

# Brazilian oil workers' unions shut down strike to "negotiate" with Labor Court

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The oil workers' union federation FUP, which is affiliated to the Workers Party (PT)-controlled CUT union federation, ended a three-week strike against Brazil's giant state-owned energy conglomerate Petrobras last Wednesday, February 19, after the Superior Labor Court (TST) set a "negotiation" meeting to discuss the demands of the strike.

The other oil workers' union federation, the FNP, which is affiliated to the Morenoite-led union federation Conlutas, followed the FUP's decision the day after.

Petrobras workers had been on strike since February 1 against the closure of the Nitrogen Fertilizer Factory (Fafen) in the southern state of Paraná, the layoff of its nearly 1,000 workers and plans by the government of Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro to privatize refineries and subsidiaries of the energy conglomerate.

Since the strike began, workers' participation had been growing, with 21,000 workers from 121 Petrobras units taking part in the strike before the oil workers' union federations decided to end it. It was the largest strike of Petrobras workers since 1995.

Last Monday, February 17, Ives Gandra Martins Filho, the right-wing TST minister, demanded an end to the strike as a condition for negotiations between the Labor Court and the oil workers union federations. This demand came on the same day that Martins Filho, who is famous for his anti-worker decisions, decreed the strike "illegal" because of its "political connotations" and reiterated the massive fines he had already imposed on striking unions.

He had demanded in the first week of the strike that 90 percent of the workers continue working, allowing temporary workers to be hired to scab on the strike. The oil workers, whose days on strike were already being deducted from their salaries, defied Martins Filho's decision and continued the walkout.

According to the FUP, the meeting with Martins Filho, which took place last Friday, February 21, managed to "guarantee the main points on the oil workers' list of demands", such as getting paid for the days on the picket line and canceling more than a thousand warnings issued against workers on strike. The meeting also managed to reduce the fines imposed on the unions by 95 percent, from R\$ 50 million (US\$ 11 million) to R\$ 2.5 million (US\$ 570 thousand).

However, the most important issue in the negotiation, the layoff of nearly 1,000 workers at Fafen, has been postponed to the next hearing, which will take place on February 27.

*Folha de S. Paulo* reported that Petrobras negotiated with the oil workers union federations in the Labor Court only on the "benefits offered to the laid off workers." Among the benefits already granted to laid off workers from Fafen, which were decided by the Regional Labor Court (TRT) of Paraná on February 18, are the maintenance of the health and dental care plans for two years and severance pay. The TRT also suspended the layoff of 396 full-time employees at Fafen until the next negotiating session on March 6.

The FUP declared the TRT decision and the negotiations with Martins Filho an "important victory". This alleged "victory", however, is a fraud. The FUP accepted the layoffs of the workers as long as there was negotiation with the Labor Court, while it did not question the closure of Fafen. According to the union's own estimate, the closure of Fafen could destroy up to 4,000 jobs in the production chain. In addition, the suspension of the layoffs involves only 396 full-time employees at Fafen, and does not cover the other 600 contract workers at the factory.

Another issue buried by FUP is the plan announced last year by the Bolsonaro government to privatize eight of the 13 Petrobras refineries and terminals of Transpetro, the subsidiary responsible for transporting oil and gas, which could lead to further mass layoffs. Last year, the privatization of BR Distribuidora, a former Petrobras subsidiary responsible for the distribution and sale of fuels, led to almost 1,800 workers, or 57 percent of its workforce, losing their jobs.

To wind up the strike and claim a "victory" under these conditions exposes the bankruptcy of the nationalist and pro-corporate program of the oil workers union federations, the FUP and FNP, and of the parties of the Brazilian pseudo-left and the bourgeois "left", which did everything to subordinate the strike to the TST negotiations.

The first to present this plan clearly was the federal deputy of the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), Jandira Feghali. In a speech delivered in Rio de Janeiro when the strike completed its first week, she issued the "demand that president [of the Lower House Rodrigo] Maia help in the negotiation and enforcement of the collective labor agreement".

Five days later, on February 12, she and federal deputies from the PT and the pseudo-left party PSOL (Party of Socialism and Liberty), along with leaders of the FUP and FNP and the Brazilian union federations, met with Maia and Senate President Davi Alcolumbre, both members of the right-wing Democratas

party(DEM), the successor to ARENA, the party which ruled under Brazil's military dictatorship. The meeting was welcomed by the FUP, which stated that they "pledged to seek a way out of the impasse, together with the government and the management of Petrobras."

CUT president Sérgio Nobre, also present at the meeting with Maia and Alcolumbre, went so far as to say that "conflicts [between workers and companies] have to be resolved at the negotiating table." Before, he had also met with TST ministers demanding that the strike at Petrobras to be "mediated" by the Labor Court.

At the same time, this effort to seek a "negotiated" way out of the strike was accompanied from the beginning by nationalist rhetoric from the unions denouncing the "deindustrialization of Brazil" and defending "national sovereignty." In a February 3 demonstration, the main Brazilian union federations joined in an appeal to the Industry Federation of the State of São Paulo (FIESP), for an alliance between the unions and corporations behind a "development project" for the country.

All the implications of this nationalist and pro-corporate policy were later expressed by the Chemical and Pharmaceutical Industry Workers Union of Paraná, the state where Fafen is located, which filed a lawsuit against the closure of the company. Presenting the interests of the capitalists and the workers as one and the same, the lawsuit says that Fafen provides "essential inputs for agribusiness and the auto engine part industry" and that its shutdown would "increase deindustrialization and compromise national sovereignty."

This is the essential policy of the Brazilian unions: subordinating workers to a faction of the national bourgeoisie dissatisfied for tactical reasons with the Bolsonaro government, including multi-billion-dollar Brazilian agribusiness and the FIESP.

The CUT and the other union federations did everything to keep the oil workers' strike isolated. The two union federations representing 110,000 workers from the state-owned postal company Correios twice postponed a strike during the oil workers' walkout, scheduling an assembly to decide to call a strike only for March 3. The Bolsonaro government also plans to privatize the Correios next year.

At the same time, the oil workers' union federations were unable to mobilize Petrobras' contract workers, who represent the large mass of the workforce. The great increase in the number of contract workers at Petrobras took place during the 13 years that the PT was in power, reaching 80 percent of the company's workforce by 2014. This, together with the 2013 pre-salt oil field auctions by Dilma Rousseff's government, which brutally repressed workers' protests against them, exposes the fraud of the PT's posturing as an opponent of privatization.

This failure to extend the strike was also expressed by limited actions of the oil workers' unions to sell fuel and cooking gas below the market price. These actions took place in order to denounce Petrobras' pricing policy, which adjusts fuel prices according to changes in the value of the national currency, the *real*, against the dollar and global oil prices.

In May 2018, the soaring price of diesel fuel was responsible for a nearly two-week truckers' strike, bringing Brazil to the brink of

collapse. Last week, two truckers unions threatened to go on strike in support of the oil workers, but the same Labor Court to which the FUP and FNP were directing their appeals for negotiations prevented road blockades with multi-million *real* fines against the unions.

The truckers' initiative came amid signs that the Petrobras strike could affect fuel supplies in Brazil, as the president of Brazil's Oil Agency (ANP) admitted last week. In the port of Santos, the largest in the country, where one of the truckers' unions joined an oil workers demonstration last Monday and threatened to strike, the walkout was already causing delays in supplying fuel to cargo ships.

The FUP and FNP decided to end the strike just as it started to have an impact on the Brazilian economy. Together with Brazil's ruling elite, the union federations feared that the strike could spread to other sections of the working class and get out of their control.

The Brazilian pseudo-left also played its role in isolating the strike and making fraudulent calls to the union federations.

The Morenito tendency in the PSOL, Resistência, which has members in the FNP leadership and defended the end of the oil workers' strike, insisted that "further expanding the dialogue with the population ... on the topic of gas and fuels ... is essential for us to continue accumulating strength and guiding the national political debate." In other words, the mobilization of Petrobras workers must be subordinated to a nationalist perspective and the "political debate" between Brazil's rival bourgeois factions.

Meanwhile, the Movimento Revolucionário de Trabalhadores (MRT), affiliated with Argentina's Socialist Workers Party (PTS) and responsible for the *Esquerda Diário* website, continued to sow illusions in the unions, demanding that the CUT and other federations—including the ultra-right Força Sindical, which was linked to the military dictatorship—break the isolation of the oil workers by calling "demonstrations in support of the strike". In other words, the MRT was telling Petrobras workers to rely on the very unions that were preparing to betray the strike and throw them at the mercy of the TST labor court.

The oil workers' strike has exposed the bankruptcy of the pro-corporate and nationalist policies of the unions and the pseudo-left organizations orbiting these corrupt organizations.

To go forward, Petrobras workers need to establish new independent organizations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees, that will work to develop a unified campaign of industrial and political action together with other sections of the working class in Brazil and internationally.

Such organizations must be guided by a socialist and internationalist strategy that rejects the dictates of the profit system and aims to establish a workers' government that will place basic industries, along with the banks, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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