Brazilian pseudo-lefts seek to divert campaign to cut workweek into dead end of parliamentary politics

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In recent months, a campaign to shorten the working day in Brazil has gone viral on social media, while receiving significant attention from the corporate media. Support for the campaign among Brazilian workers and youth, who are subjected to a regime of brutal labor exploitation in one of the most unequal countries in the world, is being channeled by the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) into the dead end of nationalism and the institutions of the bourgeois state.

A petition addressed to the National Congress in September of last year demanding an end to the so-called 6x1 work schedule (six days on the job for one off) received almost 3 million signatures, half of them in the last three months alone. Entitled "For a Brazil that Goes Beyond Work," the petition states that "working hours in Brazil often exceed reasonable limits, with the 6x1 work schedule being one of the main causes of physical and mental exhaustion for workers."

The petition calls for "a revision of the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) ... allowing workers to enjoy time for their personal and family lives" and the "creation of worker protection policies that include the rights to regular vacations, parental leave, limitation of overtime, among others."

In September 2023, pharmacy worker Ricardo Azevedo released a video that went viral on TikTok in which he asked: "I'm wondering when we, the working class, are going to make a revolution in this country in relation to this 6x1 scale?" In the same month, he created the "Life Beyond Work Movement" and the petition for an end to the 6x1 scale.

Azevedo, until a few months ago an unknown political figure, was quickly elevated within PSOL and was elected to the city council in Rio de Janeiro. He ran in the October election on the basis of the demand for an end to the 6x1 scale, receiving 29,364 votes, the highest number for any of the party's candidates seeking this position.

On May 1 of this year, PSOL federal deputy Erika Hilton authored a Constitutional Amendment Proposal (PEC) in the National Congress to end the 6x1 scale based on the petition. On November 13, she obtained the minimum number of signatures for the PEC to begin going through Congress.

According to the bill, under law the work schedule will have "normal working hours of no more than 8 hours a day and 36 hours a week, with a work schedule of four days a week" with no reduction in pay. Currently in Brazil there exists a 44-hour workweek.

The PEC draws attention to the fact that although the post-dictatorship 1988 Constitution reduced the workweek from 48 hours to 44 hours, "the other major changes in work schedule legislation have favored businessmen to the detriment of workers, as happened in 2017."

In 2017, the federal government led by former vice-president Michel Temer of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) party approved a "labor reform" that unleashed brutal attacks on the Brazilian working class. Intense disputes within the Brazilian bourgeoisie reflected its intractable crisis amid the country's biggest economic recession in a century and led to the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (Workers Party, PT) on fraudulent charges. The 2017 reform had the fundamental aim of restructuring class relations in Brazil with a series of measures weakening labor regulations and promoting an increase in informal, low-paid and temporary jobs.

Other changes in labor relations made it possible for companies to demand up to two hours of overtime per day, including on weekends, when the 6x1 work schedule predominates. The changes in 2017 replaced the rules in force since the creation of the CLT in 1943, in which workers received 50 percent additional pay for overtime, reaching 100 percent on weekends. Although the labor reform stipulates that these overtime hours must be compensated with an equal number of rest hours within six months, this is often not complied with by companies.

According to a survey carried out by insurance company Maxis GBN in 2019, workers in Brazil work an average of 18 hours of overtime every month, adding 4.5 hours to their weekly work schedule.

The 6x1 shift is widespread in retail and services, the two sectors with the highest number of formal jobs in Brazil and which need workers every day of the week. Out of the almost 55 million formal jobs in Brazil, around two thirds have a work schedule of more than 40 hours a week and are probably on the

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6x1 schedule. In addition to being exhausted, those who work more than 40 hours a week receive low wages, with 82 percent of workers in retail and services earning less than two minimum wages (R$2,824, or US$455) and 42 percent earning up to 1.5 minimum wages (R$2,100).

The debate over the 6x1 work schedule in Brazil has also exposed the right-wing role of the PT government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. On November 11, days before the PEC reached the minimum number of signatures to pass through the Brazilian Congress, the former union bureaucrat and Minister of Labor, Luiz Marinho, wrote on X/Twitter: "[T]he Ministry of Labor believes that the issue of the 6x1 work schedule should be dealt with in collective bargaining agreements" between unions and companies. Facing backlash for his indifference to the open collusion between unions and companies, Marinho was forced a few days later to describe the 6x1 work schedule as "cruel," and say that the government "has great sympathy" for ending it.

What the Lula government fears most is that the significant support for this demand will find expression in the struggles of the Brazilian working class, including federal civil servants who have carried out multiple strikes this year. After being elected with the promise of repealing a series of pro-corporate reforms introduced since Rousseff's impeachment, including the labor reform, the Lula government has since only continued a series of attacks on the working class. As a consequence of his "new fiscal framework," Lula supported the approval in Congress of a cut of almost R$70 billion (US$11.3 billion) from the federal budget over the next two years, mainly targeting social spending.

The cuts come as Brazil's social crisis intensifies amid growing signs of a global economic crisis. Data from a survey carried out by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) shows that six out of eight Brazilian capitals, state and federal, have seen a sharp rise in the prices of basic food items over the last six months. This has certainly contributed to 53 percent of Brazilians believing that 2024 was a bad year for them and their families, according to a recent opinion poll by the Ipsos Institute.

The broad popular support for the petition to end the 6x1 scale is only a pale reflection of this crisis and of the massive opposition that has accumulated against years of cuts to public services and the destruction of jobs and historic rights for the working class. However, the "Life Beyond Work Movement" and PSOL are deliberately seeking to prevent workers and youth from understanding capitalist exploitation at the root of the 6x1 schedule and diverting this demand into futile appeals to the Brazilian Congress based on bourgeois nationalism.

Reproducing a series of platitudes from the corporate world, the "Life Beyond Work Movement" petition and the PEC repeat the old bourgeois nationalist conception that it is possible to find a middle ground satisfying the interests of workers and employers and, consequently, contributing to national economic development.

According to the text of the PEC drawn up by PSOL, the adoption of a four-day workweek aligns "the country's labor practices with global trends in the flexibilization and humanization of work environments," representing a "significant innovation in human resource management, aimed not only at improving the well-being of workers, but also at promoting an increase in the productivity and efficiency of Brazilian companies."

Under conditions of heightened class tensions in Brazil and internationally, PSOL and the "Life Beyond Work Movement" are working to block working class anger from breaking through the bourgeois parliamentary structure. This aligns perfectly with the petty-bourgeois program of the PSOL, whose specialty is providing a left-wing cover for the PT—from which it split in 2004. Today it holds posts and ministries in the Lula government, while using pseudo-radical rhetoric to divert all political opposition into the channels of the capitalist state.

Today, more than at any other time in history, the productive forces are capable of guaranteeing decent living standards with time off for all workers. However, all of the political organizations involved in the campaign to end the 6x1 scale base themselves on the outdated capitalist structure of nation states and private ownership of the means of production.

Changing conditions of grinding exploitation requires the development of an international working class struggle to put an end to the system of wage exploitation, which produces the impoverishment of workers and is leading society to war and dictatorship.

As countless examples internationally have shown, particularly in the recent strikes at Amazon and Starbucks in the US, the struggle for social improvements is not a struggle "for Brazilians," as the petition states, but for workers all over the world who increasingly confront similar conditions of exploitation within capitalism. The response of the ruling class reinforces the need to build a massive and independent working class movement to prepare for the overthrow of capitalism and organize society on new bases, i.e., socialism.

To do this, workers must organize their struggle for better wages and shorter working hours through the formation of rank-and-file committees in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-And-File Committees (IWA-RFC), independent of pseudo-left parties like PSOL .

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