

# After weeks of silence from union, Mercedes-Benz begins mass firings in Brazil

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28 September 2022

Reports from Mercedes-Benz workers at the São Bernardo do Campo plant in the ABC industrial region have exposed the results of what have been weeks of meetings between the ABC's Metalworkers Union (SMABC) and the auto company. Hundreds of contract workers arrived at the plant on Monday to discover that they are being summarily fired as part of the company's announcement earlier this month that it would cut 3,600 jobs.

In addition to the workers who have been targeted for cuts, including 2,200 company employees and 1,400 contract workers, Mercedes had announced on September 6 that it would outsource several sectors within the plant, including logistics, maintenance, tooling, laboratory, front axle and mid-transmission manufacturing and assembly.

Union bureaucrats are responding with efforts to divide the different sectors within the plant and prevent a strike by its approximately 9,000 workers. Under conditions of enormous anger among workers, and with only a few days left before the presidential election on Sunday, the bureaucracy of the SMABC, affiliated to the Workers Party (PT)-controlled trade union federation, the CUT, is assisting the company in the job cuts while trying to divert opposition into the reactionary channels of economic nationalism.

On Monday afternoon, after the firings, the union called a meeting for only the 361 contract workers whose contracts are set to expire on October 3, a fraction of the thousand targeted for termination in the next weeks.

On Tuesday, at the SMABC headquarters, the union bureaucrats tried to deflect anger by blaming the job cuts on Chinese workers. While stating that they were occurring because the current president, Jair Bolsonaro, wanted to import buses from China, they advanced the absurd claim that the only way to stop the cuts would be to elect the PT candidate, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva.

Critically, the bureaucrats felt obliged to cite the World Socialist Web Site article denouncing the union's sabotage of the workers' struggle in the plant. While the bureaucrats derided the article, they limited themselves to declaring it fake news. They felt the need to discredit the WSWWS because it is the only publication speaking the truth to the workers at Mercedes, and the article clearly resonated broadly within the

rank-and-file.

Meanwhile, almost at the same time that the SMABC bureaucrats were gathering the fired workers at the union's headquarters, its executive director, Aroaldo da Silva, was working to contain an eruption at the Mercedes plant.

After the logistics workers saw that the company was already bringing suppliers into the factory to plan the outsourcing of their sector, showing that there isn't actually any "negotiation" going on with the union, the workers themselves downed tools on Tuesday morning. Fearing that the rebellion would spread, Silva gathered the logistics workers in the courtyard to contain the job action to the logistics sector and to only the morning shift. He declared that they would hold work stoppages on separate shifts and separate days "so as not to stop production".

Silva told the logistics workers that any amount of job cuts demanded by Mercedes must be accepted so as not to harm the company's profits. "We have to do all the probing possible to try to lessen the impact on the sector," Silva said.

Tuesday's events show that the union works to keep autoworkers divided even within the same plant. No trust can be placed in the union bureaucrats defending even workers most immediate rights to a decent job and working conditions. The fact that the union bureaucrats are not responding to the mass firings by denouncing them, but by covering them up, exposes its dirty maneuver in collaboration with the company.

In the last three weeks since Mercedes announced the cuts, the SMABC leaders have made every effort to keep workers divided, failing to make any call for the 1,400 contract workers to be hired as full-contract employees. The union called a three-day strike in the plant to keep it isolated, without calling for any joint job action with other workers in the auto industry. In the three weeks since Mercedes' announcement, the bureaucrats have made a systematic effort to impose an information blackout among the workers.

One contract worker who contacted the World Socialist Web Site denounced the union's maneuvers the day before the firings began on Monday.

He said that "The union doesn't have any information [about the layoffs], they just talk about how hard it is and that the company won't back down. When the union talks about contract workers, it says that the company "doesn't know, that

they haven't said anything, they don't touch on the subject. That means that the union itself doesn't touch on the subject in the meetings, which they say have been going on since September 6. But they won't say anything about the meetings, and just say that 'they are negotiating', and that 'the company doesn't want to back down'."

The worker pointed out that the union gave unofficial statements a few days before to sectors inside the plant, saying that "nothing is certain yet".

There is no reason to believe that the union bureaucrats were unaware of Mercedes' plans to move forward the termination of the contract workers. They have been meeting with the company since the September 6 as these workers approached their contracts' expiration dates.

As SMABC president Aroaldo da Silva himself admitted, the bureaucrats had known for a long period of time about the company's plans to implement various "restructuring" measures, including job cuts. Silva had stated to the crowd at the assembly three weeks ago, "We have been dialoguing about these issues. The management of Mercedes began to present a scenario in which the company has not been making the expected profit. ... According to them, it was necessary to start discussing the São Bernardo plant so that the worst wouldn't happen."

The worker pointed to the general role of the union in suppressing workers' struggles. He declared: "I've worked at Volkswagen, at GM, and the union always carries out the same maneuvers: they say they are doing something. But in the end they serve the bourgeoisie, the businessmen, and we are left with the crumbs".

After years of acting as an auxiliary of the auto companies in cutting wages and jobs, and blaming workers of other countries for factory closures, the PT-linked union wants workers to support the election campaign of former president Lula da Silva, who has campaigned on the same nationalist program advocated by the union and Bolsonaro himself.

This program is a critical component in the attempt to suppress working class opposition in Brazil in the name of "national development". The SMABC bureaucracy is promoting this nationalist program as a component of the PT campaign through the "10+ Industry Plan."

The plan, promoted in a meeting of Aroaldo da Silva and the central unions with Lula's vice-presidential candidate Geraldo Alckmin, calls for the construction of "multipartite" organizations, which would in practice subordinate the working class to the dictates of the transnational corporations as they demand ever more cuts in labor costs. This would mean more cuts in wages and jobs and intensifying exploitation of the workers to maximize profits and attract investments.

Autoworkers must be informed of the huge betrayal that is being prepared behind their backs. The firing of contract workers that has already begun is only the prelude to a massacre of jobs at Mercedes. Instead of the union's so-called

"negotiations" with the company, a Mercedes-Benz Rank-and-File Committee must be organized by the workers themselves to discuss critical demands, including the reversal of all firings, the defense of every worker's job, a full contract for all workers, and an immediate raise to compensate for the losses in real wages being caused by inflation.

All these demands should be discussed among the Mercedes workers, and a resolution written by the workers themselves should be adopted. All these demands and any others that are raised by the workers can only be discussed frankly and democratically if the workers create their own organizations of struggle independent of the union and the company.

These demands can be paid for with the huge profits being recorded by Mercedes, which in the last quarter alone made profits of more than €3 billion.

Above all, the workers need to call for the help of the entire working class, not only in the ABC industrial zone and Brazil generally, but internationally, organizing as part of the International Workers Alliance of Base Committees (AOI-CB). Workers all over the world confront rising prices, increasing exploitation and have been forced to work throughout the pandemic and should all be united in a common struggle in defense of their jobs, decent wages, safe working conditions and democratic rights.

With inflation eroding real wages for workers throughout the industry and across the country and internationally, a strike at Mercedes that appeals to auto workers in other plants in Brazil and internationally would quickly become a focal point of the international working class offensive.

Nurses have been carrying out mass strikes in Brazil against the Federal Supreme Court's (STF) reversal of a mandatory threshold wage. Spain's Mercedes autoworkers were recently betrayed by the UGT union and the Podemos-linked "Workers' Commissions" (CCOO).

Meanwhile, in the US, Will Lehman, an autoworker at Mack Trucks, is waging a powerful campaign in the election for president of the UAW, the US union. He is campaigning on the platform of throwing out the entire union bureaucracy and wresting the vast resources accumulated from the workers' own labor out of the hands of the parasitic officials and utilizing them to mount a genuine struggle.

The Socialist Equality Group, which works in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International in Brazil, will assist workers who wish to build a committee in their workplace. We urge those who are willing to fight to get in contact.



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