

Brazilian Workers Clash with Police on Eve of World Cup

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With just days to go to the June 12 opening of the World Cup football (soccer) tournament in Brazil, the country has been shaken by a series of strikes and protests, including a six-day walkout by transit workers that has paralyzed the country's largest city, São Paulo, with a population of nearly 12 million people.

The authorities have confronted the transit strikers with naked repression and violence. Military police shock troops have been deployed against workers' picket lines and demonstrations, employing tear gas, rubber bullets and sound grenades against strikers and their supporters, dozens of whom have been arrested.

A São Paulo labor court, in an unprecedented Sunday session, ruled the strike "abusive" and illegal. A mass assembly of transit workers voted the same day to continue the walkout in defiance of the court ruling and of the threat from the state government that all strikers who failed to return to work on Monday would be fired.



São Paulo Metro strikers [Photo: Oliver Kornblihtt / Midia NINJA]

A meeting between union officials and representatives of the São Paulo state government Monday afternoon broke up without any agreement being reached. Brazilian media reported that the union had been willing to accept a wage settlement below the 12.2 percent hike it had demanded, but insisted that the firing of some 60 strikers for actions on the picket lines be withdrawn.

São Paulo Governor Geraldo Alckmin, who was the 2006 presidential candidate backed by the Brazilian right, took a hardline position that there was “nothing to discuss,” i.e., that there would be no wage offer other than 8.7 percent originally offered, and none of those who had been fired would be given their jobs back.

Transit officials claimed Monday afternoon that 29 percent of the workforce was on the job Monday and that 50 out of 65 train stations were open, but with limited service.

The union held an assembly late Monday in which workers voted to suspend the strike until Wednesday, when they are to meet again to decide whether to resume the walkout—on the day of the World Cup’s first game—if their demand for the rehiring of the fired strikers is not met.

The transit strike follows similar actions by teachers in both São Paulo and Río de Janeiro, bus workers and other sections of the working class. These strikes have been accompanied by mass demonstrations across the country rejecting the vast expenditures on the World Cup amid mass poverty and inadequate government spending on education, health care, housing and other basic necessities.

Organized by the International Football Federation (FIFA), the tournament, which takes place every four years, brings in the national teams of many countries. The football tournament is expected to generate US\$4 billion and over US\$2 billion in profits for FIFA and the Cup’s corporate promoters. This record sum is roughly twice the revenue generated at the South Africa games in 2010.

Authorities claimed to have “learned the lessons” of the protests that rocked Brazil a year ago, when demonstrators fought pitched battles with security forces outside stadiums hosting the so-called Confederation Cup, which serves as a rehearsal for the larger World Cup tournament.

The government is spending close to \$1 billion on organizing a huge repressive force, including an army of 57,000 troops and 100,000 police and security agents to protect the games primarily from social protests and strikes—though inevitably terrorism has been raised as a pretext.

The buildup to the tournament was a major factor in the mass demonstrations that brought millions into the streets of Río de Janeiro, São Paulo and other cities a year ago. While those protests were triggered by threatened transit fare hikes, the demonstrators pointed to the public expenditure of 18 billion *reais* (US\$8 billion) that the government had budgeted for building and upgrading stadiums and airports, while education, health care and other human needs were neglected.

In the wake of last year’s mass protests, the Workers Party (PT) government promised to comply with the demands for improved education, health care and housing. However, since then, President Dilma Rousseff has failed to make good on these promises and instead has

repeatedly made use of federal security and military forces to repress strikes and protests.

The military police have been employed as an occupation force in the favelas (shantytowns), including the Maré complex of 15 favelas in Río de Janeiro, which straddles the route between Río's international airport and the wealthy tourist districts.

As early as 2009, the government had begun building walls around Río de Janeiro hillside slums (favelas) in preparation for their militarization in anticipation of the World Cup. Having failed to resolve the social issues, the government has made use of the police. Government security forces have killed over 5,600 Brazilians since 2007, many of them in the occupied favelas.

This is the second time that the FIFA cup is being held in Brazil. The first was in 1950 and marked the resumption of the games following their suspension during World War II.

Brazil at the time was a nation in the process of rapid industrialization. War-imposed shortages had stimulated domestic production, spurred by government import-substitution policies. Millions were abandoning the countryside and settling in the coastal cities and the industrial south. Plans would soon take shape for creating a new capital, Brasilia, in the center of the country, in large measure to isolate the government from mass strikes and social struggles. Even though more than half of the nation's inhabitants were in poverty, living standards and life expectancy were on the rise, infant deaths had declined, and more Brazilians had access to medical services.

Despite this accelerated growth, successive governments were unable to resolve long-standing social and regional conflicts and free the country from the stranglehold of US imperialism. The latter played a crucial role in imposing, in 1964, a brutal military-fascist dictatorship that lasted until 1985.

Sixty-four years have passed since the 1950 World Cup. In contrast to that earlier event, this time the country is in the midst of economic decline. For many Brazilians, their country is moving in reverse. A poll released last week showed that 72 percent of the population are dissatisfied with the way things are going, compared to 55 percent a year ago.

In 2003, when FIFA announced that Brazil would host the championship, a PT government, under former union leader Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, had come to office and had raised expectations that Brazil, along with the group of so-called emerging economies known as the BRICs (including Russia, India and China), would find a path to increasing economic growth and greater social equality.

The PT model of "Lulalism" or "Brasilia consensus," consisted of free market policies, privatizations and de-regulations combined with populist demagoguery and minimal assistance programs for the most impoverished layers of the population. It was promoted as a free market alternative to both the "Bolivarian Revolution" of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and to the "Washington consensus" of savage cuts in social programs. The government was to deregulate businesses and privatize state industries, and create a Central Bank independent of the government but under the control of global financial institutions, while still devoting some resources to social programs.

In the end, neither Brazil, the BRICS, nor the rest of the emerging economies proved stronger than the world capitalist crisis and the deterioration of global commerce and the

collapse of world commodity prices, due in Brazil's case to a drop in orders from China.

The world price of iron ore, for example, up until recently Brazil's main export product, has fallen by more than 20 percent this year alone. The Reuters news agency recently interviewed officials of Brazilian iron producer Vale, who indicated that less efficient and exhausted mines are being shut down in an attempt to support ore prices. Since 2010, Brazil has faced rising inflation, unemployment and capital flight.

The PT was created as a political instrument for diverting the explosive eruption of mass workers' struggles at the end of the military dictatorship into safer reformist and parliamentary channels. Various pseudo-left tendencies participated in its construction and hailed it as a model for organizing workers internationally.

Since then, it has been exposed as a corrupt bourgeois party and, after over a decade in power, the favored instrument of rule of the Brazilian financial and corporate elite. The pretense that this party has anything to do with social reform has become more threadbare with each passing day. As it hosts the 2014 World Cup, the Rousseff administration reveals itself as a government that lives in fear of the Brazilian working class and poor and which is prepared to resort to police state repression to guarantee the interests of big business.

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