

Brutal police murder by gassing in Brazil provokes international outcry

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The killing of a man by the police on May 25 in Brazil caused shock and angered millions around the world, with video of the brutal assault going viral on social media.

Video recordings show 38-year-old Genivaldo de Jesus Santos being approached in the city of Umbaúba in the state of Sergipe by the Federal Highway Police (PRF) for riding a motorcycle without a helmet. The man, diagnosed with schizophrenia, can be seen cooperating with three police officers, who approach Santos aggressively, manhandling and cursing him while carrying assault rifles. Santos' nephew, one of the witnesses to the attack, said the officers took the medication Santos kept in his pocket.

The videos show the violent response of the officers, surrounding, pushing, knocking down and pointing their guns at Santos in what witnesses said lasted half an hour. Then the officers decide to trigger a tear gas bomb inside the trunk of the police car with Santos inside, who can be seen swinging his legs out of the back hatch until he passes out. In the police report, the officers said that Santos had a "sudden illness" on the way to the police station and was taken to the municipal hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

The sadistic public torture and murder of Santos provoked anger among the residents in the city, who blocked the highway where he was killed, burned tires and carried signs denouncing his death and calling for justice. In the newspapers and social media, many compared Santos' suffocation by asphyxiation to the Nazis' gas chamber.

The attack in Umbaúba occurred exactly two years after the police murder of George Floyd in the US and is a particularly brutal expression of the response of the Brazilian capitalist class to the intensifying social crisis in Brazil and internationally.

Over the past two years, the Bolsonaro government's indifferent and criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed the virus to spread through the population, resulting in over 660,000 deaths and leaving millions more with the after-effects of Long COVID.

This period of suffering and death for millions has meant financial prosperity for a thin layer. Brazilian billionaires increased their wealth by 30 percent during the pandemic, while 90 percent of the population became poorer. The richest 1 percent in Brazil owned almost half of the national wealth in 2021, an increase of 0.5 percentage points since 2019.

Santos lived and was brutally killed in Sergipe, the fifth poorest state in Brazil according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), with 46.8 percent of the state's population facing serious problems related to the lack of food. Luís Moura, regional coordinator of the union-funded social studies institute DIEESE, pointed out that the population considered poor increased from 42 percent in 2019 to 46 percent in 2021. This situation is repeated throughout the country, with an increase in poverty from 25 percent to 29 percent in the same period.

A study by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) showed that while 30 percent of Brazilian households had no money to buy food at least once in the previous 12 months in 2019, that number increased to 36 percent in 2021. Among the poorest 20 percent, food insecurity jumped from an

already staggering 53 percent to 75 percent in the same period.

Today, the enormous poverty and social inequality in Brazil, which has only intensified with a dramatic rise in food and fuel prices, are raising social tensions.

According to data surveyed by the University of São Paulo Center for the Study of Violence and the Brazilian Public Security Forum, 5,200 people died as a result of police violence in Brazil in 2017. In 2020, the number killed jumped to 6,400 and last year it was 6,100.

Under such conditions, the assassination of Genivaldo de Jesus Santos was met by the PRF command with cold indifference. A "technical note" from the PRF blamed Santos himself for his death and covered up the actions of the agents. The note stated that he "actively resisted an approach by a PRF team. Due to his aggressiveness, immobilization techniques and instruments of less offensive potential were used to restrain him."

It is not a coincidence that the sadistic violence released against Santos occurred just one day after fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro praised one of the deadliest operations ever carried out by the murderous Military Police (PM) in the Vila Cruzeiro favela in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The operation resulted in the death of 25 people, including one killed by stray bullets and four people still hospitalized. The police took responsibility for only ten deaths, while local residents were forced to take the bodies of their relatives and neighbors to the hospital.

The operation, carried out in the morning of May 24, had the participation of the PRF and the notorious Special Operations Battalion (BOPE). After it became news, Bolsonaro stated: "Congratulations to the warriors of the BOPE and the Military Police of Rio de Janeiro who neutralized at least 20 criminals linked to drug trafficking in a confrontation, after being attacked by gunfire during an operation against criminal faction leaders."

The PM portrayed the operation as an ambush for a convoy of the drug trafficking gang, Comando Vermelho, which was leaving the Vila Cruzeiro favela. According to the official narrative, the operation was compromised when a group of plainclothes police at one of the entrances to the community was intercepted by drug traffickers, leading the police to react by entering the favela and killing them. However, the facts point less to an ambush and more to a provocation to justify the assault inside the favela that resulted in the massacre.

The commander of the Military Police of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Uirá do Nascimento Ferreira, declared the day after the operation that it had been planned months before and cruelly stated that it "did not have the objective of serving arrest warrants."

How the operation, which officially was to target criminals caught in the act leaving Vila Cruzeiro, ended with a violent assault inside the favela has not been explained except by the untenable police narrative. The presence of 11 police armored cars in positions that so far have not been publicized and the movement of dozens of plainclothes agents around the slum has all the indications of an operation planned to provoke a response

from the drug traffickers. The alleged initial attack against officers was responded with more than a hundred agents entering the community.

Almost a week after the brutal murder of Santos in plain sight, Bolsonaro finally responded to the episode by lamenting not his death, but that of PRF agents in another case the same week. Bolsonaro concluded that the media “always has a side, the side of the criminals.”

In the same week of these two horrific incidents, the Bolsonaro government also published a report on human rights abuses with a glaring absence of the section on “public security,” that is, abuse by cops.

Bolsonaro’s statements are a signal to the president’s fascist supporters in the state apparatus, including the police forces and the military, that launching the brutal crackdown on the working class amidst the upsurge in strikes and protests in Brazil will have no repercussions for the agents involved.

So far, the only repercussions for the three policemen recorded in the scenes in Umbaúba have been minor. Kleber Nascimento Freitas, Paulo Rodolpho Lima Nascimento and William de Barros Noia were relieved of duty and a disciplinary action process was initiated. The cruel response of the PRF command, blaming Santos for resisting the officers’ aggression, expresses Bolsonaro’s encouragement of these fascist sections.

The cultivation of such forces is an expression of the ruling class’s fear in the face of intense social crisis. On Tuesday morning, a day after Bolsonaro’s statements defending the police in the Santos case, Bolsonaro’s chief-of-staff, minister Ciro Nogueira, signed the dismissal of the PRF’s executive director and intelligence director, only to announce on the same day that they were being promoted to higher positions in the US.

The Bolsonaro government’s encouragement of these forces is also a response to tensions building up across the region. In Chile, where huge demonstrations against former President Sebastián Piñera’s policies in 2019 were seen by Bolsonaro as a major domestic threat, current President Gabriel Boric is plummeting in approval ratings just months after his election. The country experienced a refinery workers’ strike in early May, while in Argentina, a simultaneous truckers’ strike with no deadline to end was barely averted after its third day.

In Brazil, workers at Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN) in Volta Redonda in the state of Rio de Janeiro went on strike at the end of March, creating a commission elected by the rank-and-file to negotiate independent of the union. After a campaign of isolation and suppression aided by the unions, the company is feeling emboldened, sending in police to prevent worker assemblies this week. On the day of Santos’ murder, Bolsonaro’s communications minister, Fábio Faria, revealed the fear within the ruling class of a strike in a critical sector of the economy. Faria said, “Is R\$15 billion [from Petrobras’] R\$44 billion profit too much to subsidize truckers’ diesel to avoid a strike? I’ve heard the market saying it’s not.”

Meanwhile, all three countries are facing new outbreaks of COVID-19 cases, with ICUs filling their capacity and reports of outbreaks in schools.

In this explosive situation, with less than five months to go until the elections in October, Bolsonaro sees the police forces as a shock troop against any political opposition, while preparing to respond to the scenario of a defeat with a coup, with the increasingly direct collaboration of the military.

Bolsonaro’s unfettered encouragement of the police forces immediately after they commit acts of extreme violence is only possible amid a shift to the right of all forces in the political establishment. The intensification of poverty and social inequality in Brazil and throughout Latin America, at the same time that a thin layer has become richer at an unprecedented rate, are being responded with the promotion of the repressive forces of the state by the entire political spectrum, including the nominal opposition to Bolsonaro led by the Workers Party (PT).

In an expression of the enormous nervousness throughout the political

establishment following the recent episodes of police violence, the PT’s response was limited to PT president Gleisi Hoffmann, tweeting that the Santos murder and the slaughter in Rio are examples that it is necessary to “review the command and training of police officers.”

After remaining completely silent about the massacre for a week, PT’s former president and front runner for the October elections, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, refused to make any call for an end to the police killing spree. Instead, he stated in a conformist and empty fashion: “If the state was present in these areas, the police would only be a component to maintain tranquility. ... the state only appears when it is to kill someone, through the police.”

In fact, the apparatus of repression being thrown at the working class on the highways and slums was strengthened during the PT governments. The foremost example is the Drug Law passed in 2006, which according to the National Prison Department resulted in the increase of those arrested for drug-related crimes from 9 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2014, while the prison population more than doubled in the same period, from 361,400 to 607,700.

The order of the day in the so-called “left” is to provide a political cover for the fascist forces being cultivated by Bolsonaro. Marcelo Freixo, Lula’s main ally in the race for governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro for the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), responded to the slaughter in Vila Cruzeiro by posting a series of tweets to clarify that he did not call for the end of BOPE and CORE, the notoriously violent special forces of the military and civilian police in the state, respectively.

The same reasoning is true for the media. It presents the response of the Brazilian judiciary, demanding explanations from the police about the operation in Rio, as a sign that there will be significant repercussions for the killings in Vila Cruzeiro. However, it was the STF itself that upheld the extension of powers of the PRF to “investigative and intelligence operations” in 2020, allowing it to take part in the killing of Santos and the Vila Cruzeiro massacre.

The chief goal of the opposition is in fact to deflect social opposition and disarm the working class while Bolsonaro aims to create a fascist movement within the security forces.

Only a massive movement of the working class, independent of and in opposition to all the forces that sustain Brazilian capitalism, can stop the spiraling police violence and attacks on democratic rights, and put an end to the massive misery and suffering caused by the pandemic and the international economic crisis. For this, it is necessary to build the leadership of the working class in the International Committee of the Fourth International in Brazil and across Latin America.



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