

# Union leaders meet with Lula amid strike wave in Brazil

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Officials from Brazil's largest union federations met last Wednesday, April 15, with Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party – PT). Officially portrayed as delivering a series of demands compiled in the nationalist and pro-corporate document “Working Class Agenda 2026-2030,” the meeting signaled the open support of the union federations for Lula’s candidacy in October’s presidential election.

The meeting took place amid a wave of strikes in Brazil, particularly in the education sector at the municipal, state, and federal levels. Just as happened during the administration of the fascist President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), Brazil’s largest union federations are making it clear that they will do everything they can to once again isolate, stifle, and divert these struggles behind Lula’s candidacy.

During the 2022 election campaign, Brazilian union federations offered unprecedented joint support for Lula’s candidacy against Bolsonaro. Explaining this support, Ricardo Patah, president of the UGT — Brazil’s third-largest union federation — told *Folha de S. Paulo* in February: “Bolsonaro wanted to wipe out the union movement, a pillar of democracy, while Lula listens to us and endorses our demands.”

At the April 15 meeting, Lula greeted the union bureaucrats, repeatedly calling them “comrades.” Sérgio Nobre, president of the PT-controlled CUT—Brazil’s largest union federation—responded by declaring: “President, here is your army, and we will be fighting this battle alongside you. You are our general.”

The labor federations made a big fuss over their drafting of the document “Working Class Agenda 2026–2030” and its presentation to Lula and to the presidents of the House of Representatives, Hugo Motta, and the Senate, Davi Alcolumbre. The CUT wrote on its website that the unity of the federations “ensured that our voice would echo in the ‘corridors of power.’”

The document was written in the tired language of bourgeois nationalism, which assumes that conflicting interests between “capital and labor” can be reconciled by the capitalist state. Furthermore, it promotes a protectionist chauvinism that mirrors the support US unions are giving to Trump’s tariff war.

One major priority of the “working class,” the document states, is the “ENHANCEMENT OF THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT, linking economic growth, reindustrialization, and innovation.” This measure, the document continues, must be coordinated with “THE PROTECTION OF BRAZILIAN WORKERS AGAINST IMPORTED PRODUCTS AND TRADE AGREEMENTS,” such as “mechanisms ... of local content” to benefit “domestic production,” and “STRENGTHEN THE COUNTRY’S ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY.”

Another issue of concern to Brazilian union federations is the decline in both the financial resources and membership of unions since the beginning of the last decade (from 16.1 percent in 2012 to 8.9 percent in 2024), a trend that accelerated with the elimination of the mandatory union dues under the 2017 labor reform. Seeking to reverse this process, at least in part, the document argues that the Brazilian state must “value

collective bargaining, strengthen the labor movement, and ensure conditions for the survival of these organizations.”

Echoing the corporatist logic of the PT’s first terms and deepening the unions’ integration into and dependence upon the state, Lula reestablished several tripartite councils during his third term, comprising representatives from business, unions, and government. One of the document’s points highlights the importance of these councils, stating that it is necessary to “STRENGTHEN SOCIAL PARTICIPATION, tripartism, and permanent social dialogue” for the “formulation of public policies.”

The top demand made by the labor federations in the document is a reduction in the workweek, which they and Lula hope will help boost their virtually nonexistent credibility among young people and workers in Brazil and translate into electoral gains in October.

This demand went viral on social media in late 2023 through a campaign—conducted entirely outside of official unions and political parties—calling for an end to the widely despised 6x1 work schedule (six days on, one day off), which is prevalent in Brazil’s service and retail sectors. According to a March *Datafolha* poll, support for ending the 6x1 work schedule rose from 64 percent in December to 71 percent in April, a figure that climbs to 83 percent among young people aged 16 to 24—the age group that disapproves of the Lula administration the most.

On the same day that union bureaucrats met with Lula, the president took the opportunity to send a bill to Congress that would end the 6x1 work schedule, reducing the workweek in Brazil from 44 to 40 hours without a pay cut, with a maximum of five working days per week.

Beyond the electoral nature of this measure, Lula and the labor federations’ call to end the 6x1 work schedule in Brazil is a response to the brutal social and economic conditions faced by the working class, which is subjected to exhausting workdays, low wages, and suffocating levels of debt. There is widespread recognition that this situation is a social powder keg ready to explode, with Lula, the PT, and the union federations fearing that this situation will spiral out of control and turn into a struggle against the entire capitalist political establishment in Brazil.

At no point do Lula and the union federations point out that the brutal regime of labor exploitation in Brazil is a consequence of the capitalist system in one of the most unequal countries in the world. For them, a measure such as reducing the workweek is something that “helps improve productivity” and “the winners are Brazil and the companies,” as the labor minister, former union bureaucrat Luiz Marinho, declared last year. This illusion also helps divert the struggle for a reduction in the workweek into the safe channels of the Brazilian Congress, pressuring it to approve the end of the 6x1 shift schedule.

## Wave of strikes signals an escalation of the class struggle in Brazil

The behind-the-scenes negotiations in the “corridors of power” between union leaders, the Lula administration, and the heads of the Brazilian Congress take place in the context of a powerful working-class movement emerging in Brazil.

A report by DIEESE published on Wednesday indicates that the number of strikes in Brazil increased by 14 percent in 2025 compared to the previous year, rising from 880 to 1,006. The largest increases occurred in the “private sector” (from 440 to 539) and in state-owned enterprises (from 46 to 71). Among the latter are numerous work stoppages throughout 2025 and strikes at the end of the year by postal workers and Petrobras employees against the Lula administration.

Like everywhere else in the world, this trend will intensify as the effects of the war in Iran become more pronounced in Brazil. Since last October, inflation has been rising, climbing from 0.09 percent that month to 0.88 percent in March. The largest increases were in diesel fuel (13.90 percent), gasoline (4.59 percent), and food and beverages (1.56 percent).

Last week, a strike by app drivers and delivery workers took place in at least four Brazilian states. In addition to protesting against rising fuel prices and increased fees charged by companies, they protested against a bill in the Brazilian Congress to regulate app-based work. Championed by app companies, this legislation leaves “platform-based independent workers” without an employment relationship with the companies. In 2024, the Lula administration had advocated for a similar bill, which was also widely rejected by app workers.

Since the beginning of the year, a series of strikes in primary and higher education has erupted across Brazil at the municipal, state, and federal levels. Teachers, staff, and students have been fighting against widespread attacks on public education, which combine low wages, poor working conditions, and a rapid advance of privatization and pro-corporate policies.

Today, this movement has been making its presence felt in a powerful way in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which are among the most populous states in Brazil. Teachers in the public school systems of the capitals of these states, as well as those in the state public school system, and teachers, students, and staff at state universities—the University of São Paulo (USP) and the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ)—have been staging walkouts and strikes.

At the University of Sao Paolo (USP), the largest university in Latin America, a proposal by the administration to offer teachers a bonus of nearly 30 percent for research projects sparked outrage among staff and students, who have been suffering for years from deteriorating working and teaching conditions. On Thursday, they held a massive joint demonstration through the streets of São Paulo.

Staff members staged one of the largest strikes in recent years between April 14 and 23, largely organized outside the union, which ended after the university administration extended the bonus offered to faculty members to them as well. Students also went on strike on April 14, and more than 100 departments are now on strike. They are demanding investment in measures to retain students, such as housing and scholarships, and are fighting against a measure by the university administration that aims to strip academic centers of their autonomy to manage the spaces where they operate and generate revenue.

On April 9 and 10, teachers in the São Paulo state public school system—one of the largest in the Americas—held a two-day strike against an administrative reform proposal by Governor Tarcísio de Freitas, an ally of Bolsonaro, which seeks to alter career paths and impose performance evaluations that threaten teachers with dismissal. A new one-day strike has been scheduled for next Tuesday, April 28, when they will be joined by teachers from São Paulo’s municipal public school system, who have been holding one-day strikes once a week since early April.

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s most indebted state, teachers and other public sector workers have for years suffered from successive governments’ attempts to place the full burden of the crisis on their shoulders. Teachers in the state public school system have seen their salaries decline by more than 50 percent since 2019, a figure that stands at 26 percent for teachers in the municipal public school system of the

capital, Rio de Janeiro. On April 9, they held a joint one-day strike, a movement set to be repeated in the coming weeks.

Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ) staff have been on strike since March 23 and April 9, respectively. Like elementary and secondary school teachers, they have been suffering for years from cuts to basic rights, delayed salaries, and poor working conditions. This is the first strike by UERJ teachers in over 10 years.

The strikes at USP and UERJ are taking place amid a two-month strike by staff at federal universities. Today, the walkout affects at least 51 of the 69 federal universities in virtually every Brazilian state. They are demanding compliance with the agreement that ended the four-month strike in 2024—one of the longest against the Lula administration—including a salary increase and a reduction in working hours.

Education strikes have already taken place in the states of Minas Gerais and Paraná in March, and in Curitiba, the capital of Paraná, and in the Federal District in April. Today, teachers and municipal public sector workers in Florianópolis, the capital of Santa Catarina, and teachers in Canoas, in Rio Grande do Sul, are on strike for better wages and working conditions.

Workers have faced repeated betrayals by the unions, which refuse to unite their struggles. At the same time, the vast majority of these unions are led by bureaucrats from the PT and from Morenoist and Pabloite groups within the PSOL, who do everything to suppress these struggles for fear that they will get out of their control and seek to divert them toward bourgeois politics, particularly elections.

The attacks on education and the working conditions of the working class and Brazilian youth are being waged by the entire ruling elite and its parties, including Lula’s PT. Like other bourgeois rulers around the world, Lula’s response to the growing global crisis—now intensified by the war against Iran—has been an open defense of increased military spending, while continuing to commit to austerity policies. Conversely, this policy is paving the way for the electoral rise of Bolsonaro’s son, the equally fascist Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, who is already tied with Lula in the polls.

Brazilian workers and youth seeking a socialist and internationalist response to the capitalist crisis—the root cause of austerity and the attacks on education and working conditions, as well as of war and the threat of the fascist far right—will find a genuine path forward in the International Online May Day Rally organized by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). We call on you to organize to attend the rally, which will take place on May 1, and to help publicize it as widely as possible.



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