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Brazilian workers stage strikes and protests against COVID-19 pandemic and social crisis

Workers have staged strikes and protests across Brazil against the murderous, uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing social crisis that has driven tens of millions into poverty.

The weeks-long strikes by teachers in São Paulo against deadly school reopenings are being joined by a growing number of work stoppages by bus drivers, oil and railway workers, delivery app workers and other sectors as Brazil has recorded nearly 14 million coronavirus infections and a staggering 375,000 deaths.

Bus drivers have staged work stoppages in a number of state capitals. While the National Confederation of Transportation and Logistics Workers (CNTTL) union has sought to isolate these struggles, it has been forced to call a nationwide “health strike” today.



Delivery workers demonstrating for better pay and working conditions in São Paulo on April 16. (Twitter)

Meanwhile, some 1,700 oil workers at the President Getúlio Vargas refinery (Repar) in the state of Paraná, went on strike April 12 against a plan to bring in 2,000 workers from the across the country for nonessential maintenance work. A similar operation in March at the Gabriel Passos Refinery (Regap), in the state of Minas Gerais, resulted in a coronavirus outbreak that led to at least 200 infections and five deaths. A study by the National Amazonian Studies Institute (INPA) predicted that, given Brazil's current infection rates, sending 2,000 workers into Repar would trigger an outbreak resulting in at least one additional death every day in the city of Araucária.

Yesterday, in the face of skyrocketing infections on crowded offshore oil rigs, the São Paulo Coastline Oil Workers Union (Sindipetro-LP) called a “state of strike and permanent assembly,” stopping short of a complete shutdown of rigs. The action was triggered by a planned change in work schedules by the state-run Petrobras energy conglomerate, which is introducing speedups under the guise of reducing infections. São Paulo's coastline oil operations employ 900 workers and have the capacity to extract more than 1.3 million barrels of oil a day.

Increased militancy fueled by the combined impact of COVID-19 deaths and the social crisis has also brought app delivery workers employed by tech giants such as iFood and Uber Eats into action. Last Friday, thousands of delivery workers stopped work and paraded through the streets of São Paulo, being greeted with applause from truck drivers and hospital workers as they rode down the city's main thoroughfares.



Bus divers in São Paulo's ABC region demonstrate against high COVID-19 infections and deaths (Credit: Sintetra)

Metalworkers staged a week-long strike against the closing of the LG plant in the industrial corridor along the banks of the Paraíba river connecting the country's two main cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The LG workers returned to work after the local SINDIMETAL metalworkers union announced it was resuming negotiations with the company. As part of global restructuring plans, LG has announced it will cease production of computer monitors, resulting in the layoff of 700 of the 3,000 workers at the plant. Workers at outsourced component factories in the region, employing 430, have been on strike against the LG shutdown since April 6.

The nationwide strike action by transportation and logistics workers follows a week of demonstrations and partial stoppages at shift changes by bus drivers in some of Brazil's largest cities. Buses were halted on different days in the federal capital Brasília, the third-largest city in the country; Salvador, Bahia, the fourth-largest; Recife-Pernambuco, the ninth-largest and São Luís-Maranhão, the 15th-largest. Buses were also stopped in Vitória, the capital of the state of Espírito Santo. On Monday, an indefinite strike began in Brasília's subway system.

Today, demonstrations are planned in 14 states, and will for the first time include a halting of rail service in São Paulo, the largest mass transit system in the country, as well as in Porto Alegre. Bus drivers, fare collectors and clerks will stage a 24-hour stoppage in every major region of the state of São Paulo, including the Paraíba valley and other industrial centers such as Sorocaba, Jundiaí and Guarulhos, covering over 80 percent of the state's population of 44 million.

The militancy of mass transit workers is a direct response to the herd immunity policy adopted by the Brazilian ruling class and all of its representatives, from the fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, to state governors of the so-called political opposition led by the Workers Party (PT).



LG workers vote to strike against Taubaté plant closure (Twitter)

Excess deaths among bus drivers throughout Brazil in the last year stand at 62 percent, according to a study sponsored by *El País* based on the National Employment Registry (CAGED). This is triple the national average of 22 percent. Both figures are based on deaths registered in 2020, and have not yet incorporated the horrific toll from the latest COVID-19 surge, which has seen daily deaths rise to 3,000, triple the number recorded during the peak of the first wave in mid-2020. Nor do these figures give any insight into how many family members of transit workers fell victim to infections that they brought home from their jobs.

The numbers in São Paulo expose this reality even more starkly. In the Greater Sorocaba region, the fourth-largest largest metropolitan area in the state with over a million inhabitants, a shocking 10 percent of bus drivers have already lost their lives to COVID-19. Despite all the propaganda claims that the state was keeping only “essential business” open, in the city of São Paulo alone, the mass transit system has registered 3 billion trips during the pandemic—over 1.6 billion on buses, and 1.4 billion on the rail system. In the subway, 22 workers have already died and 1,500 of the 8,000 workers have been infected. In the even more crowded commuter transit system, 50 of the 8,000 rail workers have died, as well as 131 bus drivers.

Mass transit workers have also been hit with over 50,000 layoffs during the pandemic, as transportation companies seized on government propaganda about a vast reduction in circulation resulting from pandemic restrictions to restructure operations and reduce the number of buses and trains.

The transport strike in São Paulo comes as the state government announced the reopening of in-person retail service after a so-called “emergency phase” which saw the state’s ICU beds reduce their occupancy to just under 90 percent for the first time in a month. The move came after the São Paulo Shopping Mall association announced stores would fire 60,000 workers in the city if retail was kept closed for another week. That would represent 1 percent of the city’s workers thrown onto the streets overnight. The state is currently recording over 820 deaths a day.

Mass death has been joined with mass immiseration and an unprecedented growth in social inequality. Tens of millions of Brazilians have been thrown into poverty since the pandemic began, and unemployment is at record levels. More than half the population faces food insecurity. Meanwhile, the number of Brazilian billionaires has climbed over the past year from 45 to 65, while their combined wealth rose by a staggering 72 percent to \$219 billion.

The wave of strikes and workers’ protests in Brazil are an expression of the increasing anger and militancy of workers over similar conditions that exist all over the world. After a year that has seen 3 million COVID-19 deaths and immense social deprivation, the conditions are emerging for an eruption of class struggle on a global scale.

In Brazil, as in every country, the ruling class refuses to take measures needed to stop mass death and prevent mass poverty and hunger because they would impinge upon their profit interests. Therefore the battle against COVID-19 cannot be waged successfully outside of a political struggle against the capitalist system.

To wage this battle, Brazilian workers require a new leadership and new organizations of struggle. The existing unions, tied to the Workers Party (PT) and its capitalist program, have refused to fight for measures required to contain the pandemic. Instead, they have promoted the murderous policies of economic reopening and herd immunity, attempting to isolate every struggle, while demanding only that the workers they purport to represent be given priority over other sections of the population for the grossly inadequate supply of vaccines.

Brazilian workers, including bus and train drivers, oil workers, delivery workers and teachers, must form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist

unions, to wage a united fight for a real shutdown of all non-essential services until the spread of the virus is halted and vaccinations are available for all. They must demand full compensation for workers and ruined small businesses to stop the economic blackmail that forces workers to labor under unsafe conditions.

These demands can be realized only by means of a frontal assault on the vast wealth accumulated by the ruling elite, which must be expropriated as part of a socialist program to fund a global response to the pandemic based on the health and social needs of all.

The development of the emerging movement of the working class into a conscious and revolutionary struggle for socialism requires the building of a new revolutionary leadership: the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sympathizing organization in Brazil, the Socialist Equality Group.

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