

Brazilian teachers report 36 COVID-infected schools after one week of classes in Manaus

Tomas Castanheira
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The first week of return to classes in public schools in Manaus, the first Brazilian capital to take the measure, was marked by disastrous episodes.

The Secretariat of Education and Sports (Seduc) of the state of Amazonas reported that 123 state schools reopened in Manaus on Monday. About 110,000 students returned to classrooms under a “hybrid system,” alternating days of attendance.

The Secretary of Education Luís Fabian Barbosa assured that the government was going to implement “a safe plan for resuming classroom activities, which included the participation of control agencies, unions representing the workforce, the students’ parents and the school community.”

This statement was backed up by a committee of deputies from the Amazonas Legislative Assembly that visited schools “at random” and proved that “all the measures are being taken.”

The commission was led by congressman Sinésio Campos, the state president of the Workers Party (PT), who said: “As a teacher I understand the concern of teachers. ... But I also understand that students need to resume educational activities.”

In contrast to the statements made by Seduc and the deputies, educators and students shared on social media images of crowded schools with extremely precarious infrastructure. The masks distributed by the government, unusable because of being oversized, became a meme among students.

The day after the reopening, the government confirmed the COVID-19 infection of a teacher who, after giving a full day of classes on Monday, showed symptoms during the night.

Two days later, eight schools had already been closed for disinfection after reporting cases. They opened again the next day or the afternoon of the same day. Staff and students who came into contact with cases were not isolated and returned to their schools.

The government placed the responsibility for reporting cases and isolating contaminated teachers and staff on the

schools themselves. Educators reported disputes over the closure of schools with school boards that tried to suppress cases.

A map drawn from complaints sent to unions showed, as of Friday, 36 schools that reported infections among students, teachers and other staff after reopening. This represents about 30 percent of schools in Manaus.

But the real scale of the disaster is certainly much greater. Workers, students and family members are being forced to go forward in the dark, with the secretary of education stating that mass testing of students and teachers is not a “recommended strategy” of the Health Surveillance of Amazonas.

The degree of recklessness of the policy being implemented in Manaus is shocking, if not surprising. A few months ago, the world was shocked by the scenes there of graves being dug by backhoes for thousands of COVID-19 victims after the collapse of the local health care system. The governor of Amazonas, Wilson Lima of the Christian Social Party (PSC), under investigation for corruption in connection with the purchase of ventilators, tested positive for coronavirus on Thursday.

The disaster of the reopening in Manaus was suppressed by the media, which reported only bits and pieces of what is happening there and mostly on local channels. The repercussions of these events threaten to undermine the policy being implemented by virtually all Brazilian states and capitals, which plan to reproduce the homicidal model of Manaus.

On Friday of last week, the governor of São Paulo, João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), who has also tested positive for the coronavirus, announced his agenda for reopening public schools.

In a maneuver covered up by the media, the government declared that the return to schools had been postponed until early October. In practice, however, the government is maintaining the reopening in early September to “attend to students whose parents have started working and are having trouble taking care of their children...[offering] school

tutoring and optional activities such as sports and conversation,” in the words of *O Globo*.

São Paulo is the state with the highest number of confirmed coronavirus cases worldwide. On Thursday, after a change in the notification system, which now considers results of imaging exams, the state announced a single-day record of 455 new deaths and 19,274 new cases, bringing the total to 26,324 deaths and 674,455 cases. This is more than the number of cases in California, which has recorded the highest for any US state, topping 600,000 on Friday.

In Rio Grande do Sul, the reopening of schools, starting with kindergarten, was scheduled for August 31. The extremely unsettling situation of the pandemic in the state is shown in the occupation rate of hospital beds, which has remained for the last two weeks at 89 percent, even as new beds were created.

The imprudence of the decisions being taken by the Brazilian political establishment as a whole was expressed quite openly by the secretary of education of Rio Grande do Sul, Faisal Karam. Justifying the plainly precipitous back-to-school plan, opposed by 84 percent of families, he said:

“We can’t wait another five months for a vaccine or fully secure alternatives. ... There was no time to plan. There was no collective form among all the secretariats in the country, nor was there a federal government regulation to support the return to classes.”

In similar terms, the governor of the state of Bahia, Rui Costa of the PT, ridiculed teachers who demanded vaccines before returning to school. He attacked the workers, saying, “It is unreasonable that people think they can go to the mall and are not able to teach in a school. ... I haven’t seen anyone talking about genocide when we talked of reopening malls.”

None of the criteria upon which governments base their plans for school re-openings are based on scientific perspectives or any social interest in preserving lives.

They are based upon the claims of a) a supposed control of the pandemic, expressed in the color maps showing the rate of infection in a given territory; b) the capacity of the health care system to attend to new patients; and c) safe return protocols.

The first two arguments assume that the majority, or the entire population, should contract the virus. It is the so-called “herd immunity” policy, which has no scientific value and will result in an incalculable number of deaths that could be totally avoided.

As for the “safe protocols,” they were nakedly shown in the criminal episodes of last week in Manaus. But even if followed to the letter, the protocols have no effectiveness in the absence of a policy for the eradication of COVID-19, which involves massive testing of the population and a strict

contact tracing.

Neither are true, and this overrides all the official rhetoric feigning concern for the welfare of children being adversely affected by distance learning.

Behind the moral crusade against the “incalculable losses” to the learning process are the same political parties that have been promoting the destruction of public education, scrapping classrooms and attacking the gains of teachers and school workers.

As the pandemic spreads, they have not bothered to ensure a minimally adequate infrastructure for families and teachers to effectively carry out distance learning.

The plans to reopen schools in Brazil, as in every other country in the world, are dictated solely by the interests of capitalist profit. The ruling class needs the schools opened so that workers have a place to leave their children while they are exploited at their jobs and themselves subjected to infection, and that is all.

The main issue being discussed by the bourgeoisie now is how to break the resistance of parents and educators to work or send their children to environments that are being described as “slaughterhouses.”

The working class, in an association between family members and education workers, must lead a joint struggle against the measures of the bourgeois governments to force schools to reopen. Both the false campaign of existence of safe conditions and the attempts to gain ground with partial reopenings must be fought.

Teachers and school staff need to advance their discussions of organizing a general strike of education. To overcome the efforts of the unions to isolate them locally and from the rest of the working class, they must organize themselves in rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood.

Through these committees, they will be able to appeal to their colleagues in every part of the country and to the working class as a whole, turning this struggle into a fight for safety in every working place and decent living conditions for all.



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