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In alliance with Workers' Party, Bolsonaro sends Brazilian army to contain police strike

Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro sent in Army troops into the northeastern state of Ceará late last week to quell a strike by Military Police (PM) and take control of the state's security forces. A request to the Bolsonaro government for a federal "Guarantee of Law and Order" operation was made by Ceará's Governor Camilo Santana of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT). Since then, Santana has repeatedly taken to social media to thank Bolsonaro for his support.



Brazilian Army troops with Military Police

Demonstrations by the Ceará police began at the end of last year. On December 5, police and firefighters protested in front of the Legislative Assembly, threatening to paralyze the state if they failed to receive a better offer for salary increases. The government offered to

raise basic monthly salaries from R\$3,200 (US\$720) to R\$4,200. After the protest, Santana gave in to pressure and agreed to increase salaries to R\$4,500 by 2022. On February 13, the government announced it had concluded negotiations with representatives of the Military Police.

However, a group of police officers refused to accept the agreement and, demanding that the increase be granted immediately, declared a strike on February 18. Defying the Brazilian law which prohibits strikes by the Military Police, police officers mutinied at 10 of the state's 43 battalions. Together with wives and family members, masked and armed police officers took to the streets to puncture the tires of police vehicles. These masked bands also imposed curfews on the streets, ordering merchants to close their doors. Other violent actions were reported, such as a woman who had her car set on fire after criticizing the movement on social media. The number of murders in the state skyrocketed after the strike began, increasing five-fold over the same period last year, with 147 people killed in the first five days of the action.

Political tension rose on the second day of the strike when Senator Cid Gomes of the Democratic Labor Party (PDT) used a bulldozer to charge a group of police strikers blocking the entrance of a PM battalion in the city of Sobral. Masked men responded with gunfire, and the senator suffered two bullet wounds to the chest. He was hospitalized, but is expected to recover. Cid Gomes is a former governor of Ceará, and one of his brothers is the current mayor of the city. His other brother, Ciro Gomes, ran in the last elections as the PDT presidential candidate, promoting nationalism as a supposed left-wing opposition to the fascist Jair Bolsonaro.

The police strike in Ceará has the potential of spreading throughout the country, starting with the neighboring states in the northeast. In 11 other states, salary negotiations are underway with the Military Police, and in five of them demonstrations have already taken place, including a 12-hour strike in Paraíba. The strike movement has been driven in part by a wages agreement signed in the state of Minas Gerais, which is considered superior to what is being offered in other states.

With the state claiming a fiscal crisis, public workers in Minas Gerais have been paid their salaries in installments since 2016. Most workers have not received the 13th salary (an extra-month year-end bonus) for 2019 so far. While 92 percent of education workers are in the lowest wage bracket, receiving no more than the equivalent of four minimum wages,

most Military Police receive a salary equal to between eight and 16 minimum wages, with more than 30 percent of them getting more than 16.

Without any proposal to grant raises for workers in the health and education sectors, Governor Romeu Zema of the Partido Novo, who claims to be ultraliberal, offered the security forces a 37 percent salary increase until 2023. Considering the raise inadequate, the police threatened to go on strike. Despite the state's fiscal crisis, Zema responded by granting a 42 percent increase. Making clear the decisive importance of the repressive forces for Brazilian capitalist interests, Zema stated: "We are prioritizing security because it has an immediate impact on the issues of development and job creation. Education is very important. But if I invest in education, it will take me a while to collect the data. And health, we know that's a different situation."

Along with Minas Gerais, the case of São Paulo reveals the political context that drives the police strikes. The current governor of the state, João Dória of the PSDB, was elected in 2018, running as a supporter of Bolsonaro's extreme-right militarist rhetoric. During his campaign, he promised the state police the best wages in the country. However, after being elected, the governor announced a salary increase for the Military Police of just 4 percent, provoking open discontent among the ranks of the PM. After the strike began in Ceará, Dória declared his concern that the movement would reach São Paulo, the most populous and industrial state in the country.

Together with Dória and Wilson Witzel—elected governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro through a campaign that defended giving the police a license to kill—Bolsonaro rose to the presidency with the backing of right-wing congressmen who make up what is popularly known as the "Bancada da Bala", or "Bullet Caucus," which represents the police forces. For the first time, the caucus sent members to the Senate, 15 in total, including the president's son, Flávio Bolsonaro.

Congressman Captain Augusto, who chairs the caucus, said he is concerned over the threat of police strikes spreading across the country. Although he voiced opposition to "any kind of paralysis by the police," he said he is holding meetings with governors and the president of the House and Senate to discuss the Military Police members' demands. The captain issued a dire warning: "Without the PM, inevitably, there will be a paralysis of commerce, industry, schools, the judiciary, tourism, etc ... besides the irreparable damage in the area of security, there will also be huge economic damage."

In reality, the “Bullet Caucus” has a very direct relationship with the police strike and its leadership. Major Fabiana (PSL), who is a caucus member, traveled to Ceará and visited the strikers accompanied by local leaders. According to *El País*, the major spoke in front of a police barracks. “For the first time we have a president who knows what it is to be a military policeman,” she said, accompanied by shouts of “*o mito, o mito!*” (the legend)—as his supporters call Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro himself expressed an ambiguous attitude toward the strike. While sending the Army to repress it, and warning that “things will heat up”, he said that the movement is justified. In his weekly press conference, he focused his fire on Cid Gomes and gave the floor to his minister of citizenship, Onyx Lorenzoni, who declared that the shots fired at the senator were in self-defense. This theme was taken up by the president’s son Eduardo Bolsonaro—a federal deputy and close associate of Steve Bannon—on his Twitter account.

The PT’s Camilo Santana summoning of the Army gave Bolsonaro the opportunity to promote his demand that troops involved in Guarantee of Law and Order operations be immune from criminal prosecution. The measure, if approved, would allow military personnel acting in these operations to kill innocent people without being held accountable.

Bolsonaro is only deepening the policy of using the Army in domestic affairs that was developed when the Workers Party controlled the federal government. Under President Dilma Rousseff’s administration, federal troops were sent in to suppress police strikes, police the 2014 World Cup, occupy the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and quell protests.

The PT continues to mount a fierce competition with Bolsonaro for political support from the security forces. Camilo Santana’s tough response to the strike—with the summoning of the Army, the cutting of salaries and the suspension of hundreds of police officers identified as participants in the mutiny—is counterbalanced by his reaffirmation of his willingness to meet demands from the police. “Whatever I can do as governor to value my troops, our troops, the glorious Military Police, I will do,” he said on a visit to a barracks.

Santana, who is now in his second term as governor of Ceará, has already granted immense resources to the Military Police. In his first term, he’s allocated more than R\$500 million (US\$112 million) for the purchase of vehicles and weapons, hired more than 5,000 soldiers and officers and promoted about 14,000 military personnel. He invested particularly in the resumption of a training course for the PM’s heavily militarized special

operations troops, coordinated by Aginaldo de Oliveira, who went on to become the head of the National Security Force of the Bolsonaro government.

The reactionary defense of the repressive apparatus of the bourgeois state by the PT is echoed by the pseudo-left, represented mainly in the PSOL (Party of Socialism and Liberty). With Marcelo Freixo at its helm, the PSOL voted in favor of Bolsonaro's "anti-crime" package, which expanded the repressive powers of the state and increased prison sentences. Today, its members in the Ceará state legislature are supporting the police strike, calling the Military Police "public security workers", and proposing a solution to the "confrontations" based on "the formation of a plural commission made up of several institutions".

Behind this opportunistic policy they are advancing the totally bankrupt program of "demilitarization of the police". This measure would supposedly put an end to the brutal character of the Brazilian PM, which carries out systematic murder against the most impoverished layers of the population, while its off-duty and retired members provide the manpower for militia death squads. The PSOL is promoting the idea that a change of uniform would turn these murderous forces from a principal organ of repression of the bourgeois state into an institution providing security for the working class. This is a matter not of political illusions, but rather the complete integration of this party, along with its Pabloite and Morenoite factions, into the capitalist state apparatus.

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