Brazil: Amid university strikes, São Paulo public sector workers walk out against privatizations

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Last Tuesday, October 3, workers of five São Paulo's Metropolitan Train Company (CPTM) railway lines, five Metro lines, and the water and sanitation company (Sabesp) held a one-day strike against the wide-ranging privatization plan of São Paulo's far-right governor, Tarcisio de Freitas.

This strike occurred amid a series of strikes that have broken out in recent weeks in São Paulo, Brazil's largest and richest state. In the main one, students at the University of São Paulo (USP), the largest university in Latin America with almost 100,000 students, have been on strike since September 18 against the lack of teachers and for policies to keep students at the university.

On September 27, USP professors also went on strike, while university employees took part in the walkout on October 3.

At the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), staff have been on strike since the end of August for a pay rise and against installing electronic timecards. UNICAMP students walked out in solidarity with both the university's staff and the strike at USP last Tuesday, when they decided to go on strike against the deterioration of education, and lack of teachers and infrastructure.

While the pseudo-left leaderships of the trade unions and student organizations seek to concentrate opposition against the current governor of São Paulo, the attacks now faced by workers and students have been systematically promoted for years by all political factions of the ruling class.

In recent, the policies of privatization and destruction of social services have been presided over in the state of São Paulo by the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), especially by former governor Geraldo Alckmin, who remained in office for 12 years.

For years, the Workers Party (PT), and its pseudo-left backers such as the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), have diverted the working class from openly fighting capitalism by blaming all social grievances on the PSDB's "neoliberal project." But in Brazil's recent elections, the PT tapped Alckmin as the best suited as vice-president for current President Lula da Silva, and political ally in the struggle against "Bolsonarismo."

Today, Tarcisio's administration is deepening the capitalist adjustments against the working class amid an acute economic and social crisis in Brazil and internationally, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. A former minister of Jair Bolsonaro and a loyal ally of the fascistic former president, he was elected governor last year and is implementing a combination of law-and-order policies, giving the green light to the São Paulo Military Police to kill without restraint, and harsh attacks on São Paulo's workers and youth.

Tarcisio denounced Tuesday's strikes, saying the movement was "political, illegal and abusive." The São Paulo labor court, working in close contact with the governor, had ordered before the strike that 100 percent of train and subway services be operated at peak times and 80 percent at other times, with a fine of 500,000 reais (US$97,000) if the court order was not complied with. However, the subway and railway workers defied this decision.

The Tarcisio government intends to carry out a wide-ranging privatization program, which, in addition to subway and railway lines and Sabesp, includes the privatization of 100 units of the youth detention center CASA Foundation. Of these public companies, the most advanced privatization project is that of Sabesp, one of the largest water and sewage companies in the world, which serves more than 28 million people in São Paulo.

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Sabesp is a mixed-capital company with shares on the São Paulo and New York stock markets, and in 2022 it made a profit of 3.21 billion reais (US$620 million).

The disastrous results of the privatization of public services in São Paulo are already being felt on the subway and railway lines run by private companies, which record most of the breakdowns on the state's train system. The prospect of worse and more expensive services, as has happened all over the world, has led to the privatization of Sabesp being rejected by the majority of the population of São Paulo.

Public higher education in São Paulo is going through a similar process, which combines budget cuts, the acceleration of pro-market measures in state universities, and the outsourcing of services. Since 2014, USP has lost more than 1,000 teachers, leading to many subjects not being offered and students in some disciplines having to postpone graduation. This unsustainable situation has led to all 28 faculties and institutes on USP campuses in São Paulo, the state capital, joining one of the biggest strikes in USP's history.

The subway, railway, water and sanitation workers of São Paulo, as well as the students of USP and UNICAMP on strike, face a two-front struggle, both against the capitalist parties and the workers' and student union bureaucracies. Each in their own way, the pseudo-left organizations are working to isolate their struggles and divert them into a sterile "pressure movement" directed toward the Lula administration and Tarcisio's government itself.

Camila Lisboa, president of the São Paulo Subway Workers Union and member of the Morenoite Resistência tendency in the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), wrote on X/Twitter that the fight against privatization can be advanced by pressuring the Tarcisio government to hold an "official plebiscite so that the population can democratically decide." The fraudulent nature of this demand was exposed during the October 3 strike, when the government doubled down on its intentions to privatize public companies.

Resistência is one of the pseudo-left organizations that has most often argued that the fight against the extreme right in São Paulo and Brazil must be carried out through a "broad front" involving social movements and bourgeois parties like the PT. To this end, it has ignored the Lula government's attacks on education and its recently-launched wide-ranging Public-Private Partnership project. In an interview with *Carta Capital* right before the strike, Lisboa announced: "We would love to welcome President Lula to our picket lines ... to defeat Governor Tarcisio's project to privatize São Paulo's public companies."

The Morenoite Workers Revolutionary Movement (MRT) and its youth movement, Faísca Revolucionária, which publishes the *Esquerda Diario* website, is advancing more radical rhetoric that includes formal proposals such as assemblies and unified strike commands, without any defined political content and totally subordinate to the union bureaucracy. It hailed the October 3 strikes as an example of the "worker-student alliance," arguing that "The [union] federations, such as CUT and CTB [controlled respectively by the PT and the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil], and unions must build this unified struggle in all sectors now!"

Meanwhile, the Lambertite Workers' Cause Party (PCO) lamented the fact that the "'leadership' of the strike movement [at USP] ... is in the hands of sectors of the petty-bourgeois left," such as the PSOL, MRT and Maoist and Stalinist parties, while the PT is remaining "on the margins of what is happening at the country's largest university."

Trying to give a left-sounding cover for the subordination of the student movement to the capitalist state, the PCO advocated that the strike at USP "evolve into a political strike that goes beyond the demands of student unionism," in which the "big national issues are debated." In other words, that it "evolves" into a movement to pressure the PT government to implement a bankrupt bourgeois nationalist program.

The workers of São Paulo fighting against privatizations and the students at the state universities must reject these nationalist perspectives for subordination to the Lula government and the unions controlled by the PT and its pseudo-left satellites.

They must orient themselves to the growing movement of the international working class and must adopt a socialist and internationalist strategy, advocating the expropriation of the wealth of the ruling elite to guarantee broad public investment in education, transportation and the water supply and sewage treatment system.

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