

GM workers in Brazil reject contract, continue strike in defiance of union and courts

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On Thursday, workers at General Motors in São Caetano do Sul, in São Paulo's ABC industrial region, voted overwhelmingly to continue their strike initiated on October 1. They defied a decision by the Regional Labor Court (TRT), which declared the strike illegal as of Friday.

The readiness of workers to continue their struggle for jobs and decent wages is an expression of the growing resistance of the working class in Brazil and worldwide to the assault on their living conditions and the ruling class's demand for a new "normal" of mass COVID-19 infections. Recently, strikes in defense of living conditions were also conducted by Jurong shipyard workers in Espírito Santo, metalworkers in Paraná, app delivery workers throughout Brazil, and yesterday by teachers and municipal employees in São Paulo.

Since the beginning of the year, the living conditions of the working class have seriously deteriorated in Brazil. Studies have shown that as early as December 2020, more than half of the Brazilian population was living under food insecurity, a situation that has worsened in the face of food and fuel price hikes and a cumulative inflation rate of 10.25 percent over the past 12 months. The federal government's emergency aid during the pandemic—which had already been cut in half and terminated for tens of millions of recipients—will definitively end this month, leaving 39.8 million more without the vital income supplement.

Throughout this period, automakers have been compensating for the instability caused by the global shortage of auto components by cutting labor costs. Tens of thousands lost their jobs or had their work contracts suspended. In January, Ford closed all of its plants in Brazil, leaving thousands unemployed. Stellantis recently announced the layoff of 1,800

workers for three months at its plant in Betim, Minas Gerais, starting on Monday, October 18. Renault will put 300 workers in Paraná on layoff for five months and has also opened a voluntary dismissal program for 250 employees.

The strike at the São Caetano plant, which employs 7,600 workers, was declared after months in which GM workers in Brazil had their labor contracts suspended in order to reduce the company's expenses. By October 1, the workers in São Caetano had been working for more than a month on their expired contract.

In its new contract proposal, GM demanded cuts in workers' income and benefits, including cutting food stamps provided by the company by more than half and ending job stability for injured workers. On Thursday, the TRT labor court presented a less aggressive version of the attacks demanded by the company and established a daily fine of 50,000 reais (US\$ 9,158) against the union for each day the strike continues.

The workers, however, refused to bow to this intimidation. The massive vote to continue the strike came after weeks of efforts by the São Caetano Metalworkers Union to contain and suppress their struggle. After GM went to court last week asking that the strike be declared "abusive," the union advocated that the decision on the fate of the strike be left to the courts.

After the TRT's decision in favor of the company, the president of the union, Aparecido Inácio da Silva, known as Cidão, cynically admitted that the judge "had already indicated that the approval of the food stamps would be very difficult." He proposed: "Maybe stopping *completely* is not the goal. We can stop some sections while others continue to work and this will show GM." And, to the sound of boos from the workers, he concluded: "To win is to give a truce at this

moment. The union's recommendation is to return to work, even more so because we don't want to see the workers being fired."

The Metalworkers Union of São Caetano has made it clear that it will do everything in its power to bury the strike, having met for weeks with the company to discuss the best conditions to break the workers' opposition.

In March 2020, GM responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by starting a temporary layoff program that affected 15,000 workers in Brazil. This measure was part of a policy of mass layoffs and wage cuts in industrial sectors across Brazil promoted by the capitalists with the help of the unions. The São Caetano Metalworkers Union blocked any resistance from the workers by holding a rigged online vote on the layoffs that had already been agreed to by the unions. At the time, Cidão declared: "We respect and defend the rights of the workers, worried about their health, but we have to see the issue of production, no one can afford compromises if there is no income."

In the face of intense opposition from rank-and-file workers, the union is claiming that they will be isolated and weakened if they strike.

The current crisis has exposed the depth of international integration of production, in which a shortage of components produced in one region affects production lines across various countries. The current conditions are especially favorable to workers, and immediately raise the possibility of a coordinated struggle by autoworkers in Brazil and internationally.

Last Wednesday, more than 10,000 workers at John Deere in the United States went on strike for the first time in 35 years, fighting to ensure decent working conditions and wages and to defend newly hired workers from pension cuts. The UAW's corrupt contract deal was rejected by 90 percent of the workers. After the massive rejection last Sunday, the UAW postponed the start of the strike while looking for a pretext to stop it.

Workers at John Deere formed a rank-and-file committee to organize themselves independently of the union and unify their struggle with that of workers in other factories and workplaces in the US and around the world.

The struggle in São Caetano do Sul is being watched with nervousness by GM executives and corporatist

trade unions around the world. A spokesman for the UAW in Brazil gave a statement at the end of Wednesday's assembly in São Caetano. He said: "We have been following [your strike] since October 1." He added a fraudulent claim that the 40-day strike of GM workers in the US in 2019, suppressed with decisive help from the UAW, won improvements for workers' living standards.

As at John Deere in the US, GM workers in Brazil must form organizations independent of the unions, committees elected by the rank-and-file, to carry forward their struggle. This fight must be coordinated with autoworkers and other sections of the working class in Brazil and around the world, by building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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