

Brazilian union bureaucrats travel to Germany amid massive job cuts at Mercedes-Benz

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Union officials of the Brazilian Metalworkers Union of ABC (SMABC) returned last week from a trip to Germany which was especially aimed at preparing a new trap for the workers at the Mercedes-Benz (Daimler) truck plant in São Bernardo do Campo. In the coming weeks, they expect the implementation of massive layoffs announced by the company in early September, which includes 3,600 job cuts and the outsourcing of several sectors of the factory.

After two months of making every effort to prevent workers from mounting a struggle against these attacks, the unions bureaucrats announced a trip to Germany in late October. Their aim was not to meet and organize a joint struggle with the Mercedes-Benz workers in Germany, who are also facing job cuts and who staged a one-day strike last week against the closure of a plant in the south of Berlin. No, they went for closed-door meetings with the big bosses at the company's headquarters.

As SMABC's Executive Director Aroaldo da Silva admitted at an assembly at the factory gate after the trip, "We only have [to offer] what the company told us, that they don't want any contract worker to remain in the plant. ... We don't really have anything (to offer) right now."

Nevertheless, the bureaucrats asked the workers to submit to the "best voluntary resignation plan [PDV, in the Portuguese acronym] in the plant's history" that would supposedly "lessen the impact of outsourcing." SMABCP President Moises Selérges declared that the union's only course of action will be to demand a PDV organized with the union's approval. He said, "Mercedes used to carry out their PDVs without negotiation. With the exception of 2016, there were none. So, a PDV like this will have to be the result of negotiation and approval in an assembly."

Da Silva defended the massive cuts while identifying the interests of the workers with those of the business owners. "We want to treat the plant as a whole. This situation concerns everyone, because if the plant closes [the victims] will be the areas that the company wants to close, the

workers and the bosses inside the plant as well."

Far from being on the verge of bankruptcy, as the union officials' statements imply, Mercedes-Benz announced "robust profits" in the third quarter of this year, increasing its gross revenue by 83 percent over the same quarter last year, an increase from €2.8 billion to €5.2 billion. Large margins of these figures go directly into the pockets of shareholders and "the bosses inside the plant."

Instead of "lessening the impact" of outsourcing, the voluntary resignation plan would immediately put permanent workers under the threat of being fired if they do not leave the company in the near future. It would also mean a general worsening of conditions for workers who remain, replacing as many permanent contracts as possible with outsourced and temporary underpaid contracts.

In 2019, General Motors laid off thousands of employees at its plant in São Caetano do Sul, near São Bernardo. The São Caetano Metalworkers Union declared at the time that the cuts were necessary to prevent the company from leaving the region and to guarantee new investments. But in October of last year, after remaining on the production line without interruption during the worst outbreaks of the pandemic, GM workers faced a new contract with more cuts in wages and benefits and ending stability for victims of work-related accidents. The contract could be imposed, despite a 13-day strike and enormous opposition from the workers, because the union acted at every step to isolate the movement as the Labor Court prepared to declare it illegal.

That is the same course being taken today by the SMABC in the Mercedes-Benz São Bernardo plant. Two months after having hypocritically declared that they would "not accept workers being laid off," the union officials have clearly been exposed as working hand in hand with the company to allow these attacks.

After calling a three-day strike, the union remained silent throughout September as the termination date for contract workers approached. On September 26, Mercedes began the

dismissal of hundreds of contract workers a week before their contracts expired. On the same day, Mercedes-Benz announced a new deal to outsource logistics.

On September 27, as the bureaucrats brought the terminated contract workers to the SMABC headquarters to tell them that nothing could be done about their layoffs, the logistics workers at the Mercedes-Benz plant began a strike against their outsourcing. Union officer Aroaldo da Silva was responsible for defusing this spontaneous work stoppage, which threatened to explode into a wider revolt. Da Silva declared in relation to the outsourcing that “We have to do all the probing possible to try to diminish the impact on the sector.” He declared the union would not accept a work stoppage of all logistics workers “so as not to stop production.”

Now, the union officials are seeking to conceal their own responsibility while buying time for the company to cut labor costs in order to make the plant attractive for investments.

Their trip to Germany took place in the midst of an escalating global economic crisis and the drive of the imperialist governments to world war, which is provoking skyrocketing energy prices in Europe. As Mercedes-Benz pointed out in its quarterly earnings statement, the company is worried about “energy supply uncertainties in Europe and the ongoing COVID challenges in Asia” and is preparing itself “to safeguard supply chains and to maximize the potential for reducing or substituting the use of natural gas in vehicle production.”

Under such conditions, the SMABC appeals to the German capitalists heading Mercedes-Benz, promising stability for their profitable operations in Brazil by suppressing workers’ struggles for better living conditions. This corporatist procapitalist orientation has been clearly outlined in the “Industry 10+ Plan” by IndustriALL Brazil, of which the SMABC is one of the main members. The unions have presented that program as a basis for the labor policies of the incoming Workers Party (PT) government of President-elect Luís Inácio Lula da Silva.

As opposed to the “strategy” posed by the bureaucrats to secure the company’s profit interests, the spontaneous work stoppage at the logistic sector of the São Bernardo plant showed that the workers are not willing to accept the massive layoffs and outsourcing.

A contract worker who had been laid off in early October contacted the *World Socialist Web Site* anonymously to denounce the company and the union’s bankrupt maneuvers. He said: “Daimler’s biggest plant [outside Germany] is here. It’s sad because we are treated as less than numbers, who give their blood for the company to achieve its goals. ... The company is only reaping its rewards because of us, the

workers.”

About the bureaucrats’ trip to Germany, he stated: “I’m not hopeful because they are going there to talk to the businessmen, so whatever will benefit the businessmen they will do. You see that from what they are doing. Since October 3, when I left [the company], there have been no demonstrations. Their concern with the employees is zero. They are concerned that Lula wins the election.”

The worker spoke to the WSWS just days before the presidential run-off on October 30 which resulted in the PT candidate’s victory. The worker pointed to the efforts of union bureaucrats, who had absurdly declared that Lula’s coming to power would reverse the cuts and layoffs.

“Actually, the union has always been like this. They act only for some candidate and forget the main thing, which is to be on the workers’ side. They only serve the bourgeoisie, which are the businessmen. They say that they will act, organize stoppages, and then they do nothing.”

In opposition to the SMABC policy of cutting living conditions and jobs to compete for investments against plants in other countries, workers at the São Bernardo plant must organize an independent rank-and-file committee to lead their own struggle and reach out to workers in the plants in Germany and all over the world. The International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), promoted by the WSWS, will provide the necessary structure for that internationally unified struggle to develop.



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