Brazil: Railway workers strike exposes privatization disaster in São Paulo

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A railway workers' strike paralyzed three of São Paulo's most important train lines on August 4 and 5, interrupting the transport of approximately 850,000 daily passengers and exposing the disastrous privatization program of far-right Governor Tarcísio de Freitas. São Paulo is the capital of Brazil's wealthiest and most populous state. The shutdown of Lines 11-Coral, 12-Safira and 13-Jade–the latter, the only rail link to Guarulhos International Airport–of the São Paulo Metropolitan Train Company (CPTM) was suspended after the union accepted a conciliation proposal brokered by the Labor Court.

The three lines had been transferred to the concessionaire Trivia Trens on July 21. After just three days of private operation, the system collapsed: delays, crowded platforms, and on July 23, a short circuit followed by a fire on a Line 12-Safira train sent passengers into a panic. The São Paulo State Transport Regulatory Agency (ARTESP) was forced to take an unprecedented measure: it ordered the CPTM to reassume emergency operation for 90 days, suspending the concessionaire.

The strike erupted both as a direct response to these problems and out of fear of mass layoffs: 11 percent of the operational total. The state company's 4,700 railway workers saw in the privatization not "modernization," but the mass replacement of the workforce with cheaper labor lacking the experience and conditions won over decades of struggle.

After two days of a strike that openly defied the governor, the Union of Workers in Railway Companies of Brazil's Central Zone steered the category toward demobilization. At a Labor Court hearing, the Tarcísio government committed to sending a bill to the São Paulo Legislative Assembly (ALESP) authorizing the absorption of CPTM employees into state public administration agencies.

The proposal was approved at an assembly by 131 votes to 26, and the union announced the maintenance of the "state of strike"–the classic formula of the trade union bureaucracy to posture as militant while disarming workers in practice.

The bill, already submitted to ALESP, does not prevent the privatization, does not reverse the concession of the lines to Trivia Trens, and does not guarantee that the new posts in public administration will maintain equivalent wages and conditions. It merely manages the social consequences of the destruction of the CPTM, offering workers the prospect of being dispersed across different public agencies, with downgraded contracts, while the public assets built over three decades are handed over to yet another private group.

Tarcísio's program of destroying public services

The railway workers' strike is not an isolated episode. It is the most recent manifestation of the resistance to the privatization program that constitutes the central pillar of the Tarcísio government. A former minister in the government of fascist ex-President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and an enthusiast of Argentine President Javier Milei's "model" of austerity and repression, Tarcísio's promises that this program would bring "efficiency" and "investment" to public services are rapidly collapsing in the fourth year of his administration.

Tarcísio's privatization package extends far beyond the trains. SABESP, one of the world's largest sanitation companies, had its controlling stake transferred to the Equatorial Group in 2024. The result: user complaints nearly tripled in Greater São Paulo over the last two years, with recurring reports of water supply interruptions and fraudulent billing. In May, an explosion during SABESP works in the Jaguaré neighborhood, in western São Paulo, destroyed dozens of homes and killed two people.

The Tarcísio government's privatization program further encompasses the Metropolitan Water and Energy Company (EMAE), highways, subway lines and intercity rail, as well as public-private partnerships for the construction and maintenance of schools, hospitals and public housing. The package also envisages handing over to the private sector 100 percent of CPTM's train lines, state parks, and negotiations for the concession of the Port of Santos.

The farce of "private investment" and the role of the Lula government

The official narrative that privatizations attract private capital and relieve the state budget collapses in the face of the facts. The Tarcísio government's privatization program has relied on the direct support of the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party–PT) through the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES). In São Paulo, the BNDES approved R$6.4 billion for the intercity train concession, R$1.35 billion for highways and R$3.6 billion for the expansion of Metro Line 2-Green. The Santos-Guarujá Tunnel, on the São Paulo coast, is part of Lula's new Growth Acceleration Program (PAC).

This partnership between the Tarcísio and Lula governments was inscribed in the very legal and financial architecture of the Brazilian state by the first Lula administration (2003–2006). The Public-Private Partnerships Law of 2004 was drafted by former Lula government Finance Minister and current PT candidate for governor of São Paulo, Fernando Haddad, when he was a special advisor in the Ministry of Planning. The model created the framework to make private investments viable with public counterparts, particularly through the BNDES, in infrastructure projects–precisely the mechanism that today finances Tarcísio's concessions.

In a June 23 interview with *Jovem Pan*, Haddad criticized Tarcísio in the following terms: “First of all, take Tarcísio as transport minister [during the Bolsonaro government]. In terms of partnerships with the private sector, he carried out a third of the [public-private partnerships] that [current minister] Renan Filho has done.” Indeed, in three years (2023–2025), the Lula government carried out 50 concessions of highways, railways, ports and airports, while the Bolsonaro government carried out 45 over four years.

The Lula government’s privatization plan is extensive. It includes the privatization of rivers and public-private partnerships for the construction and management of prisons, and, through BNDES financing, the privatization of sanitation companies and the construction of schools in various Brazilian states. Last year, it launched a “restructuring plan” for the Postal Service that is accelerating its privatization. There is also the possibility that the Lula government will transfer two federal companies that manage state trains and subways–the Urban Train Company (Trensurb) and the Brazilian Urban Train Company (CBTU)–to state governments through public-private partnerships.

In this context, the criticisms that Haddad has made of the privatization of SABESP and train lines as part of his electoral campaign in São Paulo are strictly a matter of method, not class. For Haddad, privatization should be a tool used “by necessity,” deployed to cover occasional gaps in public financing. For Tarcísio, the sell-off of state assets is a permanent model of efficiency. In both cases, private capital is the indispensable partner, and public property is treated as an accounting burden.

A decade of resistance and betrayal

The history of strikes at the CPTM reveals a significant transformation. In the 1990s and 2000s, the walkouts focused on wage demands and working conditions. In 2007, a massive strike paralyzed the system over cost-of-living adjustments to meal and food vouchers, resulting in dismissals for just cause that dragged on for years. In June 2014, on the eve of the World Cup, railway and subway workers united in a five-day strike that ended in the labor court with the dismissal of more than 40 union leaders.

From the 2020s onward, the focus of the strikes shifted entirely to fighting privatization. In July 2021, a 24-hour strike partially shut down lines against the freezing of wages and the imposition of concessions. In October and November 2023, railway workers, subway workers and SABESP employees held unified walkouts against Tarcísio’s privatization package.

In every one of these cases, the outcome was the same: the union leaderships–controlled by bureaucrats tied to the PT, the pseudo-left Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) and Morenoite groups–steered the strikes into the courts, accepted deals that did not reverse the privatizations, and demobilized the workers. The railway workers’ strike of August 2026 repeats this script.

It erupted less than two months after the end of one of the largest strike movements in the history of Brazilian higher education. Between April and June, students, staff, and teachers at USP, UNESP and UNICAMP waged a 54-day strike against the deterioration of working and teaching conditions, the lack of teachers, the advance of outsourcing and inadequate student financial aid. On May 20, ten thousand people marched on the Bandeirantes Palace (the governor’s residence) under the slogan “Tarcísio Out.”

Throughout 2024 and 2025, state and municipal school teachers in São Paulo also held strikes against pro-corporate reforms that threatened dismissals and against the privatization of education. Subway workers maintained mobilizations against the handover of lines to the private sector.

The convergence of these struggles in São Paulo–railway workers, subway workers, teachers, university staff and students–objectively places on the agenda the possibility of a unified mobilization of the working class against the Tarcísio government’s program of privatization and austerity. But this unification is systematically sabotaged by the union and student leaderships.

The Railway Workers’ Union isolated its strike, negotiated sectorally in the Labor Court and accepted a deal that does not touch the privatization. The student council leaderships, controlled by the PSOL and by Stalinist and Morenoite tendencies, steered the strike at São Paulo’s universities into sterile negotiations with the university administration and the state government, ending it without the main student demands being met–and still proclaimed “victory.”

This is the objective role of the trade union bureaucracies and the pseudo-left organizations: to isolate each struggle, divert it into the channels of the bourgeois state and, at the decisive moment, shut it down with minimal concessions, keeping the program of attacks intact.

A national and international struggle

The São Paulo railway workers’ strike is part of a national and international movement of the working class against the policies of austerity, privatization and war that bourgeois governments of every political stripe are implementing in response to the capitalist crisis.

This year, the Lula government faced one of the largest waves of strikes against the austerity policies implemented under the guise of its “new fiscal framework”–formulated by former Finance Minister and now PT candidate for governor of São Paulo, Fernando Haddad. In the first half of the year, federal university staff carried out nearly five months of strikes, in parallel with the strikes at São Paulo’s state universities and a three-month strike by teachers and staff at the Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ).

Protests and strikes against the Lula government’s privatization plans were led by dozens of indigenous peoples in the first half of the year, fighting to preserve the rivers and their ways of life, and by postal workers, who, together with Petrobras workers, carried out one of the largest strikes at public companies in Brazil in the last 30 years at the end of last year. This movement has continued this year and could intensify. In June, outsourced Petrobras workers held strikes in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, while postal workers are planning to strike in September against the Lula government’s “restructuring plan.”

Internationally, in recent months, massive strikes against cuts to education and public services have taken place in Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Australia, Portugal, Spain, France, Canada and the United States. The German railway workers’ strike, the mobilizations of British workers against the privatization of the Royal Mail, and the transit strikes in the US are manifestations of the same global crisis.

In Brazil, this crisis is intensified by the effects of the war against Iran, which is driving up fuel and food prices, and by the instability of the political regime on the eve of the October presidential elections–the first since the attempted fascist coup of January 8, 2023, with Flávio Bolsonaro technically tied with Lula in the polls.

The response to this crisis cannot be entrusted to bourgeois governments, to the labor courts, or to the trade union bureaucracies that have betrayed struggles for decades. The CPTM railway workers, the subway workers, the teachers, the university staff and students of São Paulo must break with these leaderships and build independent rank-and-file committees, oriented toward the unification of all struggles against the program of privatization and austerity. They must forge their own political leadership, armed with a socialist and internationalist program, aimed at the expropriation of the wealth of the ruling elite and the reorganization of society under the democratic control of the working class.

The disaster of the privatization of Lines 11, 12 and 13–the fire, the delays, the emergency CPTM intervention–is the definitive demonstration that essential public services cannot be handed over to private profit. The railway workers' fight is the fight of all workers. It can only be victorious as part of the international struggle of the working class against capitalism.