

After ending oil workers strike in Brazil, union approves plant closure and layoffs

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Last Thursday, March 6, the oil workers federation FUP, led by the Workers Party (PT), approved the closure of Fafen, Petrobras' fertilizer plant in the state of Paraná, and the firing of all its employees. This was the final filthy outcome of the unions' betrayal of the largest oil workers strike in Brazil in the past 25 years.

The threat to close the Fafen plant was the trigger for the strike that spread to Petrobras facilities all over the country in opposition to not only the destruction of some 1,000 jobs at the plant, but also the proposals for the privatization of refineries and other Petrobras units by the government of Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro.

After three weeks on strike, the movement had brought out 21,000 workers at 121 Petrobras facilities and was gaining momentum every day. Then the FUP told workers to comply with the demands of the Labor Court (TST), which ordered an end to the strike as a condition for negotiations.

This surrender organized by the unions was celebrated by the bureaucrats as a "victory" for the workers, because the TST "suspended" the layoffs at Fafen until negotiations could take place. To suppress the growing movement of the workers, they did their utmost to cover up the their betrayal of the strike. "[We made] the decision to maintain the level of mobilization ... We are indicating the provisional suspension of this movement," said union leader Deyvid Bacelar in an official statement from the FUP. He concluded: "If we don't make progress in this negotiation, we will resume this historic strike of the membership."

The union's promises were blatant lies. In the negotiating session held on February 27, Petrobras' management made it clear that it did not intend to grant a single millimeter to the workers' demands for a halt to the closure and layoffs at Fafen, not even regarding the relocation of direct employees—396 of the nearly 1,000 workers at the plant—to other units of the company.

Leaving this meeting, Bacelar made a new statement, in which he once again bragged about the "fruits of the historic strike," this time the mere fact that Petrobras' management had "sat at the table" with the union!"

Instead of "resuming the historic strike," as they had promised, the unions declared that the FUP's Deliberative Council would discuss the proposals and then present them to the workers. The position taken by the council only came to light on March 6, when they argued in an assembly in front of the Fafen plant for the workers to accept its shutdown and the destruction of their jobs. They were told that they could choose between two different layoff plans "won" in the labor court negotiations.

Trying to cover up this shameful event, the FUP said nothing directly about it. It treated the decision as if it was of merely local interest, limiting itself to releasing a note from the regional affiliated union, Sindiquímica-Paraná. The note regretted the layoffs as "another sad chapter in the policy of deindustrialization of the country and the dismantling of the Petrobrás System by the Bolsonaro Government."

This was, in fact, another sordid chapter in the history of unions' betrayals of the Brazilian working class. This betrayal was not led exclusively by the FUP. The so-called opposition union, the Oil workers National Front (FNP), led by the Morenoites of the CSP-Conlutas federation, contained its membership longer, delaying the start of the strike, and calling for workers to return to work together with the FUP. The tendencies of the pseudo left, like the Revolutionary Workers' Movement (MRT), were also accomplices, promoting illusions in a possible turn to the left by the unions, justifying the subordination of the workers to the reactionary union apparatus.

Other pseudo-left organizations also endorsed the bourgeois nationalist program promoted by the FUP. Their feigned opposition to privatization—which will destroy jobs and workers' living standards—is entirely

designed to channel workers' anger behind self-styled opponents of Bolsonaro within the top layers of Brazil's capitalist ruling elite. Their demands for a policy of subsidized fuel prices and for Brazilian agribusiness to buy fertilizers produced by Petrobras instead of importing them from abroad promote the false hopes that economic nationalism and protectionism can rescue the Brazilian economy from the deepening crisis of international capitalism. Their paramount political aim is preventing workers from breaking from the bourgeois-nationalist forces represented by the PT.

The reactionary and anti-working class character of Brazil's unions is not an accident. Like the unions in other parts of the world, they are incapable of responding in a progressive way to the economic and social transformations that have accompanied the globalization of capitalist production. In the face of a world economy increasingly unified by highly interconnected production chains, the unions, based on a national structure and subordinated to the national state, seek not to defend the jobs wages and conditions of their members, but rather to increase the competitiveness and profitability of their "own" country's industry at the expense of the living standards of the working class.

The campaign by the PT and its affiliated unions against the "deindustrialization of the country" is a direct appeal to sectors of the Brazilian industrial bourgeoisie that are divided over the economic policies pursued by Bolsonaro and his Minister of the Economy Paulo Guedes.

In the midst of the oil workers' strike, the trade unions demonstrated in support of this bourgeois program in front of the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (FIESP), demanding a "development project" for the country. This position was summed up politically by Fernando Haddad, who ran as the PT's candidate in the last presidential elections against Bolsonaro. In an article written for *Folha de São Paulo* at the beginning of January, entitled "Is there a Brazilian industrial bourgeoisie?" Haddad lamented the decreasing share of industry in the country's GDP and criticized the national bourgeoisie for its lack of a "national project," that is, for having abandoned the PT as its preferred political representative.

The PT systematically dismisses the predominance of world capitalism, attributing the crisis of the Brazilian economy entirely to the mistakes of Bolsonaro and Paulo Guedes. The 1.1 percent growth of Brazil's GDP in 2019, well below expectations, was interpreted by Gleisi Hoffmann, the current PT president, as a result of "the

Bolsonaro family's confusions that drive away investors and Guedes' neoliberal impetus." The same was said by Lula, the former president of the party, about the rise in the price of the dollar: "It goes off because nobody trusts this government."

It is true that the policy pursued by Bolsonaro and Guedes is incapable of resolving the contradictions that have kept the Brazilian economy close to the lowest level of its crisis over the past five or six years. The policies adopted by the current government to encourage private investment show no signs of success, and the projections for this year are poor.

However, the nationalist perspective presented by the PT and endorsed by the pseudo left is absolutely bankrupt. The growth of the Brazilian economy during the first PT governments was largely based on the influx of Chinese capital and the high prices of commodities on the world market. These conditions no longer exist.

The sharp fall of the Brazilian Stock Exchange at the beginning of this week, following that of stock markets around the planet, was directly linked to the fall in oil prices, driven by the falling growth of the Chinese economy. This resulted in a drop of about 30 percent in the value of Petrobras shares.

There is no solution to the crisis faced by Brazilian workers on a national level. The Brazilian economy is highly intertwined with the world economy, and the struggle of the Brazilian working class can be waged successfully only to the extent that it is united with that of workers from all over the world, who face the same conditions of exploitation dictated by the global capitalist elite. For this to happen, workers must break with the nationalist and pro-corporate PT and the unions, establishing workers' committees directly controlled by the rank-and-file. Above all, a new revolutionary leadership must be built, a Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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