

Brazilian workers clash with unions over coronavirus crisis

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The vicious choice advanced by Brazil's fascist President Jair Bolsonaro at the beginning of the coronavirus crisis – that workers keep working, exposing themselves to the coronavirus, or starve – is becoming more and more concrete for millions.

As Bolsonaro conducts a virulent agitation for a premature return to work, in tune with US President Donald Trump and the interests of Brazilian and international capitalists, layoffs and wage cuts are spreading throughout the country at the same pace as the new and deadly coronavirus.

A new provisional measure approved by Bolsonaro on April 1 allows companies to suspend contracts, reducing working hours and cutting wages by up to 70 percent. With only partial compensation from the government, workers are facing drastic shortfalls in their incomes. The government has cynically named its measure the "Emergency Program for Maintenance of Employment and Income."

The unions that claim to represent the workers, are running to approve agreements with these measures as their foundation. But this criminal movement did not start only last week.

Ten days earlier, Bolsonaro had failed to implement another even more radical provisional measure, which allowed the suspension of employment contracts without any financial compensation to workers. In the few hours that the measure lasted, before being revoked on the afternoon of the same day it was announced, unions were quick enough to negotiate deals on its basis.

The Union of Workers in Hotels, Bars, Restaurants in São Paulo and Region (Sinthoresp) signed a deal authorizing, for four months, the suspension of contracts without payment of wages for workers in 32 municipalities, in addition to São Paulo, the largest city in the country.

This agreement was sharply criticized. One worker said: "This corrupted union has signed a criminal deal that will destroy the lives of millions of workers." Another added: "The intention of the unions is clear, either the worker dies of hunger or with the pandemic, so the boss does not pay anything in both cases; this is a clear example of why unions

should be EXTINCT!"

Over the last few weeks, strikes, work stoppages and protests have been carried out almost daily by bus drivers and ticket collectors in several Brazilian states. The bus companies are proposing mass layoffs and pay cuts that could affect more than 70,000 workers in April, according to the companies' own assessment. Just this Monday, April 6, two industrial actions by bus drivers and collectors have shut down bus terminals in Campinas, São Paulo, and Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul.

The unions have been calling for these strikes and stoppages to alleviate pressure from the workers, and are quickly suspending them by reaching partial agreements in the interest of the companies, reducing workers' wages and benefits. Every effort is made to isolate the workers locally, preventing the unification of the movement.

An agreement made behind the backs of the workers in Rio de Janeiro, in the southeast of the country, was denounced on Twitter. The wife of one of the workers wrote: "Here in Rio de Janeiro, the bus company workers' union made an agreement that harms the workers. Unpaid vacation, 15 days of unpaid leave, you either sign or are fired".

The pro-corporate policy adopted by the unions in the midst of the coronavirus crisis is hardly surprising; it is merely a continuation of their previous policy. Wagner Santana, the president of the Metalworkers Union of ABC (SMABC), a historic base of the Workers Party (PT), made this clear in an interview with the business newspaper *Valor Econômico* on the eve of the approval of Bolsonaro's provisional measure.

Santana defended, in the name of maintaining jobs, the resumption of layoffs and other policies along the lines of the Employment Protection Program (PPE), a milder version of the current Bolsonaro program, proposed by the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), run by the PT, and implemented by the PT administration of President Dilma Rousseff.

Santana's argument that these measures "saved a lot of

jobs" is completely undermined by data from his own union: since 2011 the number of metalworkers in the ABC region has fallen from 119,000 to 68,000. The only result of these policies has been the safeguarding of corporate profits, especially of the transnational corporations operating in the country.

At General Motors, the workers have gone through bitter experiences with several of these agreements. Over the past week, the unions have coordinated the implementation of yet another hated layoff program.

The metalworkers' union run by the Morenoites of the PSTU at the GM plant in São José dos Campos, which initially claimed to be against the agreement signed by the other unions, is now leading a campaign for its approval. After its second meeting with the company, union leaders announced that they were willing to accept a layoff program if it were implemented in the same way as those signed in previous years, which involved minor losses to workers. This position was widely rejected by the rank-and-file, which said it was not willing to accept any form of layoffs.

The union, after meeting with GM for the third time, reported that the negotiations had ended and that the company would not make any concessions. The workers were told they would have to assess whether the proposal was "feasible" and vote. In response, the workers' opposition was even more overwhelming. Hundreds of comments on Facebook denounced the union.

"They keep us waiting and waiting to bring us the same thing in the end. They make it seem like they're fighting and later they come back passive," one of them commented. Others said, "GM doesn't want to give in? Just don't accept its proposals."

"This union is completely without direction. 3 meetings with the company to present this... No more trust in our representatives, let's refuse this shameful agreement..."

The experiences of Brazilian workers point to the urgent need to overcome the reactionary structure of the unions, which has served only as a blockade against the working class movement.

This was radically demonstrated by the uprising of call center operators throughout Brazil, who organized strikes and militant protests against the unsafe conditions imposed by large corporations in the name of their profit interests. State and municipal companies and governments responded to the workers by giving extremely limited concessions with one hand and, with the other, redoubling the attacks.

An AlmaViva worker in São Paulo reported to the WSWs that most operators maintained the strike for more than a week. However, the company is now trying to force a return to work. "I didn't get the home office, they would have to give me both the computer and the internet. They're not

giving it to me and they want me to keep going to work normally. They've threatened that after 14 days of uninterrupted absences, they'll let you go for just cause... I have friends who are coming back to work for fear of starvation."

The WSWs also talked to call center operators in Salvador, Bahia, who organized a page on Instagram, called *senzala80*. They reported that although the local city hall has ordered the release of 30 percent of workers from the companies, "there is a lack of oversight by the competent agencies".

At the company ATMA, the workers of *senzala80* said, "It is still very crowded and now they are not respecting the 30 percent since they brought the majority of the people who were sent off back today ... They are all apprehensive about being fired. The company 'established a constitution', where they dictate the rules".

A similar situation is happening in Sergipe, also in the northeast of the country, where AlmaViva managed to reverse a judicial decision and forced the return of 30 percent of the workforce.

Fighting the workers' movement opposing AlmaViva, the union that officially represents this sector, Sinttel-SE, published a note repudiating the protests: "The greatest enemy that the Sinttel-SE has faced is the virus of misinformation spread daily by unscrupulous people who, ignoring the risks of contagion from COVID-19 and the possibility of employer reprisals, try to induce workers to participate in actions at the company's gates."

Against this union blockade, the workers of Salvador affirmed that they continue to work within the companies to organize new protests and strikes. They say that the creation of the web page was very important: "It is where we can talk without reprisals about our dissatisfactions and even fear. Here we receive complaints, we publish it. Here we have a voice".

They also see their struggle in the context of the strikes carried out worldwide by the working class against the conditions of insecurity imposed by capitalism. "We've been going through a lot of problems for a while now... so this [the risk of contamination by COVID-19] was a kind of spark," one of them said. "It would be important to have this international unification, all united to achieve a single purpose. It would be good because we have no unions, they usually pull to the company's side and ours is no different."



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