

Reinstate the fired strikers at Brazil's CSN! Unify the struggles of the working class!

Brunna Machado
15 April 2022

After a week of a growing strike movement of Brazilian steelworkers independent of the trade unions, the CSN (Companhia Nacional Siderúrgica) is imposing massive layoffs trying to end the uprising at the Presidente Vargas Steelworks in Volta Redonda in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Up to now, about 120 workers have already received layoff notices. The letters are being sent without the signatures from their bosses, which increases the suspicion of illegal layoffs.

In an attack against workers' right to strike and with the clear intention to nip the movement in the bud at Volta Redonda, the company aimed the first layoffs precisely against members of the commission elected by the rank-and-file workers to negotiate in their name. In its press releases, the CSN stated that it will only negotiate with the Metalworkers Union (affiliated to the right-wing Força Sindical federation) and that it does not recognize the "legitimacy of parallel movements that occur during union negotiations."

A CSN worker, who preferred to be identified only as Anonymous Blue Collar, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The strength of the workers is all we have. We organized the commission with 10 people, but it's like a war, and they have put down the generals."

The WSWs and the Socialist Equality Group in Brazil demand the immediate reinstatement of the members of the rank-and-file commission and of all fired workers and urge workers across the country and internationally to campaign in solidarity with the striking CSN workers. This struggle is one of the main bastions of a growing workers' rebellion extending across Brazil and around the world, from Sri Lanka to Spain, Turkey, Iraq and Peru, as well as the United States and Europe, in response to capitalism's universal destruction of working class living standards.

Besides the layoffs, CSN is punishing workers with suspensions, blocking them from using the cafeteria, issuing internal press releases attacking the strike movement, and putting sectional leaders under direct pressure. Despite all these efforts, the commission and other fired workers remain in the movement.

"They continue in the Juarez Antunes Square, which is our landmark from 1988," said Anonymous Blue Collar. In the square, there is a monument honoring three workers killed by the Brazilian Army while participating in a sit-down strike at CSN in 1988. In a video posted on the internet, a member of the workers commission says: "We are here in front of the square [in tribute to] the three workers killed to build up our strength with you guys. We have just been fired. ... We have a labor cause, and CSN tried to shut the workers' mouths once again. They are terrified."

The reason the company insists on negotiating only with the union is obvious. According to Anonymous Blue Collar, the strike was called after an attempt to reach an agreement behind the workers' backs. The union established no communication with the workers for two years and then "a negotiation came out of nowhere, they did it without our knowledge. ... This created even more anger."

The last time the CSN workers heard from the union was in 2020, when it guaranteed the company a long-term take-away contract. "[The union] revealed the content for the two-year agreement, and everybody you talked to said that they were not satisfied. But suddenly, the 'yes' vote appears for the company's proposal," said the interviewed worker.

He continued: "What one can conclude from the agreement they made two years ago is that there was corruption. The union abandoned us. It does not represent us; it is a mafia. Even the union president is

being investigated because his assets don't correspond to what he earns.”

This agreement was responsible for freezing wages, which have already suffered a real loss of 30 percent given the added inflation during that period. For more than two years, the average salary of the workers at CSN stood at 1,635 reais (US\$350) a month.

The worker also criticized the corporate media blackout about the extremely significant strike movement. “The movement that is happening is very big. It should be exposed in the *Jornal Nacional* [Brazil's main news TV program], but the media is totally indifferent. What is happening is a human rights issue. And the people are closing their eyes.”

The struggle against exploitation at CSN and for the reinstatement of the fired workers can only be guaranteed with the expansion of the strike, with the adherence of all sectors in the Volta Redonda Steelworks and in the other CSN units across the country. The independence of the workers organization from the unions is a critical factor for the development of this movement.

At the CSN facilities in the state of Minas Gerais, the union led by the pseudo-left CSP-Conlutas buried the strike, isolating the workers in Volta Redonda. In the Port of Itaguaí, the workers also rebelled against the union, carrying out strikes independently. In every case there is an urgent need to establish permanent rank-and-file committees, which are instrumental not only for workers to control and decide on the struggle in each workplace—begun by the Volta Redonda commission—but also to coordinate the strike nationally in an uncompromising movement in defense of the workers' interests.

Last year, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The ICFI wrote: “The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

To free the labor movement from the mafia leadership of the trade unions and the bankrupt so-

called oppositions, it is necessary to draw the lessons from the experience of the last 30 years of union betrayals. To break the isolation imposed by the corporatist trade unions and unite their struggles with workers across Brazil and with other sections of the international working class, democratic organizations of rank-and-file workers must be established.

Recalling the historic 1988 strike, Anonymous Blue Collar pointed out:

“My father was there [at the Volta Redonda Steelworks occupation], he stayed on the plant's roof, because if he went down, he would be caught by the Army. ... That strike revolutionized, changed things for the better for everyone. The problem is that what the strike won, the union made us lose little by little. In the '88 strike, at the cost of blood, because three workers died there, we won the 6-hour shift. Then, in 2017, the union negotiated the 8-hour shift back again. It sold the death of our comrades for 4,000 reais (US\$850). It was the blood of the workers in exchange for a 4,000 reais bonus.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)