Workers Party pushes back-to-school campaign amid warnings of second COVID-19 wave in Brazil

Eduardo Parati
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Workers Party (PT) and Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) state governments in Brazil's Northeast region are showing once again that they have no significant differences with the essential response to the coronavirus pandemic by fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro and the rest of the right-wing parties in Brazil: implementing a de facto herd immunity policy.

In October, Ceará's deputy state governor, Izolda Cela of the Democratic Labour Party (PDT), pointed to a series of coronavirus-related issues in returning to school (means of transporting students, staffing, school infrastructure). She went on to state that the decision for the gradual reopening of the private schools was correct because the simultaneous reopening of the public school system could have provoked "a rigorous demand for health care," effectively admitting the surge in cases and deaths that would follow the return.

On October 1, the PT state governor, Camilo Santana, announced that the offer of in-person classes would be increased in the metropolitan region of Ceará's capital, Fortaleza, which is the most populous center of Brazil's Northeast.

Ceará's state government had already authorized in-person classes in the 44 municipalities of the metropolitan region starting in September. In the following month, it authorized reopening for all middle school students with reduced capacity (35 to 50 percent), all senior high school classrooms (35 percent) and an increase in capacity of preschool to 75 percent. In-person teaching was also re-started for 739 inmates in socio-educational centers and prisons. Local public schools in the capital of Fortaleza had already been declared closed until 2021, but the city authorized the reopening of private schools for middle school students last week.

As of Tuesday, just in Fortaleza, 27 schools had already reported confirmed or suspected coronavirus cases to the Ceará Health Department (Sesa). Sesa did not disclose the numbers in each school and declared that no school had been closed by the state Health Surveillance after the reports of contagion.

In the state of Piauí, Governor Wellington Dias of the PT announced the return of high school seniors in September, postponing the return of the other students until 2021.

In the state of Bahia, governed by Rui Costa, also of the PT, the state health secretary declared that the return to classes for higher education would take place on Nov. 3, and for high schools two weeks later. Costa said at a press conference: "We are monitoring and evaluating this [return] along with the decision of other states. Today, we are closer ... to the return to schools." Even as he admitted that the low rate of cases is nothing but "an assumption," he affirmed that the drop in the number of deaths would allow the reopening "within [safety] protocols."

Maranhão's state governor, Flávio Dino of the PCdoB, had declared a return to school for July, at the height of the wave of cases and deaths in Brazil, following the same policy as right-wing state governments. In the face of enormous opposition from teachers and parents, with positive tests of private school students being reported, the state government canceled the return to classes in the state's public school system. In October, Dino promoted the policy of herd immunity, declaring that he would conduct a serological inquiry to verify the "collective immunity" of the population.

The lie of an alleged concern for workers during the pandemic in the states governed by the PT and PcdoB, supposedly counterposing support for science to the herd immunity policies of the federal government of Jair Bolsonaro, was completely exposed by the admission—on the same day that the health secretary of Bahia announced a return to classes—that there existed a state of public calamity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Ceará and Bahia.

The back-to-school campaign is driven by the capitalists' need to force workers back into workplaces. Fortaleza had registered a fall of 84.5 percent in the monthly enrollment of beginners in the state school system between March and October. In São Paulo, the number of public student school enrollments between January and September fell by 94 percent compared to last year, underlining a trend in school dropout rates. In the first half of the year, a very high number of dropouts was recorded, connected to financial pressures on poor families, with school-age family members sent out to work to make up for the loss of income during the pandemic.

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The Northeast is one of the regions most affected by poverty and social inequality. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 42 percent of people living in Ceará are below the poverty line, classified as those living on between US$36 and US$105 per month. The entire region suffers from similar poverty rates, with 53 percent living under these conditions in the state of Maranhão, the highest number in the Northeast. In 2017, more than a third of the entire Brazilian population did not have access to sewage systems and the figure was a staggering 91.7 percent for the population of Piauí.

Ceará faces one of the most devastating impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. It is the state with the third highest number of deaths, despite being eighth in terms of population, with 8.843 million inhabitants. It had recorded 9,416 deaths as of Tuesday. This corresponds to a mortality rate of 103.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, one of the highest in the country.

In some regions of Ceará, the weekly average for new cases increased by more than 50 percent during the month of October, while deaths increased more than 30 percent. Last Saturday, the IntegraSUS system registered for the first time in four months more than a thousand cases per week in Fortaleza.

The ruling elite is implementing the same murderous policies throughout the country. At the end of last month, Infogripe, an Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) group, stated that 10 Brazilian capitals show signs that the spread of the virus is once again on the rise. So far, Brazil has registered roughly 5.8 million confirmed cases and 165,000 COVID-19 deaths, trailing only the United States in fatalities.

In São Paulo's capital, a 48.7 percent increase in hospitalizations was reported over the past two weeks. The state governor, João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), has been touting an early vaccine since the middle of the year for political gain. He was accompanied by the director of the state Coronavirus Contingency Center, João Medina at a press conference on Monday, where Medina said: "There wasn't a real lockdown during the first wave and there shouldn't be one in this second moment, because the increase in the number of cases shouldn't be sufficient to saturate the health system the way it's organized now."

On October 22, the Scientific Committee of the Northeast Consortium issued an alert about the possibility of the second wave of COVID-19 reaching the region in the next few months. In the report, the committee points to the advent of the region's high season, with the arrival of tourists from Europe, and this month's municipal elections as major factors threatening an increase in cases and deaths. The reopenings and the precarious conditions faced by the majority create the perfect conditions for a new and even more deadly surge.

The serious risks posed by a second wave did not prevent the Brazilian educators' trade union from covering up for Governor Camilo Santana's policy in Ceará, while suppressing and diverting teachers' opposition. Following the same line as unions throughout the country, the APEOC (Union of Teachers and Servants of Education and Culture of the State and Municipalities of Ceará), linked to the PT-controlled CUT union federation, filed a public civil action requesting that in-person learning remain suspended for the rest of the year. Meanwhile, the union is organizing a series of meetings for this year's wage negotiations, in which they are using the slogan "Enough Bolsonaro/Do it Camilo."

Last week, the APEOC declared that it would send Santana a proposal for the end of the school year calendar, at the same time that it declared its opposition to the policy of reopening schools being carried forward by the governor.

The following day, the union's president, Reginaldo Pinheiro, met with Fortaleza's 2020 mayoral candidates to announce the inauguration of an online education platform. During the meeting, he expressed the union's readiness to promote hybrid education as a means to reduce costs and attract private investments. He said that "Considering all this reality of revenue retraction, the moment is urgent. In the document, we point out a concern with the year 2021, which must first reconcile the remote and in-person activities, and for that it must have more investment and security for the teachers."

The trade union's legal maneuvers and empty statements of opposition, made at the same time that it negotiates with the government, expose the deceptive policy of APEOC and of the unions throughout Brazil, which are carrying out similar policies.

The return-to-school campaign faces huge opposition from educators and families. Mobilizing this opposition to prevent a catastrophic resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic requires a break with the trade unions and the PT and other parties that support the ruling elite's murderous policies. Teachers should form rank-and-file committees, in alliance with workers across Brazil and internationally, to demand the shutdown of in-person learning and all non-essential production—with full income compensation—and to organize a struggle against the capitalist system to place the defense of life over the drive for profit.

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