

Wildcat strikes erupt in Brazil's steel industry as workers defy unions

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In the midst of the intensification of a nationwide and global strike movement, Brazilian workers at Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN) began a series of strikes and demonstrations across the country, demanding higher salaries and bonuses.

The strike began on March 31 at the Casa de Pedra mine, located in the city of Congonhas, in the interior of Minas Gerais. According to CSN's website, it is the "oldest iron ore mine in operation in Brazil" and "currently has a production capacity of 30 million tons per year." The movement was joined by workers at the Pires mine, which is in the neighboring town Ouro Preto.

In both units, the movement is led by the trade union Metabase Inconfidentes, affiliated to the trade union federation CSP-Conlutas and controlled by the Morenoite Unified Socialist Workers Party (PSTU). Despite the workers' demonstration of struggle throughout the week, challenging the company with effective participation in the strike and demonstrations, the union bulletin on April 7 reported:

"Are we on strike after all? No, comrades! We are in a mobilization process according to the deliberation of the assembly that took place on April 1, in which 77.11 percent of the workers decided to reject the company's proposal."

The bulletin still tried to defend the union's refusal to demand an indefinite strike: "In our initial understanding, this measure [the strike] is precipitous and can defeat the movement...."

The treachery of the pseudo-left union in Minas Gerais became even more evident after the movement spread beyond its ranks. Workers rose up independently of their unions at the Port of Itaguaí—a major iron ore export hub—and at the Presidente Vargas Steelworks in Volta Redonda, the largest steel mill in Latin America,

both in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

According to a report on the website *Foco Regional*, the strike at the Presidente Vargas plant on the morning of the April 5 was carried out by a group of maintenance workers "in a demonstration that reinforces the lack of credibility of the current leadership of the Metalworkers Union *and even of those who call themselves opposition leaders*" (our emphasis). While the union in Volta Redonda is led by the Força Sindical, the official opposition is headed by the PSTU Morenoites, the same ones who refused to declare a strike at the mining units in Minas Gerais. Also, according to the report on the Volta Redonda steelworkers strike, "the action was supposedly spontaneous, gathering between 40 and 50 workers of the shift that ended at 3 pm."

Following the example set by the wildcat strike in Volta Redonda, CSN workers in Porto de Itaguaí also stopped working. As reported by the *Jornal Atual* newspaper, "The movement in Itaguaí is actually a reflection of what is happening in Volta Redonda." In an interview with the newspaper, the vice-president of the union himself confirmed that the movement "came from the employees themselves and was not organized by the union."

Foco Regional reported a substantial increase in the movement in Volta Redonda the following day, with a new strike and a strongly attended assembly inside the mill. In a video posted on the internet, a worker declared to the applause of the assembly, "Either it improves [the agreement proposal] or we stop everything."

The third day of strike at the mill was even stronger, with an assembly fully occupying the facility's courtyard. In a video shared on social media, workers are called to shout "our battle cry" and respond

massively: “Workers united will never be defeated!”

The cry of the workers today hearkens back to historical struggles of the working class in Latin America, and particularly the struggles against the military dictatorship in Brazil, initiated with a US-backed coup in 1964 and officially ended in 1985 as a result of a semi-insurrectionary uprising by the working class.

In 1988, CSN workers put the newborn “democratic” regime to the test by staging a massive sit-down strike and were brutally repressed by the Army. Three metalworkers were killed, and hundreds were wounded in what became known as the “Volta Redonda massacre.” The strike had strong support from the population and the workers’ funeral service was celebrated with a massive march, gathered under the cry “People united will never be defeated!”

More than three decades later, CSN workers today face changed conditions, both in relation to their unions and the company.

In 1988, CSN was still a state-owned company and with less capacity. Today it has facilities in 18 Brazilian states and two other countries—Germany and Portugal. Established as a transnational corporation, CSN had a net profit of 13.6 billion reais (US\$ 2.9 billion) in 2021, which meant a 217 percent increase over 2020. But it continues to pay low wages to its roughly 30,000 workers in the country, with a large portion even lower than 2,000 reais (US\$430) per month.

The Workers Party (PT)-linked CUT trade union federation, which led the 1988 strike, played a systematic role of channeling the movement of strikes and demonstrations that emerged in the crisis of the military regime toward domestication of the working class and adaptation to capitalist relations of production as well as to the bourgeois state, culminating with the rise of the PT to Brazil’s presidency.

Having played the role of a buffer between the ruling class and the workers for over 30 years, these unions have crystallized as capitalist agents, and today face consistent rejection by the working class. Hatred towards the unions has increasingly manifested itself as the cost of living has risen in Brazil, with food prices up more than 10 percent in the last 12 months.

The CSN workers’ movement is an integral part of and represents a qualitative step in a wave of strikes in

different sections of the economy throughout Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, street sweepers went on a ten-day strike for better wages despite all the efforts of demobilization by the union affiliated to the UGT federation. Education and transport workers are also on strike in at least five states, demanding better salaries. In the state of São Paulo, metalworkers at Avibras are on strike against the lay-off of more than 400 workers, while workers at Toyota issued a strike warning against the company’s decision to close its long-standing plant in São Bernardo do Campo.

In the face of the intensifying economic and political crisis in Brazil and around the world, with the ruling class dragging millions into hunger and subjecting humanity to a policy of mass death with an uncontrolled pandemic and a threat of nuclear war, the only progressive social force is the working class.

Its strength has been demonstrated in the largest wave of social protests since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic: in Greece, workers staged a 24-hour general strike on April 5; in Sri Lanka, massive demonstrations demand the resignation of the president in the face of the worst economic crisis in decades; in Peru, mass protests against the rising cost of living are facing violent repression by pseudo-left President Pedro Castillo, in which five people were killed in the past week.

The coordination of these struggles internationally is advocated only by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) with its fight for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We call on workers in struggle throughout Brazil to study the IWA-RFC manifesto, form rank-and-file committees and join this critical international initiative.



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