

Union federations turn May Day in Brazil into platform for Lula government

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Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party - PT) attended last Wednesday's May Day rally called by Brazil's largest trade unions, including the PT-controlled CUT. Elected with their unanimous and unprecedented support in 2022, the Lula government is carrying out a corporatist agenda to integrate the unions into the Brazilian state to help suppress the class struggle in Brazil.

Under the theme "For a fairer Brazil," the May Day rally served on the one hand, for the Brazilian trade union federations and the elements of the Brazilian pseudo-left gathered in the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), to prepare for this year's municipal elections, particularly in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city where the rally was held. On the other hand, the union bureaucrats hailed the "reconstruction of Brazil" that the Lula government is allegedly carrying out as they look for ways to reverse both the unions' financial collapse and their decline in membership.

The unprecedented unity of the Brazilian trade union federations in the May Day rallies since the election of the fascistic ex-president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) was explained by Sérgio Nobre, president of the CUT, who said that it "was fundamental to the election of President Lula." In addition, these rallies also provided important spaces for coordinating with bourgeois politicians with the aim of building an alliance with significant sectors of the bourgeoisie dissatisfied with the Bolsonaro government that culminated in their support for Lula's election.

Lula entered the stage alongside the leader of the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST) and federal deputy Guilherme Boulos, from PSOL, who is the PT-backed candidate for mayor of São Paulo this year. After introducing several of his government's ministers who accompanied him on stage, Lula said that the election in São Paulo will be a "real war," with Boulos running against the Bolsonaro-backed candidate and the city's current mayor, Ricardo Nunes. Lula called on "every person who voted [for him] in 1989, in 1994, in 1998, in 2006, in 2010, in 2018... 2022, to vote for Boulos for mayor of São Paulo."

A split from the PT that emerged in 2004 in response to the regressive pension reform of Lula's first term (2003-2006), the PSOL has in recent years moved closer to the PT in what is portrayed as a "broad front" against *bolsonarismo*. Boulos, the leading advocate of this front in the PSOL, praised Lula at the May Day Rally, saying that he is "the best president in history."

The scale of political opportunism on display at the May Day rally was inversely proportional to the size of the crowd. Even

Lula couldn't suppress his irritation at the lack of "effort needed to bring [a] larger crowd" than the 2,000 people present, predominantly union bureaucrats holding large banners to mask the rally's fiasco. The trade union federations had expected 50,000 people to attend.

The demonstration was held for the first time outside of the center of São Paulo. According to CUT president Sérgio Nobre, the eastern region of São Paulo was chosen because it is "an area with a high concentration of workers."

Contrary to Lula's claim in his speech that the "rally was poorly called" – and that this and other problems of his government supposedly stem from a "lack of communication" with the population and "fake news" – what actually exists is a broad hostility on the part of the workers towards the unions and his own government. The unions' long history of collaboration with the corporations and the state has led to repeated workers' struggles being isolated and diverted into the dead ends of fruitless negotiations and bourgeois politics.

This dynamic was seen graphically on the Friday before the May Day rally, when APEOESP, the São Paulo teachers' union, was forced to call an assembly to relieve the enormous pressure among teachers against the growing attacks by Bolsonaro's ally, governor Tarcísio de Freitas. On that occasion, the PT and PSOL-affiliated union bureaucrats were booed and heckled numerous times by a significant number of the more than 10,000 teachers present when they did everything they could to prevent the calling of a strike that could quickly get out of their control.

Situations like this, which have become increasingly frequent in Brazil and worldwide, are not merely the work of corrupt union leaders who could be replaced and the unions reformed, as the pseudo-left claims. The root of the unions' betrayals lies in the change in the dynamics of the capitalist economy over the last 50 years. Capitalist globalization has completely undermined even the most modest reformism of the unions, which have become incapable of even minimally defending the wages, working conditions, and jobs of the working class.

As a result, the rate of unionization and union revenues in Brazil have collapsed in recent years, a process that accelerated with the 2017 labor reform of President Michel Temer's government (2016-2018). Among other measures, it ended the compulsory union tax, which was inspired by Benito Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy and instituted in 1943 by Getúlio Vargas' corporatist Estado Novo dictatorship.

From 2017 to 2022, union tax revenue fell from 1.5 billion reais (US\$ 296 million) to 13 million reais (US\$ 2.6 million) for trade unions and from 213 million reais (US\$ 42 million) to 1.9 million reais (US\$ 374,000) for trade union federations. The rate of unionization among workers in Brazil fell by 37 percent between 2012 and 2022, from 16 percent to 9 percent.

The Brazilian trade union federations see the Lula government as an ally in their bid to “minimize the damage,” according to Ricardo Patah, the president of Brazil’s third largest trade union federation, the UGT. To this end, they are counting on the support of the Lula government for a bill that they will present to the Brazilian Congress this month, which establishes a fee to be paid by workers and employers involved in collective bargaining. Workers, whether they are union members or not, would decide the amount of the fee in assemblies.

On the other hand, the Lula government has revived a series of tripartite councils and working groups, made up of representatives from unions, business, and the government, and has further integrated the unions into the state. This and other corporatist measures, such as the re-creation and strengthening of the Ministry of Labor, were outlined in April 2022 in the document “Pauta da Classe Trabalhadora” (Working Class Agenda) that the trade union federations delivered to then-candidate Lula.

The real character of the tripartite initiatives, which assume some common interest between “capital and labor,” was exposed in a bill drawn up by a working group that the Lula government presented to the Brazilian Congress at the beginning of March to regulate the work of app drivers. Lula said at the time that it was “a very important day” because “For some time now, no one in this country has believed that it would be possible to establish a negotiating table between workers and employers and that the result of this table would be to conclude a different organization in the world of work.” CUT and the other trade union federations have also supported this bill.

However, many scholars and drivers have denounced the bill, dubbing it the “UBER bill” for ensuring the interests of the largest app-based transportation company. Although it guarantees some rights for drivers, such as social security and paying at least one minimum wage, it keeps drivers as “self-employed platform workers” with no employment relationship.

Significantly, since the bill was sent to Congress, app drivers have held a series of demonstrations. *Folha de S. Paulo* also reported on May 1 that “drivers of apps that transport passengers are against the possibility of unionization that is included in the bill to regulate the category.”

The anti-worker character of the “UBER bill” was further exposed in Marinho’s speech delivered on national radio and TV on the evening of April 30 to celebrate May Day. Cynically, he said that “It’s necessary to fight against the precariousness of work, in Brazil and in all parts of the world,” adding: “That’s why President Lula and US President Joe Biden signed an unprecedented partnership last year in New York for workers’ rights and in defense of decent work.”

While for Lula and his ministers, Biden is the “most pro-worker president in history” and a guardian of world democracy, he has been denounced in the pro-Palestinian protests as “Genocide Joe”

and, with his recently passed record arms budget for Israel, Ukraine, and Taiwan, is bringing the world closer than ever to a nuclear world war.

An attempt by elements of the Brazilian pseudo-left outside the PSOL to hold a May Day “with class independence and internationalism” was nothing more than a cover for imperialism and the Lula government. This rally was called by the CSP-Conlutas trade union federation, controlled by the Morenoite Unified Socialist Workers Party (PSTU).

Like other pro-imperialist organizations around the world, the PSTU and CSP-Conlutas have portrayed the Ukrainian war as a fight for national self-determination against “Russian imperialism,” supporting the arming of the “Ukrainian resistance” by the US and NATO. CSP-Conlutas has also maintained a close relationship with pro-corporate unions in the US, having met in April with UAW President Shawn Fain, while attending the conference of *Labor Notes*, both supporters of Biden and the pro-war Democrats.

In Brazil, they have been sowing the illusion that it is possible to advance a purely national and union struggle against the 2016 pro-corporate high school, 2017 labor, and 2019 pension reforms, as well as against the austerity measures of the Lula government that continue the attacks of the Temer and Bolsonaro governments, such as the “new fiscal framework”. They disregard the global capitalist nature of these attacks and reject an international struggle accordingly. The Revolutionary Workers Movement (MRT), the sister organization in Brazil of the Socialist Workers Party (PTS) in Argentina, has also advocated that this struggle be carried out by putting pressure on the CUT and the other trade union federations.

With policies like these, the Lula government, the trade union federations, and the pseudo-left in Brazil are working to politically disarm the Brazilian working class and youth and thus paving the way for a nuclear world war.

In contrast, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* held a May Day rally on May 4, pointing out that the genocide in Gaza and the war in Ukraine are the initial fronts of a developing Third World War, which threaten to envelop Brazil and Latin America as a whole. What is required is the broadest international unity of the working class based on a socialist perspective to stop this threat. We call on everyone to study the presentations made on May Day and take forward this fight against war based upon the independent mobilization of the international working class in the struggle for socialism.



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