

Brazil on the Brink of Environmental Collapse

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A MV Stellar Banner ship with almost 300 thousand tons of iron ore is stuck on the Brazilian coast, just over 10 kilometers from the coast. There is a great risk of sinking, as its hull is on the verge of breaking. In addition to ore, there is an immense fuel load, with 3,500 tons of residual oil and 140 tons of distilled oil. It can be one of the greatest environmental disasters in Brazilian history.

The case would be tragic in isolation; however, environmental disasters in Brazil have been practically unceasing in recent years. The ship, interestingly, serves the Vale Company, the same company that was responsible for the disasters in Mariana (2015) and Brumadinho (2018), both in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais and which resulted in the death of almost 300 people. In both cases, tailings dams broke in the areas explored by mining, destroying two historic cities of Brazil, which have not yet been restored. The victims' families remain homeless and without compensation – Vale has never been legally held responsible for the tragedies.

To fully understand these cases and the whole controversy surrounding the company Vale, we have to analyze a little of Brazilian political history. “Vale” was the name adopted by the company after its privatization. Before, it was called “Vale do Rio Doce” and was a state-owned mining company, founded in the 1940s by former president Getúlio Vargas, who saw it as an important stage in Brazilian national development. The decades had passed and the political rivalry between the nationalist defenders of Getúlio Vargas and the liberals has been intensified. The getulists wanted to preserve the public companies created by the ex-president to develop the country; liberals wanted to privatize them and subordinate the country economically to international economic elites. In 2007, the privatization of the Vale do Rio Doce was finally concluded, and the company came to be called “Vale”, being now a publicly traded company, operating worldwide and with shares traded on the world's main Stock Exchanges.

It is precisely from the moment of its privatization, that Vale begins to drop the quality of its services, ceasing to be a central point of the Brazilian economy to become a truly murderous and mercenary company. In 2012, Vale was elected by the “Public Eye People's” as the worst company in the world in regard to human rights and the environment.

Three years later, there was the incident in Mariana, considered until today the biggest environmental disaster in the Brazilian history, which, in addition to deaths and general destruction, caused the extinction of a large and important river in the region. Three more years passed and the company repeated its actions in the city of Brumadinho, killing an even greater number of people. In 2019, in another episode involving the company, approximately 500 people had to be forcibly removed from their homes due to a warning about possible breakdown of new dams. The collective evacuation in the city of Barão dos

Cocais, also in the state of Minas Gerais, caused a huge disturbance to the population that remains homeless and prevented from returning to their residence, while more than a year has passed and nothing has been done to remedy the problem, with the homeless population and the environment waiting for yet another disaster.

Now, we have a new chapter happening involving the company and its environmental and social neglect. The ship belongs to the South Korean company “Polaris Shipping”, which was contracted by Vale to transport iron ore from Brazil to China. The ship is stranded and almost sinking in the coast of the state of Maranhão, in northeastern Brazil. Images captured by the Brazilian Navy detected a series of oil stains in the regions around the stranding. According to Brazilian authorities, there is no defined containment plan yet.

Why is Vale still involved with impunity in so many scandals and environmental disasters? How does a company “internationally awarded” with the “Oscar of environmental shame” continue to operate freely in Brazil, being involved in at least three tragedies in five years? Why has Vale never been punished? What prevents Brazilian authorities from restricting the activities of a company that has already killed hundreds of Brazilians?

The answer lies in other data: Vale is one of the main controllers of the Brazilian National Congress. Its political influence is immense, with several parliamentarians at its disposal. After the incidents of Mariana and Brumadinho, a survey organized by the Brazilian newspaper “Estadão” revealed that the company had already donated around US \$ 19 million to Brazilian deputies, senators, governors and candidates for the Presidency of the Republic. Such donations were a key point in a major institutional corruption scheme in which politicians were bribed for failing to pass strict environmental laws, which to some extent “hurt” Vale.

Now, we see the results of the environmental neglect of neoliberalism: yet another environmental tragedy is approaching in Brazil. There will be more victims and the social and environmental impact will be even greater than that of previous crises. And this will not be the last tragedy, as Vale will probably go unpunished again.

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