

Brazilian steelworkers at CSN reject union-backed sellout agreement by more than 96 percent

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4 May 2022

On Wednesday, April 27, steelworkers at the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN) in Volta Redonda, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's largest steel mill, massively rejected a new proposed agreement negotiated between the union and the company. Only 262 voted in favor, with 6,396 against. That is, the agreement was defeated by more than 96 percent.

The new proposal, coming after a workers' rebellion against negotiations led by the unions behind their backs, was for an 11 percent raise, representing an increase of only 180 reais (US\$35) a month, for workers who currently earn monthly 1,640 reais (US\$327). In addition, the contract did not include reinstatement of approximately 400 workers who were fired after participating in wildcat strikes.

The voting was by secret ballot and had to be closely watched by the rank-and-file, who denounced a record of union frauds in previous years. On social media, workers reported the ostensible presence of plainclothes police and union security guards. When trying to address the ranks, unionists were booed.

Last week, the Metalworkers Union of Sul Fluminense, run by Força Sindical, Brazil's largest trade union center, declared its open hostility to the workers by filing a lawsuit against a worker member of the union opposition and part of a Workers' Commission formed during the wildcat strike at the Presidente Vargas Steelworks in Volta Redonda.

The worker, Edimar, is the only one among the 10 leaders of the Workers' Commission who was not fired, since he is also a CIPA member (Internal Commission for Accident Prevention). This mandatory body in every Brazilian company with more than 20 employees prevents the firing of its members as a

matter of law.

Although he was not fired, Edimar was judicially charged by CSN with "acts of vandalism and threats." The company asked the courts for measures to prevent him from blocking the entrance and exit of other workers in the company. Simultaneously, Edimar was sued by the union, which demanded an order to keep him 100 meters away from the ballot boxes.

This coordinated action between union and company reflects the rotten character of unions in the current era, which no longer serve as negotiators for better wages and conditions for workers, but rather as agents of employers and the capitalist ruling class.

What the Força Sindical mobsters are doing today with the CSN workers in Volta Redonda is not an exception, but the rule. Since its creation in the 1990s, it has preached in favor of the market, privatizations and pragmatism in relations between capital and labor.

In the Metalworkers Union of Sul Fluminense, Força Sindical is supported by CUT, the largest union federation in the country, run by the Workers Party (PT). The union's hated president, Silvio Campos, received the support of PT unionists in the last union election held in 2018.

In its own ranks, such as in the ABC Metalworkers' Union in São Paulo, CUT has pursued a policy of union-company agreements that give up more each year. This has already led to a universal lowering of wages in factories in the historically industrial ABC region, and a significant reduction in jobs. In 2010, the union had a base of around 100,000 workers, and today it has less than 70,000.

CUT has played a role in historic defeats, such as the closure of Ford's São Paulo plant in 2019.

CUT drags behind it, under the same policies, other union federations such as the CTB, run by the Maoist PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil). Just like its counterparts, the CTB has stacked up defeats for the working class, among them the massive layoffs at the 2021 closure of the Ford plant in Camaçari, in the state of Bahia.

In Volta Redonda, the CTB presents itself as the official opposition alongside the CSP-Conlutas, led by the Morenoites of the PSTU (Unified Socialist Workers Party). The latter has been in control for more than 15 years of the Metalworkers Union of São José dos Campos in São Paulo, a major industrial center that includes factories such as those of Embraer and General Motors.

Despite the red colors and its seemingly more radical talk, the fact is that the union mints downgraded agreements year after year.

Since 2010, two-thirds of GM's 12,000 workers have been laid off. In 2012 and 2015, the union defended the layoff programs proposed by the company as workers' achievements that would protect their jobs. Those same "protected" workers were subsequently laid off. As if that were not enough, in 2019 and 2020 the union justified cutting workers' wages and benefits.

It is also the CSP-Conlutas that runs the Sindicato Metabase Inconfidentes in Minas Gerais, where the current CSN movement began with a broad participation of workers in the strikes and demonstrations. The CSP-Conlutas, however, based itself on the most vacillating elements of the rank and file that didn't adhere to the movement to shut it down. It now blames the workers themselves for not fighting, after working hard to discourage them.

As "opposition" to the Força Sindical in Volta Redonda, the CSP-Conlutas and the CTB have given the strikers material support, with sound trucks, meals and lawyers. But in reality, their effort to conquer one more union apparatus is done in order to prepare a political defeat for the workers' movement that arose against the union.

It is significant that in none of the opposition bulletins is there a defense of maintaining the strike. Nor does the opposition advocate for the development of an independent organization, even as the union led by the Força Sindical again takes control of the negotiations with the company.

The so-called opposition won't take the fight against the union and the company to the end because that would risk both its control over its own ranks in other unions, as well as its plans in Volta Redonda. The only policy that it clearly points to is a "change" through the next union elections, which will only lead the workers to a dead end.

CSN workers don't have to call the CSP-Conlutas-CTB slate's bluff and wait for the next elections, given that there is already a vast experience and knowledge about the unions accumulated by the working class that points to the way forward.

The struggle in the largest steel mill in the country demands a leadership that is based on the most advanced workers in each company, as well as in each country, that is, a clarified leadership that does not confuse the workers with half-truths and fake "leftist" policies. What is required is a socialist leadership that defends the complete independence of the working class from the ruling class and its agents in the union apparatus.

The actions of CSN workers are a sharp expression of the worldwide explosion of class struggle against the intolerable conditions imposed by capitalism on the working class in all countries. The COVID-19 pandemic, explosive levels of unemployment and inflation, and the threat of world war and authoritarian dictatorships are provoking mass strikes and protests around the planet, from the strikes against fuel prices in Peru to the insurrectionary uprising of workers in Sri Lanka.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is the only political force that gives conscious expression to the interests of the global working class and struggles to build new workers' organizations that can meet the current tasks posed by the class struggle. We call on workers at CSN to join the ICFI and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which for the last year has been built through committees formed at workplaces around the globe.



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