

Union shuts down Brazilian postal workers' strike after court paves way for privatization

Gabriel Lemos**30 September 2020**

Brazil's two postal workers union federations decided on September 21 to shut down a 35-day strike against the state-owned Brazilian Post Office (Correios) after the Supreme Labor Court (TST) ruled on the same day in support of the company management's withdrawal of benefits. These benefit cuts are part of the plan by the government of Brazil's fascist President Jair Bolsonaro to privatize the postal service by 2021.

Postal workers had been on strike since August 17 after the company decided to withdraw 70 of the 79 provisions of their collective agreement, which reduced benefits related to food, vacations, maternity leave and the education of employees' children, among others. Initially, the agreement signed in October of last year was to be in effect until 2021, but the Supreme Federal Court (STF) accepted a request from the Correios management to abrogate the two-year agreement at the end of August.

The Labor Court's decision maintained, besides the nine provisions that had already been proposed by the company, another 20 social provisions from last year's collective agreement that involved no increase in the company's expenses. The Labor Court also imposed a wage increase of 2.6 percent for the postal workers, barely half of what they were demanding.

The withdrawal of 50 out of the 79 provisions of the collective-bargaining agreement represents a harsh attack on postal workers, who, according to the statistics institute DIEESE, may have their wages reduced by between 43 percent and 69 percent. "This is the first time that we have ruled on a matter in which a company withdraws practically all of its employees' rights," labor court justice Kátia Arruda acknowledged.

The deciding opinion of the Labor Court was drafted by the right-wing judge and member of the reactionary Catholic order Opus Dei, Ives Gandra Martins Filho. He also proposed ruling the strike abusive and deducting every day on strike from the workers' wages. The Labor Court plenary rejected this proposal, but decided to deduct wages for half the days on strike and to apply a daily fine of R\$100,000 (US\$18,000) against the unions if workers failed to return to work.

This workers' strike was one of the longest against the Correios management and the largest one since 1995. It was

also the largest strike during the Bolsonaro government, which demonstrated workers' determination to fight back against the attacks on their living conditions, now aggravated by the uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Having been considered an essential service at the beginning of the pandemic, thousands of postal workers were infected by the deadly virus, and at least 120 are known to have died from COVID-19.

The end of the strike came amid the government's drive to privatize Correios. The Bolsonaro government recently announced that it plans to send a bill to the Brazilian Congress by the end of this year to end the monopoly of the postal service. In fact, Correios management had justified its withdrawal of the provisions of the collective-bargaining agreement by saying that this would adapt it to "a business logic similar to that practiced in the market."

Last Wednesday, Fábio Faria, whose ministry of communications is responsible for Correios, said that the privatization of the company is on the "agenda" and that five companies would be interested in purchasing Correios, among them the American firms Amazon and FedEx and the German DHL. The site *Poder360* reported that by November the consulting firm Accenture will present a privatization model for Correios, a process that could destroy up to 60,000 of the company's 100,000 jobs.

Operating in nearly all of the country's 5,500 cities, Correios has developed a unique logistical capacity over its 357 years of existence in a continent-sized country like Brazil. It is this capacity, together with the possibility of retail companies such as Amazon to operate in places far from large urban centers, that interests the companies willing to purchase Correios. In the last three years, Correios has also made hundreds of thousands of dollars in profits, not only from the postal service, but also the parcel delivery service, which is open to free competition in Brazil.

Shutting down a strike amid these brutal attacks and the increasingly real threat of privatization is only the latest in a series of betrayals by the two union federations of postal workers, Fentect, affiliated to the Workers Party (PT)-controlled CUT union federation, and Findect, which is affiliated to CTB, the union federation controlled by the Maoist

Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB). Both union federations represent what is most corrupt about Brazilian unionism, using the structure of 36 local unions to divide postal workers and finance the union bureaucracies and the political parties behind them.

In 2013, the bureaucratic union apparatus in five of the local unions split from Fentect and created Findect in order to receive the union federations' share of the transfer of union dues—which until 2017 were obligatory for all workers and historically constituted one of the Brazilian state's mechanisms of control over workers' organizations. Despite the small number of affiliated unions, Findect controls the two largest postal workers' unions, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which include about 40 percent of Correios' workforce. During the strike, Findect boycotted local rallies and marches, and the only national demonstration against Correios management, an empty “virtual assembly,” was called on the same day as the Labor Court hearing.

Fentect and Findect's justifications for shutting down the strike could not be more fraudulent. On its site, Findect wrote that “there was no defeat, only an advance by the enemy.” Fentect said in regard to the Labor Court decision that “this result does not contemplate the workers and will lead to an impoverishment of the workers,” but even so it “guides the affiliated unions to return to work.”

As for the CUT president, Sergio Nobre, the Labor Court's decision takes away “everything that postal workers have conquered over more than 35 years of struggle,” adding, “what happened is very serious because the Labor Court is a court that should defend the workers.” In addition to sowing illusions in the capitalist courts, the CUT kept the postal workers' strike isolated from the beginning. It controls more than 2,000 unions in the country, including those representing other sections of federal workers threatened by the Bolsonaro government's privatization schemes, and teachers, who are entering into struggle against the reopening of schools in Brazil.

It was also during the postal workers' strike that the CUT-affiliated union federation of Petrobras oil workers, FUP, accepted a two-year agreement proposed by the company that it claimed would “strengthen the fronts of struggles against privatizations, involving other categories, governments, parliamentarians and civil society.” However, the FUP's claim that it is fighting against the privatization of Petrobras is a fraud.

In recent weeks, plans for privatizing Petrobras have advanced amid negotiations between the union federations and Petrobras management. Petrobras' president, Roberto Castello Branco, declared on September 9 that the sale of Liquigás, a liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) distribution company, and the oldest Petrobras refinery in Brazil, is expected in the coming months. Last year, the Bolsonaro government completed the sale of BR Distribuidora, which destroyed 1,800 jobs at the former Petrobras subsidiary responsible for fuel distribution,

and it announced the privatization of eight of the country's 13 oil refineries.

At the beginning of the year, the closure of a Petrobras subsidiary, Fafen, against which Petrobras oil workers carried out a 19-day strike, led to the firing of 1,000 workers and thousands more in the production chain. On September 7, Castello Branco announced that next year it is expected that 11,000 of the 40,000 Petrobras direct employees will leave the company through a voluntary layoff plan.

The FUP subordinated the strike against the closure of Fafen to all possible layers of the Brazilian state—including the Labor Court and the right-wing presidents of the two houses of the Brazilian Congress—with empty appeals against the country's deindustrialization and in defense of national sovereignty.

The same nationalist script was seen followed in the Correios strike. The PT said that “Bolsonaro betrays national sovereignty to hand over Correios,” while the CUT advanced the slogan “Defending Correios is defending national sovereignty.” However, the struggle of postal and oil workers, as well as that of the entire Brazilian working class, requires a defense not of national sovereignty, but rather the independence of the working class. The calls for a defense of national sovereignty mean a subordination of the workers' struggle to the capitalist state. At the same time, they oppose the independent mobilization of the entire working class in defense of jobs and living conditions.

All of the organizations that depend upon and operate within the structure of national states, such as the trade unions, have been completely undermined by the globalization of the capitalist economy. The problem is not merely the treacherous bureaucratic leaderships of the unions, as the Brazilian pseudo-left claimed in the face of the defeat of the postal workers' strike, but the unions themselves, which no longer ensure any wage gain or improvement in working conditions at the national level.

Postal workers and the entire Brazilian working class cannot defend themselves against the intensification of capitalist exploitation imposed by globalization by reforming unions or restoring national sovereignty. Workers must create new organizations of struggle, independent rank-and-file committees, which must turn to the Brazilian, Latin American, and international working class in a common struggle against the source of modern exploitation: the capitalist system.



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