Thousands of Brazilian workers and youth protest against Temer’s pension reform

By our reporters
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With the expectation that the Lower House of the Brazilian Congress will vote in favor of the pension reform proposed by President Michel Temer (PMDB) within the next few weeks, on March 15, 1 million workers and youth protested across all of the country’s 26 states. It was the largest demonstration in Brazil since the impeachment of former Workers Party (PT) president Dilma Rousseff last August.

The demonstrations were organized by the popular fronts “Brasil Popular” (Popular Brazil) and “Povo sem medo” (People without fear). Created in the end of 2015 by the unions federations, social movements and pseudo-left parties like the PT, PSOL (Socialism and Liberty Party) and PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil), the fronts initially diverged in their politics: while “Povo sem medo” insisted on the struggle against Dilma’s austerity measures, “Brasil Popular”, of which PT is part, focused strictly on an anti-impeachment campaign.

With the initiation of the impeachment procedures and Dilma Rousseff’s suspension from office last May, the two fronts joined efforts against Temer’s government and his austerity measures, of which the pension reform is the latest example. Today in Brazil, the struggle of the two popular fronts represents the “unity of the left” against Temer’s attacks. This unity has been built upon the “protagonism of the social movements” to “radicalize our democracy”, defending “taxation of large fortunes and profit”, according to the “Povo sem medo” program. There is not a sign, therefore, of a socialist and internationalist perspective in their struggle, which certainly will be coopted and defeated.

The March 15 demonstrations were called by the slogans “Pensions stay, Temer is out!” and “Elections now!”. The call “Fora Temer” (Temer out) has united all the pseudo-left organizations since the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, not preparing the working class against Temer’s attacks and ignoring the Workers Party’s responsibility for attacks on the working class and in paving the way to Dilma’s impeachment.

After the impeachment, as Temer’s government sent congress a constitutional amendment limiting social spending for the next 20 years and a pro-corporate high school reform, and no effective resistance was mounted by the unions and social movements orbiting around the popular fronts, “Brasil Popular” and “Povo sem medo.” Instead, they have raised the slogan “Elections now!”, trying to rebuild the 1984 mass movement for presidential elections after 20 years of Brazilian military dictatorship. The popular fronts are attempting to channel the growing social discontent with the Temer government’s anti-working class measures towards the 2018 elections.

On the day before the March 15 demonstrations, the PT-aligned media announced Lula’s plan to be present at the São Paulo rally. After touring a series of workers congresses linked to the CUT, the national union controlled by the PT, such as the education workers, in January, and the rural workers days before the demonstration, it was the first time Lula took part in a public workers’ demonstration after Dilma’s impeachment. A February electoral poll on the 2018 election showed Lula ahead of his contenders in all possible scenarios.

The demonstrations of the March 15 were also a call for a “general strike” of workers after three failed attempts between September and November of last year to organize such an action. This time, besides the major union federations that are taking part in the popular fronts, the CUT and the CTB (Brazilian Workers Confederation, controlled by PCdoB), the ultra right Força Sindical, which is linked to the military dictatorship, joined the protest against Temer’s pension reform.

On the March 15 demonstration, there were strikes of metallurgical and chemical workers, bus and metro workers, post office workers, bank workers, teachers and public sector workers, with protests beginning in the early morning, along with road and street blockades.

In São Paulo, around 200,000 people took part in the demonstration. Before the rally of the popular fronts in Paulista Avenue, Brazil’s financial center, 50,000 state public school teachers and 30,000 municipal teachers held their assembly in the city center as part of a one-day national education strike. Then, they walked up to Paulista Avenue to join the others at the rally, where WSWS reporters talked to the demonstrators.

All of them expressed strong opposition not only to Temer’s pension reform, but to his whole austerity agenda. Luis, an architect, said, “A government that is not democratically elected has no commitment with the people’s interests. This government is trying to use the time it has until the 2018 elections to push through the interests of the market against those of the people.”

The harsh austerity measures Temer’s government is trying to implement following the impeachment of Rousseff on trumped up charges led many demonstrators to call Temer’s government “golpista” (putschist).

Rachel, a biology teacher from the rural town of Valinhos, said, “The impeachment of Dilma was not legitimate, there was no
Talking particularly about the pension reform and its harsh measures led two demonstrators to associate it with Brazil’s slavery period. Neuéli, a public school teacher from São Paulo, said, “If we do not unify ourselves to bar the reform, we will come back to total slavery, without any rights.” Gabriel, an architect, also said, “Temer’s pension reform is something that reminds us of the sexagenarian law (a pre-slavery abolition law of 1885 which freed slaves over 65 years of age); no one will be able to retire with this proposal.”

Among workers and youth, there was a broad solidarity with the most vulnerable layers of the working class in Brazil. Ulisses, a public school teacher, said, “I believe that this reform will harm the whole Brazilian working class, but especially the poor and the rural workers.”

Leila, a 35-year-old teacher at a private school in São Paulo, said, “I’m not going to work 49 years of my life in a classroom with the same health of today. Imagine others categories whose work is extremely exhausting.” Her friend Tiago, also a teacher, completed her thought, saying, “considering the periods of unemployment, there is a high chance of working until you are 75 or 80 years old”.

The demonstrators also didn’t believe in the alleged pension deficit Temer’s government is using to justify its reform. Eduardo, a post office worker, said, “I don’t believe that this deficit is real, they only want to put it on the workers’ account.” The architect Luís explained, “the deficit the government has been attributing to the pension system is only to guarantee the debt payment.”

The demonstrators also expressed their disbelief that the pension reform will do anything to help Brazil overcome its economic crisis. “The solution they are adopting to say we are coming out of the crisis is taking everything away from workers, taking away from the retirees”, said Diego, another postal worker who attended the demonstration.

The architect Luís also complained about the major impact that Operation Car Wash (the criminal probe into the massive bribes and kickbacks scandal surrounding the state-run energy conglomerate Petrobrás) is having on the Brazilian economy: “Operation Car Wash has stopped the Brazilian economy. We who work in civil construction are seeing a lot of good professionals becoming unemployed, with major architectural firms being closed.”

Bruna, a book editor also attending the demonstration, said, “there were few perspectives last year, and this year, that things seemed to be getting better, but there have already been layoffs in the book publishing industry.” She complained that, “publishers tercerizados (outsourcing) the editing work, paying less.” Leonardo, Bruna’s editor colleague, said, “the number of freelancers is growing every day over the CLT (formally registered) workers.”

The situation facing Bruna and Leonardo is the same as that of almost 13 million tercerizados (informal) workers in Brazil, a figure that increased three times since the beginning of the Worker Party government of Lula, in 2003. One of the consequences of a three-decade-long deindustrialization in Brazil, and acting mainly

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