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Pandemic provokes wave of bus workers strikes across Brazil

Responding to brutal cuts in jobs and wages and grossly unsafe conditions at workplaces, a wave of strikes by bus drivers and fare collectors has engulfed bus transportation systems across Brazil over the past year.

A report published last week by the National Association of Urban Transport Companies (NTU) made this clear. Between March 2020 and April 2021, workers carried out 238 strike movements, protests and demonstrations that disrupted the circulation of 88 different bus transportation systems in the country. And given that these struggles have continued at a feverish pace over the past months, this number must already be considerably higher.



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Bus workers on strike march in Vitória, Espírito Santo. May, 2020. (credit: CNTTL)

The intense strike movement of bus workers in Brazil is part of an international resurgence of class struggle that has been accelerated by the catastrophic response of capitalist governments to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic had a tremendous impact on transportation systems. In Brazil, although considered a public service, bus transportation is run by private, profit-driven companies that have incurred substantial losses that they have tried, as much as possible, to shift onto the backs of the hundreds of thousands of workers they employ.

The NTU report states that since the pandemic began, some 77,000 jobs have been cut in the industry. Those workers who have managed to keep their jobs have suffered heavy cuts in their salaries, officially implemented through a wage and hours reduction bill approved last year by Jair Bolsonaro's government, and by delays in payments that have become widespread among the companies.

The attacks on bus workers during the pandemic represented only the most recent escalation of a process that has been going on for the last few years. Bus companies have declared for years that their operations are not profitable enough, and in response they have raised fares, laid off workers and sought to eliminate the jobs of fare collectors, intensifying the workload of the drivers.

The immense anger that has built up among the workers against increasingly intolerable conditions imposed by capitalism was exposed by the explosion of strikes in the last 14 months. Besides paralyzing the transportation systems, bus workers expanded their struggles with protests that took over the streets of capital cities all over Brazil.

In Teresina, capital of Piauí, drivers and fare collectors started a strike in May 2020 against the dismissal of 400 co-workers and cuts in their wages and benefits. They marched almost daily in the streets and in front of the City Palace, raising hand-made signs that read: "I don't have enough to eat today, imagine tomorrow" and "Bus drivers' lives matter."

Although the strike was ended by the union after 50 days, the problems faced by the workers have not been solved. Last Monday, bus drivers from three bus companies in

Teresina held their seventh strike since the beginning of 2021, demanding their unpaid wages.

In Vitória, capital of Espírito Santo, a series of militant strikes broke out in different bus companies in the city throughout 2020. The bus workers held several demonstrations and used buses to block traffic on the city's main avenues. Although their demands were essentially the same, the unification of the workers' struggle was undermined by the unions negotiating the termination of the strikes with each company.

In one of the longest and most militant strikes in Vitória, at the Tabuazeiro bus company, the workers continued their movement in defiance of decrees by both the courts and the union. "We are now at the company's door convincing workers to accept the injunction [preventing the strike], but they are not complying with the union's request," declared the president of the bus drivers union.

The strikes have increasingly taken on a political character. On election day of the second round of Brazil's municipal elections, some 2,500 bus drivers went on strike in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's second largest metropolis, demanding their unpaid wages. The workers' protest was interconnected with the widespread repudiation of the capitalist political system at the ballots across Brazil, which reached record levels in the last elections. In Rio de Janeiro, nearly 50 percent of electors refused to choose between the two hated candidates.

This process of political radicalization of the working class expressed itself with special clarity in an episode that occurred in Maceió, capital of Alagoas. In September of last year, a group of bus workers fired from the Veleiro company blocked one of the city's main avenues, demanding the payment of their outstanding salaries seven months after they were dismissed.

A worker interviewed during the demonstration by a local TV station stated: "This is going to happen to all the workers, to the workers as a class. This is absurd, we are fathers of families. This is happening to the system as whole, it's the system that is allowing all this. It's not Veleiro; if it were only the company, it would already have been solved. The system is unable to solve it."

The protest was met with brutal repression by the government of Renan Filho of the MDB party. The military police Special Operations Battalion was mobilized to conduct a war scenario on the streets of Maceió, attacking the workers with rubber bullets and gas grenades while chanting battle songs.

An official statement from the Veleiro company, in repudiation of the workers' protest, demonstrated the terror with which the ruling class perceives the revolutionary implications of these growing struggles. The company stated, "If all problems have to be solved in this way, society will live in anarchy."

Besides the economic demands, the struggles of bus drivers and fare collectors were driven by the highly unsafe conditions in transportation that led to explosive rates of infections among its workers.

Bus drivers accounted for the highest number of workers whose labor contracts were terminated by death over last year. In São Paulo, the largest city in the country, the COVID-19 death rate among bus drivers and conductors is three times higher than the rest of the population. Up until April, according to the union, 131 bus drivers had died from the disease just within the city.

The outbreak of the second wave of COVID-19 in Brazil since the beginning of this year has fueled mass anger among workers against deadly conditions in their workplaces. In the first five months of this year, infections and deaths skyrocketed, jumping from 195,000 deaths on January 1 to more than 470,000 today.

On April 16, bus drivers in Salvador, the capital of Bahia, shut down bus garages and blocked avenues with their cars after the news of the death of two co-workers from COVID-19. In the same period, bus drivers in Vitória went on a one-day strike to protest the unsafe resumption of public transportation, which had been shut down for two weeks to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Other similar protests have taken place in different regions of the country.

At the same time that bus workers were striking, other sections of the Brazilian working class were giving combative responses to the danger of infections in their workplaces. Strikes and protests against deadly conditions have also erupted in the rail and subway

transportation systems, among teachers against the unsafe reopening of schools and by oil workers over outbreaks of infections in their plants and offshore platforms.

This clearly demonstrates that the wave of strikes among bus workers in the last period represented a powerful movement of the working class in defense of broad social interests. How is it possible then that these struggles have remained deeply isolated from each other until today?

Just as in every country, the radicalization of Brazilian workers is exposing the absolute contradiction between their interests and those of the corporatist trade unions that claim to officially represent them.

The National Confederation of Land Transport Workers, which includes more than 300 unions, made this abundantly clear in an open letter it sent to the government at the end of February. The union demanded that the state fund the bus companies – the same demand made by the association of the companies – with the stated aim of “mitigating the growing general strike movement” among its ranks.

In the months following the publication of that letter, which were marked by a growing rank-and-file revolt against the increasingly catastrophic situation of the pandemic, the unions employed a series of criminal maneuvers with the aim of sabotaging the workers’ movement towards a general strike.

Seeking to deflect the growing call among workers for the implementation of scientific measures to combat the deadly virus, the trade union federations called for a March 24 action dubbed as the “working class lockdown.” The event was a complete fraud. Not even the innocuous one-day strike announced by the unions was organized in the workplaces. The bureaucrats limited themselves to holding token demonstrations demanding the speeding up of vaccinations.

With the same strategy, the public transportation unions in the state of São Paulo called for a general strike on April 20, also dubbed as the “transportation lockdown.” The call coincided with the highest peak of COVID-19 deaths in Brazil, which exceeded the average of 3,000 deaths per day. In the state of São Paulo alone, 1,389 deaths were registered in a single day in April.

A transportation strike under these conditions would have a colossal impact on the circulation of people and the transmission rate of the virus, and would point towards an independent working-class response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The movement was, however, called off on the day before by the unions after they had a theatrical negotiation with the state government, which agreed to include transportation workers as a priority in the vaccination schedule.

This grotesque betrayal has been widely used as model by local unions across the country, which continue to hold a series of theatrical one-day strikes to alleviate the pressure from rank-and-file workers, which invariably end in their inclusion in the local vaccination schedule.

The wide popular anger against the criminal handling of the pandemic and the social crisis by the fascistic Bolsonaro administration has emerged in massive demonstrations across the country last Saturday.

By isolating and betraying these movements, the corporatist trade unions are playing a key role in implementing the homicidal herd immunity policy of Bolsonaro and the ruling class. The corrupt leaderships behind these unions, connected to the Workers Party and their allies in the pseudo-left, are trying to deflect the growing movement against Bolsonaro into a dirty deal within the bourgeois state.

The fight against the catastrophic development of pandemic and the growing social crisis in Brazil can only go forward if the working class is mobilized as an independent social force.

This makes imperative a definitive break with the unions and parties that represent capitalism and the establishment of rank-and-file committees that directly represent the interests of the working and advance socialist politics.

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