# Brazilian students return to the streets over classroom censorship laws

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On August 11, national Student Day, Brazilian secondary students took to the streets of four state capitals in protest against cuts in education and a series of “Schools Without Parties” bills, the latest attack on public education in Brazil.

Mixing conservative Christian ideology and anti-communism, these bills have already been presented, but not yet approved, in more than 20 city and state legislatures as well as in the national Congress. Promoted mainly by Christian caucuses, they are meant to fight a supposed “ideological and political indoctrination” by left-wing teachers alleged to have taken place during the 13 years of Workers Party (PT) control of the national government. They are also justified in the name of defending “the religious convictions of the students’ families.”

If approved, the laws would allow for suspending and even firing public school teachers for teaching anything from history to evolution to sex education, based on charges filed by “offended” parents with education “ombudsmen”.

The largest demonstration, held in Sao Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, was harshly repressed by the Military Police. Before the demonstration started, when the students were still arriving at the meeting point, downtown’s Roosevelt Square, the Military Police used tear gas and pepper spray to intimidate and disperse the students, detaining three underage youth who were charged with contempt for law enforcement. After later allowing the march to proceed for a few blocks, the police finally dispersed it with tear gas.

This is however only the latest of a series of demonstrations since the aggravation of the economic crisis in the country. In Brazil, as elsewhere internationally, the cuts to the education budget are part of a broader program of attacks on the working class.

Last year, the PT government of President Dilma Rousseff cut 11 billion reals (US$3.4 billion) from education, reducing the education budget by 22 percent, and, this year, another 6 billion reals (US$1.9 billion) were cut before she was suspended by the ongoing impeachment process.

The interim government of president Michel Temer (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party—PMDB) promises to intensify the cuts in education even further. In his first 100 days in office, Temer has already gotten the lower house of the national legislature to approve two constitutional amendments that will impose even more sweeping reductions in the education budget. First, on June 8, an amendment was approved to the so-called “Divestment of the Union’s Revenues” articles of the constitution, allowing the federal government to divert constitutionally-mandated spending from several areas, increasing the total portion of the budget that can be diverted to 30 percent until 2023. This will reduce the education budget from the current 18 percent to 12.6 percent of the already contracting federal budget, and further imply a slashing of local-level education budgets from 25 percent to 17.5 percent of total local spending.

Then, on August 10, a bill was approved which restructures the states’ debts to the federal government, and will limit any increase in spending to the level of the previous year’s inflation for the next two years. Economists estimate that, if the rule had been in place since 2006, education would now be receiving only 30 percent of the current funding.

These cuts in education occur amidst an increasing deterioration of the Brazilian public schools and worsening of teachers’ working conditions. A study released in 2013 by researchers of Santa Catarina Federal University showed that 84 percent of Brazilian

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schools still don't have either library, laboratory or sport facilities. Another report released in 2014 by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that among its 34 member countries, Brazilian teachers are second only to their Chilean counterparts in terms of the number of hours spent teaching. At the same time, Brazilian teachers receive just 55 percent of higher education professionals' salaries, and 41 percent of them work extra hours to make up for their low monthly income.

With low wages and extended working hours, Brazilian teachers are increasingly getting sick and leaving the classroom. In the state of Sao Paulo, the richest and most industrialized in the country, 372 teachers take medical leaves a day, almost 30 percent of them due to mental and behavioral disorders. Between 2011 and 2014, the number of teachers working in alternate functions other than teaching on medical advice increased 24 percent, and last year 172 teachers a month gave up their careers in Sao Paulo public schools.

The teachers' answer to their poor working conditions since last year has been a series of the longest strikes in the history of the Brazilian education system. In 2015, in a 44-day strike against pension cuts, teachers from Paraná made worldwide headlines for being brutally repressed by the military police with tear gas bombs and rubber bullets that left more than 200 wounded. Then, Sao Paulo's teachers held their longest ever strike, for 92 days, followed by the teachers from the inland state of Goias, in an almost three-month long strike. In the first semester of this year, teachers held a 110-day strike in the state of Rio de Janeiro, went out for 53 days in Rio Grande do Sul and another 107 in the northeastern state of Ceará. In none of these strikes did they succeed in preventing wage and pension cuts.

In the last three states, moreover, the teachers' strike was accompanied by wildcat school occupations by high school and even middle school students, many aged as young as 12, with 52 schools occupied in Ceará, 73 in Rio de Janeiro and 186 in Rio Grande do Sul. In Rio de Janeiro, the students' schools occupations and the teachers' strikes had minor gains in ending the state's standardized testing system and initiating long-promised elections for school principals.

These occupations followed the 196 wildcat school occupations by students in São Paulo at the end of last year, which led the governor Geraldo Alckmin (Brazilian Social Democracy Party—PSDB) to suspend the closure of 94 public schools. Many of those students this year once again occupied their schools against the cuts to the education budget at the state level and the lack of school meals in 45 percent of São Paulo's industrial-training schools. Now they are being brought back into struggle against the "School Without Parties" bills.

The teachers' strikes, the students' schools occupations and the demonstrations all over Brazil show, unequivocally, the willingness to fight on the part of both teachers and students.

However, this struggle has been constantly blocked by the teachers' unions and student organizations linked to PT and other pseudo-left groups, which have done everything in their power to keep simultaneous strikes all over the country isolated from each other. The best example is the PT-dominated Teachers' Union of Sao Paulo, APEOSP, among the largest unions in Latin America, which has consistently opposed the student movement in which not only the state government, but also the PT federal government is widely hated.

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