

Brazil: Half a Million Workers Strike

Brazil has been swept by a massive wave of militant labour strikes since late April, involving some half a million workers, particularly in the heavily industrialised region around Sao Paulo. The strike wave began just as Jose Sarney became Brazil's first civilian president since 1964. One of the Brazilian ruling class's motivations for opting for civilian rule after two decades of military dictatorship was the hope that it would help diffuse the mounting labour and political ferment that the generals were no longer able to contain. By drawing the main bourgeois opposition parties into the government, they also sought to use those parties' political influence to conclude a "social pact" with the unions, in which the workers would restrain their wage demands in the face of austerity policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

That has clearly not happened. The workers have downed tools, and in some cases occupied their factories, to fight for higher wages, shorter working hours, and union rights. They are doing so as a continuation of the struggles they originally launched under the former military regime.

Police attacks

By May Day, there were already some 40 different strikes underway in the country. These and later strikes included airline workers, post office employees, teachers, railway workers, electricity workers, metalworkers in Sao Paulo's auto and auto parts plants, and migrant cane cutters on sugar estates in the Sao Paulo region.

Though most such strikes are still illegal under the former military regime's anti-strike legislation, the Sarney government has thus far not invoked those laws. To do so would undercut its claims that it is bringing "democracy" to Brazil. Nevertheless, selective repression has been used against some of the strikes.

Military police personnel have been used to disperse picket lines of striking bus drivers and conductors and to protect scab drivers. This led to clashes with the police and the

arrest of 136 strikers. In late May, police attacked pickets of striking migrant workers in Ribeirao Preto in northern Sao Paulo state, injuring 20 and arresting more than 50. According to union sources, this strike involved some 100,000 sugarcane cutters and orange pickers. In Pitangueiras, police broke up pickets that had blocked the city exits to halt the transport of scabs. The military police anti-riot force also took over all the roads leading to Serrana and attacked any groups of striking migrant workers who resisted.

Metalworkers strike

The most persistent strike has been by some 300,000 metalworkers employed in Sao Paulo's auto and auto parts plants. This sector of the Brazilian working class has been one of the most militant. It launched some of the first major strikes under the military regime in the late 1970s and provided an important impetus for the formation of the Workers Party (PT) and the 1.5-million-member United Workers Federation (CUT), an independent union federation which is committed to defending the interests of the working class.

The metalworkers have been on strike since mid-April, demanding a reduction in the work-week from 48 hours to 40 hours and salary increases every three months instead of twice a year. (This latter demand is in response to Brazil's astronomical inflation rate, which reached 223% in 1984.) The auto companies, however, have resisted these demands.

At a large May Day rally in Sao Paulo, Jair Meneguelli, the president of the CUT and a leader of the metalworkers, stated that these actions and the May Day rally could be the starting point for a general strike this year. Five days later, at a metalworkers assembly involving 10,000 unionists at the Sao Bernardo do Campo stadium, the workers decided to intensify their action by occupying factories. This was followed by occupations of plants by metalworkers in Sao Caetano do Sul.

Some of the strikes have been settled, with modest gains for the workers. The sugarcane workers' strike ended after a week with the signing of a statewide collective agreement affecting some 300,000 cane cutters and related workers. The airline workers, railway workers, and others also went back after winning wage increases. In a nationwide address on the eve of

May Day, President Sarney announced a doubling of the minimum wage. But it is still a meager R120 a month.

Slander campaign

Besides using direct repression against some strikes, the authorities have launched a major smear campaign against the strikers. Government officials and media commentaries have frequently blamed the strikes on "infiltrators" and "agitators" ostensibly seeking to undermine the new "democratic" civilian government. In particular, bourgeois newspapers have accused PT leader, Luis Inacio de Silva, known as "Lula", (who is also a leader of the metalworkers), of seeking to "exploit" the strike for political purposes. Industries and Commerce Minister Roberto Gusmao charged, "The strikes have been fanned. Not only by the PT, but by all the parties with a leftist, and even revolutionary, ideology, who want to use the movement as a platform."

An article in the May issue of Em Tempo, a monthly that supports the PT, responded to Gusmao's accusation: "This is a complete falsification. It is not the PT that is making the strikes. It is the strikes that have made the PT."

Besides Gusmao, there have been other government ministers who have been unhappy with the way the strikes have been handled, arguing for a greater use of repression to bring them to an end. Communications Minister, Antonio Magalhaes, openly called for outlawing of the postal workers strike. That strike was subsequently broken when 28 union leaders were fired and the government moved to hire scabs to replace the strikers.

"Truncheon still works miracles"

In mid-May, General Octavio Medeiros, a former minister and head of Military Intelligence, urged his civilian colleagues to crack down on the strikes, stating that "the truncheon is no saint but it still works miracles."

At the same time these strikes have been unfolding, the PT and CUT have continued to demand greater democratic rights, such as the right to strike and direct elections for the president. (Sarney was initially chosen as vice-president by an Electoral College, then became president when Tancredo

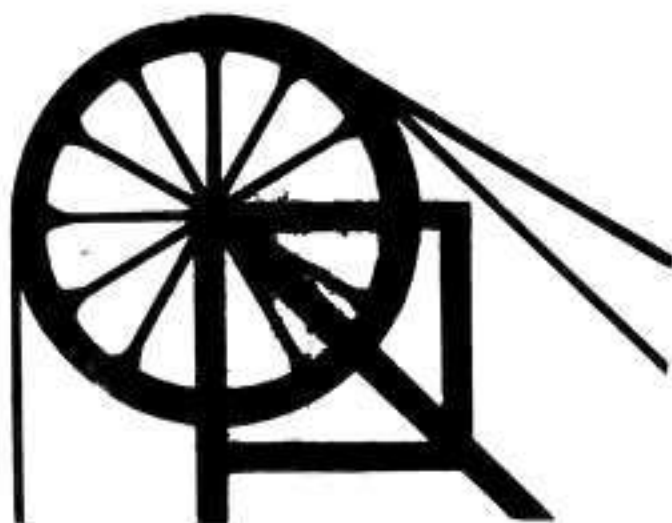
- Brazil -

Neves, also chosen by the college, died before he was ever sworn in. Sarney and other bourgeois political figures have been stalling on the question of when direct elections for a new president would be held.)

In late April, PT leader Lula called for setting a date for direct elections and full trade union rights, including the right to strike. On May 6, while introducing a one-hour PT programme on a national television and radio network, Lula declared, "We are struggling for a direct balloting system for the election of mayors in the capitals. We are struggling for the convocation of a national constituent assembly." The PT's main concern, he said, centred on social questions: "We are being hit by unemployment and land and housing shortages." The PT, he said, has proposals "on new labour laws, on labour union freedoms and on the right to strike. Without these things, Brazil will not be a democratic country."

(Sao Paulo correspondent, June 1985)

British Miners - A Reply



The miners' strike is over, but its analysts rumble on. And so they should, for it is only by analysing the strike that the appropriate lessons can be drawn from the dispute. Yet in looking at the strike it is important not to mythologise what

took place. Although the strike had the backing of almost all sections of the British labour and trade union movement, this emotional support was not translated into real support. In trying to find out why this was the case we should not try to fool ourselves or others, as Jeremy Krikler attempts to do.

For in his article he concludes that "the conservative bureaucracies of many unions, of the TUC and the Labour Party must bear a great portion of the blame for the miners defeat." This analysis is itself a version of the ritual denunciation that is peddled by the British ultra-left at the end of every