

Pseudo-left slate wins union election after wildcat strike at Brazil's CSN steel mill

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Three months after a wildcat strike at the Presidente Vargas Steelworks of the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional (CSN), one of the largest steel mills in Latin America, elections for the Metalworkers Union of Southern Rio de Janeiro were held. Its result reaffirmed the workers' deep rejection of the union bureaucracy.

The election started on July 26 and was closed in the early hours of July 29. With 67.1 percent of the votes, the so-called opposition slate, composed of the union federations CSP-Conlutas (linked to the PSTU, a Morenoite party) and CTB (linked to the PCdoB, a Maoist party), won the most ballots. Força Sindical, the current leadership, received only 18.5 percent of the votes. And the CUT, which supported management, received 12.7 percent.

Força Sindical's record with the metalworkers of Southern Rio de Janeiro is an example of the reactionary role of the unions in the current era. In its first experience as the union leadership, in the 1990s, it advocated for the privatization of CSN, fulfilling a decisive role for the ruling class. In 2017, it secured the return of the eight-hour shift at CSN, overturning the six-hour shifts won at the expense of the death of three workers in an historic 1988 strike.

The CSP-Conlutas/CTB slate celebrated the victory as the beginning of a "new era" in the union, which would end "this sad chapter of betrayal and submission in our history." Self-declared the "peon's slate," it was elected based on a phony identification with the powerful rank-and-file movement that spurred the recent strike.

In April, workers at the Presidente Vargas Steelworks in Volta Redonda rebelled against a contract negotiated by the union in collusion with the company. With one of the lowest wages in the industry, the CSN workers refused the proposal and went on strike in defiance of the union, demanding a 30 percent increase, and electing a parallel commission to represent them in the negotiations. The offensive against the union bureaucracy was clear in a march of the workers to the union, with cries of "*pelegos*" (or, "scabs") and "the peons are back."

The threat of this movement advancing and replicating

itself in other places worried not only the company and the executives of the Metalworkers Union, but also other trade union factions. The CSP-Conlutas, linked to the PSTU, controls the Metabase Inconfidentes union, based at other CSN units in the state of Minas Gerais, and therefore was particularly interested in diverting the workers' anti-bureaucratic drive.

Despite claiming to be on the side of the workers who rebelled against the union in Volta Redonda, the PSTU acted to keep their strike isolated and to undermine the independent organization of the rank-and-file, promoting the illusion that living conditions could be improved only through a change in the union administration, that is, after the next election. To this end, it joined forces with the CTB, linked to the PCdoB, a party of Maoist origins that runs dozens of city governments and is integrated into the highest spheres of the bourgeois state.

In the aftermath of the strike, the CSP-Conlutas/CTB slate attracted some leaders of the parallel commission of CSN workers. The integration of these elements was key to lending a "legitimate" appearance to the slate. But any genuine intention of these workers to defend their class interests has no chance of survival under the rotten structure of the union.

The winning slate's bulletin, published on August 1st, declares: "This result made very clear the workers' desire for change. In fact, much more than a desire, it evidences the need for change in the political running of negotiations of the collective agreements of the workforce." The words could not be vaguer. Workers should ask themselves: what does this "change in the political running of negotiations" mean?

Unlike the workers in the rank-and-file, many of whom had their first political experience in the last strike, the CSP-Conlutas and CTB have a long history at the head of reactionary trade unions.

It is worth mentioning a recent example from CSP-Conlutas, which has controlled the Metalworkers Union of São José dos Campos for the last 15 years. In February of

this year, the union advocated the acceptance of a temporary layoff program at the automaker Caa Chery, arguing that it was “conditioned to the guarantee of rights.” But, as has been happening systematically for years in the auto industry, the approval of this layoff program only opened the way for wage and job cuts. Only four months later, the union was negotiating a severance agreement for about 500 metalworkers fired from the company.

This is the kind of “negotiation” that is to come for the Metalworkers Union of Southern Rio de Janeiro.

Currently, the union is responsible for negotiating the working conditions of approximately 60,000 metalworkers in the south of Rio de Janeiro state. This includes workers not only from the already mentioned CSN, but also other steel industries and an important automotive hub including companies like Stellantis, Volkswagen Trucks, Nissan, Jaguar Land Rover and others.

The victory of the CSP-Conlutas/CTB slate is a very distorted expression of a leftward trend among rank-and-file workers. Only the workers who voluntarily join the union have the right to choose the leadership, and the number of voters in the Metalworkers Union of Southern Rio de Janeiro’s elections was 1,842, which is only 3 percent of the total number of metalworkers the union purports to represent.

Therefore, the election cannot be claimed as a mandate for the union slate that received the majority of the votes, but rather is an expression of the massive rejection of the union and its bankruptcy as a representative of the workers.

The wildcat strike at CSN, in one of the main industrial centers of the country, is an expression of the explosive state of class relations in Brazil. It is part of a rising movement of the Latin American and international working class, which is taking the form of a wave of massive strikes and protests against capitalist attacks and the governments, parties and unions that implement them.

The rebellion of CSN workers against the sell-out contract imposed by the Metalworkers Union erupted at the same time that massive protests against the rising cost of living were spreading around the world. Triggered by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, rising food and fuel prices provoked working class demonstrations from Peru to Sri Lanka.

The Brazilian ruling elite, which knows that it is sitting on a social powder keg, is desperate to keep the working class under the tightest control. This is the real issue around which the Brazilian presidential elections in October revolves. While current President Jair Bolsonaro openly prepares a coup d’état to implement a presidential dictatorship, challenger Lula of the Workers Party (PT) claims his ability, with the help of the trade unions, to discipline the explosive

opposition of the working class.

In this context, the role fulfilled by the PSTU is particularly criminal. It seeks to restore the credibility of the massively rejected unions, guaranteeing the ties necessary for the capitalists to maintain their exploitation over the working class.

Its role in Volta Redonda also exposes the lies of the PSTU’s national politics. Launching its own candidate through its so-called “Revolutionary Socialist Pole,” the PSTU claims to hold an independent position from the PT and to oppose its “alliances with the bourgeoisie.” However, its trade union alliance with the PCdoB (one of the parties supporting the PT) shows that the Morenoites play a decisive role in protecting the union apparatus, which is paramount for the maintenance of the capitalist order.

This policy must be actively rejected by the workers in Volta Redonda and elsewhere. The demands of the April strike have not been met. The exploitative conditions continue at CSN, as in the other companies, and can only be confronted by an independent working class movement. High inflation, deadly working conditions and the danger of increasingly authoritarian governments are conditions common not only to metalworkers in Brazil but all over the world.

The deep rejection of the unions demonstrated in the CSN strike expresses the need for new forms of proletarian organization.

To give political and organizational expression to the developing global movement of the working class, the International Committee of the Fourth International (CIQI) fights for the construction of rank-and-file committees in each company, coordinated nationally and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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