

Facing COVID-19 outbreaks and privatization, oil workers shut down refineries in Brazil

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The deadly combination of worsening working conditions and the uncontrolled acceleration of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil is provoking strikes and work stoppages at Petrobras refineries since the beginning of March. On Monday, the strike by nearly 900 oil workers at the Landulpho Alves Refinery (RLAM), in Bahia, entered its 18th day. It has been strengthened by the walkout of fellow Petrobras workers at the Gabriel Passos Refinery (Regap), in Minas Gerais.

Both refineries have suffered severe COVID-19 outbreaks. At RLAM, two oil workers died this month after being infected with the coronavirus: operations technician Carlos Alberto, 55, and shift coordinator Wagner Plech, 52. In addition to these fatalities, more than 80 other workers have tested positive for COVID-19 at the facility, with eight of them being hospitalized and three admitted to an Intensive Care Unit.

The coronavirus outbreak at RLAM began after management took action to prevent a strike in February, when workers were protesting against the sale of the refinery. “Workers report that cases of contamination by the virus began to multiply about six days after the eve of their [scheduled] strike [on February 17], when RLAM’s General Manager authorized the entry into the facility, without any kind of safety controls, of contract and outsourced workers, placing up to three teams of operators in CCLs [Local Control Houses], who slept on mattresses on the floor and in a closed environment,” the union reported.

At Regap, the decision to stop the work was taken after more than 200 workers, including contract and outsourced employees, tested positive for COVID-19 in March alone. Eleven of them had to be hospitalized due to severe cases of COVID-19. The cases at Regap skyrocketed during a “maintenance stop,” a periodic procedure for check-up

and renovation of the structure that requires the presence of up to 2,000 extra workers. The procedure was started on February 28 and was supposed to last about 30 days.

The coronavirus is also spreading uncontrollably through Petrobras’ terminals and offshore platforms. According to a *Reuters* report, oil workers at the Campos Basin in Rio de Janeiro have pressed charges at the Labor Prosecutor’s Office demanding that Petrobras provides clarification on the spread of the coronavirus on oil and gas platforms, following a spike in cases in March.

Considered by the government as “essential,” oil workers are being pushed into highly infected workplaces to ensure a high production of fuels and oil derivatives and meet Petrobras’ demand for profits. While subjecting its employees to deadly conditions, the company has closed 2020 with a net profit of 7 billion reais (US\$ 1.27 billion).

From the beginning of the pandemic until mid-February, 60 oil workers had already died from COVID-19. According to the Oil Workers Federation (FUP) website, “More than 11 percent of Petrobras workers have already been infected. This is twice the national average. Each week, more than 400 workers are infected and an average of 20 are hospitalized.” According to the FUP, these numbers are an undercount, because “Petrobras insists on not releasing data regarding outsourced workers.”

The spread of COVID-19 in Brazil, which has reached the staggering average of over 2,000 deaths a day, was the last drop of water for Petrobras workers, who were already on the point of exhaustion. In the midst of a privatization process over recent years, Petrobras has substantially reduced its workforce, forcing workers into exhausting shifts and exacerbating the risk of accidents. Today, in several units, the majority workers are outsourced.

This set of conditions has led to a wider mobilization of workers. Besides the ongoing strike at the RLAM and Regap refineries, frequent work stoppages are taking place at the Manaus Refinery (Reman), in Amazonas, at the Abreu & Lima refinery and at the Suape water transportation terminal, in Pernambuco, as well as at facilities in Espírito Santo and São Paulo.

Although presented by the unions as “regional strikes,” with specific demands, these mobilizations express a common demand for safe working conditions, more jobs and better salaries. They also represent a continuation of the long strike that the oil workers carried out in 2020.

Just as with the strike last year, the recent walkouts have taken place in the midst of a rise in fuel prices. At the beginning of the month, protests against the rising fuel prices by truck drivers, app delivery workers and app drivers spread through various parts of the country. Some of these strikes included demonstrations outside the refineries, pointing to their powerful unity with the oil workers.

The necessary unification of these workers, however, faces major resistance from the trade unions, which are fighting to keep oil workers divided from each other, insisting on the separate and particular character of the struggles at each refinery, and, above all, isolated from the working class as a whole.

To respond to the murderous policy of the ruling class, which combines massive layoffs and pay cuts with deliberate exposure of workers to the deadly virus, oil workers must form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and unite with their class brothers and sisters to fight for the shutdown of all non-essential economic activities, establishing workers control over the workplaces that continue to operate, and demanding full income for all working families.



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