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Brazilian unions sabotage one-day general strike

Last Friday saw workers and youth carry out partial work stoppages and demonstrations in 380 cities and towns across Brazil. The widely anticipated one-day general strike had been called as early as May Day by unions covering workplaces employing some 45 million workers, and was meant to let off steam amid mounting popular opposition to the austerity measures of the Bolsonaro government.

Unrest has grown in particular against his widely hated pension “reform”, which the government anticipates will funnel at least 1.2 trillion reais (US\$300 billion) out of workers’ and pensioners’ pockets and into the coffers of finance capital over the next 10 years.



PT's 2018 presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad, addresses group of supporters.

However, the strike failed to shut down key sectors, such as transport, metalworks and oil extraction, in most of the country. This is despite the fascistic Jair Bolsonaro's record low popularity for the first months of any elected president in Brazilian history, and the fact that millions of workers and youth took part in anti-government demonstrations just last month.

The backdrop to the strike was highlighted by an editorial the following day in Brazil's oldest daily, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, titled "Economy in free-fall," predicting that economic growth will be null in 2019 and unemployment will remain at 13 percent.

Nonetheless, pickets and demonstrations were sabotaged by the decision of the largest trade-union federation, the Workers Party (PT)-controlled CUT, to tell workers to "stay home" during the strike, as well as the last-minute decision by the second-largest trade union, the UGT, to call off planned strikes in mass transit in major cities. As scattered roadblocks hit highways and avenues across the country, only schools and universities saw major stoppages, with banks and civil service weakly hit, oil drilling, ports and airports untouched, and retail, as well as industry, suffering only minor effects.

In São Paulo, the president of the bus drivers' union admitted to the press to calling off the strike at 3 a.m. after a simple "request" by the mayor in a meeting held in the early morning hours. The "request" was accepted in order not to disturb the opening game of the Copa América soccer tournament on Friday evening, when Brazil played Bolívia in front of President Bolsonaro and an affluent audience paying an average ticket price that was equivalent to half a monthly minimum wage.

At the end of the day, protest organizers throughout the country claimed an attendance at the rallies that was less than half that at the largely spontaneous May 15 demonstrations against the pension reform and cuts to education, when more than 1 million teachers and working class high school youth took to the streets.

That was precisely the goal of the organizers. On the May Day when the strike was announced, all of Brazilian trade-union federations staged a first-ever joint rally where the nominally "oppositionist" trade-unions controlled by the PT, the Maoist wing of the Communist Party (PCdoB) and the pseudo-left Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) joined the leaders of the UGT and Força Sindical—the third largest federation—for a "united front," even as both the UGT and Força Sindical openly defended the pension reform, including on the day of the rally itself.

Ricardo Patah, UGT's president, attended the May Day rally less than 24 hours after meeting Bolsonaro and promising he would work to "smooth" the relations between the unions and the government. Patah also publicly opposed the call for the general strike.

For its part, the PT's feigned opposition to the reform is belied by the actions of PT governors, who are the protagonists of a dirty spectacle of lobbying the national Congress to approve even deeper cuts to state and city workers—who have their own pensions system—in order not to be forced to face the rage of workers by trying to pass the reform through state legislatures.

From the start, the 45-day truce the unions gave the government was designed to give plenty of time to the government for congressional horse-trading—as well as to the lobbying efforts by PT governors. Thus, the strike was set to coincide with the conclusion of the work of the special panel on the pension reform. Its organizers had no intention of mobilizing masses in the streets as were seen in the spontaneous protests last month.

Predictably, as the special panel released the reform's report the day before the strike, opposition leader in the House and panel member Alessandro Molon, of the Socialist Party (PSB), hailed the "victories" imposed on the government by the opposition, resulting in a "better" reform. What he hailed was no more than the redirecting of funds from the National Development Bank—cutting investment—to pay for the maintenance of pensions for the elderly poor and rural workers—a crucial anti-poverty scheme allowing rural workers and older poor people without records of formal work to claim benefits based on age alone.

Molon's speech was completely theatrical: While the cuts to the pensions for rural workers and elderly poor generated wide revulsion among workers, they amount to only 10 percent of the planned "economies" being imposed under the federal reform alone—excluding the state and city reforms that the PT and other parties want to bundle in with it. Moreover, the government had clearly indicated that it included these cruel cuts only in order to rescind them, and thereby give the opposition the ability to claim a "victory."

The same line was taken by speakers at the strike rallies, who hailed the "unity" of the opposition and the "victories" it had obtained in Congress. However, in an involuntary self-exposure at the São Paulo rally, PSOL's 2018 presidential candidate, Guilherme Boulos admitted the paralysis and cowardice of the opposition. He commented on press reports about the lack of demonstrations by the PT-linked Landless Workers (MST) and Homeless Movements (MTST) he leads by saying that the government "was longing for

[*estão com saudade*] our demonstrations” but “today they had the opportunity to overcome that longing [*matar a saudade*].”

Boulos and other speakers—including PT’s 2018 presidential candidate Fernando Haddad and the party’s president Gleisi Hoffmann—addressed just a few thousand supporters from a small podium set up at ground level, instead of the large sound trucks that are normally used at mass rallies.

The contrast between the union-controlled “general strike” and the recent, largely spontaneous demonstrations is significant evidence that such empty rhetoric is wearing thin. As a result, the unions are ever more wary of losing control of a renewed protest movement. Significantly, São Paulo’s demonstration was formally split in two, with a large part of the demonstration refusing to listen to the PT politicians.

This contrast is even more significant given that the general strike was immediately preceded by *The Intercept*’s publication of leaked evidence of miscarriages of justice in the all-encompassing Lava-jato (Carwash) corruption probe. Leaked messages revealed that Brazil’s current justice minister, Sérgio Moro, who previously was the leading judge in the investigation, had colluded with the prosecution. During his election campaign, Bolsonaro associated himself with Moro, praising him for “taking on the system,” as he himself posed as the only political opposition to the establishment. He later sought to strengthen that populist appeal by naming Moro to his cabinet.

Moro’s most prominent role was to hand down the corruption sentence currently being served by former PT president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. Popular revulsion over the austerity measures and corruption schemes developed by the PT in collusion with the whole political establishment played the decisive role in Bolsonaro’s election, and Moro was rewarded with the justice ministry in order to further Bolsonaro’s populist appeal.

The leaked messages published by the *Intercept*, however, portray Moro doing precisely the opposite of “fighting the system,” by directing the prosecution to avoid an “*abrupt perat mundo*,” a reference to the Latin phrase that “the world will fall, but justice will be done.” As part of this effort, Moro was recorded instructing the Attorney General’s Office not to bring charges against all of those in the political establishment against whom it had evidence, and, on the other hand, counseling the prosecutors in Lula’s case on how to strengthen the charges against him.

The messages are further evidence that the root of Lula’s thinly substantiated conviction was an effort to cover up the wider implications of the corruption scandals the PT oversaw

during his rule, that is, “not to let the world fall” by channeling widespread revulsion over the PT-led political system into safe channels and, furthermore, exploiting it to drive Brazilian politics far to the right.

The PT has responded by doubling down on its claims that Lula is innocent and has no responsibility for the vast network of corruption that developed under the party’s rule, and that the sentence deprived him of a certain victory in the 2018 presidential elections—even though this is belied by the PT’s burying his name in the second round, fearing a campaign to free Lula would strengthen Bolsonaro.

The party seized upon the *Intercept* revelations to suppress the wider issues in the demonstrations under the “free Lula” campaign and its reactionary narrative that right-wing media manipulation, and not widespread rejection of the PT, was responsible for Bolsonaro’s victory.

There is no doubt that the unions’ sabotage of the strike was carried out in large measure out of recognition that a mass workers’ rally would not endorse such slogans. The PT is conscious of the widespread perception that the party was responsible for paving the way to the ever-more despised Bolsonaro and his fascistic policies.

PT-linked pundits have drawn comparisons between the recent teachers’ and students’ demonstrations and the June 2013 anti-government demonstrations that targeted the whole political system. Their goal is to discredit the emerging mass movement against Bolsonaro. The 2013 protests—to which the then ruling PT responded with police state measures—are today denounced by the party as nothing less than the beginning of a pro-imperialist “color revolution” against its rule.

Both the unions’ sabotage of the general strike and the growing contrast between the actions of the official opposition and those of broad layers of workers and youth must be taken as a warning: The PT, the pseudo-left and the unions fear that they are as much of a target of the growing popular unrest as Bolsonaro himself, and will not oppose the sharp rightward lurch of Brazilian politics.

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