

The General Strike in Brazil. History and Analysis

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April 28th will be a date to remember. Even though some of the great media claim that there were only demonstrations around the country, it is to assume that, by a consensus or not, what happened here was a strike. A general strike, the first in 20 years, one of the biggest in the History of the country, highly cited in the social media (figuring the trending topics in the whole world for hours), spread over the 26 states and the Federal District. Barely any buses or trains in the city of São Paulo. Diverse unions like the teachers' and the bankers' and the two main popular fronts were not only present, but also organised the event.

The reason for that? Not Mr. Temer's government, specifically; not this time. But the new measures and reforms he has emphatically worked on since the end of last year, that happen to surprise and worry – to say the least – the average Brazilian worker.

The outraged atmosphere, however, comes way before today and takes a brief economic explanation to understand.

Old but not gold

The last general strike happened in 1996, during Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government, another neoliberalist. One of the points in common is the fight against turning the workers' rights more flexible. At the time, Mr. Cardoso even claimed that 'strikes don't create jobs', as the protesters also manifested against the high unemployment rates.

It is natural that a moment of economic instability creates some sort of friction amongst the workers and the government. The late conjunction of that with a huge political crisis under the stigma of corruption is perfectly combined with strict measures from Mr. Temer and creates a dangerous mixture.

One of the most controversial acts proposed by the new president concerns the pension reforms. The original project aimed to establish a common age for retirement, being that valid for men, women, being them urban or rural workers – 65 years old, against the current 55 for women and 60 for men. Also, the minimum working time for retirements with a full pension (starting with 70% of its value and progressively evolving to 100%, according to the years of extra contribution) would be of 49 years, against the current 25 years for urban workers and 15 for the rural ones. Since it was not accepted nor tolerated, some changes were made to be voted again in the Parliament – yet, the amount of people impacted by the reform will be enormous, and the time they need to work until they retire will increase. The country, Mr. Temer says, cannot afford for the current system and some austerity must be shown, even in such a delicate matter.

It is clear as Malthus could foresee that times of prosperity and abundance do not last forever, but one must make no mistake and believe that any reform should be accepted. Indeed, the Brazilian pension system works as a pyramid – the ones who start working pay for those who have already stopped. This pyramid, following the global tendency, is becoming inverted and finding solutions for that is more than an obligation. Mr. Cardoso, and also Mrs. Rousseff created some formulas for calculating the ideal age for retiring and, until now, workers were to choose which one would fit them best. The clash came with a proposition of a questionable redistribution – which might have come as a demand from the president's supporters – that would ultimately harm the Brazilian workers' rights.

Work, work, work



Those, however, were not the only plans of the PMDB, Mr. Temer's party, government. On Wednesday (27), a late voting session at the Lower House showed an articulation of a worried president for the approval of a reform of working laws before the pickets that would happen the next day. This reform would change some important aspects for workers, like the possibility to work as third parts, maybe causing more instability; the prevalence of employer-employee agreements over the law, which may bring poorer working conditions, and the end of the obligation of yearly paying the union, being the latter clearly one of the reasons why the unionists were so heated.

The other side

The day after the general strike, Mr. Temer went to the television. He had already discreetly positioned himself by saying that the workers were in their right to protest, but that he would keep the discussion where it was due: the Congress.

But what he and most of the citizens could take from the acts on Friday was that 1) protesters and non-protesters, especially the low-income ones, were terrified with the idea of reforms that 2) they could not fully understand.

Therefore, on April 29th, the president appeared on a popular TV show, in which he was interviewed by a charismatic TV host, and had about half an hour to assure the mentioned workers that 'the reforms would be totally positive, no one would lose their rights'. He also took time, through simple metaphors, to explain the contention measures and how some economic measures – like the now allowed withdrawals from inactive accounts from the Guarantee Fund for Length of Service and a R\$5000.00 budget for renovating the houses of low-income families – would inject money in the country again and create jobs.

Mr. Temer, this time, tried a clever movement in hopes of becoming more popular and clearly rejected the populism present in the 'late governments'. He even reaffirmed his position in a brief 2-minute video shared on the government's official social media about the Workers Day, but the consequences of this effort will only be felt as time passes and his propositions are negotiated in the Legislative sphere.



On May 1st, many spots of entertainment, militancy and discussion were organised by the unions, where many celebrated and protested during the holiday. What was clear to see were the significant fewer voices from politicians and an official letter from those institutions, in which they claimed to be still fighting for the workers' right and considering, if necessary, a new date for strikes.

"If history ... was ever on holiday, or seemed retired, it looks as re-employed now." – professor Anis Bajrektarevic – discussing state, rights and ideology – recently wrote in his luminary essay on Europe.

The next days will be decisive. The country lives a moment of increasing turmoil and, in times of Car Wash operation and increasing legit criticism against the people's representatives, no change will be easy. Mr. Temer appears to be determined, but his government shows a history of rethinking policies and measures. Until now, one can only try to interpret the facts – so far, unemployment rates rose to 13,7% and, even though inflation fell from 10,71% to 4,5%, so did his approval rating, which was 4% in April – and hope for, if not innovative, feasible solutions for the puzzle Brazil has become.

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