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Brazil

Brazil after the April 28 general strike

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On April 28, Brazil witnessed one of the most impressive general strikes ever. What, if anything, changed after the strike? How will the resistance to the Temer government go on?

The general strike of April 28, 2017 in Brazil took place 11 years after the last one and 100 years after the first. Throughout this period, trade unionism has actively taken part in the history of the country. After the two decades of a dictatorship (1964-1985) during which it was persecuted, the trade union movement played a prominent role in the re-democratization process and in successfully managing to include social improvements in the Constitution of 1988. Between 1983 and 1996, the Brazilian unions carried out six general strikes. Right from the start, two different approaches crystallized: one represented by the Unified Workers' Central (CUT), created in 1983, heir to the so-called "new unionism" and allied with the Workers' Party (PT); the other represented by the National Conference of the Working Class (CONCLAT), created that same year with the support of sectors linked to official federations and confederations, and renamed in 1986 as General Confederation of Workers (CGT). A few years later, in 1991, a dissident sector of the CGT created Union Force (FS), which defends a pragmatic vision related to neoliberal thought.

In the 1990s, the governments of Fernando Collor de Mello and Fernando Henrique Cardoso promoted a neoliberal agenda through macroeconomic policies dissociated from job creation: privatizations, divestment in public services, laxer labor laws, anti-union standpoints, and so on. Faced with the ensuing scenario of increasing unemployment, labour market informality and cuts in wages and benefits, unions were forced to the defensive. To a large extent, they managed to stay at the forefront of the workers' demands, but they failed to show the political leadership which had characterized them in the past.

Under the presidencies of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, the country resumed a path of economic growth and improvements in the distribution of income. Better formal conditions in the workplace, and a more favourable political climate, benefitted union performance in collective bargaining and in different political action scenarios. But this did not result in recovery of the political role unions had enjoyed in the 1980s. The prevailing position within the CUT was to support delegating the initiative on the social and labour agenda to the government, and this led to internal dissidence. It was then that the Trade Union and Popular Centre Conlutas (CSP-Conlutas) emerged, influenced by two parties to the left of the PT: the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) and the Socialist Party of Unified Workers (PSTU); the Workers' Central of Brazil (CTB), linked to the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB); and the Inter-union.

Rousseff's second term began in 2015, in the context of an incipient economic crisis and the advance of the conservative forces, helped by the mainstream media and backed by successful right-wing coordinated action in both Chambers, as well as by the judiciary's shift to the right and the mobilization of middle class sectors under the banner of the "fight against corruption". The siege on the center-left government kept on closing, and this led to the dismissal of the President through non-constitutional means. The parliamentary, judicial and media coup was carried out between April and August 2016. With Rousseff out of the way, Vice-President Michel Temer stepped in and took office as head of a coalition led by his party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), and Cardoso's party, the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), which had been defeated by the PT in the previous four elections. Since then, as the economic crisis deepens and unemployment reaches 13.7% (after having reached its minimum, 4.8%, in 2014), a regressive social and political agenda is being implemented by the current government. Despite its very low approval ratings and the allegations of corruption involving its main cadres "including the President himself", it can still count on ample support in Congress and in the media, which allows it to carry on with its political and social program.

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The government has three main priorities. First, fiscal adjustment, aimed primarily at reducing public spending (a constitutional amendment putting caps on the budget for the next 20 years has been passed, with the sole exception of budget allocations for debt interest payments). Second, the reduction of social and labour rights (a law has already been passed that broadly extends outsourcing, even within the public administration, and several bills on labour market and pension reform are currently under consideration in Congress). Third, intensifying privatizations and the transfer of public enterprises to the private sector (the emblem here is Petrobras's assets and mineral extraction areas).

What is being targeted is not only the social policies of the Lula and Dilma governments, but also the rights recognized by the 1988 Constitution and even the guarantees included in the Consolidation of Labour Laws (CLT) of the 1940s. To date, protests against this drift have been violently repressed and criminalized with the support of the mainstream media. The new scenario thus places an enormous responsibility on the shoulders of trade unions and popular movements to reverse this regressive agenda.

This was the context in which the trade unions - CUT, CTB, Inter-unions, CSP-Conlutas, UGT, Union Force, New Central, CSB and CGTB - and the popular movements - the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), the Movement of Homeless Workers (MTST) and the Popular Movements Central (CMP), among others -, organized and structured in blocks such as the Fearless People Front or the Brazil Popular Front -, called a general strike on April 28. It was an atypical moment of unity of the different unions and popular forces. It is to be noted, for example, that Union Force, despite its involvement in Lula's government, nevertheless supported Rousseff's impeachment.

The general strike took place at a decisive moment. The previous Wednesday, congressmen had approved the draft labour reform bill submitted by the government, which must now go through the Senate proceedings. The reform of the pension system is also currently being considered and is up for congressional approval soon. Backed by intense social media activity, the protest had the initial support of some key unions such as the banking, metallurgical, oil and petrochemical sectors' workers, public and private school teachers, public transport and motorcycle workers, and the mail, civil construction, trade, healthcare and urban services unions. The government kept to its roadmap and ignored the movement that was consolidating. The mainstream media were careful to avoid any information spreading the call for strike, which was basically carried out through social media. The support of Catholic priests and bishops throughout the country was interpreted as a very positive development for the strike - a change of attitude reinforced by Pope Francis's refusal to accept Temer's invitation to the festivities for the 300 anniversary of Our Lady Aparecida, patroness of Brazil. In addition to refusing to attend, the Pope added some critical comments on government measures which aggravate the situation of the poorest sectors of the population.

The strike on April 28 saw a stoppage of activities throughout the country, followed by marches, rallies, road blocks and demonstrations. Provincial governments allied with Temer gave a green light to repression, and Rio de Janeiro's was a case in point: police prevented demonstrators from rallying in the Cinelandia quarter of the town using tear gas and beating up demonstrators. In Goiás, a young student who was battered by a policeman is currently in a coma. In São Paulo, three MTST leaders were arrested and are now in prison, charged with criminal arson and incitement to violence. In their statements, government officials disqualified and criminalized the protest: for the Minister of Agriculture, the strike was 'inconsequential'; for Temer, it was only 'small groups blocking streets and terminals', driven by their rejection of the 'modernization of national laws'. As for the media, they tried at first to ignore what was happening, but eventually found it impossible to cover up the facts and took the option of reporting confrontation and material destruction in the streets.

The organizers say that some 35 million workers supported the strike, which makes it one of the biggest general strikes in the country's history. Their action continued with the demonstrations on May 1st, putting pressure on deputies and senators who are to vote for or against the labour and pension reform bills, and with the preparation of a great unified march in Brasilia - on a date yet to be defined. For the forces opposing the conservative onslaught,

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April 28 is already beginning to be considered a historic day in which the course of the country turned in favour of the resistance.

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