



Todos somos bombeiros! The struggle of fire fighters in the state of Rio de Janeiro

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Fire fighters in the state of Rio de Janeiro have been organising protests for half a year. They organised several demonstrations and protests and in September they set up a camp in front of the parliament building in downtown Rio. So what is their struggle about?

Many people often argue that workers should be happy that they even have a job and an income. These same people are bothered by the strike and protest actions, which they see as an unnecessary disturbance. But in this case, even the most snobby do-nothing new age folks must admit that the condition of fire fighters in Rio de Janeiro is desperate. They have the worst salary of all states in Brazil, which is already ridiculous, especially considering that Rio is one of the richest states in the country. A fire fighter in Rio earns about \$1000 a month which is around US\$710. Considering the extravagant cost of living in the city of Rio de Janeiro this wage is ridiculously low. In other states fire workers earn up to R\$5000. A suggested law to establish a minimum wage for all fire fighters in Brazil was recently rejected by the Dilma administration.

What is even more ridiculous than the low wages paid to fire fighters is the reaction of the government to their protest. They simply ignored the demands of the movement and refuse to negotiate. Their protest started on 9 April 2011, and as of October nobody has even talked to them. The governor, Sergio Cabral, who promised in his election campaign to promote public service workers, reacted by raising their salary by 5.8 percent at a time when national inflation is at 7.1 percent.

The ruling class has responded by using the tactic which is most familiar to people who have ever tried to change fundamental aspects of our capitalist society: state repression. In June 2011 the fire fighters occupied the main fire station in Rio to increase the pressure on the government. The military police (*polícia militar*) violently entered the building, shooting tear gas at the workers and arresting 439 people! Several people were injured, including children. The arrested workers were brought to the neighbouring city of Niteroi and denied food, water and medical attention for over 24 hours. The governor called the workers 'vandals' and accused them of public order disobedience and damaging a public building. They were threatened with a jail sentence of approximately ten years!

But in the following days there was a huge solidarity campaign in the city with many people joining demonstrations against the repression and in support of the fire fighters. The government was forced to drop charges against them and they were released after a few days.

This was by far the highest confrontation between the workers and the repressive forces. But since then the fire fighters have been repressed and intimidated on several other occasions. On 13 September, for example, two leaders of the struggle, Benevenuto Diacolo and Capitaio Marquesine, were arrested and kept for two days when they initiated a protest in front of the government palace. They were accused of 'disobedience'. Ridiculous.

So here lies a very important fact about this reaction. The fire fighters in Brazil are officially (or rather technically) members of the military, they are not considered civilians and fall under military legislation. This basically means that they are denied several labour rights which are guaranteed by the constitution. Among this is, of course, the right to organise a strike and be in a trade union. As they are not allowed to strike, they are forced to reduce their actions to

protests and other demonstrations, which makes it easy for the government to ignore them. The only time when they tried to increase their pressure, by occupying the fire station in Rio, the government answered with brutal repression and public denunciation. But, of course, everybody would recognize the importance of fire fighters. So if this is the case, why doesn't the government recognize their ridiculous working conditions and improve them? Isn't this unreasonable?

This is the inherent problem with the current global capitalist system. The naked fact behind this is that the improvement of the conditions of the working class can only be achieved through class struggle, not simply by argumentation. Although the argument to improve the wages and working conditions is obvious, the ruling class still continues to deny it. This means that they must be forced to adhere to demands of the working people.

In addition to demanding a minimum wage of R\$2000 the fire fighters demanded payment of their transportation to and from work and the end of gratifications (which is a kind of arbitrary payment to individuals decided by superiors). They also outline the general struggle against corruption in Brazil, which many of them consider as one of the most damaging problems in the country today.

This struggle is the first struggle of fire fighters in Brazil for many years. They have been living under these conditions and have accepted them for too long. Things are getting worse due to rocketing costs of living in Rio, mostly driven by the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016. The fire fighters don't have any political representation, and as mentioned above they are not allowed to organize a trade union. This is why they formed an association, called 'SOS Bombeiros', which functions like a trade union but is not officially recognised as one. Of course their political consciousness has developed a lot during their experiences. One worker mentioned that he considers one of the biggest political problems in Brazil is the lack of a link between different protests, for example the campaign for the improvement of public education and the campaign against the privatization of the health system organize separately. This is a known problem with social movements in Europe and many countries around the world. This is even more interesting taking in account that in Brazil there exist several associations of trade unions (CUT, CONLUTAS, INTERSINDICAL) which generally should provide the foundation for the unifying of struggles, but they are obviously not willing or not capable to do this. Clearly a more unified front is needed.

Finally, this struggle indicates that the widespread disappointment among the working class with the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) and its inability to meet even the most basic demands has led and is leading to an increasingly radical political consciousness shift and a surge in grass-roots workers organisation. This shift stands in direct contrast to the largely apathetic working class during the 8 years of the Lula administration and has made more clear the need and potential of a real revolutionary alternative left of the PT.

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