

# Wave of teachers strikes confront attacks on pensions and working conditions in Brazil

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A wave of strikes by public school teachers, joined by other sections of public workers, has swept Brazil since last month. With the entire Brazilian working class confronting practically identical attacks as the teachers, which are even further driving down their conditions of life, there is a growing potential for the eruption of a nationwide upheaval on the scale of Chile.

A number of Brazilian states are trying to enact, simultaneously, modifications to the pension systems for public employees. The measures are aimed at reducing the benefits for state and municipal workers to the levels of the recently approved pension “reform” pushed through congress by Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro. State and municipal workers are not covered by the this national plan, which provoked a one-day general strike in June that was sabotaged by the unions.

In the drive to destroy jobs in the public sector, there has been a generalized attack on public employees. Bolsonaro’s government and its economy minister Paulo Guedes have made it clear that they aim to privatize all public services. Guedes, who is the brother of the president of the National Association of Private Universities, Elizabeth Guedes, has defended the replacement of public schools by private schools that “offer cheaper service,” i.e., that drive down labor costs.

The first of the strikes against the changes in the pension system and working conditions was launched by teachers in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil’s southernmost state. The announcement by the administration of Governor Eduardo Leite, of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) represented the last straw for teachers who had already suffered major attacks.

Teachers and other public employees in Rio Grande do Sul have gone five years without a wage increase, and their paychecks have been constantly delayed since the previous administration of José Sartori, of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) party. Sartori was defeated in his campaign for re-election, which focused on the need to cut spending in the state, which has declared itself in a fiscal crisis.

The announcement by recently elected Governor Leite that he was deepening the attacks on public employees provoked immediate opposition from the workers, who decided to launch a fight against the new measures as well as against the holding back of their wages. An assembly on November 14, in front of the government building in Porto Alegre, the capital of the state, was attended by close to 20,000 teachers, who voted in favor of a strike set for the following Monday.

At the end of the first week of the strike, the Leite government tried to force a return to work, announced the cut-off of salaries for strikers, and refused to negotiate restoring pay for the days spent on the picket

line. The threat of cutting wages, which already were not being paid regularly, further angered the workers. Rather than intimidating them, the threat caused the strike movement to grow.

In the beginning of the second week of the strike it was estimated that 1,500 of the state’s schools—close to 65 percent—were either totally or partially paralyzed. From then on, it was considered the biggest teachers strike in Rio Grande do Sul in decades. The strike spread through the interior of the state, and in some cities every school was shut down.

In the state capital, a major demonstration by teachers and students on November 26 was brutally repressed by the shock troops of the Military Police. The teachers tried to enter the state’s Legislative Assembly together with their negotiating committee, composed of members of the union, and were met with truncheons and tear gas grenades that left 11 teachers and students wounded.

On the same day, an assembly of the other sectors of public employees filled the auditorium of a hotel in Porto Alegre, with workers spilling out onto the sidewalks in front of the building. Among the state employees present, who voted to immediately join the strike, were agricultural inspectors and public health workers.

The way in which the strike movement spread laid bare the increasingly stark class divisions that prevail throughout Brazilian society. The population of the state quickly identified with the public employees, rejecting the propaganda lie of the government that the cuts to their conditions were designed to combat “privileges.”

The strike became a mobilization of broader sections of the working class, which joined the teachers in the streets. In cities in the interior of the state, popular protests took over the main highways. The movement of the working class also drew support from local small businesses, also oppressed by the capitalist system. In many shops, posters were hung up bearing the words “I support the teachers strike.”

On the opposing side, the capitalists and their representatives united, exposing the interests dominating the state government. In a video circulated on social media, the president of the Federation of Commerce of Goods and Services appeared in an office of the institution surrounded by businessmen, whom he claimed “represent half of the GDP of the state.” They demanded that the state’s deputies vote “in favor of the reforms of the state public sector, because this is the only way to get out of the state’s current financial crisis.”

Brazil’s Economy Minister Paulo Guedes appeared together with Eduardo Leite, declaring that the governor was “doing a heroic job” combating costs for the state’s civil service and pensions that are “out of place.” The courts also supported the government, upholding its cutting of wages for workers on strike.

In the same week that the strike was intensifying in Rio Grande do Sul, teachers in the state of Sergipe, in the northeast of Brazil, went on strike over the same issues. The government, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Workers Party (PT), launched sharp attacks on teachers' working conditions and pensions in the name of "economizing on spending."

Beginning on November 26, the strike spread in less than a week to 40 percent of the schools in the state and was ended only after the withdrawal of the majority of the state's proposals. While the union declared it a victory for the teachers, the state government managed to implement at least one of its attacks. The right to a shortening of the working day after 15 years will now take effect only after 20 years in the classroom.

On the following Monday, December 2, teachers in the state of Paraná, in southern Brazil, walked out over changes in pension rules and against the closing down of night classes.

In 2015, the Paraná teachers had carried out a massive strike against another proposed pension reform. The teachers won the support of the general population above all after brutal repression by the Military Police that left more than 200 wounded when they attempted to occupy the state Legislative Assembly to block a vote on the bill.

This time, the attacks on pensions have more immediate effects, considerably raising employee contribution rates, as well as the minimum age for retirement. In a demonstration held on December 3, strikers knocked down barricades and occupied the Legislative Assembly in the midst of the vote on the legislation. In the face of the occupation the legislators left for another building, surrounded by police, and continued with their deliberations. Under these conditions, the union shut down the strike, defending the return to work as the best means of "advancing the struggle."

Despite the attacks on public employees being essentially the same throughout the country, the strikes have taken place in an isolated manner and without any communication between them. The unions in these states belong to the same union federation, the CUT, and are members of the same union, the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), neither of which have any interest in uniting the ongoing strikes.

The teachers union in the state of São Paulo, the APEOESP, claims to be one of the biggest unions in all of Latin America, with a membership of 180,000. The APEOESP has been led for the last 10 years by Maria Izabel Azevedo Noronha, known as *Professora Bebel*, who is also a deputy in the São Paulo state legislature.

Teachers in São Paulo are likewise threatened with a pension reform and new work rules, which would increase salaries in the short term, but do away with step increases as well as job security. In the face of these attacks the APEOESP called a strike "only on Tuesdays," beginning on November 26.

Danilo, a teacher in the São Paulo state system for 15 years, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "In the state of São Paulo the movement has already begun very weakly." Referring to the increase in the pension contribution rate from 11 percent to 14 percent of total salary, he said "I don't see a real fight for this not to go up to 14 percent. They are already assuming that it will pass."

Fabiano, who has been teaching in a state school for eight years, said that the government, in putting the vote back until the end of the year, "is using the same strategy adopted by the government of the city of São Paulo," where the pension reform was approved on the first vote in December of last year. The APEOESP called a mobilization on the last Tuesday of November, which is the last week

of classes for students. However, Fabiano said, "No strike was proposed, but rather a shutdown on every Tuesday, which is already weird."

Both teachers stressed the major cuts in salaries and working conditions carried out over the last decade, which have forced teachers to find second jobs or accept conditions of poverty. Moreover, teachers were divided into various sub-categories, with the short-term contracts becoming generalized. "We have actual teachers and various other teachers who simply work under conditions of an extreme lack of rights," said Danilo. "It seems that the unions accepted these conditions, allowing employees to be divided."

The two teachers doubt that the unions will call for the national unification of the strikes. As is the case with many teachers in the state system, they work a second shift in a municipal public school. Both related that, more than once, the municipal and state teachers unions have called demonstrations for the same day, but in different locations, breaking up a common workforce. "I have never seen any joint action, just the opposite," said Danilo. "The impression is that one union just as much as the other wants to maintain a distance."

For Danilo, "The unions were built by men who don't have any ideology, but only aspirations and interests. It is divide and conquer. As long teachers don't understand that we are a class, we will not have a unification."

For public school teachers to unify their strikes across Brazil, they must break the control of the unions over their struggle. The unions are against any independent political action by the working class, because it puts at risk the material base of their social position. The union officials do not want their funds, which guarantee them conditions far superior to those of the working class, to be compromised by strikes, nor do they want the class struggle to disrupt their political pretensions within the bourgeois state. Under the control of the unions, workers will only see their already deteriorated conditions of existence negotiated even lower.

The movement of Brazilian workers is part of the resurgence of the class struggle on a world scale. 2019 has been marked by teachers strikes across the planet, in dozens of countries and across five continents. In all these places, teachers are fighting against governments and capitalist corporations that demand privatization of schools and cuts to public education, and, invariably, their struggles have been isolated and betrayed by the unions. Overcoming this obstacle with new forms of organization, democratically directed by the rank-and-file, is a crucial task for the working class worldwide.



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