

Brazilian teachers oppose back-to-school drive

Our correspondents

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As Brazilian local governments are pushing for a general reopening of schools, following the sociopathic demands of the fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, widespread opposition to these measures is emerging among parents and educators.

A survey by *Instituto Datafolha* in April revealed that three in every four people in Brazil believed that it is more important to “stay home to avoid the coronavirus spread, even if this jeopardizes the economy and provokes unemployment.” In June, another survey from the same institution revealed that 76 per cent of Brazilians are against the schools reopening in the next two months, and that only 21 percent are in favor of going back to schools in the short term.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers from different parts of Brazil about the political reasons behind the back-to-school campaign and the dangers it poses to the lives of the school staff, students, and their families.

Francisca, a public school kindergarten teacher in São Paulo, explained that a series of safety protocols being approved by state and municipal governments are an active part of the back-to-school campaign. “The protocols that are being presented seem to me like a listing of general procedures that do not guarantee the safety and well-being of workers, children or families and do not consider the specifics of each age group or the structure conditions of each education unit.”

Arguing that adequate infrastructure is a pre-requisite for protecting people from contagion, Francisca said, “The school where I work has an inadequate infrastructure ... and one which, in this moment, determines the impossibility of implementing the [protocol] measures: reduced spaces, making social distancing difficult; the absence of reserved spaces for isolating symptomatic children; and poor airing and cooling systems, compromising the air healthiness. These are only three basic preventive measures that our school, as many others of the school network, are under no condition to implement.”

Fabiano, a Portuguese middle school teacher in São Paulo’s public system, made reference to the cuts that were already occurring before the pandemic. “These protocols are very subjective, and we know that the municipal government under this administration [of Bruno Covas of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB)] has already reduced the cleaning staff. The hygiene aspect is fundamental for these protocols to

work and I don’t believe, especially due to this administration’s record, that there would be personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer, soap, what they call ‘safety protocols’.”

Job cuts in the municipal school system of São Paulo have been occurring under successive administrations, including that of Fernando Haddad of the Workers Party (PT), who was the PT candidate in the 2018 presidential elections.

Geraldo, a Sociology teacher in a public state school in Amazonas, warned about a potential new upsurge in infections resulting from a return of classes. “The Department [of Education] will leave us to fend for ourselves and there will be no following of safety protocols ... One person can transmit to another five or ten. I read that, at the same time as kids have a lower probability of contagion, they are less symptomatic. And how are people going to interact in schools without human contact? And by that I don’t mean touching other people—they are going to touch things; they are going to walk to different places.”

Pedro, a primary school History teacher also working in the Amazonian public school system, described the “safety protocols” being planned for the return to schools. “One hundred percent of the students would come back under a hybrid, rotation scheme. They claim that there will be testing for teachers, but only once, when they get back to school. This testing is not being planned for students, who will, at most, have their temperatures measured.”

Pointing out the herd immunity policies being *de facto* implemented by governments throughout the world, Geraldo warned: “The professionals are being prepared to return as guinea pigs, with all of the existing surveys about chronic diseases among teachers.”

There is an understanding among educators that the back-to-school campaign is based on financial interests. Igor, a private school teacher in São Paulo, stated that “The immediate return certainly cannot solve even the teaching issues for students. The interests are economic ones.”

He also exposed the movement in private schools to decrease teachers’ wages. “From one side, there are demands from parents, who want to pay less for not getting the same services. From the other, there is pressure from the companies, which

indeed can suffer from decreases in enrollment and default, but which may use the moment to worsen labor relations. A sign of that is that a big company in education where I work reduced wages by 25 percent for three months, but considers that it can be a good moment to make new company acquisitions.”

Expressing the educators’ distrust of the ability of a return to school to solve the educational issues existing in distance learning, Francisca denounced the new issues that would arise. She highlighted the utter lack of preparation and indifference towards the education of small children.

“It will be, at best, an uncertain, if not worrisome outcome, as the return does not completely solve the problems posed and, actually, creates other ones: Which kids and families will ‘earn’ the right to be part of the first 35 percent [of students allowed in classrooms in the first phase of the plan]? They will be guaranteed meals, ‘safe’ school-day time and it will relieve the workers responsible for them, but at what cost? Are the protocol measures really sufficient or possible? In the specific case of small children, how to guarantee significant school experiences in the face of physical distancing, restricted spaces and the prohibition of sharing?”

Pointing to the worsening of the work conditions that came with the widening of digital service platforms, Geraldo made a connection between the inadequate conditions and poor wages of app delivery workers, who have recently engaged in strikes in Brazil, and the attacks faced by education workers over the last years. “If you look at people who work in tourism sector, in hotels, or submitted to companies as Airbnb, I think that situation has also arrived in education, in the sense that the teacher will also start to share content without any labor obligations.”

The pandemic was seen by education government officials, NGOs and companies as an opportunity to accelerate the introduction of distance learning digital platforms in school curricula. Already, hundreds of millions of dollars in digital equipment were promised to supposedly ameliorate working conditions for teachers.

However, Pedro denounced the precarious experience that actually is being provided. “Not even half of the students own a cell phone ... many families are poor. We have many Venezuelan students, who have just arrived in Brazil and don’t speak Portuguese.”

“Participation is minimal, with three or four students attending classes where there are almost 50 students enrolled.” Those that do participate are doing so by overcoming precarious conditions. “A colleague of mine told me that a parent works as a night guard. His son finishes the activities, then his father takes pictures on his cell phone and sends it when he arrives at work, where there is wireless internet connection.”

He went on to explain the inadequate meal distribution to the families. “They have created a program called ‘Meals at Home’, distributing one food basket to the family of each

student during these four months. However, there are many parents complaining that they still haven’t received it. In the countryside, families are just now receiving their first food basket.”

Geraldo denounced the criminal response of the trade union in São Paulo joining the government in implementing the return to school plans. “In some schools, the attacks were so intense that many teachers were fired, and some lost their contracts. And the response of the trade unions is limited to assistance, sending food and aid. The trade union is unable to get close to the rank-and-file. It is already supporting the Plano SP [the return-to-work plan of the state government], limiting their demand to a ‘drastic decrease’ [in cases before reopening schools], which doesn’t mean anything.”

“The trade union doesn’t create an official Facebook, or Instagram account and doesn’t show their number of followers because they are afraid to be among the rank-and-file, exposing their own contradictions and problems, which teachers would expose.”

On Wednesday, São Paulo state teachers organized a motorcade, planned to finish outside of Governor João Doria’s house. Doria ordered the police to block the motorcade, preventing it from reaching his house. Then, the São Paulo Teachers Union (APEOESP) president, Maria Izabel Azevedo Noronha, known as Bebel, walked towards the police blockade and feigned opposition to the governor’s plans.

In the beginning of July, Noronha met with the state’s education secretary to supposedly oppose the back-to-school drive, on the grounds that a “drastic reduction of the pandemic” is needed before that. Such formulation leaves open the possibility that teachers and students are forced into schools as cases and deaths reach an “acceptable” level.

In Rio de Janeiro, where the Mayor Marcelo Crivella of the Republicans party is promoting the reopening of private schools starting this Monday, trade unions are blocking a unified opposition of the educators. The unions officially representing state, municipal, and private school teachers, who are all threatened by the same policies, held separate meetings in different dates.

Teachers, school staff and workers in Brazil and internationally must form rank-and-file committees independent of both the trade unions and “left” parties such as the PT, PSOL and PCdoB. They will allow workers to unify themselves to fight against the murderous back-to-school campaign, and for the modernization of schools and high-quality infrastructure for distance learning, both financed by the expropriation of the capitalist oligarchy.



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