

Brazil: The social contradictions underlying the violent eruption in Sao Paulo

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For the past five days, chaos and terror have reigned in São Paulo, Brazil's financial capital and South America's largest city, due to the armed actions of the powerful PCC (First Command of the Capital) crime organization.

São Paulo has a population of almost 11 million people, with 15 million if one counts all of "Greater São Paulo" (including municipalities like Guarulhos, Osasco, Santo André, São Bernardo, São Caetano, Taboão and Carapicuíba, which are practically neighborhoods of the city itself). In this gigantic urban conurbation, which is itself a demonstration of the irrationality of capitalist urban development, the absolute poverty of the *favelas* (slums) exists side by side with the greatest luxury.

The poorest dwellings offering minimum shelter are located not far from mansions and fantastic condominiums the likes of which are seen in few cities in the world. Stalls run by street vendors, similar to those found in the poorest countries on the planet, are close by to commercial shopping centers similar to those found in New York or London.

During these five days of terror, this routine coexistence of opposites was disrupted, and the violence existing within the immense contradictions of the city of São Paulo and Brazil as a whole emerged in an abrupt form. The PCC criminal organization, in a civil war-style operation, carried out 251 attacks, openly contesting the power of the state. Police stations, police posts and patrol cars were machinegunned, law enforcement officers and even firefighters were shot dead. Fifteen bank branches and 80 city buses were set on fire.

The population was seized by panic: various department stores, universities and schools closed. Owners of bus companies, fearing for their property, did not allow their vehicles to leave their garages. Thousands of *Paulistanos* were left without any means of getting to work. Throughout all of Monday, May 15, a traffic jam that extended for 120 miles turned the city into a nightmare, with car horns and police sirens making the noise in the center city deafening.

In addition to this, there were revolts in many prisons, and vandalism took place throughout the country. In São Paulo itself, as in nearby cities like Campinas, and in various Brazilian states such as Paraná and Bahia, prisoners rose up, taking control of cell blocks and also stationhouses, and buses were attacked, turning the civilian population into a hostage of organized crime.

The toll of five days of violence, according to the secretary of state security, was 115 dead and dozens wounded, this in the city of Sao Paulo alone. In the early hours of Tuesday, May 16, there were still more attacks in Greater São Paulo, but by morning the buses began to circulate again in the city's southern zone, the area most affected by the developments, with the police guarding the terminals. On this day, however, a good part of the population stayed inside their homes, and Tuesday seemed like a holiday, with few cars on the roads, and with trains and buses running without passengers. As this is written, on Tuesday night, some buses are still being burned, but the situation appears to have suddenly quieted down. How is it possible that routine calm has been restored so abruptly?

Rumors are circulating that the governor of the state of São Paulo, Cláudio Lembo, entered into negotiations with the criminal faction, acceding to some of the PCC's demands. The principal go-between in these negotiations is said to be Orlando Mota Júnior, known as *Macarrão* (Noodles), who is serving a sentence of 48 years and eight months for crimes including robbery, theft, forming a gang and dealing in stolen goods. Orlando is reputedly one of the main PCC leaders, just under the gang's top figure, Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, known as *Marcola*.

The rebellion broke out because Marcola, Macarrão and other PCC leaders were being transferred to a maximum security prison known as the CRP (Centro de Readaptação Penitenciária) in Presidente Bernardes (more than 350 miles from São Paulo), where they would be isolated under a system known as Differentiated Disciplinary Regime, losing privileges and freedom of action that they still maintained in the regular prisons. Rejecting the transfer of its leaders, the PCC unleashed the five days of terror.

The revolts in the jails and the attacks on the outside were called to a halt on Tuesday, according to this account, precisely because the state government met some of the PCC demands. After the agreement, Macarrão would then have used a cell phone to order an end to the criminal operations and would have been immediately obeyed by his thousands of loyal followers. Among the demands of Macarrão was said to be a promise on the part of the government not to employ shock troops—known for their extreme violence—in suppressing the prison riots, and the return of a series of privileges for Marcola and other PCC leaders.

The suspicions of state negotiations with the criminal organization has caused outrage within much of São Paulo's population, but events like this are becoming common, with corruption dominating political life and all major institutions, revealing the deep crisis of bourgeois rule in Brazil.

In addition to the exposure of scandals involving the entire Lula government, the national congress and the judiciary itself, recently, with the arms robbery from an army barracks in Rio de Janeiro, there also took place similar negotiations with organized crime. At that time, there were rumors that the armed forces recovered the stolen weapons through negotiations with the *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command), another large criminal organization. Thus, a certain continuity and complementary relationship emerges between the bourgeois state, the expression of the ruling class in arms, and the large armed criminal organizations, which base themselves, in a certain sense, on the misery of the majority of the population and on the inhabitants of the *favelas*.

In this sense, it is worth recalling the origins of the *Comando Vermelho*. This organization was formed in 1979, when Brazil was still ruled by a military dictatorship. It emerged from the Cândido Mendes prison in Rio de Janeiro, as a product of the interaction between political prisoners and other inmates. The organization was born with a political connotation, calling itself the "Falange Vermelha" and making its motto "Peace, Justice and Liberty."

Initially gaining control of the cocaine traffic in Rio de Janeiro, it grew

rapidly, distributing the drug as well to the European market. In order to control the drug trade, it began to use heavy weaponry, large-caliber arms stolen from the army or brought in from Europe, particularly from the former Soviet Union, whose ex-bureaucrats were selling even anti-aircraft weapons at affordable prices.

This was the trajectory followed by one of the best known leaders of the Comando Vermelho, Fernandinho Beira-Mar. He began stealing guns from the Brazilian army and soon prospered, above all as an international arms trafficker. He was recently jailed in Colombia, where he made major deals with the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla movement), receiving cocaine in exchange for guns. It is believed that before recent splits within the Comando Vermelho, the organization had 6,500 armed men working directly in its operations and close to 300,000 individuals working indirectly. It was out of one of the splits that the PCC originated, operating more in the city of São Paulo and in the coastal region of the state.

Like the Comando Vermelho, the PCC has an ample social base in the prisons and in the favelas, boasting thousands of collaborators. Frequently these organizations control neighborhood associations, clubs, sporting and musical activities, even donating or obtaining certain small benefits for the population. They also organize “cultural” activities like the “funk” dances, where drugs and sex attract even bourgeois or petty-bourgeois youth. The funk singers compose hymns of exaltation to the criminal factions and even audio CDs eulogizing the leaders of the Comando or of the PCC.

These CDs are often well recorded and of a high technical quality, and are being played on pirate radio stations and sold by hundreds of street vendors in Rio de Janeiro and in São Paulo. In cities in the coastal area of São Paulo, principally in Santos and São Vicente, there are famous funk artists linked to the PCC, like Renatinho and Alemão, the principal “MCs” who record albums that are directly in homage to the organization. For example, in the CD “Guerreiro Não Gela” (A warrior doesn’t freeze), Renatinho and Alemão send messages to Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, or Marcola, who is one of the leaders of the civil war unleashed over the past several days in São Paulo.

We recall that the most successful CD produced by the duo of Renatinho and Alemão was entitled “Taleban—Parque dos Monstros” (Taliban, monsters’ park), which is what the PCC calls the maximum security prison at Presidente Venceslau, the place where Marcola and Macarrão are jailed. On the CD’s cover, the two *funkeiros* appear wearing dark glasses and military-style berets in front of a photograph of the World Trade Center in flames. In CDs found in the prisons, there can be heard bursts of machinegun fire and direct threats to members of the government and the police.

It is clear that these organizations have a social base among the inhabitants of the favelas, a “cultural” work and even an ideology that vaguely identifies with terrorist acts against the government and against international imperialism. Thus, the criminal organizations begin to appear as quasi political parties of the favelas, but obviously they are not.

Like organized supporters of football teams, who cheer fanatically for their side, and which also frequently confront the police, or like members of the Samba schools, who are also fanatical supporters of the banner of their community, organizations like Comando Vermelho and the PCC express, in reality, the absence of a true party of the working class and represent an obstacle to the construction of such a party.

These organizations are, in the final analysis, allied with and accomplices of the bourgeois state and products of capitalism itself, despite appearing at times to threaten interests of both. Therefore, there is nothing shocking about the state negotiating with them, as the government of the state of São Paulo appears to have done on this occasion.

However, in a far more dangerous form than the football fans or Samba schools, organizations like the PCC and Comando Vermelho,

strengthened by their control of drugs and their access to heavy weapons and money, despite being accomplices and partners of the bourgeoisie, also express the absolute irrationality of the capitalist system and its descent into barbarism. The events of these five days in São Paulo demonstrate that this process is already present in the streets.

On the other hand, if the bourgeois state is an accomplice of the PCC and the Comando Vermelho, also complicit (and even more so) are all those who have helped create false workers’ parties. Those who have betrayed the working class have helped these criminal organizations grow. In this sense, we recall that during approximately the same period that the Comando Vermelho emerged, close to 26 years ago, another red flag was also hoisted, that of the Workers Party (PT), the party which is today in power and also sunk in crimes not that dissimilar from those of Fernandinho Beira-Mar, Marcola and Macarrão.

What can one say about Silvinho Pereira (the former PT chairman, who is at the center of the corruption scandals), about the dollars stuffed in officials’ underwear, the murder of mayors, the mafias controlling garbage collection and public transport, all of the PT scandals? What about the “mensalão” (the monthly bribes) used to pay off almost the entire National Congress? What can one say about “Sombra” (the Shadow), one of the sinister figures of the PT implicated in the 2002 murder of the mayor of Santo André?

In this sense, all of those who built the PT, and the centrists who helped them do it, are accomplices, even if indirect ones, of both the PT mafia and that of Marcola.

Now, faced with the events in São Paulo, some parties of the so-called left, thinking (as always) about the next elections (and merely about gaining posts), have seized upon the violence to attack their potential political rivals and blame them for the lack of security. Depending upon their electoral position, some attacked the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) or the Party of the Liberal Front (PFL), while others the PT itself. The latter include people who themselves left the PT in some cases a few years ago, in others only a few months and even some who quit the party only days before (in advance of the deadline for seeking a different ballot line).

Others attack “neo-liberal capitalism” as the cause of the violence. Is this last culprit more to blame than capitalism itself? How many bursts of the PCC’s machinegun fire will it take to silence the electoral rhetoric and the pseudo-theory of these other indirect accomplices of organized crime in São Paulo and Brazil as a whole?



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