

New rail strike in São Paulo exposes conflict between workers and unions

3 September 2021

A strike by 2,000 railway workers in São Paulo paralyzed three commuter rail lines operated by the state-run CPTM company on August 24. The strike was marked by the militancy of the rank-and-file, having as its central demand a wage rise. It came in the wake of a strike 40 days earlier on four other lines operated by the company and a wave of strikes in the transport sector.

Just as with the July 15 railworkers strike, rank-and-file workers of the Central do Brasil union (linked to the Workers' Party) responded to the strike call with a massive walkout, shutting down more than 20 stations in the eastern sector, the most populated region of metro São Paulo.

Together, these two strikes in an essential transportation sector of South America's largest metropolis in just over a month, mark a significant defiance of the straitjacket imposed by the unions, which had done everything in their power to prevent them from happening.

In a December 2020 newsletter, the São Paulo Rail Workers Union, representing workers of the four lines that went on strike in July, declared unabashedly: "Never cross your arms!" The phrase—meaning never sit back doing nothing—was the title of an article aimed at channeling the workers' struggle into mere legal actions.

The other unions were no different. The Central do Brasil union postponed the strike in every assembly held over the last months and enforced the isolation of the workers, basing itself on decisions from the regional Labor Court.

In one of the meetings, held on August 4, the maneuvers of the union officials were questioned by dozens of workers. The rank-and-file workers were outraged by a proposal to postpone the strike and the fact that the union was charging them with a negotiation fee.

"The union representative made a speech in order to persuade the people not to accept the proposal for the payment of the PPR [an annual bonus]," a rail worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "A vote was taken, and the

great majority was in favor of the union's indication not to accept the proposal. After the vote, the representative announced that, for non-members to be represented, there would be a 10 percent charge on the full amount of the PPR.

"This generated a buzz because he didn't explain it before the vote. It was voted on again and this time it was a very close result, with 33 votes in favor and 30 votes against following the union's direction."

The proposals presented at the meeting by the union were devised to corner the rank-and-file, forcing them to choose between their rights being attacked by the company, which wanted to postpone the payment of the bonus, or by the union itself, which wanted to get their hands on part of the amount.

"Apparently, the union, even with all the attacks that the workers have been suffering, is still running after its own interests," said the railway worker.

All four unions that claim to represent CPTM employees played a crucial role in the deterioration of the living conditions of railway workers over the last decade. Especially in the last two years, the worsening of living standards has accelerated both due to the process of privatizing the company, and the attacks on workers' rights promoted by the ruling class at the national level, through successive "labor reforms" and massive unemployment.

Despite the deep and widespread attacks, the unions systematically acted as agents of the company and the government, reinforcing the isolation of workers of each line with fragmented meetings devised to water down opposition and convince workers to accept the company's proposals.

In a string of defeats organized by the unions, the CPTM workers were already entering their third year without any pay increase. With union efforts to prevent a struggle failing, the company offered a 4 percent wage increase relative to 2020, plus 6 percent for 2021. But the

proposal included the payment of wages owed from 2020 over 10 installments, and the workers refused, launching a strike.

Another railroad worker who spoke to the WSWs pointed out that “without the organization of the rank-and-file, nothing would have happened, because the union didn't have enough people engaged and didn't have the initiative to go to the stations and really mobilize the working class.”

The radicalization of the railway workers—demonstrated especially by the train drivers, with 100 percent adherence to the strike—was quickly answered by the government. While the strike was still taking place, the state secretary for mass transit, Alexandre Baldy, announced the dismissal of ten workers “to set an example.”

Baldy said, during an interview on *Radio Bandeirantes*, that the fired workers had been selected “according to their operation teams” for having “incited” the strike or “harmed those who wished to go to work.”

A few hours after the beginning of the strike, 13 workers had already received telegrams with dismissal notices. The company's intimidation started to generate indignant reactions in some WhatsApp groups of rank-and-file workers, who started to demand, in addition to the wage rises, “zero dismissals” as a condition for returning to work.

As the transit stoppage in São Paulo became a major issue in the press, the negotiation of the strike became a TV show. At the end of the day, the government and union representatives sealed an agreement, live, on the police chase show *Brasil Urgente*. The union accepted the deal immediately, even before consulting the rank-and-file. The proposal included the payment of overdue wages in five installments, instead of 10; and the company committed itself to “review” the layoffs announced earlier.

Two days after the promise on national TV, the company had not yet rehired the dismissed workers. According to rail workers, “the rank and file were on fire, everyone was outraged.” A condition for a new strike was developing and, realizing it faced a new workers' mobilization, the CPTM made the reincorporation of the dismissed workers effective.

Despite the “victory” speech made by the unions, the “achievements” of both strikes—the bonus related to 2020 paid in installments and an inflationary correction that does not meet the erosion of real wages—absolutely failed to meet even the most urgent needs of the railway workers, most of whom today receive a salary of about R\$

2,800 (US\$ 470) a month.

In addition to struggling to pay their bills, the railway workers, along the entire Brazilian and world working class, are facing a global system of class exploitation in deep decay, which has a particularly advanced expression in Brazil in the fascistic figure of President Jair Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro continues to show his absolute contempt for the 580,000 lives lost in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. His repeated defenses of continued work and exposure to the virus have the most terrible roots in recent world history. Last year, to publicize its actions towards the pandemic, the government advocated the slogan “work makes you free,” the same one that was used on the gates of Nazi concentration camps. Bolsonaro has already given countless demonstrations that he is willing to suppress basic democratic rights to ensure “the freedom to work,” or rather the freedom to exploit workers.

It is impossible to evaluate the performance of the rail unions and draw a balance sheet of the recent strikes outside of this context. The role played by the unions during the pandemic, helping to keep forcing workers into deadly workplaces, was fundamental to the implementation of the ruling class' murderous policy of “herd immunity.”

Under these conditions, the claims of the so-called “left” bourgeois organizations like the Workers' Party (PT), as well as its pseudo-left satellites, repeated in the current strike, that workers were “victorious” and had “partial achievements” are ludicrous. These forces, and the unions affiliated to them, are pillars of support for a rotten government like Bolsonaro's, in the face of which their fading radical pretensions and their formal titles of “workers' representatives” fall apart.

A genuine railroad workers' movement requires a break with these false representatives and their rotten union structures. This means building independent grassroots committees that are independent of and opposed to the unions, direct themselves to their class brothers, nationally and internationally, and that are armed with a socialist program.



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