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Brazil

Strike wave sweeps Brazil: no sector unaffected; a new union movement on the march

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Workers in Brazil—in heavy industry, services, the public sector, and agriculture—are involved in a series of strikes and mass protests such as the country hasn't seen in decades. . Driving the new labor upsurge is the strength of the country's economy, the powerful position of unions in the society, and the rising inflation. In 2007 and 2008, Brazil's economy grew at a rate of 5%, and though in the depths of the crisis in 2009 it shrunk by .02%, last year the economy grew again at a rate of 10%. As Brazilian-born Eduardo Siqueira, a public health professional and activist in the Brazilian immigrant community says, "Workers in Brazil are not afraid of losing jobs, so they're not afraid of striking."

And strike they have. Since the beginning of September there have been strikes by bank workers, postal workers, and metal workers, including the auto parts workers at GM plants. Several of these strikes are on-going. With the inflation rate at about 5.0%, many workers are fighting to catch up with rising prices. Workers are demanding big wage increases: metal workers want 9.5% more, bank workers 12.8 percent. Postal workers are striking against a reform passed by the Brazilian Congress that gives the Brazilian Post and Telegraph Company (ECT) greater power, including the power to form partnerships with the private sector.

In addition to the strikes in industry, services and the public sector, there is also a very vigorous agricultural workers movement. The month of September opened with the "Marchas das Margaridas," that is, the "March of the Daisies." 70,000 women rural workers, wearing their uniform of straw hats and purple clothing, marched through the nation's capital Brasilia. Maria Luiza dos Santos, a rural worker from Afonso Cunha in the state of Maranhão, explained that the women wanted, "women's rights, wage equality, and land distribution" to the landless.

Brazil's Powerful Unions

An American executive who works in the Brazilian petroleum industry posted an article in the Oil & Gas Financial Journal this month, warning his colleagues about the "inflexible" Brazilian labor laws and the "powerful" unions. "To say Brazilian unions are powerful is a gross understatement," he wrote. "In Brazil, workers automatically 'join' a union, defined by the region the worker works in, and his field of work. A worker, by law, must pay dues that to union (one day's salary per year). In Brazil there are around 18,000 labor unions, all deeply rooted in their respective sectors, with guaranteed dues to fund their operations and enormous political influence."

The U.S. oil man's shock at the strength of Brazilian labor tends to oversimplify the great complexity of the labor movement. Brazil has several labor federations, each with political positions a little different from the others, some left, some center-left, some center or moderate. These federations both compete and cooperate with each other, and lately, says Siqueira, they're cooperating more than in the recent past. Local unions and workers are cooperating too, engaging in sympathy strikes, one group of workers supporting another, even though they may not be in the same union or the same federation. The strikes and the general effervescence in the labor movement has given rise to a new more militant middle layer of union officials, says Siqueira. Just back from visiting his homeland, Siqueira says he hasn't seen anything like this new wave of union militancy since the 1980's.

Union Movement Born In Struggle

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Brazil's contemporary union movement was born in the struggles against military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1965 to 1985. Led by the metal workers in the "ABC" industrial suburbs of São Paulo, workers first created industrial unions, then a new labor federation (the CUT), together with a Movement of the Landless (MST), and then the Workers Party (PT) which brought Luiz Inácio da Silva to the presidency in 2002 and reelected him in 2006. Lula, as he is popularly known, continued the neoliberal policies of his predecessors but with a difference, promoting poverty programs that benefited Brazil's poorest people.

Lula's first term in government was a mixed blessing for workers. PT leaders and activists filled important political positions in the government. The CUT had greater influence than labor had had at any time before in the nation's history, but it was only influence, not power, and the federation's tendency to rely on Lula to make change, rather than organizing the unions and workers to fight for it, weakened the labor movement. The Movement of the Landless (MST) continued to fight on, virtually the sole radical social movement in the country.

Despite those unfortunate developments, with the global commodities boom, the economy growing, and an estimated 14 million new jobs created, during Lula's second term the labor movement made a comeback. Strikes grew, the unions created coalitions with other social movements, new leaders came forward, and unions adopted political platforms to pressure the government.

The election of Lula's handpicked successor Dilma Rousseff to the presidency has created some anxiety in the labor and social movements and in society generally. Coming to power on the basis of a broad and ungainly political coalition, she is not promising to move the country toward socialism, nor even to dismantle the neoliberal economic system. There has been speculation about whether she will continue Lula's brand of neoliberalism plus social programs for the poor, but the unions aren't waiting for her to act. From one end of Brazil to the other, in a wide variety of industries, workers are on the move.

So far the new militancy has not been accompanied by a new radicalism. By and large the unions are not opposed to the government. The unions are pushing President Rousseff, the PT, and the government to fulfill their promises to the labor movement and the poor. What will happen when the government proves unwilling or unable to do so in the face of the next stage of the unfolding world economic crisis remains to be seen.

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