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Rio Teachers Strike Sharpens Brazilian Protest Scene

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Four months after the June protests in Brazil brought hundreds of thousands to the streets in a national airing of grievances, such mass demonstrations persist albeit on a smaller, more-focused scale (NotiSur, Aug. 23, 2013). At the same time, marches continue to conclude with violent clashes between police and protesters. This trend is a result of both a tougher line by authorities as well as a proportionally larger use of black-bloc tactics, whereby masked protesters wearing black pursue direct action to destroy symbolic physical property such as banks, media vehicles, and police cars. The outcome has been widespread destruction of public and private property, mass arrests of civilians, injuries to protesters, and chaotic scenes on the streets of Brazil’s major cities, principally Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Brasília.

While Brazilian Independence Day on Sept. 7 was the impetus for one of the larger rallies since June, the month of October showed the most sustained protest activity. Specifically, a teachers strike in Rio sparked a series of well-attended marches, with sympathy crowds in the thousands in São Paulo and Brasília and the hundreds in dozens of other cities.

In addition to the weekly marches in downtown Rio, including tens of thousands on Oct. 15, Teachers’ Day, around 1,000 protesters affiliated with the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST) attempted to invade São Paulo’s City Council building in a separate political action on the same day to demand more affordable housing.

Negotiations brought the 77-day teachers strike to an end on Oct. 25 following the intervention of Justice Minister Luis Fux, after the state teachers union appealed a lower-court decision that ruled the strike illegal and authorized pay deductions for strikers. Darci Frigo, co-founder of the public interest law nongovernmental organization (NGO) Terra de Direitos, called the involvement of a federal mediator "unprecedented." He continued, "I’ve never seen this before in my life. It shows how powerful street protests have been."

Teachers were subsequently awarded pay that had been docked during the strike and will create working groups to dialogue with government officials. Nevertheless, in the agreement, the public sector did not make any of the main concessions on salary or job-description issues.

Educators’ Strike Predates June Protests

Education was one of the major issues raised during the June protests, and Rio’s municipal and state teachers unions had already held general assemblies and considered striking as early as mid-May. While Brazil’s winter school holiday in July delayed the question for a month, the decision not to start the academic year on time led to the beginning of the strike on Aug. 8, the first in 20 years and the first ever to unify both city and state teachers.

At issue was the Career, Position, and Salary Plan (Plano de Cargos, Carreiras e Remunerações, PCCR), which the teachers unions rejected in large part because its benefits only apply to those who work 40 hours per week. Presently, only 7% of the city and state public school teachers have such
full-time positions. There is such a low percentage of full-time teachers because currently Brazilian students only attend school in half-day sessions. However, full-time schooling, under debate in Congress as part of the National Education Plan, is a stated goal of the city of Rio. To that extent, the mayor’s offer intended to incentivize more full-time teachers but could only finance a gradual increase rather than offer immediate 40-hour positions to all who requested them.

The length of the school day and workweek was, however, only one of several bones of contention between the teachers unions and the city and state education secretaries. Pay raises were also at stake—an important matter given Brazil’s inflation rate, which has been rising steadily since 2006—as well as "multitalent pedagogy," whereby teachers with one specialty, such as chemistry, are expected to teach other related subjects, such as biology and environmental science.

Early on in the strike, Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes fanned the flames by telling a radio news anchor that he would not enroll his students in a public city school as long as he could afford a private one. Such a sentiment is common among the Brazilian middle and upper classes, which pay tuition for private schools in order for their children to secure entrance to the generally high-quality, free, public universities.

As negotiations faltered throughout the month of September, teachers took to the streets. To this extent, João Feres Junior, professor of political science at the Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Políticos of the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro (IESP-UERJ), argued in an interview, "These protests aren’t the same because in June there was a plethora of absurd demands, it was a thing without a center. Now there are focused movements."

For example, Ocupa Câmara (Occupy City Council) began on Aug. 9, one day after the teachers strike commenced, over concerns about the parliamentary inquiry commission (Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito, CPI) that was convened to investigate the mafia-like arrangement that governs the contracts for Rio’s bus lines. While initiated as a response to the popular outcry in June, the CPI was quickly deemed problematic because several city councilors who opposed its establishment were subsequently appointed to serve on it. In response, protesters occupied the council chambers, although by September they had been relegated to the front steps of the building that faces historic Cinelândia Square in downtown Rio, following several clashes with police and attempts to set fire to the building.

**Increasingly militarized police tactics and destruction mark protest escalation**

On Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, the teachers unions and allies, including black blocs, joined Ocupa Câmara to demonstrate in front of the city council building as Mayor Paes advocated for the council to pass the PCCR in what protesters alleged was a closed-door, backroom deal. The protest was dispersed with tear gas, rubber bullets, pepper spray, and physical altercations with nightsticks. In an Oct. 9 assembly, striking teachers approved a manifesto that accused the governor, Sérgio Cabral, and Mayor Paes of "launching a military offensive against social movements and our strike." They also voted to support the presence of black blocs, provided they continued to serve as a physical buffer to protect strikers from police violence.

By the Oct. 15 protest on Teachers’ Day, downtown Rio had begun to resemble a city under siege. Wooden boards had replaced the glass windows of countless ground-level facades, especially in
bank branches, and it was not uncommon to encounter a bus shelter ringed by shattered glass. Graffiti against police violence, the governor, and the mayor were a common sight.

The battle lines had further hardened as the state government declared that it would charge arrested protesters under statutes against conspiracy to form a criminal gang. Thiago Poblan, who teaches at the Escola Municipal Irmã Zélia in Rio's working-class northside neighborhood of Madureira, was undeterred as he led a delegation from his school. "We support the black blocs—any group that is willing to help us. But we’re always afraid of the conflict."

Crowds gathered around Rio’s Candelária church for the march up Avenida Rio Branco to the beat of samba drums and under banners with the slogan "Cabral be gone, go with Paes," the latter a play on words of the Brazilian farewell "go with peace." In addition to signs about public education, infrastructure, favela removal, the cost of reforming Maracanã stadium, demands for a CPI into the public-education fund, and anti-corruption, one large banner indicted the rare multiparty alliance between federal, state, and local government in Rio: "Dilma, in three years Cabral and Paes have dragged your credibility through the mud."

Nevertheless, President Dilma Rousseff’s approval rating has rebounded since June, and she has received credit for the Mais Médicos (More Doctors) program (NotiSur, Aug. 23, 2013) while passing the onus of a reform package to Congress. In his interview, Feres analyzed Dilma’s increased public presence as an effort "to generate more news by going to more ribbon cuttings." He continued, "Even those who respond in polls that they don’t support Dilma don’t have anywhere to go, there aren’t many viable alternatives."

As the march began, Divina de Jesus Scarpim, a teacher at the Colégio Estadual Herbert de Souza, cited Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed but admitted that, with respect to achieving the strikers’ demands, "I’m not an optimistic person, though it’s always worth trying."

Earlier that day, the newspaper Extra published a poll by Unicarioca finding that, in Rio, 73% of respondents feel that a teaching career has no prestige, 63% say they would not encourage their children to become teachers, and 92% believe that students don’t respect their teachers.

By the end of the night, a police car was in flames, several city buses had their windows broken, more bus shelters were shattered, and 64 people were arrested while over 200 were detained. Twenty-seven of the arrested were accused of involvement in organized crime. Public outcry, especially at the arrest of university students studying journalism and covering the protests, led to several quick releases.

The black-bloc tactic continues to perplex both authorities and the public, while police violence against protesters remains an ugly fixture on Brazilian streets. While two in three support protests about social issues, over 90% in all age groups now disapprove of black-bloc tactics in São Paulo, according to Datafolha.

Regarding police repression, Feres’ explanation is thus: "The police that crack down on the protesters are the same that execute people in favelas and on the outskirts of the city." To that extent, a broad spectrum of Brazilian society is getting a taste of daily life in poorer urban neighborhoods.

In turn, sociologist Gláucio Soares, secretary-general of the Latin American Association of Political Science, called out "a gigantic irony" in the conflict. "The black-bloc participants are youth with high
school and university education, which is to say that down the road they are the future elite. A large number of police are in fact from favelas, while middle-class youth call them pigs and defenders of an unjust system."

While the end of the teachers strike has deflated some of the tension in Rio, this paradox shows no sign of being resolved in São Paulo. After the Oct. 27 police shooting of a 17-year-old student, Douglas Rodrigues, in response to a disturbing-the-peace complaint, two nights of violent protests have carried the torch in Brazil’s largest city, reminiscent of public outcry at the disappearance of Amarildo de Souza in July by Rio’s police pacification units (NotiSur, Sept. 27, 2013). Although by the numbers the June peak has diminished considerably, it is clear that specific issues are flashpoints liable to spark more direct democracy by frustrated Brazilians.

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