

As Bolsonaro pushes to reopen schools, Brazilian state governments escalate attacks on education

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As part of his drive to reopen the economy amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro advocated on Monday, April 20, the reopening of military and civic-military secondary schools beginning this week. His intention is that this will lead to the reopening of all schools in Brazil and pave the way for the reopening of business in general.

"Perhaps [the reopening of civic-military schools] is the first step for us to return to normality in terms of studies," said Bolsonaro. Showing his usual contempt for the Brazilian population, the fascistic president justified his proposal by saying, "It's a reality: on average, 70 percent will catch the virus... It is no use running away from this reality." That 70 percent of the population will become infected means 160 million Brazilians. With a low estimate of the fatality rate at 1 percent, this means at least 1.6 million deaths.

Bolsonaro's defense of reopening schools took place after a talk with Ibaneis Rocha (MDB), governor of the Federal District, where the Brazilian Armed Forces has one of its 13 military schools that are spread throughout the country. The Federal District also has nine of the 53 civic-military schools opened by the Bolsonaro government since his inauguration.

One day after the announcement of the possible reopening of these schools, the daily *Jornal de Brasília* reported that students' parents rejected Rocha and Bolsonaro's proposal, organizing a petition to the governor and the state prosecutor's office.

An outraged mother told the *Jornal de Brasília*, "Our children are not guinea pigs," while another added that "there is no scientific or legal basis for it." An opinion poll released by Datafolha Institute on April 20 showed that 68 percent of Brazilians support social isolation.

The Federal District was the first in Brazil to order the closing of schools on March 12. With the detection of community transmission of coronavirus, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the first and third most populous states in the country respectively, closed schools on March 16. By March 17, both public and private school systems in Brazil were closed.

The defense of Bolsonaro's return to school came a few days

after the fascist president fired his health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who came into conflict with Bolsonaro's proposal for refusing to defend "vertical isolation"—the isolation of adults over 60 years old and those with chronic diseases—while everyone else returns to work. Bolsonaro's downplaying of the effects of COVID-19, saying it was a "little flu," and his open defense of the reopening of business also led him to clash with former allies in the states, such as the right-wing governors Ronaldo Caiado (DEM), from Goiás and João Doria (PSDB), from São Paulo.

However, as the impact of social isolation upon an economy that has not grown for six years has become increasingly clear, with an optimistic forecast of a fall of more than 5 percent in GDP this year, the governors have also begun to express the will of the Brazilian ruling class to reopen the economy. According to the daily *O Globo*, by April 22 ten Brazilian states had already relaxed their quarantines and two others had presented plans to gradually reopen the economy.

These relaxations of quarantine measures are taking place as the number of cases and deaths from COVID-19 in Brazil are growing rapidly. By Sunday, 4,205 deaths and nearly 62,000 cases had been confirmed, with scientific studies indicating that the real toll is likely 12 times greater due to the pervasive lack of testing. According to the COVID-19 Observatory, which includes the largest Brazilian and two foreign universities, the number of deaths from the disease in Brazil is growing faster than in Spain during the same stage of infection.

In the states of São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul and Minas Gerais, which are among the most industrialized in the country, the move to reopen the economy has been accompanied by attacks on teachers and school staff. Even before the worsening economic situation triggered by the coronavirus pandemic, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul were two of the first three Brazilian states to declare a state of fiscal calamity in 2016.

The coronavirus crisis has led the state of Minas Gerais to increase its deficit forecast for 2020 from 13 to 21 billion Brazilian reals (US\$2.3 to 3.7 billion). Meanwhile, the tax on consumption of goods and services (ICMS), responsible for 80 percent of the state's revenue, is expected to fall by R\$15

billion (US\$2.6 billion) this year.

On Thursday, April 23, the governor of Minas Gerais, Romeu Zema (Novo), detailed his plan to reopen business throughout the state. Cynically called *Minas Consciente* (Conscious Minas), the plan was announced as the state had 51 COVID-19 deaths and 1,308 confirmed cases, with a number of suspected cases of almost 80,000.

Governor Zema had already tried to force the state's 135,000 teachers back into the public schools on April 22 to organize distance learning activities that will be offered to students beginning May 4. He also ordered the return to the schools of 50,000 school staff, such as outsourced janitors and cleaning staff, who are one of the most exploited labor forces in Brazil and whose presence at school could help spread the coronavirus like wildfire in the state's poorest communities.

However, on April 15, a decision by a Minas court supported a suit filed by the teachers' union and suspended the return of teachers and staff to the schools. The state public prosecutor's office also recommended that the Education secretary not reopen schools.

Teachers in Minas Gerais went on strike in early February after suffering years of low wages. The strike was suspended when the governor announced the closing of schools. With wages delayed for years, until last week teachers in the state had not yet received their pay for the second half of March.

In the southernmost state of Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul, Governor Eduardo Leite (PSDB) has already relaxed the quarantine, telling the daily *Folha de S. Paulo* on Wednesday, "we have to manage isolation in a rational way." The forecast is that the state will lose R\$700 million (US\$122 million) with the shutdown of economic activity in April.

Teachers and public sector workers in Rio Grande do Sul have had their salaries delayed for more than 50 months and have gone almost six years without a wage increase. At the end of last year and beginning of this year, teachers went on strike against Leite's pension reform, which wound up being approved by the Legislative Assembly after the union and the pseudo-left organizations sowed the illusion that the courts would bar it.

The Leite government has also cut transport benefits for public sector workers and has reduced a benefit for teachers who live far from the schools where they work.

In Brazil's most populous and wealthiest state, São Paulo, the month of April is expected to end with 30 percent less tax revenue than March, and the decrease in tax revenues due to the coronavirus crisis could reach as much as R\$10 billion (US\$1.8 billion) by June.

Last Tuesday, April 14, Governor João Doria announced an austerity plan that postpones until the second semester a bonus paid to teachers whose schools exceed targets in standardized testing and cuts food, transportation and other benefits for all public sector workers.

Shortly after the schools closed, Doria also suspended the

contracts of lunch staff, caregivers for disabled students and school transport drivers at the more than 5,000 schools across the state.

Doria has clashed a few times with President Bolsonaro for defending the quarantine measures in the state, earning him the praise of former Workers Party (PT) president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as an example for the fight against COVID-19 in Brazil. However, on Wednesday, April 22, Doria presented a plan to gradually ease the quarantine measures beginning on May 11. On Friday, April 24, Doria announced that public schools will gradually reopen beginning in July. There is also the possibility that infants and younger children will return to school even before July, allowing parents to return to work.

These moves to reopen the economy and the attacks on education are taking place amid the start of online classes in public schools throughout Brazil. The state of São Paulo, which has the largest public school system in the Americas, with 3.5 million students, was the first to present a distance learning platform in Brazil for teachers and students to use during the quarantine. This platform, which will be rolled out next week, was elaborated with the aid of technology giants Google and Microsoft, as well as educational foundations of large Brazilian corporations and banks, such as AMBEV, Itaú and Rede Globo, which see the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their presence in the lucrative educational market.

The situation with online teaching in public schools contrasts dramatically with that of the most expensive private schools in the country, whose monthly fees can reach R\$10,000 (US\$1,800). After the Ministry of Education allowed classes in all basic education—from kindergarten to high school—to be replaced by online education during the pandemic, these schools immediately began online learning.

Undoubtedly, the coronavirus pandemic will intensify the already enormous educational inequality in one of the most unequal countries in the world. At the same time, public schools will tend to suffer even greater cuts. The economic crisis caused by the pandemic is being used as a pretext for a growing presence of large corporations and banks in a system that involves almost 50 million students in Brazil.

This situation will lead to an explosion in the struggle of workers in defense of public education in Brazil and throughout the world in the coming period. A confrontation is inevitable between the capitalist governments and the major corporations and banks, on one side, and teachers and students, on the other.



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