

Brazilian demonstrators speak out during first general strike in 21 years

Our reporters
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After two major demonstrations against Brazilian President Michel Temer's (PMDB) labor and pension "reforms" in March, on April 28, an estimated 35 million workers went on strike called by the unions, social movements and pseudo-left parties *Brasil Popular* (Popular Brazil) and *Povo sem Medo* (People without Fear).

In São Paulo, with the walkout of bus drivers, metro and train workers, and street and road blockades since the early morning, the usual 100-kilometer morning traffic jam was reduced to only 3 kilometers. Many people were not able to get to work, and in the city center, few people were out on the streets, which led many stores to close their doors.

Also joining the general strike were public workers, bank and postal workers, metallurgical and chemical workers, electricians and teachers of public and 277 private schools of São Paulo. In the industrial suburbs of the ABC district—Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo and São Caetano do Sul—one of the most industrialized regions in Brazil, 60,000 auto workers went on strike.

At the end of the afternoon, around 70,000 people attended the rally called in Largo da Batata, in the western part of São Paulo, where WSWs reporters talked to demonstrators.

Amid the worst economic crisis in a century, with a record 14.2 million unemployed, a figure that has doubled in two years, the general strike, the first since 1996, was hailed by demonstrators.

Daniela, a graphics worker, said, "I think Brazilians are just beginning to protest. Now, people are going into the streets and are learning that, indeed, they have to mobilize themselves, that they have rights, and that they have to fight for their rights. Brazilians are beginning to uncover social inequality, which is our history."

The political character of the general strike, an expression of the increase of the class struggle since the

impeachment of former Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff, was manifested by many people attending the demonstration, who were explicitly against Temer's government.

Fábio, a public school art teacher, said, "I'm here because we are facing huge changes in social rights by a government whose legitimacy is in doubt. The changes they are promoting are not government changes, but state changes." However, he continued, "I'd be here even if these changes were being made by the former president [Dilma Rousseff]."

Uirã, an unemployed history teacher, said he joined the demonstration to "fight against the coup. We had the illegal deposing of a president and the substitution by a vice-president who made great changes in the policies that were being made, with the pension and labor 'reforms'."

About the demonstrations against Temer's reforms, Uirã said he was "pessimistic in reason, optimistic in will." "What makes me optimistic is seeing a lot of people mobilizing against the reforms, something that for a long time we didn't see. ... There are people against these neoliberal changes that had never mobilized before," he said.

On the other hand, Uirã said he is pessimistic about "the political system, which is far from any popular initiative. The legislators don't take into consideration what the rest of the Brazilian population wants." He believes this happens due "to the Brazilian electoral system, which favors private funding of electoral campaigns."

Mauro explained that "Brazil is a republic that began its history with a small group that didn't take into consideration millions of Brazilians, that left aside the blacks, the Indians, the poor. This republic has never recognized Brazilian people as citizens. With Temer's government, we have come back to a situation in which a small group is again taking all the gains."

The Brazilian political system is immersed in

corruption, with both legal and illegal multimillion-dollar schemes of private electoral campaign financing organized in exchange for the political and economic support of the state.

In the 2014 elections, 19 Brazilian corporations financed half of the 1 billion real (US\$312.5 million) raised by all parties for the electoral campaign. The list of corporations includes all the “Brazilian champions,” such as the second largest food group in the world, JBS; one of the largest beverage companies in the world, Ambev; and the major construction companies—OAS, Odebrecht—that have been denounced in the Car Wash corruption probe. With 30 percent of all donations, the PT was the primary beneficiary of corporate donations, followed by Temer’s PMDB.

The discrediting of the entire political system was also stressed by Fábio, who said he doesn’t believe that the National Congress, where Temer’s government holds the majority, will bar the pension reform. “It is an act of faith that the Congress will change its position. We have to be skeptical; we have to be aware that the congressmen are not sensitive to the people’s need.”

The discrediting of the whole political system is opening the way for the Brazilian right, Uirã warned. He believes that “we may see in Brazil something similar to what happened in the US with the victory of Donald Trump, either with Bolsonaro or Dória, who projects himself as a political outsider, despite being an insider.”

In the most recent poll for the 2018 election released by *Folha de São Paulo* daily on April 30, the fascistic federal deputy Jair Bolsonaro (PSC, Social Christian Party) appears tied in second place with Marina Silva (Rede) after Lula (PT).

As for João Dória, the current São Paulo mayor for the right-wing PSDB, he was elected last year with a record of almost 40 percent of voters either abstaining or casting blank ballots. Dória is a millionaire businessman who has advocated a huge privatization program. He, like Trump, was also the host of the TV program *The Apprentice*.

Fábio believes the Brazilian left parties are responsible for the rise of the right. He said, “There is a critical problem of Brazilian left politics. It is against the reforms, but it does not propose anything. We have permitted the emergence of a right-wing politics that is purposeful, from which the change is coming.”

Uirã doesn’t see “any short-term solution against the reforms. The idea of waiting for the 2018 elections will not work,” he believes. “It is ‘institutionally’ a more viable way, but I don’t know if it will work because it

goes back to the problem of the Brazilian history, that is political collusion. It is a way to pacify the class struggle, and it doesn’t solve anything. If we come back to the previous stage of Brazilian politics, it will explode once again,” he concluded.

Uirã also believes the Greek experience with Syriza “is an example to Brazil, it is very similar to what we have here. ... In so far as the Greek government decided for the plebiscite, it ignored its decision, ignored the demonstrations, ignored the strikes.”

This return to the “previous stage of Brazilian politics” referred to by Uirã, is a possible comeback of former Workers Party President Lula, who delivered a 10-minute speech at the March 15 rally.

The art teacher Fábio said he was “afraid that the same thing would happen today, as when the March 15 rally was rigged by political opportunists.” He continued by saying, “In the March 15 demonstration, a lot of people left when they turned it into an electoral platform for former president Lula. Today, even with this risk, I’m here because people’s dissatisfaction is very great with all that.”

Between the March 15 demonstration, a partial one-day general strike spearheaded mainly by teachers, and the April 28 general strike, the lower house of the National Congress approved the labor reform, which now will be discussed in the Senate.

The musician Mauro thinks that more demonstrations are needed: “Despite thinking that this general strike is something incredible, it is only for today. These people (Temer and the legislators) are doing absurd and outrageous things, and they have all the corporate media on their side. I don’t think such a one-day demonstration will be strong enough to shake the National Congress.”

He concluded by saying, “Now, there should be a general strike for an indefinite period until the fall of this government, this congress, this judiciary. Everything must be changed.”



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