

Brazil's high school students continue occupations in face of repression

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Brazilian high school students have been engaged since October 4 in their fourth wave of school occupations in less than a year against crippling attacks on the right to education by the federal and several state governments. Beginning in November 2015, threats of mass school closures, cuts to the education budget and attacks on teachers' working conditions drove hundreds of thousands of pupils, many of them as young as 12, to shut down and camp out in schools.

In every mobilization so far, students have resisted harassment by not only right-wing parents and petty school bureaucrats, but also the state, the police and organized crime. Hundreds have been detained over the year and taken to correctional facilities or even prisons, in the case of seniors, and hundreds more have faced retaliation in the form of suspensions, retentions and expulsions.

The escalation of harassment against the students reached a high point last week, when a judge authorized the Military Police in the capital Brasília to lay siege to an occupied school, cutting water and power, preventing parents from bringing food and cleaning supplies to their children and using sleep-deprivation techniques to force the students out. Frightened students decided to leave the school the following day.

The most recent movement has been largely concentrated in the southern state of Paraná, one of the country's richest, where half of the 1,700 high schools are occupied. It has now spread, however, to 19 states and more than 100 universities, with more than 1,000 facilities blocked nationwide.

The occupations' most immediate motivation is the imminent approval of a proposed constitutional amendment (named PEC 241 by Congress) to freeze government spending for 20 years, ostensibly to allow the country to overcome its worst economic crisis in a century following two consecutive years of economic contraction.

Economists estimate that the measure would withdraw from education and health funding more than 1 trillion reais (US\$317 billion) over the 20-year period, an impact that led the population to ironically nickname the proposal the "end

of the world amendment" ("PEC do fim do mundo").

For students and teachers, the amendment comes on top of a sweeping education reform promulgated by the new government of President Michel Temer. The measure, imposed by decree just days after Temer was sworn in following the impeachment of Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff in September, is also expected to freeze teachers' wages and cripple working and studying conditions in most schools.

Its pro-corporate character is an enormous attack on public education and will extend nationwide the privatization of education already experienced in the states of Pernambuco and Sao Paulo.

The education reform establishes a policy to implement full-time high schools, expanding from five to seven hours per day the time students spend in school, and allowing "flexible," pro-market curriculums, supposedly at each student's discretion.

In particular, the reform turns arts education, physical education, philosophy and sociology into optional subjects, raising the likelihood that they will rapidly disappear from the curriculum due to budget cuts, or even more likely, political intervention by right-wing and religious elements on local advisory boards. The optional character of art in full-time high school, and its possible end, means taking away from working class students one of their few accesses to culture.

A law for the extension of hours at schools has for years been demanded by educators with support of parents and students. Currently, 94 percent of Brazilian students attend one of three daily shifts—morning, afternoon and night. Of the 24 percent of high school students attending the night shift, the great majority work throughout the day. Parents have for a long time claimed that the three-shift system, which doesn't allow students to stay in school before or after classes, makes pupils vulnerable to harassment by organized crime or exploitative family relations that amount to under-the-radar child labor occurring upon their daily return home.

Longer hours have also been considered for a long time as a solution to poor performance in schools. According to the results on Brazil's standard testing exam, Prova Brasil, released in early September, 40 percent of high school students have extremely unsatisfactory educational results.

On the other hand, students fear that the change from a three-shift system to full-time schooling may force many out of school, not allowing them to combine attendance with work from the legal age of 16 in the context of the deep economic crisis.

The measures being proposed were first implemented in the northeastern state of Pernambuco in 2008 and involved the private Educational Co-Responsibility Institute (ICE—Instituto de Co-Responsabilidade Educacional) and Pernambuco's secretary of education. At the time, ICE was chaired by a former CEO of Philips, and financed by educational institutes controlled by private companies and banks, such as Natura, Itau and Bradesco.

The participation of ICE in Pernambuco's high schools takes place through reforms that fund and implement the management of schools by private companies. This means that the work regime of teachers includes periodic performance evaluations and bonuses if the students meet goals set in the standardized exams. Today, 44 percent of high schools in Pernambuco are full-time.

As usual in privatization drives, the Temer government alleges that expansion of hours would be impossible without the pro-corporate measures, given the state of the education system, in which teachers have the longest hours and the third-lowest wages compared with other OECD countries, and 84 percent of schools lack libraries, science laboratories and sports facilities. The privatization drive is further presented as an alternative in the face of the government's proposed constitutional amendment that will cut the Brazilian educational budget to an extent never seen before.

The education reform also has the explicit aim of expanding the coverage of technical education, which is currently attended by 8 percent of Brazilian high school students, in alignment with the World Bank and the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) recommendations. As the Education Ministry wrote to Congress in justifying the decree, "otherwise there is no guarantee of an economically active population sufficiently qualified to drive economic development."

The relationship between the World Bank and Brazilian education goes back to the 1950s, but was intensified during the 1964-1985 US-backed military dictatorship precisely in relation to technical education. Between 1971 and 1978, the World Bank financed the construction and reform of industrial and agricultural technical schools, with support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United

Nations (FAO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Ford Motor Company.

Prior to these agreements, the Brazilian military dictatorship reached a series of educational agreements with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which led to an enormous expansion of private higher education, with 75 percent of Brazilian students funneled into private faculties. At the same time, philosophy and sociology were removed from the curriculum. Only in 2008 were these subjects once again made obligatory.

While the educational reform and the brutal attack it represents on public education has been announced by Temer government, it was prepared by the PT governments of Lula da Silva (2003-2010) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), and is based on a 2013 bill introduced by Workers Party federal deputy Reginaldo Lopes. Moreover, the whole standard evaluation framework that paved the way for the current measures was set up by the PT's Sao Paulo Mayor Fernando Haddad when he was education minister in 2005.

Nonetheless, the fact that the pioneering states to implement such worked-out measures were, in the last election cycle, under control of the right-wing opposition to the PT, and that most officials implementing these policies have been drawn from those state governments after Rousseff's removal from office, has been used as a pretext to corral the student struggles behind the PT-controlled teachers' unions around the country. At the same time, this is being used to refurbish the image of the unions with students and teachers after their actions resulted in concessions contracts all over the country last year, which saw record strike activity among teachers.

Likewise, the historic association of the measures with the military dictatorship and traditional right-wing forces in Brazil, including Christian chauvinists, is being used by unions and the PT-linked media to foster the PT's "coup" narrative, hiding the party's complicity not only in the attacks on workers, but in strengthening the same political forces that removed it from power and which are now accelerating these attacks.



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