Brazilian teachers call strikes against back-to-school drive

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The terrible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, with more than 135,000 deaths and nearly 4.5 million recorded cases, combined with the significant deterioration of the living conditions of the masses of Brazilian workers, are provoking mounting and explosive social discontent.

Actions by teachers against the homicidal drive to reopen schools has been joined by a month-long strike by postal workers throughout the country along with strikes by bus drivers and ticket collectors in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Paraná, just in September.

The Brazilian ruling class is not only unable to provide any relief to Brazilian workers, rather, it is campaigning to further aggravate their suffering and anger, promoting a reopening of schools that will further escalate the spread of the pandemic.

On Wednesday, Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro presented a sinister public assessment of his government's response to the pandemic, dismissing its terrible human cost. At a ceremony that crowned Gen. Eduardo Pazuello as the acting health minister, Bolsonaro defended each of his homicidal steps.

He argued that businesses should never have been closed and that health had no priority over economics; he celebrated the doctors who "dared" to treat patients with hydroxychloroquine, "even without scientific proof"; and he attacked measures of social distancing implemented by governors and mayors as driven by "panic" spread by a "catastrophic media."

To applause from his government team, Bolsonaro declared: "We had no reason to close the schools, but the restrictive measures were no longer in the hands of the presidency. By judicial decision, they were exclusively in the hands of governors and mayors. I regret it. We are the country with the highest number of days of lockdown of schools. This is absurd."

This barbaric speech given by a mass murderer proud of his performance was received with indifference from the media and the supposed political opposition in the government. They are Bolsonaro's accomplices and are jointly promoting the criminal reopening of schools in the country against the opposition of the majority of the working class.

The beginning of the week was marked by the government of Amazonas, whose capital Manaus was the first to resume classes in private and public schools, announcing a sudden increase in COVID-19 cases and the filling of ICU beds. The announcement was accompanied by a retreat in the reopening of state elementary schools, which were still closed. Governor Wilson Lima of the Christian Social Party, however, blamed the outbreak of cases on "people in some places forming crowds, especially at private parties."

Seeking to sustain Lima's hypocritical claim, the Health Surveillance Foundation of Amazonas (FVS-AM), which is responsible for authorizing the opening of schools, ended up making a terrible confession. "We have noticed contempt for the precautionary measures against the coronavirus, such as social distancing of one and a half meters," said the president of FVS-AM. "It's like entering a room on fire. Avoid crowding and continue wearing a mask. There is still no proof that this is not a mutant virus."

The "rooms on fire," infested with a possibly mutant virus, are literally the hundreds of classrooms in Manaus attended by 110,000 students, which are kept open by FVS-AM and the government of Wilson Lima. The educators of Manaus, who, unlike the government, do not despise the precautionary measures against the coronavirus, responded to the outbreaks of COVID-19 in dozens of schools with strike action.

To force them into deadly workplaces, the state education secretariat has cut the strikers' salaries and threatened to replace them with scabs. The government's attack was endorsed by the Union of Workers in Education of Amazonas (SINTEAM), which called off the strike on the grounds that "the justice system authorizes imposing absences for [strikers], as well as fines against the union."

In Rio de Janeiro, the state with the second-highest number of recorded COVID-19 infections, some private schools

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resumed classes on Monday amid contradictory judicial decisions. The Military College of Rio de Janeiro, under federal jurisdiction, had also scheduled a return to classes, but this was preempted by strike action on the part of its teachers.

In Paraná, faced with a possible, but still not scheduled, reopening of schools, some 2,700 teachers from the state gathered in an online rally this weekend and voted for a strike. In other states, such as Espírito Santo, teachers have expressed anger against the unions for failing to call meetings to organize actions.

In São Paulo, the state most impacted by COVID-19, which surpassed 900,000 cases of the disease this week and registered 321 new deaths on Wednesday, the government of Governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) has already allowed the partial reopening of schools. The mayor of the capital, Bruno Covas, also from PSDB, announced yesterday that face-to-face instruction in the schools, as well as regular classes in the universities, will resume on October 7.

A simulation made by researchers from major Brazilian and international universities showed that the reopening of schools in São Paulo, even following the restrictions stipulated by the government, would cause the infection of up to 46 percent of its students and teachers in only three months. The city of São Paulo has, according to 2018 data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), about 2.5 million students. The results of a reopening will be devastating.

Demonstrating the unanimity of the Brazilian political establishment on this homicidal policy, the Workers Party (PT) governor of Bahia, Rui Costa, once again expressed his readiness to reopen schools in his state. On Monday, as he addressed the further opening of inter-municipal transportation, Costa declared: “this stage of transport relaxation is a stage that may include the reopening of schools.”

This campaign is also being pushed by the country’s major media outlets, which are spreading pseudo-scientific arguments that favor the interests of the ruling class. *Folha de São Paulo*, the most circulated newspaper in the country, highlighted the opinion of Viviane Senna, president of the NGO Ayrton Senna Institute, whom the newspaper lauded as an “education expert,” with an article headlined “It is clear that the reopening of schools does not aggravate the pandemic.”

These statements are completely false. Children are contracting the disease. International data confirm that one in three children admitted to hospitals must receive intensive care, and that 6 percent need respirators. In São Paulo alone, more than 90 young people under the age of 19 have died of COVID-19. And recent large-scale studies in the US, Italy and South Korea have concluded that children are more likely to transmit COVID-19 than adults.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has been reporting, the number of cases in Spain, France and other European countries is rapidly escalating. In the United Kingdom, the sinister growth in the number of new cases to the levels recorded in May is directly associated with the reopening of schools.

Opposition to the reopening of schools is growing among educators in Europe, just as in Brazil and on other continents. Meanwhile, unions around the world, bound to their national states and the ruling classes of their respective countries, are seeking to isolate workers, suppress their revolt and herd them into infected schools and workplaces.

In Brazil, the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), to which most Brazilian teachers unions are associated, is publishing advice for governments on how to carry out safe “gradual reopenings,” while blocking the unification of Brazilian educators in struggle.

It is essential that Brazilian educators build rank-and-file committees in schools throughout the country to organize their strikes and other actions politically independent from the unions, directly confronting the interests of the ruling class and its governments.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is promoting a broad campaign for the formation of these rank-and-file committees all around the world, and for the unification of the struggle of the international working class. We urge Brazilian workers to take up this fight.

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