

Strikes sweep Brazil as prices soar

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A wave of wage strikes is spreading across Brazil among different sections of the working class in response to explosive inflation rates that have built up over the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The official inflation rate in 2021 hit a high of 10 percent, the highest since 2015. The increase is even more dramatic in food prices, which in February registered a 13 percent increase over 12 months. A sharp increase of 25 percent in fuel prices was announced by Petrobras at the beginning of March, following the global price hike. Vehicular natural gas saw a 38 percent increase in 12 months, ethanol 36 percent, and gasoline 32 percent.

Since February, educators across Brazil have declared strikes demanding that state and local governments implement a 33.24 percent adjustment in the “teacher’s national minimum wage” approved that same month by Jair Bolsonaro’s federal government. The minimum wage for educators working 40 hours a week stands now at 3.845 reais (US\$811) a month.

- On February 9, **Piauí state teachers** declared a strike disrupting the beginning of the school year. After refusing a 16 percent raise counterproposal made by the government of Wellington Dias of the Workers Party (PT), the strike movement in the state continues. Last Wednesday, when the strike had completed 49 days, teachers held a demonstration in the state capital Teresina alongside public transportation workers also on strike for better salaries.

- On February 16, **Acre state teachers** went on strike, joined a week later by their colleagues in the municipal network of the state capital, Rio Branco. The movement forced the government to postpone the return of in-person classes in the state network, and in the municipal network. According to G1, 75 percent of schools remain closed by strikers. The teachers refused several proposals by Governor Gladson Cameli, from the right-wing Progressive Party (PP), which did not benefit all categories of educators.

- On March 7, **teachers in the municipal network of Recife**, state capital of Pernambuco, began a strike for the 33.24 percent raise. It ended 10 days later, achieving 23 percent for those who were already paid above the minimum wage.

- On March 9 **state teachers of Minas Gerais** went on strike, joined a week later by their colleagues in the municipal network of the capital, Belo Horizonte. The strike reached massive proportions, with 85 percent of the workers on strike according to a report by Agência Sindical.

Being the third richest state in the country, responsible for almost half of the Brazilian trade balance surplus, Minas Gerais pays starvation wages to its teachers, which start at 2,100 reais (US\$ 443) a month, or 45 percent less than the national minimum wage. Governor Romeu Zema, from the “ultra-liberal” New Party, suggested a meager 10 percent raise for teachers, corresponding to last year’s official inflation index. After the teachers refused this proposal, maintaining their strike and staging demonstrations, the government appealed to

the courts to declare the strike illegal and cut the strikers’ salaries.

In the last two weeks, strikes have multiplied at an ever-increasing pace.

- On March 20, **subway workers in Belo Horizonte** went on strike against the privatization of the subway being promoted by the Minas Gerais state government, threatening their jobs.

- On March 23, **teachers from the municipal network of Feira de Santa, Bahia, and Dourados, Mato Grosso do Sul**, declared a strike. On the same day, **public employees of the National Institute of Social Security (INSS)** went on strike nationally, demanding a 19.9 percent increase for three years without wage adjustments. The strike already closed INSS agencies in dozens of states across the country.

- On March 25, while teachers held large demonstrations in Belo Horizonte, **municipal educators in Goiânia, capital of Goiás**, went on strike.

- On March 28, **teacher strikes began in Porto Seguro, Bahia, and Natal, capital of Rio Grande do Norte**. On the same day, **street sweepers and bus transportation workers in Rio de Janeiro** went on strike for better wages, massively impacting the functioning of Brazil’s second largest city. The street sweepers are demanding a 25 percent salary increase and have already rejected two proposals from the Municipal Urban Cleaning Company (Comlurb), which initially offered a 5 percent increase and then 8 percent in installments throughout the year. The Rio de Janeiro bus drivers and fare collectors, who transport 3 million people daily, are demanding a raise to compensate for three years without adjustments.

The mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Paes, of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), virulently attacked both strikes. Despite the broad participation of workers, he claimed that the street sweepers’ strike was orchestrated by “old figures in Rio politics (who aren’t even from Rio)” and accused workers of “acts of terrorism, vandalism and threats” against the city.

- The following day, March 29, **drivers and delivery workers for apps such as Uber and iFood** held strikes and demonstrations in 17 Brazilian cities, demanding better payment and working conditions. The rise in fuel prices in recent weeks, which substantially impacts them by the very nature of their work, was a substantial factor triggering the strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Rober, a striking teacher from the municipal network of Belo Horizonte, who reported on his experience and the political implications of the movement in which he participates.

Explaining the underlying problems that led educators to strike, Rober said: “Both state and Belo Horizonte teachers have suffered

salary losses in recent years, but mainly losses in career plans [wage increases for years at work]. In the state, they have the problem of a large number of teachers working under temporary contracts. Recruitment programs are increasingly rare and insufficient to fill the necessary number of teaching positions. Wage increases have only been conceded after strikes, but even then were far below the demanded rates and the real inflation for poor and lower middle class consumers.”

Asked about the workers’ active participation and militancy, he reported, “I feel that the demonstrations are gaining strength, in large part given by the fatigue that the workforce is feeling from the abuses to which it has been subjected over the years. Many, even those distant from the political discussions, are realizing the losses, not only the salary losses. The posture of explicit disrespect on the part of the president, ministers, governor, mayors and secretaries has become hard to ignore.

“The sight of people sleeping on the streets and begging for food or spare change, shacks multiplying under bridges; the rising prices of many essential foods, rents, consumer goods and fuel; the frequent reports of police abuse and corruption with no action on the part of governments, even seeming that governments collaborate on this, are waking people up.”

The WWSW asked the teacher how he sees the potential for unifying the struggles of educators and other workers nationally and whether unions are striving for it. Recognizing the common nature of the problems faced by educators throughout Brazil, he said, “The unions are weakened and don’t seem very combative in defending the rights of the workforce. Even so, they are still what we have to fight, but we need to recover their strength through the engagement of the workers.”

Rober’s response, which in many ways reflect the perception of large numbers of workers, raises fundamental questions of political perspective for the Brazilian and international working class. In particular his conclusions regarding the unions deserve to be discussed in light of the experience of recent years.

The response of Brazilian unions to the social and political crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened the fundamental contradictions of the international capitalist mode of production, is extremely revealing of the real nature of these organizations that portray themselves as representatives of the workers.

The “Balance Sheet of Strikes in 2020” published by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (DIEESE) points out that the year of the outbreak of the pandemic registered the lowest number of strikes in the last 10 years in Brazil, and a drop of 42 percent in relation to the previous year. Drawing conclusions from these figures, DIEESE stated that “There are, in conditions like these [posed by the pandemic], very few chances on the horizon for a union campaign to be successful.”

This is a delicate way of saying that, in the face of the biggest crisis of world capitalism since the first half of the 20th century, unions proved incapable of offering any protection to the working class as it suffered brutal attacks on its jobs, income and its very physical existence. On the contrary, in the name of saving the capitalist economy, the union federations negotiated wage reduction programs, forced workers into workplaces infected with the deadly coronavirus, banned strikes, and openly sabotaged the workers’ struggles that emerged against their opposition.

The experiences of public transportation workers and educators,

who are at the forefront of the current wave of strikes, vividly illustrate how the unions worked against the development of an independent political response of the working class to the pandemic.

In response to an explosion of strikes by bus drivers and collectors, considered by DIEESE as the “largest striking sector” in 2020, the National Confederation of Land Transport Workers (CNTTT) directly appealed to the Brazilian state for measures to “mitigate the growing general strike movement” in its ranks. Similarly, the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE) has responded to dozens of educators’ strikes across the country against the unsafe reopening of schools by joining the capitalist governments and justifying their criminal policies on the false premise that damage to education “outweighs the direct risks from coronavirus.”

These experiences attest to the fact that unions are not the “only available tool” for workers to fight, but rather that to advance their struggle workers need to break free of these corrupted pro-capitalist organizations and form new ones that directly and democratically represent the rank-and-file.

A fundamental factor prevents unions from being reformed to assume a democratic and progressive character for the workers’ movement today. Formed in the early stages of industrial capitalism as nationally based reformist organizations, the trade unions entered into a historic crisis as capitalism entered its imperialist stage and have then taken an eminently reactionary character with the globalization of the economy in recent decades.

The struggle of the Brazilian workers is developing as part of an increasingly integrated movement of the international working class: the wave of wildcat strikes by Turkish workers demanding wage hikes that compensate for the explosive inflation rates; the government-attacked strike movement by railway workers in Canada and the United States; the massive strike by Spanish truck drivers against fuel price hikes; the hunger protests in Sudan and other African and Middle Eastern countries, triggered by inflation provoked by the war in Ukraine fomented by US-NATO imperialism.

This global fight requires organizations of struggle that correspond to its internationalist character. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has created for this purpose the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We call upon workers in struggle throughout Brazil to study the IWA-RFC statement, form rank-and-file committees in your workplaces and join this critical international initiative.



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