

Brazilian students occupy Sao Paulo schools against “restructuring” plan

Our reporters
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Brazilian secondary and middle school students, some as young as 12, are entering the fifth week of a spontaneous rebellion of school occupations and protests against a sweeping “Schools Restructuring Plan” initiated in Sao Paulo, the country’s most populous state.

The plan, introduced by Sao Paulo’s right-wing Governor Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB), called for the shutdown of 94 schools, involved the transfer of some 311,000 students and would have affected 74,000 teachers. The state government claims that the massive reorganization is aimed at separating middle schools from secondary schools to improve education.

Oponents of the plan charge that it directed at furthering the Alckmin administration’s agenda of cutting costs at the expense of students and teachers and promoting privately funded charter schools. It was expected to lead to increasingly overcrowded classrooms, teacher layoffs and pay cuts, as well as long commutes for students.

The student movement erupted almost three months after a strike by the state school system’s teachers against layoffs and labor flexibility. While strongly supported by the same students who are now occupying their schools, it was sabotaged by the teachers’ union.

The union, the 180,000-member APEOESP, called off the strike on June 12, securing only a promise that the strikers would not be persecuted by the government through their headmasters and school administrators.

The government made the reorganization plans public on September 23, and the first demonstrations were organized by the students shortly thereafter. On November 9, the first school was occupied by students in Diadema, a city of 400,000 in the heavily industrial outskirts of Sao Paulo, the state capital.

It took the government until December 1 to finally issue its official decree initiating the process, only to announce its postponement three days later. By that time, 196 schools were occupied, and widespread support for the students had been organized.

The struggle has broken out in the midst of the worst economic crisis to face Brazil since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and under conditions in which every political institution, from the administration of Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff on down, has been discredited by the massive corruption scandal surrounding the state-owned energy conglomerate Petrobras.

While the political response to this crisis has been dominated by the Brazilian right, which seeks Rousseff’s impeachment, the students’ struggle is symptomatic of the profound class tensions underlying these events. Through their spontaneous actions, the students have managed to break through the political stranglehold imposed by the PT, together with the trade unions, along with the pseudo-left organizations that gravitate around them.

The students’ struggle has become a regional flashpoint in Brazil, attracting broad popular support from the working class, professionals and civil servants, while also facing intimidation and violence at the hands of the fascist-minded police and vigilante groups.

Reports emerged in late November from Osasco and Sorocaba, two large industrial cities to the west of Sao Paulo, of the invasion and plundering of three occupied schools. Frightened students left the targeted schools, blaming organized criminal elements and pointing to police complicity and cover-up in the attacks.

In other cities, in anticipation of harassment, lawyers set up teams put on standby for student calls in case of unlawful detentions or intimidation. There has also been a constant flow of donations and offers of services from gardeners, electricians, arts teachers and others, so that the students could repair decaying infrastructure and keep activities going without having to leave the buildings.

Later, in events widely covered by the press, a court issued an injunction on November 14 suspending all authorization previously given for the police to forcibly remove the students. Escalating street demonstrations that followed were met with increasing brutality. Amnesty International denounced the Military Police for “use of excessive force” against peaceful demonstrators, including attacking minors with stun grenades, tear gas and physical violence.

Finally, on December 3, the public defenders office and the state attorney filled a request for the suspension of the decree, which was accepted by the governor, even before a judicial decision, on Friday, December 4.

Along with this decision, Herman Voorwald, the Secretary of Education, resigned. He was regarded as a cold technocrat, who since 2011 has implemented a series of accountability policies and charter schools in the state. His resignation was followed by that of his chief of staff, Fernando Padula, who was caught on tape saying the government was “preparing a war” against the students.

The students’ struggle has represented a severe political blow for Governor Alckmin, a former presidential candidate of the rightwing PSDB. According to a December 4 report by the Datafolha polling institute, the popularity of Alckmin, who has occupied the Sao Paulo governorship for more than 10 years over alternating periods, is at its lowest ebb. The poll shows his approval rating at just 28 percent, just a year and a half after he was reelected in the first round with a 57 percent majority, based on a regional-chauvinistic right wing platform.

On Sunday, December 6, a meeting was held at the E.E. Diadema School, the first to be occupied by students, to discuss continuing the mass mobilization until the full revocation of the restructuring. The meeting was held under the auspices of the ad hoc “Occupied Schools Command,” set up parallel to the state student union, UPES, and the schools’ student governments.

Students spoke out against the general deplorable state of the schools, the economic crisis, the role of the APEOESP union bureaucracy, gross mismanagement by school administrators, police violence and the offensive against the occupations by an army of petty bureaucrats used to harass the students in a truly Dickensian fashion.

The content of the discussion confirmed the widely discussed parallels

between the current movement in Brazil and the 2006 Chilean “Penguins Revolt” by pupils against the Socialist Party’s continuation of dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet’s authoritarian legacy in education.

The growth in popular support for the students’ cause is attributable in significant measure to their own efforts to answer, largely in social media, the information war waged by the government and the corporate press.

Victor, 25, a student of adult education attending the meeting, told the WSWs: “We are careful with the help given by APEOESP and other organizations because we know their will is limited. They have their interests against the state government, but we don’t care who’s there. It could be the Pope at the head of the state, we are fighting for education.

He added: “We want equality, and not someone needing to take a two-hour ride to attend a good school like mine because your neighborhood has a decaying one.”

Johnny, attending the meeting from the coastal city of Caraguatatuba, 130km from Diadema, added: “There are no guarantees of what will happen to the workers of the closed schools. [...] At the bottom of all this are the austerity measures at the federal level, which the governor has promised to oppose, but doesn’t.”

This same charge was leveled by Júlio, 16, who attends night shift classes at E.E. Diadema. The night shift is a particular feature of the Brazilian school system, designed to allow attendance by children working legal apprenticeships and by those pursuing adult education. These shifts generally suffer a chronic lack of staff and resources. Even so, it is widely seen by working class families as a way of breaking the poverty cycle caused by lack of education and opening opportunities to more skilled jobs in industry and services.

We asked Júlio about how Diadema students see the restructuring. He said: “The Brazilian crisis hurts only the poor, and we are seeing this very clearly in Diadema. At first there was the attack on all these good [factory] jobs we had here.”

He said that on top of seeing many of his friends fired, now the state government was attempting to close his school.

“This is a good school, with high performance in state evaluations: it would make no sense closing it,” Júlio said. With the shutdown of the night shift, he added, there would be no alternative for students like himself but to end their studies.

Asked about government repression, he said: “It starts inside. Functionaries lie to the public that we are destroying the school. Our headmaster reached the point of claiming that she was being held hostage by the students. You can’t say she is only taking orders when she does everything against us that the government asks. She believes in the restructuring.”

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He said that, while the police had not yet attacked the school, they had announced that they would only come to “make peace.”

“Make peace from what?” he asked. “It could only be from something they provoked themselves.” Júlio said they had drawn inspiration from the Chilean movement and also spoken about the reaction of the wider public: “People get a little confused because the mass transfers seem a technical question... Luckily, lots of people who have questions actually come to the gates and talk to us.”

Mistrust of the police was further explained by João, 18. He told the WSWs: “What our parents fear the most is the police. They fear when we go to demonstrations which are escorted by the police. In the school, they fear less, because it is not legal for the police to come here.”

Natália, 16, added: “In my school there was a girl leader who wore shorts on the day of the occupation and was called ‘bitch’ by the soldiers outside of the school. [...] You can’t even look at them and they make up that it is disrespect for them [a minor offense in Brazil, for which one can be detained].” She pointed to pending votes in Congress to lower the legal

age for criminal prosecution as an adult from 18 to 16, and said: “At the [street] demonstrations, there was a real hunt for 18-year-olds, and many were detained, but also under-18s, who couldn’t [be detained]. Imagine if the legal age had been lowered? The military police don’t know that this is not the dictatorship anymore, they don’t have the power they used to.”

A common slogan in the street demonstration and at the occupied schools called for an “End to the Military Police.” João was asked what he thought was behind the police brutality. He said: “We are always told that when we reach the age of military conscription, we will be mistreated ‘til we learn to behave; that’s what happens to them.”

One product of the school occupations has been a flood of exposures of administrative mismanagement. Dozens of pictures have emerged of hidden material of all sorts, from sports equipment to arts supplies and even ceiling fans that students had never seen before. At E.E. Diadema, students brought to demonstrations brand new drum sets that they found hidden in a closet.

“But the worst of it,” said João, “is that in my school we found a huge breeding site for mosquitoes [*Aedes aegypti*, a known vector for Dengue Fever, endemic to Brazil]. We had to take a huge risk and clean it by ourselves. The same happened to an abandoned area that had become a sort of dump for the whole street, and had lots of plagues.”

Felipe, 17, summed up the mood of the students: “For us, the restructuring was just the last straw. We were watching the demonstrations on TV since 2013 [when millions of workers and youth demonstrated over transit fare hikes, inadequate health services and education and other grievances] but we were never allowed to go, and now we are doing it. Our parents were brought up in fear during the dictatorship, but we have no ties to that, we can do what they never did.”

The students’ final resolution on Sunday called for: (1) Revoking the restructuring (2) Immediate release of all students jailed in demonstrations (3) No further punishment of any student, teacher, parent or supporter, and (4) Prosecution of Military Police soldiers involved in abuse in the schools and at street demonstrations.

This determination to continue the struggle will doubtless meet resistance from the APEOESP union bureaucracy, which has steadily narrowed its social base, putting its trust in the abusive school bosses, and from the official student union, UPES, which is tied to it. Both are determined to subordinate every struggle to the ruling PT and the Dilma Rousseff presidency, which is currently facing impeachment procedures in Congress even as it carries forward sweeping austerity measures.

The PT-connected citywide student unions already began an attempt to chloroform the struggle of the Sao Paulo students this past Monday, telling them to place their trust in the good will of the governor and leave the occupied schools.



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