

Railway workers strike in São Paulo amidst wave of transportation struggles

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A strike by São Paulo railway workers last Thursday, July 15, shut down an important section of public transport in Brazil's largest city over the demand for higher wages. More than 40 stations and four railway lines of São Paulo's Company of Metropolitan Trains (CPTM), which carry about one million riders daily, were affected by the strike.

The action of the CPTM railway workers takes place amid a wave of strikes by transport workers in Brazil and a general growth of struggles by the working class against the lowering of living standards and the unsafe conditions in workplaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The strike was launched after the CPTM presented a contract proposal that, once again, offers a zero percent increase in wages. Railway workers are entering their third year without a readjustment of their salaries, accumulating a wage deflation of more than 10 percent, which was the official inflation rate for this period. In addition, the company, which is managed by the São Paulo state government, has not paid workers what they are owed from a profit sharing plan.

In an attempt to discredit the strike, CPTM president Pedro Moro attacked the demand for higher wages, insinuating that railway workers are "privileged."

"CPTM's average salary is much higher than the average salary in Brazil. The benefits that CPTM provides to its employees are also above what is even in the CLT [labor laws] and, therefore, we request again that everyone return to work so that we can maintain the operation, not to harm the population," said Moro in an interview on *Band News* radio.

In a press statement, the CPTM president said that the average salary at the company is 6,500 reais a month (US\$ 1,244). But this number represents a false "average," a product of lumping the pay of the top

salaried positions—a privileged upper middle-class minority—with that of regular workers, who constitute the majority of the labor force and whose "average salary" is 2,800 a month (US\$ 536). And the "benefits" mentioned by Moro are, in fact, threatened by the company's current contract proposal.

In addition to lowering wages, the CPTM has pursued a criminal policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A CPTM railway worker interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* stated:

"The employees in the 'risk group' [those of advanced age or suffering from comorbidities] working in the stations were only removed after a court decision. [The CPTM] reversed that decision in mid-November 2020 and made these employees return to work, even though they weren't even vaccinated.

"We had a huge number of deaths among workers. It is not known for sure how many, since the company did not offer the data even with a union request. But there was a period when we received as many as four death notices in a single day. Until they started not sending death notices anymore.

"The feeling of all the employees was of fear and impotence, since not even a tribute could be paid to the colleagues who had passed away, and not even death notes were sent. The feeling is that the worker is just a number and that his life is worthless to the management.

"Despite all the sacrifice that the railway workers have made and are making during this pandemic, the company, subservient to the state governor [João Doria, of the right-wing Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB)], is intransigent... This morning the CPTM president ratified the 'proposal' of a zero readjustment."

Last week's strike was the first at CPTM since 2015.

Over that period, railway workers have faced a significant deterioration in working conditions, with a reduction in the number of jobs and the loss of rights and benefits acquired by previous generations. This process was facilitated by the trade unions, which stifled workers' dissatisfaction while a process of privatization of the company advanced.

"Since the inauguration of Governor João Doria and the change of the company's presidency, today under the management of Pedro Moro, the intention to privatize the company is noticeable," the CPTM worker said. "In 2018, workers noticed the need for hiring more professionals, which didn't occur, making clear what was to come.

"In the privatization process of rail lines 8 and 9 there was no struggle by the unions against the flagrant threat to workers' jobs. Most of the employees were against the privatization and were willing to fight against it, even by exercising their right to strike, an agenda that was never raised by any of the unions."

The CPTM worker denounced the unions' efforts to keep railway workers isolated from other sections of the working class and blocking any initiative of struggle during the pandemic.

"There is a gigantic distance between the unions and the workers. Some of the employees already wanted to strike when the company managed to reverse the court decision and put the lives of employees with comorbidities at risk. The unions were previously called by metro workers to participate in a joint strike, but they declined."

The unions are also working to isolate the workers within the CPTM itself. Four different unions claim to represent the workers at the company, each one claiming their rule over a set of rail lines. Last week's strike was called by three of the unions—all of them linked to the UGT federation (General Union of Workers)—while the fourth union—linked to the Worker's Party (PT)-controlled CUT—called a strike for July 20.

While the UGT strike was decided in poorly publicized assemblies, with almost no railway workers participating, the CUT strike was approved through lists left at the stations. This form of voting raises mistrust among workers and can prevent them from joining, because of exposure to possible retaliation by the bosses.

The bureaucratic control of the unions over the strike also prevented railway workers from appealing to the working population that depends on the public transport system and suffers from the same attacks on living standards and unsafe conditions under the pandemic.

During the strike, spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity broke out, like at the Grajaú station, in the southern end of the city, where residents joined the railway workers by blocking avenues in protest against the high transport fares.

But there were also confrontations involving desperate people trying to get to their jobs, which have been widely exploited by the bourgeois press with the intention of turning the population against the strike. In the Francisco Morato station, located on the outskirts of São Paulo, passengers tried to force the gates open and were brutally repressed by the Military Police who attacked them with stun grenades and rubber bullets. A woman was shot in the face and lost sight in one eye.

In face of these pressures and the divisions they promoted, the unions managed to end the strike at the end of the day, only with a promise of payment from the profit sharing plan, but nothing in relation to a wage increase.

The CPTM strike, as well as recent strikes in the subway and bus transport systems in Brazilian capitals, which directly affect the commutes of large sectors of workers, have demonstrated the necessity and the potential for a conscious and unified action by the working class.

This task, however, cannot be accomplished through the unions, whose interests are directly bound up with those of the employers and clash head-on with the needs of the workers. The railway workers must take control of the struggle in their own hands. They should organize independent rank-and-file committees and appeal to their class brothers and sisters in Brazil and internationally, by joining the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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