

Strike at Brazil's Petrobras is suppressed by PT-led unions

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28 February 2023

On February 9, a spontaneous strike by workers at the Petrobras Alberto Pasqualini refinery (Refap) in the Brazil's southern state of Rio Grande do Sul was brought to an end through the collusion of the unions with the companies and the courts, barely suppressing its spread to other units across Brazil.

More than 4,500 workers spontaneously went on strike on January 30, denouncing worsening wages and benefits at the state-owned energy giant's refinery unit. Videos on social media showed workers who arrived for the night shift immediately leaving their buses and joining the industrial action. The movement spread throughout the workforce, despite the efforts at intimidation by the companies, which reportedly hired guards for that purpose.

When the strike erupted, Refap was undergoing maintenance work by multiple contractors. Most strikers were maintenance workers coming from other units across the country. The strike included workers from the companies Estrutural, Estel, Engeviale, Manserv and Darcy Pacheco. The outsourced jobs at these companies either don't pay transport and accommodation expenses or only compensate workers partially for them.

Among the strike's demands was pay equal to that at other Petrobras facilities in the country. According to the CUT union federation, controlled by the Workers Party (PT), monthly wages for outsourced maintenance workers at Refap can be up to R\$1,500 (US\$285) lower than in other refineries.

Workers also demanded bonuses corresponding to 350-hour maintenance work, monthly R\$1,300 (US\$247) in food benefits, R\$1,500 (US\$285) for accommodation and transportation expenses during maintenance work, and a 100 percent pay increase for extra hours on weekends. They demanded that their labor rights be put in writing by the companies before signing contracts.

While the workers' uprising broke out spontaneously,

the local metalworker's union STIMMMEC quickly formed a "strike commission" to speak in its name. Declaring itself in the workers' favor, the union's commission vetted their demands. The STIMMMEC was only one of a myriad of union organizations that rushed to the refinery in order to suppress the spontaneous mobilization, including the Sindipetro-RS. Both the STIMMMEC and Sindipetro-RS are affiliated to the CUT.

The real intentions of the unions were subsequently revealed as they proposed to start "mediation" talks with the regional labor court (TRT4) and contractors responsible for maintenance at Refap. The efforts at suppressing the spontaneous mobilization were presented as an attempt to "make the strike official." On February 3, STIMMMEC president Paulo Chitolina declared: "There was no strike warning 48 hours in advance, so we informed the companies on Monday, but they filed a claim of abuse by strikers, thus there was mediation yesterday."

Such a maneuver, so frequently employed by the unions to suppress and break the momentum of workers' struggles, was immediately opposed by the workers. They rejected returning to work to wait for a court decision and voted to continue the strike. A video recorded during the union-led assembly shows Chitolina being shouted down after stating that unmet workers' demands "will also be solved by the court."

For the next eight days, the STIMMMEC held almost daily meetings with the TRT4 court and contractors in order to put an end to the movement. The court declared the strike "abusive" and imposed individual R\$200 (US\$38) fines for each day workers defy its back-to-work decision.

Despite this punitive action, the numbers at the assemblies at the refinery gates grew each day. Desperate to suppress the movement, the CUT sent its state

president Amarildo Cenci to quell the Refap workers on February 8. While giving rhetorical pledges of support to the striking workers, he indicated the need for “discussions on wage standards” with all contractors at Petrobras.

The CUT’s call for “wage standards” throughout the company promotes the lie that workers at other refineries are doing fine. In fact, the overwhelming majority of oil workers at Petrobras face a regime of substandard pay and benefits and dangerous working conditions, while trying to survive under ever rising inflation.

The STIMMMEC was able to bring the strike to an end on February 9, only after threatening to leave workers at the mercy of the court and its punishing fines. Coming from talks with company representatives and court officials, Chitolina went to the workers’ assembly at the gates of Refap and declared: “If we keep going, we don’t have a deal with the companies and the court anymore. If we go back to work, we have a deal.”

The union bureaucracy showed its utter indifference to the workers’ situation by cynically celebrating the defeat of their movement as a “victory.” The deal included some concessions, such as an increase in food benefits, compensation for transportation and accommodation and additional weekend pay. However, they were far below the demands of the workers, and don’t even begin to compensate for years of erosion in wages.

The suppression of the oil workers’ uprising was a critical issue for the Workers Party and its associated trade union bureaucracy. Under explosive social conditions across Brazil, the movement at Refap threatened to trigger a major strike in a key economic sector in the very first months of the new administration of PT President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Exposing the bureaucracy’s anxiety over that possibility, the Sindipetro-RS president stated one day after the movement was broken: “It is unacceptable that the administration forced people to work while we oil workers keep living as if nothing is happening.” Supposedly representing full-contract workers, the Sindipetro-RS did all it could to prevent their mobilization over the previous 11 days. During the same period, the CUT-linked United Federation of Oil Workers (FUP) blacked out news about the strike, while its officials met members of the federal government.

The high stakes were pointed out in the warning by the labor court judge on the day that workers rejected the companies’ first proposal about “losses that can occur for the community in case of fuel shortages if maintenance

activities at Refap are not resumed.”

Exactly three years ago, the biggest national strike of oil workers since 1995 took place in Brazil involving 191 Petrobras units at its peak, from refineries to distribution centers and off-shore platforms. Workers opposed job cuts and the push for privatization of the company, including of Refap, under the administration of fascistic former President Jair Bolsonaro. The strike was met with massive fines and repression.

The recent strike at Refap shows the struggle of workers will continue to receive the same brutal treatment under the PT administration, despite the promises made by the trade unions with each of the sell-out deals they carried out that electing Lula would resolve every major social and political problem faced under Bolsonaro. In fact, the bureaucracy is proving itself even more eager to suppress strikes.

The Brazilian ruling class, of which the PT and its trade unions are tools, fears that the development of a strike movement by workers at the oil industry and other sectors will undermine their deals pursued under an increasingly explosive global scenario. Amid the current drive of the US and European powers against China and for alternative labor platforms and resources in Latin America, a major struggle of the working class becomes a “national security” issue.

Despite these efforts to suppress strikes, the eruption of the class struggle in Brazil is uncontrollable. Nurses are preparing for a national strike on March 10 demanding the implementation of the legal minimum wage for the sector. Recent weeks have seen protests by teachers in Rio Grande do Sul and 24-hour strikes by subway workers in Minas Gerais and São Paulo.

Those struggles are part of a growing international movement of the working class against the attacks on wages and conditions by the ruling classes as they attempt to place the full burden of the major bank and corporate bailouts and the costs of imperialist war on the shoulders of workers in every country. For that powerful movement to develop, workers must understand that their interests lie in a common international struggle to overthrow the capitalist system.



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