

Embraer and Avibras workers' struggle in Brazil confronts nationalist pro-military program of Morenóite-led union

Eduardo Parati
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In recent months, the struggle of workers at Embraer and Avibras, two of the Brazilian defense industry's most important companies, has exposed the reactionary nature of the São José dos Campos Metalworkers Union (SindmetalSJC). There is growing workers' hostility to the maneuvers of the union affiliated to the CSP-Conlutas federation, controlled by the Morenóite Unified Socialist Workers Party (PSTU), which is seeking to divert and subordinate their struggle to the rotten politics of economic nationalism and national chauvinism.

A month after the last round of negotiations between the aviation company Embraer and the São José dos Campos Metalworkers' Union (SindmetalSJC), there is huge opposition to further cuts among the workers.

On October 14, after workers spent seven years without a real wage increase, Embraer offered a small raise of 1.29 percent above inflation, which will rapidly be eroded in the coming months. Other contract provisions include an adjustment of only R\$50 (US\$9) in the grocery voucher, and the proposal for changing a clause in the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CCT) to be signed by SindmetalSJC and Embraer. Its previous version was renewed for the last time in 2017.

The change demanded by Embraer to renew the CCT would put an end to lifelong job stability for workers with occupational diseases and victims of accidents at work, reducing it to only five years and 21 months, respectively.

Embraer's proposal negotiated with SindmetalSJC virtually eliminates all of the demands raised at the start of the wages campaign launched on August 7, which called for a 10.5 percent pay raise, a doubling of the grocery voucher to R\$800 (US\$145) and for maintaining workers rights. The company is seeking to satisfy its investors at the expense of the workers while posting record profits.

At the end of September, the company's orders reached US\$22.4 billion, the highest in nine years. In its report for last year, the company had stated: "In 2023, we closed the year with revenues of over R\$26.1 billion (US\$5.3 billion), which represents an 11 percent growth compared to 2022, returning to pre-pandemic levels. ... Thanks to the increase in sales, the backlog surpassed pre-pandemic levels and reached US\$18.7 billion, the highest of the last 6 years."

The company's open contempt for its workers is producing

enormous anger. In an assembly on September 24, they showed that there is broad opposition to Embraer's proposal, rejecting any changes to the CCT and discussing the possibility of going on strike. However, SindmetalSJC has been the main obstacle to a direct confrontation with the company, isolating the Embraer workers' struggle from those of other important companies in the São José dos Campos region and, critically, from the recent Boeing strike in the US.

Since launching their "wages campaign" at Embraer on August 7, the focus of SindmetalSJC's leaders has been to deflect and suppress workers' opposition while falsely presenting the courts, the national congress and the Workers Party (PT) government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as defenders of their interests. SindmetalSJC has particularly called for new investments from the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES), one of the main funding bodies of the Brazilian state.

The bankruptcy of this approach has been exposed countless times. One example was the major auto company Ford, which closed its doors in 2021 as part of its "restructuring" program after having received massive investments from the BNDES. The closures wiped out tens of thousands of jobs. Since 2008, Ford had received approximately R\$400 million, including R\$155 million (US\$ 47 million) in 2017.

Embraer itself, the BNDES' second largest client, was on the verge of being sold to Boeing in 2020. After SindmetalSJC reported that Embraer had rejected the CCT in October, the union admitted on its website: "the funds allocated to Embraer have already amounted to more than 26 billion dollars since 1997 ... The support received from this public bank, however, has no impact on wage conditions or workers' rights."

The SindmetalSJC and CSP-Conlutas union bureaucrats are well aware of the bankruptcy of their policy of pressuring the Lula government through the BNDES. Nonetheless, after a meeting with Embraer on October 14, they went to the National Congress to promote this exact policy.

Referring to Embraer's refusal to sign the CCT, the union stated on October 15 on its website: "The seriousness of this situation has led the union to submit a proposal for a bill to the National Congress, prohibiting public funding for companies that do not sign a collective agreement." SindmetalSJC concluded about the BNDES: "This is what is expected of a bank that should honor its

role of social development.”

Nationalism and the promotion of militarism

Behind their “social” rhetoric, SindmetalSJC and CSP-Conlutas have a long history of defending a program based on the suppression of the working class for the sake of the “national interest” and aggressively promoting militarism.

In response to the announcement that Boeing will buy Embraer in 2020, SindmetalSJC and CSP-Conlutas launched a chauvinist manifesto entitled “Embraer for Brazilians. Re-nationalize, now”. Denouncing the sale of Embraer to Boeing, it says that this “would mainly benefit the US company and its insatiable shareholders, to the detriment of the strategic interests of the Brazilian nation and its desire to become fully sovereign.”

The launching of the manifesto was attended by several bourgeois politicians and received the support of the CUT, the trade union federation controlled by the PT, along with multiple unions affiliated to it. Without any references to the need for an independent workers’ movement and without any relation to the struggle for socialism, the aim of the manifesto demanding “re-nationalization” was to subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie and the Brazilian military.

This program of “nationalization” in the name of “national sovereignty” has also been repeated in the struggle that Avibras workers have been waging. In 2022, the company, which is the largest in the country’s defense industry, went into receivership, and the workers have been on strike ever since. In an April letter to Lula, SindmetalSJC wrote that it is a company of “unquestionable importance” and “certified by the Ministry of Defense as strategic for Brazil.” It “appealed to the Federal Government to intervene on behalf of the workers” by “bringing forward the payment of the R\$60 million contract signed between Avibras and the Brazilian Armed Forces.”

The significance of this program for the workers became clear in recent weeks, with the announcement on October 28 that a national company was interested in buying Avibras. The union responded by quickly organizing an assembly on the next day to end the long strike. Weller Gonçalves declared at the event that “selling to a national company would offer less risk to the country’s sovereignty.” This means nothing less than subordinating all workers’ interests to the new owners’ demands under the guise of so-called “sovereignty”.

After a meeting on Tuesday, the union officials reported that the only concession obtained was back wages, to be paid in installments over more than a year. None of the other demands, such as health insurance and the payment of fines for late payments, have been met. Nothing has been said about job guarantees, with the union having reduced its demand for the guarantee of an extra year on the job to just five months.

These policies are in themselves the expression of the program of the PSTU Morenoites, who, based on the rejection of the centrality of the international working class and the adoption of the

petty-bourgeois policy of pressure on the capitalist state. They support its strengthening against the working class in Brazil, as well as imperialist war abroad. The PSTU is a fervent supporter of the imperialist arming of the “Ukrainian resistance” in the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

In the current period, with the world on the brink of a major war between the US-NATO and Russia, and the imminence of a wider war in the Middle East provoked by Israel with US support, Latin American governments are presenting the region as an alternative to these zones of conflict as a platform for exploitation by the big corporations, while seeking to attract massive investments related to the energy transition.

Moreover, even as the US prepares for a direct conflict with China, which has forged trade and economic links with Latin America that Washington sees as unacceptable, the Lula government represents sections of the ruling class who hope to profit by balancing between the imperialist powers and Beijing.

In this situation, the Morenoite-led unions are providing a left-wing cover for the Lula government. The SindmetalSJC and CSP-Conlutas have represented the most aggressive nationalist union sectors around the Lula government, promoting its policy of strengthening the military and suppressing opposition to the wide-ranging cuts at Embraer along with the struggle of Avibras workers with calls to strengthen “national industry.”

An improvement in living conditions can only be fought for on the basis of an international strategy of the working class. Critically, the union’s maneuvers at Embraer coincided with the struggle of 33,000 Boeing workers, who were on strike in the US until November 4.

The Boeing Workers Rank-and-File Committee, set up by workers in opposition to the IAM union, called throughout the strike for its extension beyond US borders, which would put workers in both countries at a huge advantage over corporate management and the Biden and Lula administrations.

The CSP-Conlutas bureaucrats limited themselves to rhetorical phrases about “internationalism” and declarations of solidarity with the Boeing strike to cover up their nationalist pro-capitalist program. The absence of a struggle at Embraer kept the US workers isolated and allowed a third contract proposal to be imposed in the beginning of the month.

The workers at Embraer must organize their struggle in opposition to Conlutas and the forces around the PT and turn to their true allies, the workers around the world. They should contact the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to discuss the next steps in their struggle.



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