

# Millions of Brazilian students refuse to take exam amid rising opposition to back to school campaign

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While the second wave of the coronavirus is resulting in record numbers of cases and deaths and overwhelming Brazil's health care system, all sections of the ruling class are imposing the "herd immunity" policy, with several state governments announcing a return to school in the coming weeks.

Last Thursday, the country registered 1,382 new coronavirus deaths in 24 hours, the highest number since August 4 during the height of the first wave of the pandemic. The seven-day daily average has surpassed 1,000 deaths once again, amid a grossly mismanaged rollout of the COVID vaccine. São Paulo State Health Secretary Jean Gorinchteyn has stated that the vaccine will have no impact on the number of cases for six months.

Under these conditions, the country's 2020 national college admission exam, the ENEM, was held last week throughout the country, after being postponed for a couple of months. In the state of Amazonas, where the health care system collapsed with COVID-19 patients dying due to the lack of oxygen tanks, the ENEM was merely postponed for a few more weeks.

Students responded to the holding of the exam with a 51.5 percent absence rate, which corresponds to more than 2.8 million candidates. Between 2009 and 2019, absence on the first day of the exam was 28 percent on average. The unprecedented absence during one of the most important national yearly exams, taken by millions of students every year and widely seen as a way out of poverty, amounts to a statement of opposition to the herd immunity policy and the reopening of schools and universities throughout the country.

The ENEM forced millions of young people to choose between risking infection or, what means in many cases, abandoning higher education. In a *BBC* report, one young student stated bluntly, "I won't be able to attend college if I'm dead," while another in the same report said, "I've been preparing for this test all year, but I thought about my family and my health."

There is no doubt that many are being forced to abandon the chance of obtaining a college degree due to financial pressures. Between 2017 and 2019, the number of ENEM candidates fell by 1.3 million, indicating the growing need felt by many to enter the job market earlier. The number of subscriptions in May fell to its lowest number since 2010.

Last year also saw efforts to introduce private distance learning platforms in the school curricula, with state governments making

deals with mobile communication corporations and Google and Amazon to implement mass education platforms. These deals were worked out without any concerted effort to train students in the use of these platforms, let alone provide them with digital equipment, resulting in the exclusion of the majority from access to quality education throughout the year. State governments limited themselves to providing SIM cards for teachers and students, who in many cases share one mobile phone with their entire household.

The second coronavirus wave that began at the end of November, which has been most criminally expressed in the horrific scenes in Manaus during the weeks leading up to the ENEM and continuing to this day, certainly had an impact upon students.

Photos on social media showed hundreds of students crowded near the entrances to schools and universities. One video shared on Twitter shows a queue of students waiting to enter the classrooms before the exam starts. There were similar scenes after the reopening of schools in Manaus in August, resulting in the spread of coronavirus in dozens of schools.

One day before the exam, the Federal University of Santa Catarina said that the INEP, the government institution responsible for the ENEM, would be keeping classrooms at 80 percent occupancy during the test. There were reports in three states, however, of candidates being informed a few minutes before the exam that they could not participate due to classrooms reaching 50 percent capacity.

One student voiced her outrage on Twitter: "Half stayed in and half stayed outside because INEP said yesterday classes must be reduced in half. Perhaps there will be another test in February, but we have other exams! What about the anxiety? The fear? The lack of safety? Injustice!"

The students' outrage exposed the lie told by the INEP president, "We had a smooth application from the health security point of view." Expressing the indifference of the ruling class toward the outbreak of cases and deaths that will certainly follow both the exams and the reopening of schools, Education Minister Milton Ribeiro declared that holding the ENEM in the middle of a pandemic should be seen "as a victory, by not delaying the lives of millions of students."

Holding the ENEM during the deadly second wave of the coronavirus is part of the ruling elite's back-to-school campaign.

Over the past year, state governors, including those of the Workers Party (PT) and the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), have responded to opposition by teachers, students and parents to the reopening of schools with hypocritical statements about “educational damage” and “children’s mental health” during the pandemic.

Yet in recent years, these same governors have implemented consecutive cuts to education parallel to the austerity campaign of President Jair Bolsonaro’s administration, including several state-level “pension reforms” imposed through violent repression.

This campaign has been intensified since December, with several states declaring basic education an essential service, in which schools are to remain open even in “red phase” areas. São Paulo Education Secretary Rossieli Soares announced last week that 2021 will have mandatory in-person classes during a third of the school year.

The government took the decision to hold the ENEM over the opposition of students, who in the weeks leading up to the exam had demanded on social media that it be postponed.

Meanwhile, a nationwide Datafolha poll conducted between December 8 and 10 showed that 66 percent of Brazilians support closing schools as a means of containing the spread of the virus. The majority also supported the closure of nonessential services, such as bars, stores, and gyms. According to the Peninsula Institute, 65 percent of the nation’s teachers want to keep schools closed.

The teachers and students unions are trying to divert and suppress the enormous opposition against the back-to-school campaign with appeals to the capitalist institutions. On Wednesday, the São Paulo teachers union APEOESP issued a statement opposing the “school-year planning in schools” and sent a “Collective Security Mandate” to the state court.

Although APEOESP issued statements against the reopening of schools during the pandemic, its actions consisted of holding meetings in the state legislative assembly with Secretary Soares and initiating legal proceedings against the state government. The “motorcade for life” in July was planned to go to the state governor’s house to demand an end to the reopenings and to head off a teachers strike. At the end of last year, amid calls for a general strike and strikes of Methodist teachers in several states, the unions did everything to stall and prevent teachers from waging a struggle.

Today, the unions want teachers to trust the government to coordinate a successful vaccination campaign for health workers, the elderly and the teachers. APEOESP is calling for prioritizing teachers, even after Secretary Soares stated last week that “waiting for a vaccine is not an epidemiological justification. Otherwise, they would have to close all other essential sectors.” This misleading campaign is being repeated by trade unions in all states, each one promoting its state government and judicial authorities while keeping the teachers’ struggles divided.

In the states governed by the PT and the PCdoB, the reopening of schools is being treated by the unions as a foregone conclusion, while they are anxiously asking that teachers be given priority in the vaccine rollout. In Ceará, currently the state with the fourth highest number of COVID-19 deaths, Governor Camilo Santana of

the PT declared last month, “We will be back starting on February, but making sure that we have in-person and remote classes.” In Maranhão, PCdoB Governor Flávio Dino announced coronavirus testing for teachers, which can only mean that schools will reopen.

The anger felt by millions of students and youth facing the criminal policies of the ruling class raises the specter of the 2015-16 school occupations. After years of cuts in education by then-President Dilma Rousseff of the PT, the right-wing Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) state government in São Paulo announced a “school reorganization” that would shut down nearly 100 schools and affect hundreds of thousands of students and teachers. Students responded by starting school occupations that spread to thousands of schools and universities throughout the country and lasted more than a year.

The suppression of these protests and occupations was carried out by the unions controlled by the PT and the pseudoleft, which sowed confidence in the PT government at every step of the students struggle, even as Rousseff introduced new austerity measures against the working class.

The Brazilian Union of Secondary School Students (UBES) and the National Union of Students (UNE), which played a critical role in suppressing the student occupations in 2015, published a joint statement 10 days before the ENEM, limiting their opposition to calling for the government to postpone the date of the exam. After describing the critical situation of the second wave of the pandemic, the statement points out, “Faced with the current situation, once again, the Education Ministry does not enter into dialogue with entities and society about the situation of the ENEM, and how it can be carried out safely, even though this has been asked for several times by the UNE and UBES.” Such a declaration amounts to supporting the government’s criminal policy, which will have the endorsement of the pro-PT organizations and the pseudoleft in carrying forward the reopening of schools, so long as cosmetic measures are in place.

Students and teachers must demand an immediate suspension of any in-person exams and oppose the back-to-school campaign. They can carry forward this struggle only by forming independent rank-and-file committees in opposition to the trade unions and all organizations of the pseudoleft. They must fight to shut down schools and all nonessential production until the population has been vaccinated, while demanding full income for every household.



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