

Youth protests and worker strikes show mounting social opposition in Brazil

Tomas Castanheira

10 June 2020

Brazil experienced a second weekend in a row of demonstrations against police violence, racism and the government of the fascist President Jair Bolsonaro. Tens of thousands of people, mostly young, took to the streets in every region and practically every state in the country.

In São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte and Brasília the demonstrations were attended by thousands of people. In other capitals and several smaller cities, protests occurred simultaneously and included hundreds of people.

Growing numbers of Brazilian youth and workers see their adherence to the international wave of protests driven by the police assassination of George Floyd as a political path to respond to the intolerable Bolsonaro administration.

The political establishment responded by brutally repressing these protests. Although they have not yet summoned the National Guard, as proposed by Bolsonaro, the governors of all the bourgeois parties have mobilized the police apparatus in a war-like crackdown against the demonstrators.

In São Paulo, Governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) deployed more than 4,000 military police officers, helicopters, four armored vehicles and a water cannon vehicle. The policemen conducted searches, forbade the demonstrators from carrying flags and alcohol, and arrested more than 30 people. They dispersed the protest by violently attacking it with tear gas grenades and rubber bullets and by beating defenseless people on the ground.

In Rio de Janeiro, the repression started when the demonstrators were still gathering, with police arresting about 40 people. In Belém do Pará, more than 100 people were arrested before the beginning of a demonstration, cynically accused of violating a social distancing decree. On the same day, shopping malls were reopened in the city, generating crowded lines at their doors.

The same happened in Fortaleza, capital of Ceará, a state ruled by Camilo Santana of the Workers Party (PT). The demonstrators were corralled by the police and prevented from starting the protest, and when they sat on the ground the police attacked them with tear gas and arrested seven people.

The PT governor took full responsibility for the arrests in an interview on the TV show “Roda Viva” on Tuesday night, and said he saw no “excess” in the police action. Santana reaffirmed that he will not allow demonstrations that break the quarantine, despite promoting the reopening of all activities in the state, one of the most affected by the coronavirus, with over 50,000 confirmed

cases. On Monday, commerce and shopping malls were reopened in Fortaleza.

After Sunday, Bolsonaro spoke in front of the government palace in Brasília, saying that the demonstrations are the “major problem of the moment.” Feeding his conspiratorial propaganda that characterizes the protesters as “terrorists” who are “intrinsicly linked to international extremism,” he referenced Vice President General Mourão, adding, “they are starting to pull up their sleeves” (i.e., show how dangerous they are).

Underlying these words, there is a dangerous drive toward openly dictatorial forms of rule. The political forces that claim to oppose Bolsonaro and his attacks on democracy are the same ones that are mobilizing the military-police apparatus.

The scale of the violence being mobilized by the state is a reflection of the awareness and fear of the Brazilian ruling class of the fragility of its social and political order. The threat felt by the bourgeoisie doesn’t come from the radicalism of “antifascist” demonstrators, adopted as scapegoats, but from the fact that these protests are intersecting with a growing social opposition within the working class masses.

The explosion of class struggle

Under conditions of media blackout, an explosive growth in strike and protest activity is taking place in the workplaces at an unprecedented scale and high levels of militancy. The Brazilian working class is expressing that their conditions of existence, aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic, have reached the breaking point.

Millions of workers are being pushed to working places in highly risky conditions. Factories, slaughterhouses, mining companies, hospitals and transport have registered several outbreaks of COVID-19. At the same time, millions more workers have lost their jobs and had their wages cut during the pandemic.

Last Monday, more than 3,000 workers went on a wildcat strike at Bridgestone’s Santo André plant, in the metropolitan region of São Paulo. The company is a US-based transnational and the world’s largest tire manufacturer. The workers rebelled against continuously worsening conditions and for three days stood by the machines refusing to operate them. They have had their wages cut

for months and a coronavirus outbreak has already infected over 50 employees.

The Rubber Workers Union presented the situation as a dead-end. According to them, the only thing they could do was talk to the workers “to keep the peace inside the factory” and negotiate with the company a proposal to “alleviate” the economic despair of the workers. The strike was ended three days later, with the payment of a profit-sharing bonus. Wage cuts, deadly sanitary conditions and the danger of layoffs are maintained.

In bus companies across the country, drivers and ticket collectors have faced mass layoffs and pay and benefit cuts since the pandemic began. Since March, dozens and dozens of strikes in all regions of the country have broken out in response to these attacks.

In Teresina, Piauí, drivers and collectors who have been on strike for nearly a month against the layoffs of 400 colleagues and pay cuts are holding street demonstrations daily. In a protest in front of the City Palace last Friday, workers held handmade posters reading: “I don’t have anything to eat today, imagine tomorrow” and “Bus drivers lives matter.”

Another bus workers strike started last week in Vitória, capital of Espírito Santo. The city has been the stage of a series of militant strikes by workers of different bus companies over the past few months, with street demonstrations and blockades of avenues taking place. Once again, the strike has been prohibited by the court, with a threat of a daily fine of 30,000 reais (around US\$6,000) to the union.

The workers ignored the judicial measure and went on strike anyway. According to the president of the drivers’ union: “We are now at the company’s door talking to the workers to convince them to comply with the judicial order [to stop the strike], but they are not complying with the union’s request. We try to convince them, but we can’t take them by the arm and force them to leave.”

In crowded hospitals across the country, health workers are responding, through a growing number of strikes and protests, to deadly mass contamination, which has already cost the lives of more than 150 nurses. In the last week alone, actions as these have been recorded in at least four different states. In addition to the demand for adequate protective equipment and hiring more professionals, there is a growing national movement, especially among nurses and auxiliaries, demanding better salaries.

This radical and growing activity of the working class marks a new stage of the international class struggle, in which the corporatist unions, upon which the ruling class has relied over the past decades, are losing their power to control the workers.

The struggle for a revolutionary leadership

On May 19, just over a week before the explosion of protests against the murder of George Floyd, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

The Brazilian bourgeois state is imposing a normalization

of death for the entire working class—whether through hunger, infection by the new deadly coronavirus, or the brutal murder by its military agents.

However, the working class is not a passive agent in this process. The growing mobilization of Brazilian workers in wildcat strikes against unsafe conditions in the workplaces and the revolt of residents of the poor neighborhoods against state violence are merging with a global movement of the working class that faces the same attacks by the ruling classes of all countries.

Developments are confirming this perspective. Demonstrations in opposition to the murders promoted by the state exploded simultaneously around the world. Millions of people took to the streets with a feeling that the social order in which they live is essentially unjust.

These events are reflections of objective conditions widespread among workers around the world, regardless of their nationality, race, ethnicity, or gender. In the name of the interests of a tiny corporate and financial elite, the lives of billions of workers are totally disposable.

In this weekend’s Brazilian protests, workers such as nurses and food delivery workers turned out en masse, with their uniforms and class political demands clearly recognizable. In the next stages of this struggle, the growing opposition of the working class, developing in workplaces around the globe, will emerge as a determining political factor with huge revolutionary implications.

The struggle for the common demands of the workers of the whole planet, for the socialist reorganization of economical life, should be fought as a global struggle through the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

We urge the workers and youth who follow the *World Socialist Web Site* to make the decision to join us in building a revolutionary movement in Brazil and globally, and help us build the Socialist Equality Group (GSI) as the Brazilian section of the ICFI.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)