

Sao Paulo teachers' strikes confront union betrayal

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Brazilian teachers remain on strike in the municipal school system of the city of Sao Paulo after their counterparts in the Sao Paulo state system saw their strike betrayed by their union.

Both sections of teachers have demanded significant wage increases, improved working conditions, smaller class sizes and a halt to the universal drive to privatize and cut public education.

The walkouts are symptomatic of rising militancy in the Brazilian working class in the face of an official inflation rate that has hit 6.5 percent (with the real rate affecting basic necessities believed to be at least double that figure) and an economic slowdown as South America's largest economy feels the effects of the global capitalist crisis.

Last Friday, the leadership of the state teachers' union, APEOSEP, called off their strike, which began on April 22. The decision was announced after a mass rally of strikers on Avenida Paulista in the heart of Brazil's financial and industrial capital took a voice vote that went overwhelmingly for continuing the walkout. APEOSEP President Maria Izabel "Bebel" Noronha proceeded to announce that the vote had been in favor of a return to work and declared the three-week strike over.

Angry strikers surrounded the sound truck from which the announcement had come, pelting it with cans, papers, plastic water bottles and even traffic cones. Military Police moved in swiftly to protect the union bureaucracy, hitting teachers with their clubs and escorting the president and other officials as they ran from the scene.

In the midst of the melee, the strikers chanted "Out with Bebel, Out with the military police" and "Down with repression, teachers are not thieves."

The union leadership claimed that support for the strike had dwindled, but rank-and-file teachers expressed a determination to continue the struggle and reported strong support from both students and working class families throughout the state.

The strike failed to secure any of the teachers' principal demands. The state department of education rejected the demand for a 36.74 percent wage hike, refusing to budge from its original offer of 8.1 percent. The state government offered to set up a joint commission with the union to "study" the demand that the school system comply with a 2009 federal law that grants one-third of teachers' work hours to preparation and continuing education.

The Sao Paulo state government is headed by Geraldo Alckmin, of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), who ran against the PT's incumbent President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in the 2006 presidential election. Concerned with both the threat of broader radicalization in the working class and his own national reputation, Alckmin was determined to break the strike.

In this aim, he counted on invaluable collaboration. The strike had faced opposition and outright sabotage from the beginning from a union leadership dominated by supporters of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT) of Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff and various "left" organizations ranging from PSOL, a split off from the PT, PSTU, the Brazilian Morenito organization, and the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB).

Above all, the state teachers union officials, like their counterparts in the municipal teachers organization, have been determined to keep the two struggles separate, even though they are being fought largely over the same issues.

On May 14, some 6,000 municipal teachers assembled outside the Sao Paulo's city hall, voting to continue the strike that they began 11 days earlier.

Also fighting to make up for the decimation of their wages by inflation, the teachers in the municipal school system have demanded a series of pay increases, including 6.55 percent retroactive to 2011, 4.61 percent retroactive to 2012 and 6.5 percent for this year. The city

has responded with a miserable proposal for 3.68 percent for each of three years beginning in 2014, leaving teachers far behind the official rate of inflation.

Other demands include smaller class sizes, an end to contracting out and improved working conditions to combat violence in the schools. The teachers are also fighting against government-imposed testing aimed at pinning the blame for deteriorating public education on the teachers themselves.

In the city of Sao Paulo, the teachers confront a municipal government headed by Fernando Haddad, a Workers Party (PT) mayor who came to office barely five months ago after previously serving as education minister in the federal PT government.

While many public sector workers voted for him and against the PSDB, Haddad's brief time in office has served to disabuse them of illusions that he will pursue a course different from the attacks on wages and social services carried out by the PT's right-wing rival.

The wage offers, privatization, contracting out and other regressive policies toward public education advanced by Haddad are indistinguishable from those implemented by his predecessor, the PSDB mayor, Gilberto Kassab. Teachers in the municipal school system waged a bitter strike against these policies a year ago, but were betrayed by their union, which overrode the membership's wishes and called off the action.

Under the PT government, both nationally and in Brazil's largest city, Sao Paulo, the Brazilian ruling financial and corporate establishment count on a trade union bureaucracy that is integrated into the PT party machine to suppress militant struggles by the working class, using methods of gangsterism and fraud when necessary. The teachers' struggles in Sao Paulo are one more indication that Brazilian workers are moving toward an explosive confrontation with this political-union apparatus that defends capitalism.



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