

Brazilian workers reject demands to choose between COVID-19 and starvation

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The following speech was delivered by Tomas Castanheira on behalf of the group of Brazilian supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Brazil, to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally, held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2. Castanheira is a regular writer on Latin America for the World Socialist Web Site.

In Brazil and throughout Latin America, May Day 2020 has been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic's intensification of the prevailing tendencies of extreme social inequality and the violence of the class struggle.

As elsewhere on the planet, workers are rejecting the demand that they choose between COVID-19 and starvation, and are coming forward in struggle against a capitalist system that places profit over the right to life itself.

Brazil, the largest, most populous and most unequal country on the continent, is quickly becoming a global epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic.

In Manaus, the capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, COVID-19 patients are being treated in the midst of corpses that cannot be buried. Images of hundreds of mass graves being dug have shocked Brazil and the world. After watching their colleagues get sick or die from the disease, nurses went on strike to demand the most basic protective equipment from the government.

This drastic situation is spreading rapidly to the rest of the country. The disease is only beginning to hit Brazil's crowded slums, whose precarious homes lack the least sanitation infrastructure, and where entire families share the same room.

The indifference and criminal negligence of the world's capitalist elite find no more cruel expression than in the figure of the fascist Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro. From the beginning, he minimized the effects of the disease and clashed with the governors who imposed

quarantine measures, while openly supporting fascist demonstrations calling for both military intervention and the immediate reopening of the economy.

But it didn't take long before Brazilian workers engaged in wildcat strikes and protests. Among the most significant features of these actions has been their overtly international character, along with their independence from, and hostility to, the existing unions.

Only a few days after the first COVID-19 deaths were confirmed in Brazil, hundreds of workers went on strike at a JBS meatpacking plant in Santa Catarina, in opposition to the deadly working conditions. In the United States and Canada, the same conditions made the plants operated by the Brazilian-based company focal points of the disease transmission, leading to sickness and death.

In March, thousands of call center operators staged a nationwide rebellion against their unsafe working conditions. The action began first in the centers run by AlmaViva, a transnational corporation based in Italy, inspired by the news that AlmaViva had been forced to shut down its Palermo site by a similar strike.

Last week, a protest against low pay and unsafe working conditions, imposed by global App delivery corporations, and initiated by delivery workers in Spain, was turned into a strike in Brazil, Argentina and Ecuador.

Like the workers' rebellion in Matamoros, Mexico a little over a year ago, the fact that recent episodes of class struggle in Brazil have been conducted from outside—and in opposition to—the nationalist and corporatist unions, crucially confirms the political perspective fought for by the International Committee over the past 30 years. As the Trotskyists affirmed, the globalization of capitalist production imposes upon the class struggle not only an international content, but also an international form, requiring the coordination of the struggles of the working class on an international scale.

But the intensification of industrial action by workers is

also a response to wider developments on the continent. Over the past year, Latin America has relived, in a concentrated form, the history of its oppression by US imperialism and the inability of its national bourgeoisies to sustain either lasting economic development or the most fundamental democratic rights, leading to an explosive development of the class struggle.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the “pink tide” of bourgeois nationalist governments that swept the region was celebrated by Pabloite organizations and the pseudo-left as a break with inequality and imperialist oppression, and even a “new road to socialism.” Today, with the collapse of the vast majority of these governments, the “pink tide” has been exposed as a fraud.

South America’s bourgeois rulers are once again conspiring openly with American imperialism, with Colombia’s Ivan Duque and Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro acting as key players in Washington’s efforts to promote regime change in Venezuela.

Last November’s coup in Bolivia anticipated the return of the continent’s corrupt armed forces to the center of power. The path was opened for them by President Evo Morales, who abandoned the masses resisting the coup in the streets. In a criminal betrayal of the Bolivian working class, the COB, the country’s largest trade union federation, agreed to participate in the coup regime.

An uprising of millions against social inequality shook Chile last year. Shouting “it’s not 30 cents, it’s 30 years,” the working class and youth were met with the revival of the police state methods of the bloody Pinochet era, demolishing any democratic pretensions of the regime installed after the end of the dictatorship.

The massive protests in Chile sparked obsession and terror within the Brazilian ruling class, leading Bolsonaro to call for the reimposition of the repressive laws of the military dictatorship, and the unrestricted use of the army to maintain order.

For their part, Brazil’s Workers Party [Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT] and its pseudo-left satellites, faced with the explosive development of the class struggle on the one hand, and the threat of dictatorship on the other, have sought to align themselves with factions of the bourgeoisie and even the military, which they call the “adults in the room” in Bolsonaro’s cabinet. They have hailed the most right-wing governors—even as they set their own dates for reopening the economy—as defenders of “science” against Bolsonaro’s fascist demagoguery. At the same time, they joined the government in crucial votes in Congress for a bailout of the banks and financial

markets, equivalent to 15 percent of Brazil’s GDP, even as masses of workers are offered less than starvation relief.

In the midst of the pandemic, the unions led by the PT and the Maoist PCdoB, along with the Morenito-led CSP-Conlutas, have pushed through wage cuts and mass layoffs to benefit the corporations under the pretext of “saving jobs.”

How have these parties, unions and pseudo-lefts marked this year’s May Day? Under the pretext of national unity against Bolsonaro, they invited onto their platform the presidents of the Brazilian Senate and House of Representatives—both members of the Democrats, the successor to the party that governed under the military dictatorship—along with right-wing governors Wilson Witzel, of Rio de Janeiro, and João Doria, of São Paulo, both of whom supported the election of Bolsonaro in 2018.

Whatever their empty criticisms of this “broad front,” all the tendencies of the pseudo left, from the Pabloites in the PSOL to the Morenitos of the PSTU, are committed to the subordination of the Brazilian working class to the pro-corporate and nationalist unions and through them to the capitalist state itself.

The central task now facing the most politically advanced workers in Brazil and Latin America is to draw the lessons from the collapse of the “pink tide” and the subordination of the working class to bourgeois nationalist regimes and pro-corporate unions.

This requires a relentless struggle against all the revisionist tendencies that broke with the Trotskyist movement, based on a nationalist perspective, and the claim that socialism could be achieved without building a conscious revolutionary leadership within the working class.

We call upon all those who are listening to join in the fight to build the Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, along with sections of this World Party of Socialist Revolution throughout Latin America.



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