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Brunna Machado, Tomas Castanheira
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Mass demonstrations in Brazil against Bolsonaro's homicidal response to COVID pandemic

On Saturday, massive demonstrations took place in all 28 Brazilian states against the government of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro and its criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The total number of protesters nationwide may have exceeded 100,000, according to organizers' estimates.

In São Paulo, the country's largest metropolis, the estimated number in the streets was over 80,000 people. In Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul, there were around 30,000. Thousands more also protested in Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Curitiba, Brasilia and in smaller numbers in more than 100 other cities.

In Recife, the demonstration was violently repressed by the Military Police under the command of Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) Governor Paulo Câmara in the state of Pernambuco. The police fired tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at the demonstration. Three people were wounded by the shots, and two of them, hit in the eye, were partially blinded.



People march in a protest against the government's response in combating COVID-19, demanding the impeachment of President Jair Bolsonaro, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Saturday, May 29, 2021. (AP Photo/Bruna Prado)

These were the largest demonstrations in Brazil since 2019, when students and teachers marched nationally against the cuts in the education budget implemented by Bolsonaro in his first year in office. They coincide with the mass uprising in the neighboring country Colombia, where there have been uninterrupted and radicalized protests, also opposing a right-wing government's handling of the pandemic and the social crisis.

While these are the first mass demonstrations against the response of capitalist governments to the global pandemic, they express the growing social anger within the working class all over the world over similar conditions.

In Brazil, the protests were called by social movements linked to the Workers Party (PT) and its pseudo-left satellite Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). Among these movements is the Frente Povo sem Medo (People without Fear Front), led by PSOL leader Guilherme Boulos.

The dimension of the protests, however, expresses the growth of social opposition beyond the narrow political limits imposed by these organizations.

After an official COVID-19 death toll of more than 460,000 Brazilians and with nearly 2,000 people continuing to die daily from the disease, there is immense accumulated anger in broad sections of the population.

The horror caused by the pandemic is added to the explosive growth of the social crisis over the last year. Tens of millions of workers have been thrown into unemployment or have lost their sources of income, expanding the ranks of Brazilians in misery and hunger.

Many of the demonstrators in different Brazilian cities marched with handmade banners and placards, some of which bore names and photographs of parents, grandparents and siblings lost to COVID-19, charging the government with murder. Others demanded vaccines and government aid against hunger, denounced police violence and demanded the ouster of Bolsonaro, accusing him of being “genocidal.”

The protests were also fueled, more immediately, by the investigation of the government’s handling of the pandemic by a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI). The COVID-19 CPI installed in the Senate in early May has exposed the Bolsonaro government’s sabotage of the vaccination campaign, having turned down offers from Pfizer and the Butantan Institute.

Last week, the director of the Butantan Institute, Dimas Covas, said in testimony to the CPI that the Bolsonaro government refused in October 2020 an offer of 100 million doses of the Coronavac vaccine that were to be delivered by May of this year. A study by epidemiologist Pedro Hallal, professor at UFPel (Federal University of Pelotas) and coordinator of the largest epidemiological study on the coronavirus in Brazil, calculated that with these vaccines, the country could have prevented at least 80,300 deaths.

These revelations reinforce the widespread perception within the population that the COVID-19 catastrophe in Brazil is the result of a deliberate policy of social murder that continues to be pursued by the country’s fascistic president, increasingly through dictatorial methods.

The PT and PSOL leaderships which called Saturday’s demonstrations are seeking to channel this growing discontent behind a corrupt policy tied to the bourgeois state.

In an interview with *El País* published on Saturday, the PSOL's Guilherme Boulos clarified how he is seeking to steer the demonstrations behind the political trajectory of the CPI. "The CPI creates a political environment that can lead to the corrosion of [Bolsonaro's] social and parliamentary base. So the demonstrations can play a key role of opening the way for an impeachment," he said.

This statement should be seen in the context of Boulos' efforts to align his politics with those of the most reactionary sections of the political establishment in an unprincipled opposition to Bolsonaro.

In late 2020, Boulos told *Jacobin* that it should be seen favorably that "sectors of the old Brazilian right wing are distancing and disassociating themselves from Bolsonarism." He advocated an "anti-Bolsonaro alliance ... in which all those who share this flag should participate." Following this line, Boulos met in April with the leader of the fascistic Republicanos (to which Bolsonaro's sons are affiliated) asking help to sell his image as a moderate politician to the more right-wing sectors of the bourgeoisie.

Regardless of whether they propose impeachment or waiting for the 2022 elections, in which they are pushing for a return to power of former PT President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the political way out presented by the PSOL and PT involves a dirty deal within the framework of the capitalist state. Their "opposition" to Bolsonaro poses no alternative to the catastrophic situation of the pandemic in Brazil.

A serious investigation of the Bolsonaro administration's implementation of the murderous herd immunity policy—unlike that being carried out by the political forces leading the CPI—would reveal that the local governments of the PT, the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PcdoB), and PSB, as well as of traditional right-wing parties like the PSDB were direct accomplices.

The public health institution Fiocruz warned in a bulletin last week that a third wave of the pandemic is rising as a result of the adoption of "return to normalcy" measures across the country. This exposes the fact that the PT and its allies are unable to promote a scientific response to the pandemic, which involves confronting capitalist interests with a broad-based lockdown and economic compensation for all working families.

These same political forces, through the unions they control, are systematically sabotaging the struggles of the working class against the pandemic and the decline in living conditions. The CUT, led by the PT, and the other union federations collaborated with the reopening of workplaces and isolated the strikes that broke out in opposition to their leadership.

This happened in the strikes at the Petrobras refineries against privatization and the outbreaks of contamination among the oil workers; in the school systems of São Paulo and other states, where teachers went on strike for months against the deadly reopening of the schools; in the strikes of bus drivers and other transportation workers all over the country, which have intensified since the beginning of the year; in the Ford and LG factories, where thousands of workers were ordered to sign sell-out agreements accepting the closure of their plants; and in the many hospitals where, without the support of the unions, health professionals stopped their essential work in the face of deadly conditions.

Despite the individual participation of workers in different cities, the working class as a social force was not mobilized in Saturday's protests against Bolsonaro.

There is an immense contradiction between the interests of the tens of thousands who have taken to the streets in Brazil, as well as the workers who are fighting in their workplaces, and the corrupt leaderships that claim to represent them.

A true response to the pandemic, to the social crisis and the attacks against democracy—which are being promoted by Bolsonaro and the Brazilian ruling class—requires the mobilization of the working class as an independent social force united across national boundaries.

To carry this struggle forward, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is calling for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Most importantly, it calls upon every worker, youth and intellectual reaching revolutionary conclusions from the present catastrophic conditions to contact us and join the struggle to build a socialist and internationalist party in Brazil.

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