

Brazilian unions push “green and yellow” chauvinism in education strike against austerity, political interference

By Miguel Andrade
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Brazilian students returned to the streets in at least 11 states last week for a two-day general strike at federal universities and schools. Organizers claimed 20,000 participated in a mass demonstration in Rio de Janeiro, with 5,000 turning out in São Paulo, and a few hundred in other state capitals.

This is the fourth major mobilization by Brazilian students since largely spontaneous demonstrations broke out in May against education cuts, with a million youth from 170 cities, the majority of them school-age and working class, flocking to demonstrations originally called by teachers’ unions for higher wages and against the hated pension reform being discussed by Congress.

That mass mobilization horrified not only the government, but also the bourgeois opposition led by the Workers Party (PT), the unions and the pseudo left headed by the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL). Since May, they have all directed their energy to either isolating the youth demonstrations or subordinating them to an alliance between the PT and those sections of its former right-wing opposition dissatisfied with Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, above all the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB).

The drop in the number of demonstrators since May testifies to these frenzied efforts and stands in stark contrast to the growing unrest among the youth and workers. In September, major strikes broke out involving more than 120,000 workers at the Brazilian Post Office (Correios), the aviation giant Embraer and the Federal University of Santa Catarina in the south of the country, now in its third week. In the meantime, the Post Office strike was shut down by the union after a Labor Court order, while the Aeronautic Police and Shock Troops were mobilized to literally push workers back into Embraer, which has a military division involved in producing training jets for the US Air Force, among others. The company brought strikebreakers into its São José dos Campos factory, 100 kilometres north of São Paulo.

At the same time, far from being resolved, the problems

which led students to the streets in May have only worsened, and spontaneous demonstrations have spread. These have targeted not only increasing austerity, but also a string of political interventions in the elections of new deans across federal institutions and the religious-driven censorship of books, movies and plays in schools, book fairs and cultural centers. There is also growing hostility to the rise in police violence, with a full one-fifth of murders in both São Paulo and Rio now being carried out by the ever more violent police forces.

The May demonstrations were triggered by a 30 percent cut in the federal education budget and the threats by far-right Education Minister Abraham Weintraub to cut funding for universities that allow “mayhem” on their campuses, citing public events in support of land reform and anti-fascist banners put up in the 2018 elections.

Now, the government has announced a 25 percent cut in next year’s education budget and a 50 percent cut in the funds for CAPES, a government agency responsible for financing stipends for no less than 215,000 graduate students and researchers, implying that many thousands of them will not have their contracts renewed next year. For this year, the government has simply suspended the payment of stipends to 83,000 graduate students and researchers by another agency, CNPq, and has been releasing delayed payments on an ad hoc basis, pending month-by-month negotiations.

Brazil’s 60 federal universities, attended by 1.2 million students, are behind on their gas and electricity bills and have been cutting back classes, work hours at laboratories and even catering services. In the striking Santa Catarina Federal University, catering will be offered only to students passing strict poverty tests—a 75 percent reduction in meals.

Moreover, under the direction of Weintraub—known for paraphrasing the Nazis by saying that “communists are the top of the country, the top of financial institutions, the owners of the papers, the big companies and the

monopolies”—Bolsonaro has issued a decree prohibiting deans from nominating vice-deans and other aides. These appointments will now be directly vetted by the government and intelligence agencies. He has also intervened in the election of deans in at least six institutions, nominating the least popular candidates, whom he considered right-wing loyalists, and in at least two cases nominating aides with no connection to the institutions.

Another target of demonstrators was the so-called “Future-se” (loosely translated as “Take care of your own future”) program being discussed by Congress, which would allow the hiring of professors and staff outside of public service rules, thus facilitating firings and wage reductions, as well as the creation of a new national endowment for universities that would pave the way to wholesale privatization by facilitating the private funding of research and forming special administration regimes outside of the control of elected university officials.

Leaked reports obtained by *Folha de S. Paulo* also show that the federal bank Caixa Econômica (CEF) has issued internal orders requiring that the political positions of artists be part of the vetting process of exhibitions and plays staged at its seven cultural centers located in Brazil’s main cities. Similar processes are under way for the state-owned Banco do Brasil—the country’s largest bank—Petrobras, the National Film Agency (Ancine) and countless state and city institutions around the country. Each of these measures has provoked immediate youth protests.

On the same day as the latest education strike, the Senate was carrying out a first round of voting on the “pensions reform,” which has already cleared the House and will probably be enacted next week. The reaction of PT senators has been muted at best. The UOL news portal quoted PT Senator Rogério Carvalho, from the northeastern state of Sergipe, declaring that the opposition would not filibuster the reform if the government ceded oil revenues to the states.

The PT opposition has predictably followed the government’s right-wing turn. It has isolated the struggle of federal university students from broader issues to avoid the eruption of social opposition seen in May, when demonstrators in PT-controlled states openly exposed PT governors as parroting the government line on austerity and police violence.

Moreover, for months, the PT has presented Bolsonaro’s policies as a threat to Brazilian capitalism, while promoting “green” capitalism and “human rights” imperialism by hailing threats of economic sanctions against Brazil by European Union officials.

Demonstrations against education cuts are being subordinated to the chauvinistic aims of defending Brazilian

companies and the country’s “technological leverage” in fields like oil production, agriculture and even arms production.

The unions highlighted the fact that the two-day action coincided with the 66th anniversary of the founding of the state-run oil conglomerate Petrobras by the administration of former president Getúlio Vargas, the icon of bourgeois nationalist politics in Brazil. Vargas’ authoritarian government created the national company after a mass campaign supported by unions controlled by his Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) and the Communist Party (PCB).

In the lead up to the demonstrations, PT senator Jean Paul Prates, hailed the army above all for its role in Petrobras’ founding. Meanwhile the PT used reports of cuts in supplies for the barracks to cast the party as the true friend of the military, recalling that it was a PT government that allowed it to begin the building of a nuclear-powered submarine to defend Brazilian offshore oil rigs.

The overall attempt was to frame the defense of federal universities and schools targeted by the Bolsonaro government’s brutal austerity policies and political interventions as part of a larger chauvinistic campaign for “national sovereignty.” This campaign is aimed at two principal constituencies: Bolsonaro’s opponents in the traditional right-wing opposition, which is concerned about his policies damaging business interests, and the military, with warnings that Bolsonaro’s cuts are undermining “national security” and threatening the defunding of the Brazilian arms industry,

Based on this reactionary perspective, the National Students Union (UNE), controlled for decades by the Maoist wing of the Communist Party (PCdoB), called for the use of green-and-yellow banners (the colors of the Brazilian flag), pushing demonstrators to stage a patriotic display while vying for the support of the military.

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