

Brazil: Amid brutal police repression, São Paulo government passes state pension reform

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Thousands of teachers in São Paulo, Brazil's most populous and wealthiest state, were brutally repressed by the Military Police on Tuesday, March 3, when they protested against a second-round vote on pension reform at the state's Legislative Assembly (ALESP).

The pension reform was sent to the state legislature last November by right-wing governor João Doria, who is affiliated to the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB).

According to the São Paulo teachers' union, APEOESP, which is affiliated to the Workers Party (PT)-controlled CUT union federation, 20,000 teachers participated in the protest. After the entrance to the ALESP was blocked by the military police, hundreds of outraged teachers forced their way into the building and went to the gallery of the Legislative Assembly to follow the vote on the reform.

Inside the Legislative Assembly, riot police prevented teachers from entering the gallery. It repeatedly attacked teachers who crowded into the narrow corridors of the ALESP with tear gas bombs, pepper spray and rubber bullets. Several teachers were wounded, including some shot in the face.

Outside the ALESP, the police employed similar violence against the protesting teachers, forcing them from the Legislative Assembly's entrance and sending them running through the streets near the building. The vote on the pension reform was briefly postponed because of the teachers' protest, but after the police shock troops dispersed it, the legislation was voted on and approved by late morning.

The pension reform had been approved in a first-round vote on February 18, the same day that the president of the Brazil's Supreme Court, the PT-appointed minister Dias Toffoli, overturned two injunctions that barred the proposal. These injunctions, presented by two state deputies of the PT, Emídio de Souza and the president of APEOESP teachers union, Maria Isabel Noronha, known as Bebel, had been hailed by the union bureaucracy as an "important victory" that had "barred" Doria's pension reform.

The pension reform will have far-reaching consequences for teachers and other public sector workers of São Paulo. In addition to reducing benefits for those who retire with less years of work than are required for a full pension, the pension reform raises the minimum retirement age from 55 to 62 for women, and 60 to 65 for men. For teachers, the minimum retirement age goes from 50 to 57 for women, and from 55 to 60 for men.

It also increases the pension contribution from 11 percent to up to 16 percent depending on the public sector workers' wage range. Teachers and other workers who join the São Paulo public sector after the approval of the pension reform will have to work 40 years to retire with full salary. The Doria government expects to save R\$ 32 billion (US\$ 6.9 billion) in 10 years, a figure that is almost double the 2019 tax exemptions of the São Paulo government.

The approval of the Doria government pension reform is just the latest in a series of attacks on teachers and public education in São Paulo since the PSDB took over the government of the state 26 years ago.

Teachers in São Paulo have had no salary increase since 2014, which led, starting in 2016, teachers to receive a wage lower than that required by the National Teachers Minimum Salary Law—which today is R\$ 2,900 reais (US\$ 630). In 2017, after APEOESP went to court for the law to be applied, the São Paulo Court of Justice ruled that the state had to grant a 10.51 percent raise to teachers. However, after the government appealed the decision, the salary increase was suspended until the plenary session of the Supreme Federal Tribunal meets to decide its merits.

Earlier this year, the Doria government announced a bonus—not tied to base salary—of up to 12.84 percent only for teachers who receive a lower salary than required by the National Teachers Floor Salary Law. In addition to being unconstitutional, since the law prohibits this type of salary increase, the raise offered by the Doria government is well below the 30 percent inflation rate in the São Paulo metropolitan region since 2015.

The São Paulo government's wage-cutting has been accompanied by an intensification of a policy holding teachers accountable for the results of standardized testing, with bonuses for teachers whose schools surpass established targets replacing regular wage increases for all.

In addition to the SARESP, the standardized testing exam taken by students in the final grades of elementary and high school, whose results determine teacher bonuses, since 2016 students from all grades of the public state schools have taken three other standardized tests per year, which are part of the São Paulo Secretary of Education's "Management in Focus—Results Improvement Method" (MMR) program.

The SARESP and the MMR program have taken the principles of business management into São Paulo's classrooms. This has transformed teachers' pedagogical work, which has increasingly focused on the need to surpass the targets established through

standardized testing at the expense of concerns about student learning. The pressure to exceed established goals has led to discouragement, professional frustration and illness among many teachers. A report published last year showed that 45 teachers take sick leave every day mainly because of depression and anxiety.

The MMR was elaborated by the Falconi Institute, a consulting company linked to large companies, which advocates the privatization of public education through partnerships with the private sector. In addition to the Falconi Institute, the São Paulo Secretary of Education has partnered with educational foundations linked to large companies and banks that are also transforming the state's curriculum.

This transformation has taken place through the INOVA program, which is implementing in São Paulo the pro-business high school reform measures approved in 2017 under the government of former right-wing President Michel Temer. The high school reform increases the students' time in school and implements full-time schools and a "flexible" curriculum ever more closely tied to the needs of the market, including the expansion of technical education.

Among the companies and banks behind INOVA are the largest Brazilian private bank, Itaú, the Spanish telecommunications giant Telefônica and Ambev, the global beverage giant led by the second richest man in Brazil, João Paulo Lemann. In January, Governor Doria met with the CEO of Pearson, the largest educational group in the world, which is responsible for standardized testing systems in the US and worldwide, to address "possible partnerships" for schools in São Paulo.

These moves by the PSDB governments in recent years are being intensified under Doria, paving the way for the privatization of state public education, which includes the implementation of for-profit charter schools.

This broad process, however, would not have been possible without the complicity of the APEOESP union, which has a long record of betrayals of teachers. Repeating the CUT's traitorous role in the "struggle" against the Bolsonaro government's pension reform, whose approval last October paved the way for state pension reforms, the APEOESP has refused to mobilize teachers against the Doria government's increasing attacks.

The militant response of many teachers in the March 3 protest at the São Paulo Legislative Assembly showed that there is immense anger against the attacks by the Doria government which has been deliberately suppressed by the APEOESP. It was the biggest teachers' demonstration in years. This response surprised and terrified the union bureaucracy, which did everything to prevent an assembly from being held in front of ALESP that could approve a teachers' strike.

After the brutal police repression, thousands of outraged teachers returned to gather around the sound truck from which the union bureaucracy and professional politicians were speaking. There they heard Bebel say that the pension reform had not been approved, contrary to what was being reported by news sites. This led her to go back to the plenary of the ALESP and return to the sound truck two hours later, when the vast majority of teachers had already left.

While the end of last year witnessed a wave of strikes by

teachers across Brazil, the APEOESP limited its "struggle" against the Doria government's pension reform to calling for an empty "strike every Tuesday" in front of the São Paulo Legislative Assembly. In states where teachers went on strike, governments have encountered widespread resistance to pension reform. However, despite the national level of attacks on pensions, the CUT, which controls the vast majority of state teachers' unions, worked to keep these struggles isolated and divided.

Many of those states that recently approved pension reforms are governed by the PT, such as Ceará and Bahia. Like the PSDB's Doria government, the PT governments in these states unleashed brutal repression against teachers and other public sector workers.

In the northeastern state of Piauí, also governed by the PT, which has also approved its pension reform, teachers have been on strike since February 10 demanding a 17 percent wage increase. In Rio Grande do Norte, also in the northeast and governed by the Workers Party, Governor Fátima Bezerra sent the state Legislative Assembly a pension reform in late January which increases both the pension contribution to up to 16 percent and the minimum retirement age. Last Monday, workers at the Social Security Institute of the state went on strike against the measure.

These recent developments have shown that the Bolsonaro federal government and the PT and PSDB state governments are united against teachers, public sector workers and the Brazilian working class as a whole.

The fight against the state pension reforms, as well as the defense of public education, requires a complete break with the PT-controlled unions and the building of new workers organizations, rank-and-file committees, with the goal of uniting the working class and advancing a political counteroffensive against the ruling class and the capitalist system. This means building the Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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