

Brazilian police massacre 13 in brutal operation in Rio de Janeiro

By Tomas Castanheira
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Last Friday, an operation by the Civil Police and Special Police Operations Battalion (BOPE) left 13 dead and a trail of destruction in the Alemão Complex, one of the largest groups of *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro.

Some of the dead were abandoned by the police in the streets and houses where they were killed, and their families and neighbors were forced to carry the bodies out of the community. One of the videos shared by residents shows a young man stabbed and left in agony, indicating a summary execution by the state agents.

The violence and barbarity spread throughout the neighborhood, which is home to tens of thousands of impoverished workers. Conditions of poverty and oppression are even more critical situation in the midst of the coronavirus crisis.

Residents denounced police looting of small businesses, houses destroyed by gunfire and grenades and bullets penetrating rooms where families were sheltering in terror. Videos recorded by residents show their cars destroyed after being dragged by the “caveirão,” the armored vehicle of the military police, which crossed the narrow streets of the *favela*.

“Instead of sending doctors and nurses to protect the residents from COVID-19, the government sends police, armored vehicles and helicopters to kill us,” Bruno Itan, a photographer and resident of the Alemão Complex, told the *Guardian*.

In a Twitter post, with thousands of shares, another resident said: “You know those scenes of blunt violence that we see in countries of the African continent in civil war or under authoritarian and bloody government? But this one is from ‘democratic’ Brazil, where citizens carry five bodies of people killed by state agents in the light of day!”

According to the police, the operation was aimed at finding a place where drug traffickers stored weapons, ammunition and drugs. The seizures they disclosed were

no more than eight rifles, some ammunition and a small quantity of drugs. The police also stated that five of the dead were suspected of involvement with trafficking. They provided no explanation for the other eight they slaughtered.

This massacre is another episode of the astonishing growth of murders committed by Rio de Janeiro’s police since last year. In 2019, the year Wilson Witzel, an extreme-right politician from the Christian Social Party (PSC), assumed control of the government of the state of Rio de Janeiro, deaths in police operations grew by 92 percent. There were 387 deaths in 1,296 police operations in 2019, compared to 201 deaths in 711 operations in 2018.

Witzel ran for the governorship posing as a local representative of the fascistic Jair Bolsonaro, in a campaign fundamentally based on defending unleashing the police to kill “bandits.” Witzel became infamous for a phrase he used in one of his first interviews as governor-elect: “The police will do the right thing: they will aim right at the head and... fire! So there will be no mistake”.

Among the victims of the criminal executions encouraged by Witzel is Ágatha Félix, an eight-year-old girl brutally murdered by the police last September in the same Alemão Complex. Her assassination generated unrest and revolt among the population of the *favela*, who took to the streets in protest against police violence, demanding: “Stop killing us!”

The increase in police lethality in Rio de Janeiro in 2019 occurred in the context of a strong federal government campaign, headed by former minister Sérgio Moro, for the so-called anti-crime bill, which involved granting police officers immunity in the murderous violence they commit on duty. Bolsonaro remains obsessed with the approval of this measure, which ended up not being passed last year

The escalation of state violence by Bolsonaro and Witzel is not a new phenomenon, but the continuity of a process that has advanced over the past decade. A milestone in this development was the military occupation of the Alemão Complex in 2010, under the presidency of Luís Inácio “Lula” da Silva, of the Workers Party (PT).

Under the pretext of “pacification” of the *favelas*, in November 2010, the Complex was invaded by a total of 2,600 police officers and men from the Army, Navy and Air Force. The operation, strongly driven by the media and serving the interests of capitalist enterprises in Rio de Janeiro, left dozens dead and terrorized the population. There were reports of torture, constant abuses of workers and executions of innocent people.

At the time, Lula celebrated the action alongside the then governor of Rio de Janeiro, Sérgio Cabral of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), now imprisoned for corruption. “I, who watched the occupation of the Alemão on television, was touched. I imagine you [governor Sérgio Cabral] how you felt when you saw, for the first time, the people watching the police entering as friends. The people saw the Armed Forces serving the Brazilian. Not to attack or beat the people, but to defend them from the real bandits of the country. One concrete fact is this: the Alemão Complex is no longer a bogeyman,” Lula said.

The following years witnessed a spiraling growth of violent occupation of the *favelas* by the Brazilian armed forces.

In 2014, Dilma Rousseff’s administration, also from the Workers Party, approved a military intervention in Rio de Janeiro, with the occupation of the Maré Complex, another large group of *favelas*, by 2,500 military personnel from the Army and Navy.

In 2018, the administration of Michel Temer, who took power after the impeachment of Rousseff, carried out a new military intervention in Rio de Janeiro. In command of this last operation was General Braga Netto, who today holds the highest position in the Bolsonaro government, as chief minister of the civil house. Commenting on the murderous operation he was leading, Braga Netto declared: “Rio de Janeiro is a laboratory for Brazil.”

This phrase takes on an especially alarming meaning today. As a spokesman for the Bolsonaro government, Braga Netto is committed to guaranteeing the conditions for a return to work, demanded by the bourgeoisie as a whole throughout the national territory. In the midst of the explosion of COVID-19 in Brazil, this will mean the

deaths of thousands and thousands of people and will require a deepening of police-state control over the working class.

Once again, Rio de Janeiro serves as an important “laboratory” for the crimes of capitalism. The state has one of the most calamitous conditions, with 22,238 confirmed coronavirus cases and 2,715 confirmed deaths, 101 of them last Sunday alone. But figures showing an explosion of deaths linked to respiratory diseases indicate that there are almost twice as many COVID-19 deaths as those reported by the government.

The situation in the *favelas* is especially grave. The website *Voz das Comunidades* reported about a month ago that a survey made by local health professionals registered more than 1,000 suspected cases of COVID-19 in the Alemão Complex, while the government reported only four. The disease comes on top of persistent water shortages and growing hunger and misery among the residents.

The Brazilian bourgeois state is imposing a normalization of death for the entire working class—whether through hunger, infection by the new deadly coronavirus, or the brutal murder by its military agents.

However, the working class is not a passive agent in this process. The growing mobilization of Brazilian workers in wildcat strikes against unsafe conditions in the workplaces and the revolt of residents of the poor neighborhoods against state violence are merging with a global movement of the working class that faces the same attacks by the ruling classes of all countries.

These are highly revolutionary conditions that favor the development of an independent political movement of the global working class, which will increasingly assume a socialist and internationalist direction.

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