

Brazilian postal workers set to strike against attacks by Lula government

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Postal workers in the state of São Paulo, Brazil's richest and most industrialized state, voted on Thursday for a strike to begin December 16 amid deadlocked negotiations for a new collective bargaining agreement for next year.

More significantly, they are also fighting against a "restructuring plan" presented on November 21 by the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party – PT) that will accelerate plans to privatize one of Brazil's largest public companies.

Assemblies have also been called by the other 35 local unions, and in the coming days workers in other regions and states of Brazil may approve further strike action.

The Lula administration's "restructuring" establishes a Voluntary Dismissal Plan (PDV) for 10,000 of the 83,000 employees, the closure of 1,000 agencies, and the sale of Brazil's Post Office properties. In addition, it provides for a loan of 20 billion reais (US\$3.7 billion) to supposedly "modernize" the postal service and bring it into line with business interests.

The Lula administration justified this plan due to the alleged unsustainable financial situation of Brazil's Post Office. The Post Office has suffered losses in five out of the last ten years. In 2024, the postal service's deficit was over R\$2.5 billion, and it is expected to reach R\$10 billion this year.

The Post Office has existed for 360 years in Brazil, operating in all 5,500 of its municipalities, offering services ranging from postal and delivery services to banking and the distribution of vaccines and food to poor families. It is this unique logistical capacity that has attracted the interest of companies such as Amazon and Fedex from the US, Germany's DHL, China's Alibaba and Argentina's Mercado Livre.

To meet the growing interests of these and other companies, successive Brazilian governments have been cutting staff, wages, and rights, making working conditions more precarious, and advancing the privatization of the Post Office. Today, only the postal service is a monopoly of the Post Office, while parcel delivery has been open to free competition in Brazil since 2009.

What Lula's government is doing now is a continuation of what the PT did during the 13 years it was in power at the beginning of this century (2003-2016). During that period, it increased the number of outsourced workers and affiliated

agencies. Strikes were held almost annually.

Since the first year of Dilma Rousseff's PT government in 2011, there have been no public tenders or new hires for the company, causing the number of employees to drop from 120,000 that year to 100,000 in 2020 and 83,000 today. This year alone, the Post Office lost 3,500 employees through a voluntary dismissal program launched by the Lula administration in May. According to the UN's Universal Postal Union, 250,000 workers would be needed at the Post Office to serve a continental country like Brazil.

During the administration of fascist President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), attacks on Post Office services intensified. In 2020, it removed 50 of the 79 clauses from the collective bargaining agreement, which included benefits related to food, vacations, health, maternity leave, and children's education, resulting in a salary reduction of between 43 and 69 percent, depending on an employee's salary range.

In 2021, the government sent a bill to the Brazilian Congress to break the postal service monopoly, which was approved in the same year in the Chamber of Deputies but was not even voted on in the Senate. However, Congress' efforts to break the postal service monopoly have continued, with the Chamber's Constitution and Justice Committee approving another bill to that effect in March of this year, which is now being discussed by deputies.

The Lula administration, despite claiming to be against the privatization of the Post Office, is implementing measures that will pave the way for it. In addition to the recently announced "restructuring plan," these measures include opening up certain areas to competition from private companies and reducing funding.

Between 2018 and 2020, domestic and international goods delivery services accounted for most of the Post Office's revenue (52 percent), with the Post Office handling 80 percent of deliveries for small and medium-sized online retailers.

However, in August 2023, in the first year of the Lula administration, a normative instruction from the Federal Revenue Service allowed private carriers to participate in the delivery of parcels from abroad, breaking the Post Office's monopoly over this market. This caused the Post Office's share of the parcel sector to fall from 50 percent to 25 percent.

In this general context, Brazilian postal workers, like their counterparts around the world, have been subjected to increasingly brutal working conditions, in which workplace accidents, ranging from repetitive strain injuries and spinal problems to fatal accidents, have become the norm. Today, the Post Office is the company with the most labor lawsuits in Brazil.

Recent data from the National Council of Justice (CNJ) show that in the last 12 months, more than 56,000 (70 percent of the state-owned company's total workforce) labor lawsuits were filed against the Post Office—an average of 154 new lawsuits per day, or about six new lawsuits every hour.

In an interview with the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, lawyer Marina Tambelli, who represents permanent and outsourced employees of the Brazilian Post Office, “attributes the volume of lawsuits to the company's failure to invest in worker health and safety and to outsourcing processes.” She also pointed out that “unsafe working conditions intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic,” when the Bolsonaro administration, by making the postal service an essential service, widely exposed workers to the deadly virus.

Fatal accidents that could easily be prevented have also been occurring with increasing frequency at the Post Office. In September, the Labor Court ordered the company to pay R\$2.5 million in compensation to the family of a forklift operator who died after boxes of books fell on his head. He had worked at the Post Office for 32 years.

A report on the *Jota* website stated that “Reports and testimonies pointed out that the work environment had serious safety flaws, such as defective pallet trucks, a steep ramp, lack of protective railings, and lack of load securing, factors that, according to the ruling, were decisive in causing the accident.”

Brazilian postal workers have responded to this process with increasing protests and strikes. In 2020, after wildcat strikes at the beginning of the pandemic, they held a 35-day strike against the Bolsonaro government's attacks. It was the largest strike in the sector since 1995.

In 2023, as part of a broad movement of federal public employees against the Lula administration, postal workers engaged in walkouts and protests demanding better wages and working conditions and against attacks on their health insurance plan. Last year, they staged a 16-day strike for the same reasons.

The approval of the strike notice for December 16 by São Paulo postal workers comes after a series of local protests and walkouts throughout Brazil this year.

The major obstacle to advancing these struggles is the nationalist and pro-corporate perspective of the postal workers' union federations, which have a record of dividing workers, isolating them from other sectors of the federal public service, and diverting their struggles into empty appeals to the courts to break collective-bargaining deadlocks.

Since 2013, postal workers have been divided between two

union federations: Fentect, affiliated with CUT, the union federation controlled by the PT, and Findect, affiliated with CTB, the union federation controlled by the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB). This year, they decided to take “unprecedented action” and forge “unity in the face of an unprecedented crisis, in which the company's management is trying to transfer losses to workers,” according to a joint statement on December 2.

In response to the Lula administration's “restructuring plan,” Fentect wrote a statement saying that “Pushing a voluntary dismissal program down people's throats, trying to achieve 10,000 layoffs, is not a solution, it is an attack.” It called the program “an attempt to dismantle the company from within and further weaken an essential public service.”

The solution to the crisis at the Post Office, according to Fentect, would be to “establish a serious business plan, with medium- and long-term financial planning, modernization, revenue expansion, and appreciation for the workers who sustain the company every day.”

Such a plan, however, is far from guaranteeing better wages and working conditions for postal workers. Its goal is to increase the postal service's competitiveness with international corporations, which will inevitably mean new attacks on workers.

While Fentect denounces the Lula government's attacks, it and Findect are making futile appeals for “President Lula to save the Post Office!” and promoting the nationalist poison that “Defending the Post Office is defending sovereignty!”

What postal workers need is not to defend national sovereignty to guarantee their interests, but to advance a struggle independent of the Lula government, the PT and its pseudo-left satellites, and the unions controlled by them. This means forming rank-and-file committees affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to unify their struggles with their brothers and sisters internationally.

In countries such as the US and Canada, where postal workers are facing the same threats as their Brazilian counterparts and have staged protests and strikes that have been betrayed by the unions, these committees have been formed to oppose job cuts, the intensification of working hours and the consequent increase in workplace accidents, along with the root cause of these attacks: the capitalist system. We call on postal workers in Brazil who are beginning their struggles to join this movement.



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