

With thousands facing layoffs, Brazilian unions push temporary work at Ford

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The two main trade unions leading the negotiations with Ford on the shutdown of its operations in Brazil are urging workers to return to work next Monday, February 22, in a clear gesture of their obedience to the automaker's profit interests. Even knowing that they will soon be laid off, the workers are to return to the factories to meet the company's demand for spare parts.

This imposition of the return to work comes amid pressure from Ford dealerships, which have shown concern about a shortage of spare parts for the cars that are still for sale. The announcement of the plants' closure provoked an immediate drop in sales of Ford vehicles in Brazil. In January, the company's sales were cut in half in comparison to December, totaling only 8,100 units sold in the entire country. It was the biggest drop among car manufacturers in Brazil.

According to a report by the UOL Carros website, the Brazilian Association of Ford Distributors (Abradif) warned Ford at the end of January that parts were already scarce. In their document submitted to Ford, the organization states that its members have received notifications from the Consumer Protection Agencies (Procon) due to the unavailability of maintenance components in the authorized network.

Of the three plants owned by Ford in Brazil, only the one at Horizonte, in the state of Ceará, has continued to operate. It is expected to shut down completely by the end of the year. The other two plants, in Camaçari, Bahia, and Taubaté, São Paulo, which employ the larger number of workers, have been completely closed since January 11, the day the automaker announced the end of production in Brazil.

After a few weeks, however, Ford started to recall part of the workforce at Camaçari and Taubaté. Workers were notified individually by telegrams or

phone calls from their bosses but despite direct intimidation did not respond to the summons.

In an interview with the *O Globo* newspaper, the president of the Camaçari Metalworkers Union, Julio Bonfim, had reported: "Ford is sending notices, but the adhesion is zero, everything is stopped, nobody is going. The plant was forced to rent a shed because in the region of Simões Filho [the neighboring municipality] there were no people here in Camaçari to unload goods from 90 truck drivers."

To guarantee the return to work, Ford had to call upon the services of the respective unions, not only to formalize the new order, but also to convince the workers. It was with this purpose that conciliation hearings were held this week between the unions and Ford executives.

During a hearing, the president of the Camaçari union declared himself in favor of the return to work, presenting disagreements only in relation to the criteria for this return. "The union wants to comply with the return conditions, yes, but the union wants to discuss criteria for these workers to return. Not the way Ford is doing it. Ford is recalling all workers, even disabled workers, workers who are injured," Bonfim argued.

While the company executives denounced an "illegal strike" by the workers, accusing the union of leading this resistance, Bonfim denied that he was responsible: "There is no strike, there is no stoppage." In other words, at the moment when Ford was most dependent upon the workers, when the workers' power over the company was revealed, the union subordinated that power to capitalist profit interests, disarming the working class struggle.

In a video released right after the negotiation hearing, the president of the Taubaté Metalworkers Union, Cláudio Batista, presented as an achievement the fact

that the agreement had obtained “the negotiation with Ford’s global executives, an unprecedented fact because we never managed to negotiate with Ford’s executives aiming to reverse the closure.”

Despite being held separately, the two hearings, in Camaçari and Taubaté, approved virtually identical resolutions urging the workers to return to their factories with the guarantee that there will be no layoffs “until the end of negotiations.” During this period, Ford will also maintain the payment of wages, even for those who are not called to work.

Regarding the workers who didn’t show up after Ford’s initial call, there will be no reductions in salary. On the other hand, starting on the 22nd, those who are called and do not show up will be subject to the “applicable measures.” Both agreements were later submitted to a workers’ vote and have been approved.

Besides the political implications involved, this return to work comes amidst the worst moment of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. More than 300,000 new cases and 7,520 new deaths were reported last week in Brazil, the week with the second highest number of deaths since the pandemic began. This alone justifies the need to keep workers at home, stopping all non-essential production.

This issue was mentioned during the Camaçari hearing, with a request—but not a demand—from the union that Ford test all workers who return to work, considering the recurrence of COVID-19 medical leaves recorded throughout the pandemic.

In an anti-scientific and disgusting posture—similar to that of Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro and aligned with the ruling class as a whole—one of the company’s representatives at the hearing replied that “there has been no infection inside the factory to this day.” Challenging the workers’ intelligence and blaming them for getting infected, she then said that “the employees who tested positive acquired the disease outside [the factory].”

After the insistence of the judge overseeing the hearing, who stressed the urgency of the health crisis in the state of Bahia and throughout the country, the company limited itself to “think carefully” about the proposal. Thus, workers will return to their workplaces only under the legally minimum “safety protocols,” absolutely insufficient at this critical moment of the pandemic.

In addition to Ford executives and government officials, the unions must also be denounced as those responsible for subordinating workers to the profit interests that threaten the health and living conditions of the working class.

Under such conditions, the return to work will be especially bitter for Ford workers. It urgently poses the question: who should control the Ford factories, the working class or the capitalists?



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