public to join the strike. He was later joined by several lower-ranking church officials.

This is exactly the alliance of anti-working class forces that was responsible for the promotion and later maintenance in power of the PT since it was first founded in 1980 as a “new,” original Brazilian parliamentary path to socialism. It went on to become the main party of Brazilian capitalist “national development.”

The party appears to be preparing a return to power on this same capitalist program with a 2018 presidential bid by Lula da Silva. Datafolha Institute released a poll on

Sunday showing the former PT president as the least unpopular of Brazil's politicians, with 30 percent saying they would vote for him in the first round—as compared to 2 percent for the current president, Temer. At the same time, the poll found that 71 percent reject the proposed reforms.

Nonetheless, the PT itself faces a deepening crisis and is sharply divided. The opening of formal investigations against both Rousseff and Lula had a major impact on the PT's internal elections on April 9, with participation dropping to a record low of only 14 percent of the party's more than 1.5 million members, and internal elections being cancelled in at least five cities due to fraud.

It is worth noting that the general strike was also supported by a collection of capitalist economists who released a nationalist economic manifesto the day before the walkouts. The group's leader, former 1980s finance minister Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, declared in a public event side by side with former PT Foreign Minister Celso Amorim that “the strike will help build a new country.”

The coming together of the union bureaucracy, the Catholic Church and nationalist intellectuals tied to industry bosses and the upper middle class is designed to prepare new political means to contain the movement of the working class and keep it subordinated to capitalist interests under conditions of the deepening crisis of Brazilian and international capitalism.

The betrayals by what passes for the official “left” will only pave the way in Brazil, as elsewhere, to the rise of far-right movements. Significantly, polling second, just behind Lula, in the recent opinion poll was the fascistic Rio de Janeiro congressman and reserve army captain Jair Bolsonaro, who has demagogically opposed privatizations in Rio state.

The massive outpouring of the Brazilian working class on April 28 points to the urgent necessity of building a new revolutionary leadership in an intransigent struggle against the PT and all of the pseudo-left organizations that helped to found and promote it.



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