

Growing anger among Brazilian workers to response of government and unions to coronavirus crisis

By Tomas Castanheira
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The government of Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro announced on Wednesday night, March 18, a measure that allows companies to reduce working hours by 50 percent, together with cutting wages in half. Promoted as a measure to "save jobs" in the face of a projected steep economic decline resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, it is a declaration of war against the Brazilian working class.

Designed by the government's economic team, led by ultra-liberal Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes, this policy complements the criminal contempt that Bolsonaro has shown for the lives of the millions of Brazilians threatened by COVID-19.

Last Sunday, the president criticized concern over the disease as "hysteria" and argued that it was better for the workers to continue working normally, otherwise they would be forced to starve. Throughout the week, he repeated similar statements, criticizing guidelines to the population to observe social distancing as "measures that will harm our economy a lot."

On Wednesday, the entire upper echelon of the government participated in a press conference on the coronavirus crisis. Everyone wore a mask after two ministers with whom everyone had contact, Gen. Augusto Heleno, head of the Institutional Security Office, and Adm. Bento Albuquerque of the Ministry of Mines and Energy, tested positive for the disease.

Minister of Health Luiz Mandetta said that the WHO's orientation to increasing the number of tests was a "waste of resources" and that they should only be performed in the most serious cases. The press conference was marked by the pathetic performance of the president and the ministers, who incorrectly wore the protective masks, only underscoring the incompetence of the government.

After the Wednesday press conference, there were protests against Bolsonaro in every major city, mainly in the middle class neighborhoods, with people banging pans from their windows—the so-called "panelaços"—and calling for the ouster of the president.

A more deep-going revolt is beginning to emerge within the working class, which faces the greatest risk from the crisis.

Throughout the country, entire sectors of the service industry are being closed indefinitely. Thousands of workers in movie theaters have been put on unpaid collective vacations, or have had their wages cut or pushed into voluntary lay-off programs.

The Brazilian Bar and Restaurant Association of Campinas, a city of 1 million people in the state of São Paulo, estimated that 30,000 people could be fired as a result of declining activity in commercial establishments. After Minister Paulo Guedes "relieved" companies by cutting employers' mandatory payroll contributions toward unemployment insurance by 50 percent, the Social Service of Commerce (SESC) and the National Commercial Learning Service (Senac) announced that the employers they represent will fire at least half of their 90,000 employees.

Underpaid informal work, which reached record levels in Brazil in 2019, is particularly under threat. Millions working under these conditions could lose their source of income overnight. In response, the government has announced that it will offer monthly aid of up to R\$200 (US\$39). This cannot even be considered a starvation wage! As Bolsonaro said, his government will force the workers to starve in the coming months, which will make them even more vulnerable to the coronavirus.

In the auto plants, the life of the workers is being put at risk on a daily basis to ensure that the corporations continue to extract profits from their work. The ABC Paulista automakers announced on Thursday a collective vacation of about 10 days that will only start at the end of March.

This announcement was received with expressions of indignation from the workers. On the Facebook page of the Metalworkers Union of ABC, associated with CUT, the union confederation led for decades by the Workers' Party (PT), one worker commented: "We are like the band that played on the Titanic, the boat is sinking and we can not stop playing ... In short, we can not stop producing."

Another said: "In Mercedes we are still producing, a lack of respect and care toward its employees, knowing that we are at risk, because buses to work are full and run with air conditioning systems; in the workplace there is not even a

bottle of alcohol gel. It was supposed to stop, but the profit interest is greater!”

The role played by the union, in close partnership with the corporations, is abominable. Until the day before the automakers’ announcement of the collective vacation, its only advice to the workers was: “take care of yourselves.” The only demand placed on the companies was that they should clean surfaces in the factories and not adopt ridiculously risky behaviors, such as letting everyone serve themselves with the same spoon in the factory dining halls. However, on the very same day that the companies issued their announcement about the holidays, the SMABC printed on the cover of its newspaper, *Tribuna Metalúrgica*: “Either the companies stop by the 30th or we stop the companies.” They then called the 10-day shutdown a victory.

At General Motors, the workers will not only work until the end of the month, but they will have to work overtime for the next two Saturdays to produce Tracker units, the new SUV model produced by the company in Brazil, which costs up to R\$112 thousand. The Metalworkers Union of São Caetano do Sul, where the plant is located, boasted of the fact that the workers are working overtime to “correct” GM’s claim that it would be closing because of declining market demand, saying that, instead, GM would close—after another 10 days of production—because of the spread of the coronavirus.

On Wednesday, automaker Caoa Chery announced the closure of its engine factory in São José dos Campos and the dismissal of 59 employees. The union announced that it would “demand from the public authorities measures in favor of the workers.” On Thursday the workers went on strike, demanding they be rehired, and the union announced it will meet with company representatives Friday.

Strikes for safe working conditions, like those that have spread in recent days in Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, are also beginning to break out in Brazil. In Teresina, in the northeast of the country, workers from the Almviva Call Center held a spontaneous protest on Thursday morning. Workers gathered in front of the company, shouting: “Workers, do not be afraid, your health comes first!” An employee, interviewed by *O Dia*, declared: “We are over 3,000 operators. There are a lot of people with the flu, and the only thing they are giving us is just a regular cleaning product and a cloth. No gel or mask.”

Also this Thursday, dock workers in Santos, the largest port in Latin America, threatened to stop working in protest against unsafe conditions. The government of the state of São Paulo responded by threatening a state of emergency, which would suspend the right to strike and individual rights, allowing the government to force workers, with the use of the military, back to work.

However, at least for the moment, it was not necessary to resort to the police or the military, thanks to the collaboration of the union. The minister of infrastructure of the Bolsonaro

government, Tarcísio Gomes, personally called the director of the Sindestiva dockers union, Rodnei Silva, and, according to the latter, “asked us not to go on strike. He insisted on the economic issue a lot, the losses that this could bring.” Union officials then met with the employers’ associations and together they formed a “Crisis Committee” to deal with the situation. The union suspended the strike, while acknowledging that “the most important thing, life, the issue of the pandemic, is not resolved.”

These events fully vindicate the political line advocated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, that “workers should form rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, independent of the corrupt unions, to defend their health and safety.” As in other countries around the world, every attempt by workers to take collective action to protect their health and safety and that of their communities is (and will be) opposed at every step by the unions.

The Workers Party (PT), which presents itself as the opposition to Bolsonaro, is exploiting the government’s crisis to appeal for support from factions of the capitalist political establishment and to politically subordinate the working class to the corporations. Like the Bolsonaro government, they have neglected the coronavirus crisis until the last moment, treating it as a minor problem or merely an excuse invented by the government to justify the country’s weak economy.

The PT’s answer to the crisis does not, under any circumstances, attack corporate profits. All the money for relief is to come from the Workers’ Support Fund, a state fund already destined for workers, according to the proposal advanced by the PT’s president, Gleisi Hoffmann. While Hoffmann also feigned horror over Bolsonaro’s proposed reduction in wages and hours, this is exactly what Dilma Rousseff, Brazil’s last PT president, together with the CUT, proposed in 2014, also under the title of an Employment Protection Program. If they have the opportunity, they will do it again.

The Brazilian working class can confront the coronavirus crisis only by forging its political independence from the PT and the unions. A successful struggle requires unifying with workers all over the world who are facing the same conditions. The present crisis reinforces the need to build a new revolutionary leadership in Brazil, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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