Barbaric murder by Brazilian security guards sparks protests, repression

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Thousands of Brazilian workers and youth have taken to the streets in six cities since November 20 to demonstrate against the barbaric murder by security guards of João Alberto Freitas, a 40-year-old worker from of Porto Alegre, capital of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. In addition to Porto Alegre, the federal capital Brasília and four of the country's five largest cities saw protests—São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Fortaleza.

The police have yet to explain the circumstances of the murder. Video footage shows Freitas being escorted out of a Carrefour supermarket while his wife was still paying for their purchases. He appears to make a rude gesture towards one of the guards on the way out, after which he is thrown to the ground and beaten barbarically. He was then held to the ground with one of the guards pinning him with his knee, dying in front of his wife—a scene reminiscent of the murder of George Floyd in the United States and so many other murders by police around the world.

Public information available about Freitas makes clear the social conditions that are the backdrop to such horrific violence. Freitas lived in the Vila do IAPI housing project, personally inaugurated by the bourgeois-nationalist president Getúlio Vargas in 1953 as a model social housing complex at the heart of a bustling industrial region, which is now filled with crumbling and empty warehouses. The project, a testimony to the former reforms in working class living conditions that have since been abandoned by every faction of the ruling establishment, is known as the birthplace of one of the most iconic interpreters of Brazilian popular music, Elis Regina. Freitas was forced to retire after an industrial accident at the local airport limited use of one of his arms, but even so worked as a welder with his father when there was work available.

Family and friends charged that racism motivated the hate-filled reaction of the guards, at the same time providing testimony of widespread harassment of working class customers by store security. Freitas was black, while both guards are white. They are being held in custody, and the police have acknowledged that racism is an official line of investigation.

The murder happened on the eve of Brazil's national Black Consciousness Day, November 20, which is recognized in the federal calendar and is a local-level holiday in more than a thousand cities across the country. It pays homage to the day in 1695 when Portuguese troops captured and beheaded Zumbi dos Palmares, the leader of the longest-lasting and most powerful of the inland settlements built by runaway slaves in Brazil, known as *quilombos*. The first demonstrations against the murder were coordinated with organizers of traditional Black Consciousness marches, which in many cases re-routed their traditional marches to local Carrefour branches, where they were met with shock police and cavalry troops.

Federal authorities have reacted with utter hostility toward the outpouring of grief and rage over the murder of Freitas, one of the almost 6,000 Brazilians killed by police each year, six times more than in the United States, which has a population a third larger than that of Brazil. A disproportionate number of victims are recognized as black by the national statistics bureau, IBGE, which combines the numbers of those self-declaring as "black" and "brown" in the country's historic skin-color classification. They comprise 75 percent of police victims, as compared to 56 percent in the population. Some 1,500 white Brazilians are killed by police every year, 50 percent more than all those killed in the US.

Freitas' murder is directly bound up with the terror regime imposed upon workers by Brazil's capitalist state: one of the assassins is a Military Police soldier working illegally as a private security guard, a widespread practice throughout the country.

In response to the murder and protests, Bolsonaro took to Twitter to proclaim that "miscegenation" had left Brazil free of racism, and to denounce those attempting to "destroy the Brazilian family" and replace it with "conflict, resentment, hatred and class division." He ominously warned that "those instigating the people into discord" are "in the wrong place. Their place is in the trash."

The next Saturday, he opened his remarks to the G20 meeting by again hailing "the Brazilian national character" and denouncing "attempts to import to our territory tensions alien to our history." On Saturday, the *Época* magazine revealed that the head of the federal broadcasting agency, the EBC, ordered that the agency ignore the murder.

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Bolsonaro's threats were put into practice in no time. Even before rubber bullets, tear gas and mounted police were unleashed against demonstrators in the evening of November 20, the Catholic Church leadership in Rio de Janeiro took the unprecedented decision to cancel the Black Consciousness Day mass in the city's historic central district of Gloria, due to threats of violence by far-right Catholic fanatics, who opposed the use of traditional African religious artifacts in the ceremony.

The fascistic president is openly adopting a thesis that had been until very recently the dominant ideological approach of the Brazilian ruling class towards "national unity" and the suppression of opposition to social inequality. It has extolled Brazil's history of miscegenation, as opposed to Jim Crow segregation in the United States and ethnic conflicts in Europe and elsewhere, claiming that it has rendered Brazil a nation free not only of racism, but of all internal conflicts, and that those who differ should be swiftly suppressed. In Brazil, Bolsonaro proclaimed, there are only two colors, "green and yellow," the colors of the Brazilian flag.

Bolsonaro, a close ally of US President Donald Trump and his far-right adviser Steve Bannon, is resurrecting an apparently outmoded and anachronistic view—in terms of contemporary bourgeois public opinion dominated by identity politics—that Brazil is free of internal divisions as a "racial democracy." This ideological campaign is being conducted in furtherance of an international offensive of imperialist militarism, austerity and reaction. Its aim, as that of racism itself, is to divide and weaken the rising activity of the working class drawn from every racial, ethnic and religious background.

Bolsonaro's focus on the "importing of conflicts" represent a grave and double threat to Brazilian workers. At the same time that he endorses far-right and police riots against demonstrators, he is consciously seeking to exploit divisions provoked by the turn by a significant section of the ruling class to identity politics and racialist communalism, as well as their unanimous adoption by the pseudo-left.

These forces have mounted an increasingly right-wing attack on the so-called "racial democracy myth," portraying it as a barrier to the development of a "black identity" among Brazilians. They pretend to fight racism and the hypocrisy of the past by elevating race as the primary category, thereby enabling Bolsonaro to pose as an opponent of racism. At the same time, they seek to subordinate workers to capitalist identity politics, which benefits solely a narrow "rainbow coalition" of reaction by appointing "black" and "brown" capitalist managers and officials in the repressive state apparatus.

This danger was on display in the response of the media and the political establishment to the recent Black Consciousness Day.

November 20 saw the bourgeois press inundated with reports of how companies had to do more to promote black leaders, with the conservative *O Estado de S. Paulo* —formerly a fierce opponent of affirmative action—calling attention to the fact that none of the presidents of the 100 largest companies traded on the São Paulo stock exchange are black. The CEO of the Brazilian branch of Carrefour, Noel Prioux, made a televised speech on the most watched prime-time program, Globo's *Jornal Nacional,* declaring that the murder of João Alberto Freitas was "beyond his comprehension" as a "white and privileged" person.

Signaling a renewed right-wing lurch by the Workers Party (PT), former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva declared on Twitter that "racism is the origin of every abyss in this country."

The latest unemployment figures indicate that 15 percent of Brazilians are out of a job. Brazil is being hit by a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic without ever coming close to controlling the first, and unemployment will soar even further. More than 170,000 Brazilians have already died, leaving millions with their lives destroyed emotionally and financially. The economic crisis resulting from the pandemic is vastly accelerating the war drive among the imperialist powers, which is itself making necessary brutal austerity and impoverishment the world over.

The horrifying murder of João Alberto Freitas is a sharp exposure of capitalist barbarism. Such crimes, from Brazil, to the US, to France and around the globe, are provoking an ever more militant reaction by the working class internationally. The latest demonstrations in Brazil were without question connected to a much larger movement of millions of workers and youth of every background against police violence, racism, social inequality and the murderous "herd immunity" policy of the ruling class.

In order to fight these conditions, it is necessary that workers build a conscious leadership to confront their source, capitalism, and to unify their struggles against all attempts by both the "democratic" and fascistic factions of the ruling class, along with its pseudo-left servants, to divide workers along national, racial and gender lines. That is the struggle being waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its Brazilian supporters in the Socialist Equality Group.

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