

Report from Rio by Silvia Palacios

IMF unleashes social convulsion

The biggest strike wave in 25 years is Brazilians' desperate response to the decision to pay the foreign debt.

Paradoxically, the week after Brazil brought itself up to date in paying interest on the foreign debt to the banks owed since the moratorium of February 1987, the biggest strike wave in the last 25 years broke out in the country.

The symptoms of social convulsion have claimed their first victims: three dead workers and 20 wounded in a clash between strikers and Army troops on Nov. 9 at the factory of the National Steel Company (CSN) in Volta Redonda, which is the biggest steel complex in South America, built by President Getulio Vargas during World War II.

The strikes, without exception, broke out in protest against the wage robbery which the government committed last April. At that time, to comply with the International Monetary Fund's demands, they suspended for two months the already minimal monthly cost-of-living escalator clause for government employees.

The present inflation rate is 1,000% annually, and no readjustment has made up for the wage debt. Worse yet, the government's economic team has gone to suicidal lengths to refuse to change its course.

During the first week of November, up to 1 million workers went out on strike, most of them government employees, in the nationally owned companies as well as those of the states and municipalities.

In the CSN steel complex, which is still on strike as of this writing, 23,000 workers stopped work; in Petróbras, the national oil company, the

number was 60,000, and all the refineries were paralyzed.

The company which supplies electricity to Rio de Janeiro is on strike, as are the teachers and the mass transit workers in the city of São Paulo; 338,000 employees of the ministries in Brasília have been on strike for over a month.

Rio is living through one of the most dramatic cases. The city is bankrupt, and 114,000 municipal employees have gone out on strike. Yet the federal government is refusing all aid, and instead is exerting intense pressure for the city to pay its foreign debt.

Symptoms of the growing social tensions are emerging daily, such as the looting of supermarkets in Rio de Janeiro, where people are desperately looking for something to eat, and the ripping apart of buses in response to the continual hiking of fares.

The Brazilians' rage over their impotence to maintain their standard of living was visible in the municipal elections of Nov. 15. The big victors were the anarcho-syndicalist or Marxist "theology of liberation" Party of Workers (PT); and the party of the social democratic Leonel Brizola, the PDT. Brizola was the mayor of Rio who built the Sambadrome as his big project, and whose culture minister was the most powerful Gnostic (i.e., satanist masquerading as a Christian) in South America.

Thanks to the IMF's "conditions," in the big cities—Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Porto Alegre—the PT surprisingly emerged from the Nov. 15 balloting as the second or first political

power. In Rio, first place was taken by Brizola's PDT.

Even the city of Volta Redonda, the scene of the bloody clashes, is controlled by the left. The leader of the metalworkers union of the CSN, Congressman Juarez Antunes, who is also a candidate for mayor there, is a wild-eyed leftist, a member of the PDT and of the union affiliated to the Party of Workers' trade union confederation, which is to a large extent controlled by Bishop Waldir Calheiros, a militant Marxist "theolibber."

In the growing radicalization, as was seen in Volta Redonda, the armed forces are being forced to go into the streets to put down protests in order to impose an economic policy which cannot be maintained, and which only helps out the banks, the speculators, and Moscow's hosts. But the military is also feeling internal rumblings and tensions over low pay.

And now the warnings made last April (when wages were frozen) by then-Chief of General Staff Brig. Paulo Roberto Camarinha are coming true. This "will bring unforeseeable political effects," he said. "No soldier or officer will try to stop demonstrations by strikers when they themselves would like to be participating," he added.

His warning is being fulfilled not only in the Volta Redonda case, but also in the attempted military rebellion which occurred in Minas Gerais. Between Nov. 5 and 6, the old military commanders headed by Col. José Geraldo de Oliveira (ret.)—who took part in the 1964 military movement—organized a protest against the governor over the low wages being paid to the military.

A solution was only reached when a substantial wage increase was promised. But if this is not delivered, the colonel said, "the population will rebel and take up arms."