In face of overwhelming popular opposition, Brazilian governments push criminal reopening of schools

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3 September 2020

After disastrous results in Manaus, the first capital city to resume on-site classes, the governments of major states throughout Brazil, including those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, are advancing criminal plans to reopen schools between September and October.

Headed by the different parties of the Brazilian ruling class, these governments face as their adversary the working class, which vehemently opposes this homicidal policy.

A survey published by the Datafolha research institute on August 17 found that 80 percent of Brazilians are against reopening schools. About 60 percent are sure that the return of classes will "severely aggravate the pandemic."

These polls reflect the resistance of the great majority of the population to accepting the toxic anti-scientific campaign promoted by the Brazilian state as whole, headed by the country's fascistic president, Jair Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro has been silent on the subject of schools in the recent period, clearly because he believes that state politicians of his self-declared opposition are doing the dirty work for him.

Brazil remains the country with the highest indices of COVID-19 cases and deaths, trailing only the United States. It has just crossed the milestone of 4 million confirmed cases, with roughly 125,000 confirmed deaths from the disease.

Twenty days ago, on August 10, classes in public schools were resumed in Manaus, the capital and largest city of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, by order of Governor Wilson Lima of the Christian Social Party (PSC). The immediate result was the outbreak of new COVID-19 cases in 36 schools within a week of their reopening.

Growing protests by teachers and school staff led the government to announce a massive testing of education workers, while keeping the schools functioning in the same unsafe conditions. The tests were conducted by the Amazonian Health Surveillance Foundation (FVS), which operates as a government public relations agency.

The results of the tests were disclosed in a deliberately confusing manner. On August 24, the FVS released the first result of the tests, with 342 positive cases among the 1,064 tests conducted, indicating that 30 percent of education professionals were infected.

When it presented updated numbers, on Monday, the FVS hid the results of IgG type tests (which show longer term antibodies). It just published that, in a universe of 2,114 tests, "Only 162, or 7.6 percent, had recent infections."

What they call "only 7.6 percent" is, in fact, an extremely unsettling number. Translated into the total of 110,000 students attending schools, which are not being systematically tested, it would indicate that there are more than 8,300 infected youth inside classrooms. They are putting their own lives at risk, as well as those of their fellow students, teachers and family members.

The impact this will have on the city that produced scenes of mass burials of COVID-19 victims at the peak of the pandemic are not yet clear, but some numbers already sound the alarm. Professor Henrique dos Santos Pereira, of the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM), told *A Crítica*: "From what we can see, there is an increase in the number of hospitalizations in Manaus in the second half of August, approaching the same levels as the peak of June 22."

The news portal *G1* reported that the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Pará, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo have already set dates for a return to classes between September and October.

Facing massive opposition from educators and family members, governors and mayors are spouting lies and taking minimal measures to gain ground. The first claim is that their decisions are being made on the basis of a "scientific evaluation," expressed with the release of colorful maps, whose criteria change every week. The second is that the return will be "optional" and will not be done suddenly.

The governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Eduardo Leite of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), made these hypocritical arguments in an exemplary way this Tuesday,

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during the presentation of his back-to-school calendar. “We understand that the risk, at this moment, is lower than what was perceived at other moments,” he said. “It is not a return at any cost, nor a disorganized return or a return to normal. It is a calendar to authorize, or to stop restricting (!), but not to force a return.”

What does a “risk lower than what was perceived at other moments” mean? The capital of Porto Alegre has 88 percent of its ICU beds occupied, even after the recent construction of new beds, and the state registered 1,463 new cases this Monday. Amidst this scenario, Leite proposes the return, in the first place, of kindergarten students on September 8.

The preference for reopening the schools for the youngest students is not an accident, and the rationale was explicitly stated by the governor: “Many parents have gone back to on-site work and have no one to leave their children with. This return to work imposes the need for places for child care, which are the kindergarten schools.”

Essentially the same model is being advanced in São Paulo, which has the highest incidence of COVID-19 in the country and for any state in the world, with 30,673 confirmed deaths and 826,331 cases. On Wednesday alone, 298 deaths were reported in the state.

Despite declaring, with the support of the press, that students will return to classes in state schools on October 7, the government of Governor João Doria, of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), is actually promoting the reopening of schools as early as next week. His objectives are exactly the same as those of his fellow party member from Rio Grande do Sul – to give workers a place to leave their children while they generate profits for the ruling class and are themselves subjected to the risks of infection.

To force through his criminal project, Doria is offering overtime pay to teachers who supplement their workload by receiving students on-site for an “emotional welcome” this month. In an interview with *Folha*, the state secretary of education of São Paulo, Rossieli Soares, stated that he may hire substitute teachers, in a bid to brreak teachers' resistance.

A teacher from the São Paulo state network sent the *World Socialist Web Site* a government statement sent to the school boards on September 1 that exposes the “optional” character of this return. Advising schools to conduct a survey on the resumption of classes among teachers and parents, the document concludes: “It is not necessary to reach a majority that wants or does not want the return to define the opening of the school.”

The project being prepared in São Paulo, as in other states, represents a conscious assault of the ruling class on the lives of the masses of working people that can be defined as a policy of social murder. A simulation presented by a group of researchers from leading Brazilian and international universities shows that the parameters set for reopening in São Paulo would provoke, in a three-month period, the infection of up to 46 percent of students and teachers.

School workers and families must unite to overturn this policy. They need to face not only the governments, but also the trade unions that claim to represent the educators. In the capital of São Paulo the unions are joined with the local government in an “Emergency Committee on the Crisis of Education.”

In a press release on the last meeting of this committee, which took place on August 18, the SINPEEM teachers union stated that it and “representatives of other union entities and congressmen have discussed once again the return of on-site classes ... SINPEEM has insisted once again that the return of the on-site classes can occur only in 2021, after City Hall puts in place protocols with measures that guarantee the safety of education professionals, students and their families.”

What the unions are doing, in fact, is conspiring behind closed doors with the government to create the best conditions to break workers' resistance. The same course is being pursued by the other unions affiliated to the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE).

The central objective of the CNTE in the present situation is to isolate workers locally and prevent a general strike of education workers throughout Brazil, which would join with the ongoing postal workers’ strike and could provoke an uprising of the Brazilian working class as a whole.

To overcome this blockade imposed by the unions, Brazilian educators and parents must build independent rank-and-file committees in each school and neighborhood. These committees will allow the workers themselves to politically lead their struggle and unite with their colleagues throughout Brazil and across national borders.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which publishes the *WSWS*, is already advancing the organization of such committees in a number of countries, fighting for the unification of education workers internationally and the building of a revolutionary leadership for their struggles.

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