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Brazil: Three Major Labor Confederations Organize 48-hour General Strike

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On May 21, a strike paralyzed subway systems in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, on the eve of a 48-hour general strike called by three of the country's four major labor confederations. Sao Paulo subway employees are demanding a 135% wage hike, and counterparts in Rio, a 325% increase. The federations Central Workers Union (CUT), Latin America's largest union federation, linked to the Workers Party (PT), the General Workers Central (CGT), and the National Labor Confederation (CNT) estimated that 10 million of Brazil's 80 million workers would participate in the strike. In addition to subway employees, bus driver, teacher, public health worker and bank clerk unions are to participate in the strike. The Sao Paulo steel workers union decided against joining the walkout because they recently concluded a contract with management after a month-long strike. Unions are demanding the reinstatement of automatic wage increases to compensate for inflation, real wage increases, job stability, unemployment insurance, a 40-hour work week, an end to privatizations, improved public services, reinstatement of workers who lost jobs due to cutbacks, agrarian reform, collective work contracts and non-payment of the foreign debt. On May 22, the most observable impact of the strike in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo occurred in the form of colossal traffic jams. In Rio, public transport problems, including subway, boat transport linking Niteroi with the mainland, trains, and some private bus companies were shut down. In northern neighborhoods of the city, eight buses were burned, and tires on another 18 were punctured. In Sao Paulo, strikers blocked major avenues, preventing passage of private automobiles. Strikers attacked about 100 buses with stones or attempted to puncture tires. Banks in the city proper were closed, although in the four nearby industrial belt cities (known as "ABCD"), banking activities were functioning normally. In Brasilia, urban transport functioned normally. Anti-riot and mounted police were seen patrolling city streets. In Rio de Janeiro, banks were open for business, as essential public services operated normally. (Basic data from AFP, 05/21/91; EFE, 05/22/91)

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