

Brazilian Protests and their Effect on Labour

by Kjeld Jakobsen

Introduction

At the beginning of June, some Brazilian municipalities and local state governments decided upon a change in prices of public transport, with an approximate increase ranging between 5% and 10%, depending on the city or state. Minimal issues were expected as a result of this change because on average, the inflation rate sat on approximately 6% a year and, there was at least a two year gap since the previous increase in price. However, the motion put forward has triggered protests in many Brazilian cities, with a youth movement reiterating demands for free transport for students.

Brazilians experience new forms of political participation

The initial protests comprised of small opportunist groups who went to the extent of smashing windows and the entrances of some metro stations; provoking harsh reactions from local state police. Far worse, some rioters in São Paulo surrounded a policeman and assaulted him. Two days later a new march was organized, with approximately two thousand participants. It is alleged that police came out to avenge the attack on their colleague and subsequently reacted with extreme violence. Unfortunately, this confrontation also came to affect some people who were not actively involved in the protest, with an extreme incident of a journalist who lost her eye due to a rubber bullet being shot and another incident where people inside cafés were allegedly beaten with riot police sticks.

This repression triggered the participation of more than one million people in the next march who came out to show solidarity to those who were injured and also introduced new issues as reasons for the demonstrations, such as the improvement of other public services, including health and education. These new marchers had many profiles, and ranged from left to right wing and therefore also introduced many more different issues, for instance the opposition to a proposed law which could reduce the investigation of power of attorneys, as well as raising concerns regarding corruption. Many doctors also took to the streets protesting against the possibility of foreign professionals being allowed to work in Brazil. Several unions and some of the political parties of the

present governmental coalition also joined these demonstrations.

Another strong point raised by people on the streets concerned the huge governmental expenditure to organize the Soccer World Cup of the next year (2014) vis-a-vis the scarcity of resources to improve public services. Initially, the media criticized the riots but when they perceived the potential of political embarrassment for the federal government, they introduced a more favourable coverage of the demonstrations. After a day of mass demonstrations in more than three hundred cities, mayors and governors withdrew the price increases on public transport in their constituencies.

President Dilma Rousseff took a positive position regarding the marches; proposing an agenda of reforms to be discussed and later on approved through a plebiscite. However, the conservative forces that dominate Parliament and the media soon imploded the idea of any public consultation.

Already known but not taken seriously, this conservative reaction showed that if we want further advances in the Brazilian political progressive agenda, the social movement needs to strongly push the government. So far, lobbies from employers, landlords and other similar sectors have been the most influential in governmental discussions and the media is increasingly calling for austerity measures. Therefore the trade unions organized under six national labor confederations, particularly the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), on the 11th of July decided to present their own agenda and to organize a day of national action followed by strikes, demonstrations and other means. The content of this agenda included the reduction of the working hours to 40 hours a week, opposition to the approval of a new law in the Parliament aimed at facilitating labour outsourcing, improvement of the pension system, allocation of 10% of the GDP for public education and the same amount to the public health system, and public transport of quality

and agrarian reform. Workers participation was expressive and a first meeting with the government was setup to address this labor agenda; even though another day of demonstrations was already scheduled for the end of August. This one was not so massive but one important result was to bring more parliamentarians to the unions' side regarding the opposition to the new outsourcing law, albeit this issue has not been resolved as of yet.

The dispersion of the demands

The withdrawal of the increase of the transport tickets by the local governments was a victory for the people, but smaller demonstrations continue in Brazil, although restricted to bigger cities like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte. The demands also vary from place to place, for instance: in Rio de Janeiro the target of the demonstrators is the local state governor, particularly after it was discovered that he used the government's helicopter to transport his household and pets to his beach house on weekends. Another issue in this city regarding the demonstrations of solidarity includes the case of a construction worker who disappeared after he was detained by the police.

Thus this process is not over yet and it will probably take some time before we get a deep and complete analysis about the reasons that provoked these rallies, despite the past year's improvement in the Brazilian socio-economic situation. Just to illustrate this aspect, the unemployment rate is at its lowest level (5%) since its measure started in the 90s and Brazil is the only BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) country where the Gini coefficient has improved over the past decade.

However, there is still a general "gloomy feeling". The country's public services are not satisfactory and with a relevant number of Brazilians being pulled from extreme poverty and the ascendance of other social groups, the trend of the people is to strengthen their demands for more welfare. The criticism waged on the government by conservative media also contributes to the spread of pessimism, albeit without real reasons. The rallies also exposed some of the consequences of the negotiated political transition from dictatorship to democracy in the 80s, particularly the maintenance of the military police that operates with almost total impunity and without democratic control and the unbalanced electoral system that preserves the interests of big business (as well as the most reactionary social sectors like landlords and Pentecostal churches).

Conclusion

The good lesson learned from the aforementioned demonstrations is that it is possible to organize, demonstrate and win. Brazilians have become more tolerant to demonstrations, despite the chaotic situations created by marches in the middle of the cities in rush hours. Therefore it is also more common that smaller groups come out with their demands, being fair or not, like the doctors opposing the government's "More Doctor Program". The "More Doctor Program" is a result of a shortage of healthcare professionals, particularly in the countryside and poorer regions of Brazil, and to deal with this shortage the government decided to hire doctors from other countries, particularly from Cuba to cover the lack of Brazilian doctors. The reason behind their opposition to this program is to preserve the local professional's monopoly on this basic service. The appearance for the first time of the "Black Block" in such rallies was also pedagogic because their criticism to capitalism and in particular the financial system which represents one of the most awful institutions in Brazil was informative; their violent tactics are to blame. Even extreme right fascist groups have recently shown their ugly face, protesting against a recent Latin American left wing party gathering in São Paulo in a very aggressive and non-democratic way, as usual.

The issue now is about how the unions and their allies can move ahead politically, not merely focusing on the government which despite some mistakes can be an ally. Nevertheless, it does not make sense that a left leaning government adopts parts of the conservative agenda defeated during the last presidential elections. The social movement needs to push it in order to prioritize the interests and needs of the majority of the population and to remove the dirt left by the authoritarian past.

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