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One million take to the streets against education cuts, austerity in Brazil

On Wednesday, mounting social anger over the austerity measures of the fascistic government of President Jair Bolsonaro exploded in Brazil's streets with more than one million students and teachers walking out of classes and attending demonstrations initially called by teachers unions to let off steam over the reactionary "pensions reform" being proposed by the government.

In both of Brazil's two largest cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, more than a hundred thousand demonstrators flocked to rallies, while tens of thousands attended demonstrations in other large state capitals such as Recife and Salvador, in the northeast, Belo Horizonte in the southeast and Porto Alegre in the far south, as well as in the capital, Brasília. Overall, every state capital and more than 170 regional centers and smaller cities saw demonstrations, even in the countryside of the most remote regions of the scantily populated west and the Amazon.

While the Workers Party (PT) and the unions have so far attempted to strangle mounting workers struggles, most notably shutting down in mid-March a 33-day strike by São Paulo public workers against the will of the rank-and-file, workers and youth found in Wednesday's demonstrations an outlet to express widespread opposition not only to Bolsonaro, but to the whole political establishment, with demonstrators comparing PT state governors to the fascistic president and his allies for themselves implementing brutal austerity measures and aping his apologies for the murderous military police forces.



Mass demonstration on São Paulo's Avenida Paulista

The demonstration had been called on April 5 by the PT-controlled National Education Workers Confederation (CNTE) “if the pensions reform cleared the House Constitutional Panel”, in the words of its president, Heleno Araújo Filho, which happened in late April.

The almost one-and-a-half month truce was designed to allow time for Congressional horse trading and for the mobilization to be sabotaged, as the same unions had done with a “national day of struggle” on April 24. However, the announcement of a 30 percent budget cut for all federal teaching institutions—from high schools to faculties and universities—on April 30 generated a growing wave of spontaneous protests, forcing both the CNTE and the National Students Union (UNE) to call the walkouts and demonstrations.

The immediate trigger for the demonstrations was the announcement by the Education Minister, the far-right economics professor Abraham Weintraub, that his ministry would cut the budget of universities that permitted “mayhem” on the campuses, later telling *O Estado de S. Paulo* that by “mayhem” he meant political events, citing as an example “allowing landless workers on campus”. Weintraub said among the first to have its budget cut would be the Fluminense Federal University, located in the state of Rio de Janeiro, which had been forced during the elections, under threat of criminal proceedings against its dean, to remove an anti-fascist banner put up by students. The electoral court ruled that it constituted “electoral propaganda” against Bolsonaro.

The announcement was immediately perceived as an attempt to impose political censorship, by the fascistic education minister, who is famous for paraphrasing the Nazis by saying that “communists are the top of the country, the top of financial institutions, the

owners of the papers, the big companies and the monopolies.” The funding cuts came on top of the announcement days earlier that the government would defund sociology and philosophy departments across the country, with the government affirming that it was not interested in allowing “children of farmers” to “come back home with anthropology degrees.”

In the face of widespread revulsion over the cuts, the government doubled down on the announcement declaring that the 30 percent cuts would hit all federal institutions—60 universities attended by 1.2 million students and 40 secondary technical schools, the so called “Federal Institutes”, IFs, while insisting that the motivation for the cuts were economic reasons and not political. Soon, thousands of parents began demonstrating with their children in front of the IFs, waiting for Bolsonaro at places he was scheduled to visit, such as the celebration of the 130th anniversary of Rio’s Military High School.

In every one of these demonstration and later in the mass nationwide protests on Wednesday, there was a large range of issues raised by demonstrators carrying banners opposing Bolsonaro’s campaigns for the militarization of schools, his war on climate science and his cutting in half the country’s science budget, the striking down of environmental and workplace regulations, and the continued Brazilian economic slump—with the central bank estimating a possible return to recession after a 0.1 percent GDP contraction for the first quarter.

Most significantly, while the unions, the PT and the pseudo-left organizations attended demonstrations with “Free Lula” banners—promoting the lie that former president PT President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva imprisoned for corruption, would somehow oppose austerity—demonstrators in PT-ruled states targeted the state governors as well, with demonstrators in Salvador, Brazil’s first capital and today the capital of the state of Bahia, calling Rui Costa, the PT governor the “PT’s Bolsonaro”. Bahia’s PT-run state government has closed schools with hundreds of students and cut 28 percent of the state universities’ 2018 budget. Protesters also remembered that Costa, hailed in Lula’s interviews from prison as an “important leader” on the left, regularly whitewashes police murders, famously claiming that police officers are like “strikers in front of the goal”, hailed “if they strike” and decried when they miss.

For his part, Bolsonaro reacted with unrestrained hostility and aggression to the demonstrations. Speaking from Dallas, Texas, where he travelled to receive the corporate “Person of the Year” originally meant to be delivered at New York’s American Museum

of Natural History before protests forced the event to be moved, he called the demonstrators “useful idiots” being manipulated by the PT.

Significantly, he tweeted a 2010 video from Lula using the same words as Weintraub to justify budget cuts by his PT government, saying “they were necessary because tax collections were less than predicted by the budget.” Bolsonaro wrote below the video “Lula clarifies for the left how is it when we have to withhold funds (which every government does). Thank you for explaining!”

Bolsonaro is rapidly being engulfed in the same crisis hitting every section of Brazilian political establishment, of which his election was a distorted expression.

In their immense size and nationwide scope, the Wednesday demonstrations show, like the demonstrations developing in Northern Africa, the Yellow Vest protests in France, teachers strikes in the US and the youth demonstrations against capitalist inaction over global warming, that the world’s masses are moving sharply to the left. Millions are coming into struggle against a bankrupt capitalist system which lets Notre Dame and the Brazilian National Museum burn down, is incompatible with the most basic rights of workers, to education and decent living standards, and threatens the very life of the planet.

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