

Brazilian state governments push to reopen schools as COVID-19 deaths approach 200,000

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With most Brazilian schools remaining closed during the COVID-19 pandemic last year, state governors are preparing to reopen them in February, when the next school year begins. UNICEF data showed only 3 percent of Brazilian students attending in-person classes during the second half of last year, making Brazil a worldwide exception in not reopening its schools.

By October of last year, however, 11 of Brazil's 26 states had allowed public schools to reopen in part or totally. Private schools, on the other hand, due to enormous pressure from associations representing school owners, had been reopened in 16 Brazilian states. Despite state permission, the final decision to reopen schools rests with municipalities. The return to school has also been on a voluntary basis, with many parents electing not to send their children into classrooms for fear of their contracting the deadly virus.

The drive to reopen schools last year was not broader only because the end of the school year was approaching. In addition, November saw the first and second rounds of municipal elections, and many mayors running for reelection feared losing votes if the reopening of schools caused further COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths among students and their families.

However, after the first round of municipal elections, the Brazilian corporate media began a campaign echoing the mantra of the world's ruling elite that it is safe to reopen schools during the pandemic. It widely reported an open letter from a group of pediatricians, dubbed "Science for Education," calling for the return of in-person teaching. They argued that "children become less infected" and "transmit less," concluding that "schools ... are not the places of major infection. The European experience has emphatically proven this."

In early December, in a report titled "Most countries keep schools open even with new high cases," Brazil's leading daily, *Folha de S. Paulo*, served as a mouthpiece for the president of the Brazilian Association of Private Schools,

Arthur Fonseca Filho, for whom "The logic in the rest of the world is this: education is an essential activity, so it needs to return," and for the president of the largest Brazilian pro-corporate educational think tank, "Todos pela Educação" ("All for Education"), who said, "The right thing is to do like Europe, close bars, theaters and gyms to reduce the circulation of the virus, and keeps school open."

Already in early December, *Folha* reported that six Brazilian states planned or had already deemed public education an essential service and that schools could reopen even in the "red" phase, when the pandemic is escalating and non-essential services are not allowed to open. Before, this could only happen in the "yellow" phase, with the pandemic under "control" and non-essential services functioning under restrictions. On December 17, the state of São Paulo, with the largest school district in Brazil and the Americas, proclaimed education an essential service, which will certainly pave the way for other states to do the same.

All the claims that it is safe to reopen schools have no scientific basis. The "European experience" has proved to be a catastrophe in recent weeks, with the UK and Germany reporting more than a thousand deaths per day, and December being the deadliest month since the outbreak of the pandemic. Undoubtedly, the decision by the British and German ruling elites to keep schools open contributed to the pandemic's upsurge.

Although studies have shown that children are less susceptible to the virus and that they tend to become less severely ill, they are still one of the vectors for the spread of the deadly virus. Studies have also shown that adolescents are as susceptible and as major spreaders as adults. In addition, reopening schools means setting in motion a transmission network within a huge percentage of the population, including students, parents, teachers and school staff, which would inevitably send COVID-19 cases and deaths spiraling. A study published in December in *Science* magazine showed that the closure of schools and universities

reduced the spread of the coronavirus by 38 percent.

Contrary to claims of the Brazilian ruling elite, the majority of Brazil's population is against reopening schools. On December 17, a Datafolha Institute poll showed that 66 percent of the population supports the closure of schools to contain the pandemic, as well as the closure of non-essential services such as bars, stores and gyms.

The campaign for a broad reopening of schools in Brazil is unfolding as the coronavirus pandemic is spiraling out of control in the country. The last three days of 2020 saw more than 1,000 COVID-19 deaths per day. On December 30, Brazil registered 1,224 coronavirus deaths, the highest number since August 20.

Marking the beginning of the second wave of the pandemic in Brazil, December showed increases of 64 percent in COVID-19 deaths and 67 percent in cases. It was also the month with the highest number of cases since the beginning of the pandemic. COVID-19 is already the major cause of death in Brazil, which, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, may reduce life expectancy in the country by up to two years.

The catastrophic situation of the pandemic in Brazil may be further aggravated by the millions of Brazilians who traveled over the Christmas and New Year holidays, and by the refusal of mayors and state governors to implement more restrictive measures on non-essential services. In addition, on December 31, the new strain of the coronavirus identified in the United Kingdom was detected in the state of São Paulo. It is estimated that it is 56 percent more contagious than the other coronavirus strains already identified, and that it has contributed to the huge increase in the number of cases in the UK since last month.

On January 1, Brazil surpassed 195,000 COVID-19 deaths, with a total of almost 7.7 million cases. It is the second country in the world in coronavirus deaths, trailing only the United States, and the third in cases, exceeded only by the US and India.

However, these numbers are a gross underestimation of the grim reality. On December 30, BBC Brasil reported that the excess number of deaths indicates that "there are at least 50 percent more COVID-19 deaths in Brazil than official data indicates."

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Brazil has been one of the countries with the least coronavirus testing in the world, without any systematic contact tracing program to achieve a minimum control of the pandemic. Only 20 percent of the 24 million RT-PCR tests that the Brazilian Health Ministry promised by December of last year were carried out. Since August, after the peak of the pandemic, the number of tests has decreased by between 10 and 15 percent each month.

This, combined with the lifting of the few remaining lockdown measures and the complete underestimation of the pandemic by both Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro and state governors, means that a de facto herd immunity policy is being implemented to let the deadly virus spread freely and infect as many people as possible. Under these conditions, reopening schools will further increase coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

Teachers, school staff, parents and students should be aware that it is not safe to reopen schools until the pandemic is under control on a global scale. The official claims of concern about the educational damage done to students by school closures are a fraud. For years, these same officials have been cutting education budgets and imposing pro-corporate policies with the aim of privatizing public education.

The main concern of Brazil's corporate and financial ruling sectors in promoting the reopening of schools is to give parents somewhere to leave their children and to work without any kind of constraint. This campaign has a definite political and class logic: putting profits before human lives.

Against the death policy of the ruling elites, it is necessary to demand that all schools and all non-essential services be closed immediately until the pandemic has been eradicated. At the same time, high-quality online education must be provided to all students, along with a substantial guaranteed income to everyone who has to stay home. To fight for these aims, teachers and the Brazilian working class as a whole must build rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-corporate unions and fight to expropriate the capitalist ruling elite, using the resources they have monopolized to ensure quality education during and after the pandemic.



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