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Brazil

A truckers' strike puts Brazil on edge

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Hundreds of thousands of independent truckers are continuing the second week of a nationwide strike, and oil workers have walked off the job for a 72-hour strike as political tensions escalate in Brazil. [1]

Since President Dilma Rousseff, of the center-left Workers Party (PT), was impeached in an August 2016 parliamentary coup led by current right-wing President Michel Temer, Brazil's gross domestic product has grown by barely 1 percent per year, stoking frustrations among ordinary people and intense political polarization.

The traditional right-wing parties hold the majority in Brazil's national government. In April, they struck a blow against their rivals in the PT by imprisoning Rousseff's predecessor, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, which bars him from standing in this fall's presidential elections. At the same time, Jair Bolsonaro, a neo-fascist candidate with ties to the old military dictatorship that ruled from 1964 to 1985 is not only leading in some opinion polls, but also has gained significant social support from business sectors and the middle classes, and even some sections of the popular classes.

On the left, despite the PT's bureaucratization, Brazil's working class has not been defeated, and social movements of students, homeless, landless and LGBTQ people retain significant mobilizing power. [2] In the spring of 2017, a general strike involved millions of workers "and last March, hundreds of thousands took to the streets after the assassination of socialist city councilor Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro.

Today, many of the country's most dynamic leftist forces are concentrated in the Party for Socialism and Freedom (PSOL), coalescing behind the co-presidential campaign of Movement for Homeless Workers (MTST) organizer Guilherme Boulos and Sonia Guajajara, leader of the Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB). [3] However, most social movements and trade unions continue to look to the Workers Party. At the urging of the PT, these have yet to throw their weight decisively into the fight against Temer and the right.

The article below from late May was published at EsquerdaOnline, the publication of Resistência, a political current within PSOL. [4] It was translated from Portuguese for *Socialist Worker* by Todd Chretien.

The truckers' strike is shaking Brazil. After seven days of strikes and blockades, shortages of food and fuel are affecting the entire country. The prices of basic necessities are rising in stores due to the scarcity of goods, and some factories are either partially or completely shut down. In short, Brazil has come to a halt.

His position weakened, a cowed President Michel Temer made new concessions on [May 27] to end the strike, thus addressing part of the truckers' demands, such as reducing the price of diesel "by 46 cents for 60 days" establishing a minimum price for freight, and exempting trucks with suspension axles from tolls, among other points.

Yet as of this Monday, May 28, it is not yet certain that the stoppage will end. While part of the movement is calling for a return to work, many truckers say they will continue to strike until the government falls. By the end of today, it should become clearer whether the strike will continue or not.

After calling for repression against the truckers by the armed forces and the police, Temer offered a new concession (reducing diesel prices), but did so in a way that harms the working population as a whole by cutting both PIS

(Program for Social Integration) and COFINS (Contribution for the Financing of Social Security), important business taxes that finance Social Security.

There must be a different way to meet the truckers' demands. Fuel and cooking gas prices (which are consumed by the majority of the working classes) must be reduced "not just diesel" by modifying the Brazilian national oil company Petrobras' pricing policy, instead of cutting social spending. As of now, prices are set exclusively with the interests of private shareholders and foreign oil companies in mind.

A Progressive Strike, but One with Contradictions

The stoppage, which has broad popular support, is being carried out by independent truck drivers "that is, those who hold a registered license for their vehicle" as well as by employers in the transport sector. It is, therefore, a multi-class movement, involving workers and bosses.

However, it is obviously being driven by the independent truckers. Some employers have locked out their workers, but this is not the dominant element. The strike led by radicalized truck drivers is the determining factor in the movement. All in all, the truckers' main demand "reduction of fuel prices" is just, and it is serving as a fuse for an explosion of pent-up social discontent.

The strike has exposed Petrobras' failed pricing policy, which today fluctuates according to the variations of the international market. Successive increases in fuel prices only penalize the majority population and weaken national sovereignty. Only bankers, foreign oil companies and international investors profit from it. The current policy merely facilitates the privatization of Petrobras, putting it at the mercy of the financial markets. Worse, it neither meets the needs of the working people, nor serves to further national economic development.

The truckers' movement is progressive because its principle demand objectively confronts the Petrobras directors' privatizing policy and because it is stimulating struggles among other workers.

Of course, there are significant contradictions within this movement: the extreme right and the employers are trying to put their own spin on the strike. Federal Chamber of Deputies representative and extreme-right presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro, for example, has offered his support to the truckers and backs the stoppage, as does the middle-class Free Brazil Movement and other extreme-right organizations.

These sectors are taking advantage of the crisis to raise the flag for military intervention, a call that has gained more force in recent days, despite the fact that the armed forces and the high command are already engaged in repressing the strike. There exists a real danger that the movement may be taken over and capitalized upon politically by reactionary forces.

In order to avoid this, it is necessary to understand the course of events in which the strike is unfolding. On the one hand, sectors of the left that have treated the strike, from the beginning, as reactionary are making a mistake because, by doing so, they open the way for the extreme right to consolidate and increase its influence. On the other hand, organizations that downplay employers' participation and the weight of reactionary political forces are wrong to see only the positive aspect of the process.

Get the Working Class into the Fight and Block the Extreme Right's Advance

We believe it is imperative to support the truckers' strike, while promoting an independent political program for the movement and confronting right wing and far-right sectors that are intervening in the process.

Simultaneously, it is necessary to take advantage of this moment to address specific categories of workers' needs, like oil tank technicians, electricians, subway and factory workers, civil servants, teachers, etc. If the working class takes the field organizationally, it will be possible to bring down the government and win important gains.

Oil workers, who are a strategically critical sector with deep traditions of struggle, are launching a three-day national strike starting this Wednesday, May 30. Since Tuesday, May 28, stoppages and actions already began across various Petrobras refineries and terminals. This sector represents a crucial focus for mobilizations in the current conjuncture and, therefore, must be supported by the whole working class.

In this moment of acute social and political crisis, the left must, without hesitation, fight for influence. While the Temer government is agonizing over its next steps, the bourgeoisie is at loggerheads, and the traditional right is besieged from all sides, the far right is acting resolutely to seize the moment and claim political space for itself.

Unfortunately, most of the left and the union federations, until now, find themselves paralyzed. The PT and CUT [Unified Workers Center, the main trade union federation], for example, only made formal or electoral declarations. Absurdly, instead of broadening the struggle, the unions are proposing themselves as mediators of the conflict, wrapping the strike in a wet blanket.

This approach only facilitates Jair Bolsonaro's advance and talk of military intervention. It is important to note that Bolsonaro, a fascist presidential candidate has real strength, but not the majority, among workers and the people. Thus, the left and the unions do have the social and political weight to contend for leadership in the process.

In this sense, the trade union federations, social movements and leftist parties should meet together immediately to set a national day of struggle. We need a day of strikes and mobilizations that raises the banner of the immediate reduction of fuel and cooking gas prices (without reducing the Social Security business taxes), one which defends Petrobras (demanding an end to the state oil company's current price policy and the dismissal of Petrobras President Pedro Parente) and Eletrobrás against privatization, one which demands employment, decent wages, the repeal of Temer's neoliberal Labor Reforms and an end to the freeze on social spending.

It is also important to advocate for a tax reform that doesn't fall on workers and the poor; instead, taxes must be raised on the rich. We must also defend threatened democratic freedoms, including demanding Lula's freedom, and justice for Party for Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) City Councilor Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes, who were assassinated in March.

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[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/30/brazil-truckers-strike-protest-military-dictatorship>

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[2] <http://socialistworker.org/2018/05/11/the-shape-of-resistance-in-brazil>

[3] <http://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/05/sonia-guajajara-boulos-indigenous-brazil-elections>

[4] <https://esquerdaonline.com.br/2018/05/28/o-brasil-parou-e-hora-de-ampliar-a-luta>