

Brutal repression against striking public employees in São Paulo, Brazil

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On Wednesday afternoon, teachers and municipal workers in São Paulo faced violent repression by the police as they protested against a City Council vote on a “pension reform” that dramatically slashes their pensions.

The area in front of the City Council building was turned into a battlefield, with the police firing a barrage of tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at the thousands of workers gathered there. Several were wounded by the gunfire, and one worker fractured her foot, remaining on the ground for hours without medical care as tear gas bombs landed by her side. The councillors proceeded with their session, which extended into the early morning hours, when they passed the criminal bill.

Municipal workers had been on strike since October 15 against the austerity measures introduced by Mayor Ricardo Nunes of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB). As soon as the vote ended, “at midnight and forty minutes,” declared SINPEEM, the largest union of municipal teachers, the unions declared the strike over.

This was the second strike this year by São Paulo’s municipal educators, the largest section of public service workers. In February, they struck for four months against the unsafe reopening of schools. The large support for the new strike movement, which gathered tens of thousands in several demonstrations over the last month, is an expression of the growing opposition of the working class to the intolerable conditions being imposed by capitalism.

In the last months, in addition to public employees in São Paulo, workers at General Motors in São Caetano do Sul went on strike against the company’s proposed contract and rejected the agreement presented by the union, which buried the strike against the will of the workers. More recently, truck drivers held a strike in protest over the increase in fuel prices that affected the operations of Brazil’s largest port in the city of Santos, on São Paulo’s coast. In the south of the country they were joined by demonstrations of app delivery and oil workers.

The living standards of Brazilian workers have been seriously affected in the last two years. Brazil and the entire

Latin American region were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic while already in the midst of a prolonged economic crisis, which has severely deepened. Unemployment levels have reached historic highs, more than 20 million have been thrown below the poverty line, and hunger has returned as a widespread social issue. Brazil’s working families struggle to make ends meet in the face of rampant inflation that has already reached 10.67 percent over the past 12 months.

Economic desperation is compounded by the catastrophic results of the COVID-19 pandemic policies of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro and the capitalist ruling class as a whole. The country already has more than 610,000 recorded deaths from the coronavirus and continues to record about 230 deaths daily, with significant levels of under-reporting. But across the country, local governments of all political parties are promoting an end to minimal mitigation measures, including an end to mask mandates in public places and the imposition of mandatory face-to-face education for all children.

As the WSWS reported, there was a widespread revolt against these inhumane conditions imposed by Brazil’s ruling class on the part of São Paulo’s municipal workers. Their anger was even greater in the face of the insistent and voracious attacks by the São Paulo City Hall and the endless betrayals by the unions that claim to represent them.

Workers have been fighting attempts to scrap their pensions since at least 2016, when a proposed pension reform was presented by then-Mayor Fernando Haddad of the Workers Party (PT). The attacks were intensified by his successor, João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), now governor of São Paulo, who brought the pension reform known as “Sampaprev” to a vote in March 2018. Public employees responded with a strike and massive street demonstrations, which led to the postponement of the vote on the bill. At that time, the unions called for a “suspension” of the strike, knowing that sooner or later the bill would be brought to a vote again.

The lifelong president of the SINPEEM union, Claudio Fonseca of the Citizenship party, a successor to the Stalinist

Communist Party, was then a city councillor. The unions waited for Fonseca's colleagues in the Council to convene, amid the 2018 Christmas celebrations, a new session to approve Sampaprev to call for new demonstrations. Just like this week, the public employees were barbarically repressed while the project was being approved by the councillors. Amid a rebellious mood among the workers, the unions held an assembly that voted to call a strike at the beginning of the 2019 school year.

The 2019 strike, which fought for the repeal of the recently approved pension reform, once again assumed massive proportions and was ended in a rigged vote by SINPEEM and its allies, who trampled on the decision of the majority of workers who voted to continue the movement. The same scam was applied by the unions in the strike against the unsafe reopening of schools, this time in an online meeting.

After increasing the retirement contribution rates for active employees in 2018, thus eroding their salaries, the MDB government extended the attack to already retired employees, who will have 14 percent of benefits that exceed the minimum wage ripped off. The unions, for their part, repeated their sordid strategy to disorient the workers. They subjected the powerful force of more than 100,000 São Paulo public employees to the powerlessness of the "allied" PT and PSOL councillors to reverse the vote.

The failure of this strategy was demonstrated immediately, when the entire PT caucus voted in favor of one of the bills that made up Mayor Ricardo Nunes's austerity package. The justification of the PT councillors was that the bill would be approved anyway, and they advanced its approval to discuss mitigating amendments. In reality, the Workers Party had already carried out attacks of the same character against the pensions of public employees in the states they rule, such as Ceará and Bahia.

Tired of these theatrics and recognizing the impotence of these methods to respond to the attacks of the capitalist state, many workers talked about radicalizing their struggle, with actions ranging from blocking the city streets to occupying the City Council building to prevent the vote. This mood was definitely present in Wednesday's demonstration.

As the beginning of the session approached, tensions grew between the workers and the shock troops. Demonstrators threw eggs and other harmless objects at the police, who promptly started firing tear gas grenades. The response of the union officials, perched on the top of sound trucks, was to immediately denounce workers opposed to the union's capitulation as "divisive" and "infiltrators" and spread lies that people with "backpacks full of bombs" had been seen among the crowd.

SINPEEM's directors claimed that the police, ready to savagely repress the workers, were there "working" and that

they were their allies, since the police would also be harmed by the austerity measures. The president of SEDIN (Union of Childhood Educators), Claudete Alves of the PT, on the other hand, declared that confronting the police would mean using "fascist methods" that would equate the workers with far-right supporters of President Bolsonaro. Fonseca then stated that "the last thing we need today is to invade the City Council building," since "our goal is to convince the councillors" to change their vote.

These fraudulent and deeply reactionary arguments reveal the class character of the unions. Having degenerated decades ago, they have turned into empty bureaucratic husks that support a privileged bureaucracy opposed to workers' interests. They are not only rabid opponents of socialism but of any form of class struggle. Their real role is that of policemen of the working-class movement, and therefore they identify with and respect the "work" of the shock troops.

The mood of the workers who sought to radicalize their struggle and break the straitjacket imposed by the unions is entirely legitimate. However, these goals will not be achieved by simply changing the tactics of struggle. Workers need to break politically with the unions and the pseudo-leftist parties that seek to submit them to the capitalist state.

They must fight for the mobilization of an independent working-class movement, unified internationally. Workers willing to take up this struggle should immediately contact the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil and set up in their own workplace bodies for the direct representation of rank-and-file workers, independent of the unions. This struggle is inseparable from the building of a truly revolutionary internationalist leadership within the working class, a Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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