

Brazilian truck drivers reject union-government attempt to shut down strike

Eric London and Miguel Andrade
30 May 2018

On Tuesday, hundreds of thousands of Brazilian truck drivers rejected an attempt by the trade unions and the Brazilian government of President Michael Temer to end the national strike that has paralyzed the country.

Temer sought to appease strikers Monday by offering tax cuts and the lowering and temporary freezing of the cost of diesel fuel, the central grievance of the strike. But as the sun rose across Brazil yesterday, it became clear a large number of the truckers had defied the move. Strikers at many of the more than 500 blockades set up throughout the country turned away scab convoys flanked by detachments of soldiers wielding assault rifles.

The strike, now entering its tenth day, is a powerful escalation of the resurgence of the class struggle worldwide, shuttering production across key industries in the western hemisphere's second largest and the world's eighth largest economy.

The government has sought to criminalize the continuation of the strike by claiming that it is the work of outside "infiltrators" seeking the downfall of Temer, the most unpopular president in Brazil's history.

In an attempt to prevent the expansion of the truckers' action into a wider mobilization of the Brazilian working class, the government's labor court issued a ruling Tuesday declaring a nationwide strike set for today by oil workers illegal. The union, the United Federation of Oil Workers (FUP), had called the strike for 72 hours. The court ruled that the motivations for the strike were political rather than of a trade union character. The workers are demanding a lowering of fuel costs, the maintenance of jobs and the resignation of the CEO of Petrobrás, Pedro Parente.

Petrobrás's shares lost 5 percent of their value yesterday and have fallen 20 percent since last week.

Some 80 Brazilian cities have been placed under

states of emergency as consumer supplies dwindle. Food rationing has been imposed in several cities, while many schools and bus lines have also been closed. Major factories and manufacturers have halted production. The country has been forced to stop export of two of its chief agricultural exports, beef and soy. Overall, corporate losses are already in the billions.

A mood of panic set in within the Brazilian ruling class after Temer's failed effort to end the strike. The *Folha de S. Paulo* warned yesterday: "If for some reason the destabilization worsens, the country runs the risk of a revolt of larger proportions and threatens the already weak mandate of Temer."

The international financial press noted in panicked tones that the strike appears to have broken free of the control of the trade unions. The *Financial Times* reported that truckers throughout the country yesterday were beginning to hang large banners on their trailers proclaiming: "The unions do not represent us."

Since the truckers rebelled against the announcement by the government and the unions that the strike was over, union leaders have begun denouncing the strikers as troublemakers. José da Fonseca Lopes, president of the Brazilian Truck Drivers Association (ABCAM), said the strikers are "people who want to bring down the government. We don't have anything to do with these people."

ABCAM signed an agreement with the government based in large measure on tax cuts for truckers, reductions that the government will make up for by raising taxes on other sectors. This solution has already triggered anger among sections of big business.

The truckers' strike has prompted truck drivers in neighboring Argentina to threaten a national walkout. Argentine truckers announced yesterday a demand for a 27 percent wage increase, with workers reportedly

discussing the need to “do a Brazil.” Across Argentina, workers from different industries have called for an end to the 15 percent wage increase ceiling imposed by the unions and the government in the midst of rapid inflation.

The method through which the strike developed—over social media and free from the domination of the trade unions—is part of an international process. All over the world, including with the teachers’ strikes in the US, workers have set up their own forums for communicating and sharing information with one another.

According to a report in *Folha de S. Paulo*, the call for a strike developed over the social media app Whatsapp at the initiative of a group of 60 truckers in the region of Embu das Artes in São Paulo. Similar groups developed in other regions, and as truckers began inviting their friends and co-workers, the groups mushroomed and spread their roots through new towns and cities. Local groups became interconnected with one another, creating a national mobile network for coordinating strike action.

Despite the truckers’ militancy and the progressive character of their opposition to the rising cost of living, a section of strikers have been influenced by the demagogic appeals of far-right elements like the fascist presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro. He issued a hypocritical statement claiming to support the strike and promising, if elected, to revoke any fines, jailings or confiscations of trucks imposed by the current government.

By Tuesday, however, Bolsonaro was calling for an end to the strike. A former military officer and defender of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985, in 2016 he promoted legislation imposing four-year jail sentences on anyone blocking public highways, a charge that would apply directly to the striking truckers.

At some blockades, banners have been draped over trucks calling for the removal of the Temer administration and its replacement with a military government. A significant number of truckers, though squeezed by rising gas prices and low wages, are independent contractors who own their own trucks, while others are participating in conjunction with a shutdown by private trucking companies.

The strikes retain widespread support among workers

and the lower-middle class. Demonstrations in support of the strike have taken place in some cities, though they have remained small and have involved mixed layers of workers, youth and middle class elements. Among those joining these actions are delivery workers, cab drivers and school bus drivers, who are in many cases also owners of their vehicles, and urban counterparts of the truckers.

A protest of a few hundred people held Monday night by the Workers Party (PT) of former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva sought to bolster the image of the trade unions as “pro-strike” to better bring the strike under control.

The PT and the pseudo-left organizations that orbit it are intrinsically hostile to the emergence of any independent struggle by the working class against the Temer government. They have focused their efforts entirely on a “free Lula” campaign directed at securing the release of the former PT president from prison, where he is serving a sentence on corruption charges, so that he can run in presidential elections set for October.

To this end, they are calling demonstrations today demanding the resignation of Petrobrás’s President Parente, who was installed after the impeachment of PT President Dilma Rousseff. The aim is to subordinate the struggles of the working class to sections of the national bourgeoisie.

If right-wing forces promoting a return to military rule have been able to intervene in the truckers’ strike it is because of the complete discrediting of the PT, which is not only deeply implicated in the massive corruption scandal centered at Petrobras, but also initiated the assault on workers’ living standards and basic rights that is now being intensified by the Temer government.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact