

Brazilian teachers speak out on education cuts and social attacks

Our reporters
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WSWS reporters spoke to teachers during a September 22 rally called by the APEOESP (Sao Paulo's State School Teachers Union) and the CUT (the Confederation of Workers) as part of a series of one-day protests against the plans for education "reform" and other social attacks against the living standards of the Brazilian working class. These attacks are being carried out both by the interim federal government of Michel Temer (after having been prepared by his ousted Workers Party predecessor Dilma Rousseff, who initiated the education "reform"), and by the right-wing state governor Geraldo Alckmin.

The rally was not well attended, which surprised some of the teachers interviewed. While they explained their concern about the government's plan for "reforming" education, APEOESP bureaucrats gave speeches combining rhetorical condemnations of Temer's austerity program with praise for the Workers Party and its former leader Lula Da Silva, who is expected to run for the presidency in the 2018 elections. Lula is currently facing prosecution as the "commander" of the pervasive kickback scheme at the state-owned energy giant, Petrobras.

Mariá told the WSWS that she was disappointed with the rally's poor participation. When we asked if she blamed the APEOESP's performance as a union for this, she said: "Of course. During a strike last year, teachers wanted one thing and the bureaucrats articulated another. There are divisions because they come from different parties, and if it's fragmented, they cannot unite. There is a lack of truth during the assemblies. The people that are on the top are not democratic. I know schoolteachers that don't come to these rallies because they say they don't feel represented. There are stories about the APEOESP shutting down strikes despite the teachers' voting to continue."

"They are in favor of a party [the Workers Party] and they defend their own interests. It's treacherous," she said.

We raised with her the fact that the teachers had been called out for one day, after postal workers ended their strike, while bank workers were striking separately and metalworkers were set to stage their own protest a week

later. Did she think that this division of the working class weakened teachers' struggles against the government's attacks?

She answered: "Of course, people have to be united around their class, the working class, not just acting as individuals. There is always something in the way of a unity. And when it happens, it is the [PT-linked trade union federation] CUT who does it, and not the workers. A teacher is a worker. A bank clerk is a worker. A post office employee is a worker. People from the steel factories are workers. They have to unite as workers. They shouldn't be separated because of their professions."

She declared that if such a united struggle had existed, the impeachment of former President Rousseff would have never happened. "There are a lot of people that are very revolted with respect to the coup. The PT government has a lot of responsibility with respect to that, but it was a coup, there are no doubts with me. There are people revolted but there isn't action. People have their hands tied."

Vanessa said that she had come to the rally because she personally felt the effects of the attacks from President Temer and São Paulo Governor Geraldo Alckmin, who is implementing his own assault on public education. "But I also feel it within the Brazilian nation, with my students, with my family." She said her expectations for this rally and others to come is that the whole school community (parents, children, the teachers) will "perceive what is going on with public schools that suffer the attacks from the government."

She voiced opposition to the secondary school reform which, according to her, is based on the US model and doesn't fit Brazil's patterns. "I believe this reform comes with the aim of removing the subjects of history, sociology, philosophy, and diminishing the student's time in the classroom. The student will believe that he will have to study less, and only what he really wants and likes, when actually it shouldn't be that way." She concluded by saying that the reform aims to leave many teachers unemployed and to diminish critical thinking in Brazilian society.

Paulo said he was disappointed with the rally's poor

attendance. When asked if this had to do with APEOESP's performance during the last rallies, he answered: "I wouldn't blame them, but the APEOESP insists on strategies that have already proven ineffective."

About the secondary school reform, he said: "I read from official sources that in the reform decree you would fuse human sciences and nature sciences and leave language and math sciences separated and I believe that's terrible." Asked how this was going to influence teachers' work, he said, "In the worst way possible. We know that not a large amount of classes are responsible for low student performance. But with a reform, you should have a debate and not just ram through a provisional measure just like that."

When we asked about the American-based system of private charter schools being introduced in Brazil he answered, "They're not giving us a justification for implementing an American model here. It's disproportionate to implement models from the US, from Finland, which are countries that have disparities with Brazil."

Rogério said that he would like the rally to turn into a demonstration against the *golpistas* (putschists), "against all the regressions of this *golpista* government, but I believe people are not ready; it's difficult to have expectations. I always participate in social movements, for workers' struggles. But this is a very difficult conjuncture."

"Everyone who is a teacher, who is a worker should be on the streets, or people will lose their social rights. There is a retrogression in education, in health care, in natural wealth such as oil," he added.

About the secondary school reform, he declared: "A little bit of it has been already announced by the *golpista* government. There is a suppression of human sciences, of the teacher's autonomy in the classroom. Of the students too. People saw how they were treated by the military police in São Paulo state during the occupations. There were a lot of illegal acts against the occupations."

Carolina said she hoped the rally would manage to unite teachers and also "manage to inform the population about the education reform and to stop it, whether it is by the state or federal government."

She described the APEOESP as a very "bureaucratic union" that doesn't represent teachers. "I believe teachers could organize in a more horizontal way without requiring the unions."

"I have nothing concrete on this, but I believe the APEOESP is very linked with the federal government and with the PT (Workers Party). So in this sense, instead of prioritizing the interest of workers they follow the interest of the party and not of the workers."

About the secondary school reform she declared: "This reform is directly linked with the coup in the sense that it is

an ideological fight as well. What they want to place in the classroom is a market perspective and not a program for improving education. It's a program for making school courses cheaper by cutting 50 percent of the mandatory subjects and 50 percent of the optional subjects, and that is going to lead to the dismissal of teachers and a work overload for the remaining ones. For example, they talk about setting up integral time schools (*escolas de tempo integral*, a system of semi-privatized schools with corporate funding and merit pay for teachers), but at no moment do they talk about improving the classroom, or wage increases."

When asked about the unity of workers and, given that workers from different sectors are fighting back with strikes and protests, the possibility of a general strike, she said that she expected the CUT to call one, but noted that "when it called for strikes it boycotted them."

She added: "I believe that a general strike should have already begun in 2015, not just in relation to the impeachment, but against the fiscal adjustment. I believe the impeachment arose from the push to change the government's plan. If there had been a general strike it would have shown that workers are against this type of government proposal, of fiscal austerity. The impeachment would have not been possible."

She concluded by saying that the cuts are a response to the government's fiscal crisis. "But it's a neoliberal response. It's not the only solution for this."



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