

Stop reopening of schools in São Paulo and throughout Brazil!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Group in Brazil
1 February 2021

Amid the explosive growth of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and throughout the world, Brazilian state governments are forcing their schools to reopen. A powerful wave of opposition to this homicidal policy of the ruling class is growing among Brazilian educators, with strikes being called in different parts of the country.

The state of São Paulo, the most populous and most affected by the virus, is leading the national campaign to reopen schools. This Monday, February 1, on-site classes were resumed in private schools. The state's public school network is set to reopen for students on February 8. On-site planning meetings have already begun.

In a virtual confession of the murderous character of this measure, the São Paulo government led by Governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) issued an official statement last Wednesday titled "São Paulo: new cases of COVID-19 in January reached a record since the beginning of the pandemic." It declares:

"January set a record for new COVID-19 cases in the state of São Paulo for all months of the pandemic, reaching 268,997 confirmed infections to this day. With four days to go to the end of the month, almost 7,000 more cases have already been reported than in August, which had registered 262,038 new cases and until now was the month with the highest number of infections.

"Since the second week of January, the seven-day moving average of new deaths exceeds 200 deaths per day. This level is similar to the one seen between June and August, peak months of the first wave of the pandemic."

By Saturday, COVID-19 had already killed 52,954 people in São Paulo, about a quarter of the total 224,124 deaths in Brazil. If it were a country, São Paulo would be 13th in COVID-19 deaths, with the number of deaths close to that of Germany, which has almost twice the population.

New variants of the virus and the imminent dangers of reopening schools

Reopening schools in São Paulo is like pouring gasoline into a burning building. More than 13 million, or 32 percent of the state's population, including both students and educational workers, will be sent to the streets and school facilities that will serve as centers of proliferation of the coronavirus. The state's rate of social isolation would be reduced to less than 10 percent of the population.

The capital of São Paulo has the largest school district in Brazil, with 2,099,438 students enrolled in kindergartens, elementary and high schools according to 2018 data by the IBGE. The city concentrates almost twice as many students as New York City, the largest school district in the United States, with 1,126,501 students in total.

A simulation done by researchers at leading Brazilian and international

universities in mid-2020, taking into account the conditions of schools in São Paulo and the functioning standards determined by the government, concluded that in just three months of reopening, up to 46 percent of teachers and students would be infected.

Recent factors in the evolution of the pandemic in Brazil and internationally threaten to make this measure even more catastrophic. New, more contagious variants of COVID-19, such as those found in the United Kingdom and in the Brazilian city of Manaus, have already been identified in São Paulo.

The variant of the virus discovered last December in Manaus has been singled out by infectious disease researchers as strongly responsible for the explosion of cases that led to the collapse of the health care system of the Amazonian city. This variant has quickly spread through Manaus, with its percentage detected in infected patients jumping from around 50 percent in mid-December to over 90 percent on January 13. Marcus Lacerda, a Fiocruz Amazonas researcher, estimated that it will take only one month until this variant prevails across Brazil.

The reopening of schools in São Paulo and Brazil as a whole will not only boost the spread of these variants but will stimulate the development of new strains. The more the coronavirus spreads, the more mutations it produces. The emergence of the new variant of the virus in Manaus was a direct product of the reopening of schools promoted by the government of Amazonas last August.

The mutations of the virus make it less susceptible to vaccines, threatening to effectively sabotage COVID-19 vaccination campaigns. It has already been reported that the Johnson & Johnson and Novavax vaccines had their efficacy radically reduced in face of the new variant discovered in South Africa.

The anti-science policy of the ruling class

These risks are being consciously ignored to force the reopening of schools in the interests of the ruling class. To this end, the São Paulo government in December declared the functioning of schools an "essential activity," contrary to previous norms set by government's own plan.

This policy is based on the anti-scientific claims that have been aggressively promoted by Sao Paulo's Secretary of Education Rossieli Soares. He insists on the supposed success of the "European experience" of keeping schools functioning even with the pandemic out of control. This claim is absolutely denied by science. A recent British study, from Public Health England, found schools to be responsible for 26 percent of infections in the investigated groups, a number three times greater than infections occurring in hospitals. Several other studies reveal the substantial impact of school closures on reducing cases and deaths.

This unmasks the secretary's statement that the "virus is very rare"

among children as a complete lie. In addition, there is a growing wave of childhood deaths from Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C) associated with COVID-19. The US has recently reported dozens of deaths from MIS-C among children between four and six years of age in 47 different states. In 2020, Brazil reported 39 child and adolescent deaths from MIS-C and 577 cases.

Feigning concern for the privations facing students, Soares characterized school closures as an “educational massacre.” This cynical statement contrasts with the decades of attacks on education, classroom closures, and destruction of teachers’ living standards promoted by the PSDB governments in São Paulo. It is totally unmasked by the absence of any concrete measure by the government to guarantee distance learning throughout 2020.

The real interests behind the reopening of schools were expressed by Brazil’s largest educational think tank, Todos Pela Educação, which speaks on behalf of the banks and big business. The organization’s president, Priscila Cruz, defined the opening of schools as the “pillar of support for economic recovery,” that is, as a key factor in forcing workers back to their jobs, even in the face of increasingly unsafe conditions.

The preservation of the profit interests of the ruling class in the context of the pandemic, and more fundamentally the global capitalist crisis, is deeply interrelated with a right-wing turn in politics and attacks on scientific truth. Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, the advocate of widespread infection of the population and captain of his self-proclaimed “war on lockdowns,” is the most direct expression of these socially destructive interests.

The program to fight the pandemic and save lives defended by serious scientists, who are increasingly speaking out for an urgent lockdown in Brazil, can only be implemented through the independent political mobilization of the working class.

Opposition grows among Brazilian educators

A general reopening of schools in Brazil did not occur in 2020 only because the plans of the ruling class confronted mass opposition from educators and working class families.

At the end of last year, strikes against the reopening of schools were declared in Amazonas, Pernambuco, Paraná and Rio de Janeiro, while dozens of other teacher protests erupted across Brazil. Opinion polls showed the opposition of the vast majority of Brazilians to the back-to-school campaign. In São Paulo, a survey promoted by City Hall among parents showed that 90 percent refused to send their children to school.

Faced with a new and more aggressive campaign from Brazil’s ruling class, as the new school year begins, a new wave of opposition has emerged among educators and students.

On January 17, a million students boycotted the National High School Exam (ENEM), giving a practical statement of opposition to the policy of reopening schools and universities in the country.

On January 23, more than 1,100 teachers in the state of Paraná decided on a general strike against the plans of Ratinho Júnior’s government of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) to reopen schools on February 18.

In meetings held last Friday and Saturday, thousands of state and municipal teachers in Rio de Janeiro massively voted for a strike against the reopening of schools on February 8.

The same anger against the criminal reopening of schools is emerging among educators in São Paulo, with numerous strike calls on social media. Among municipal teachers of São Paulo, a publication with a major following cried out: “If we do not begin immediately a STRIKE movement independent of the union, many who are here in this group will

be occupying a vacancy in the cemetery.”

The teachers’ unions of São Paulo, among them SINPEEM and APEOESP (which claims to be the largest union in Latin America), are making an effort to stifle workers’ opposition, having so far prevented them from organizing a strike or any action to confront the state’s policy.

The unions are effectively collaborating with the ruling class’s back-to-school campaign. The SINPEEM’s president, the reactionary councilman of Cidadania, Cláudio Fonseca, is proposing merely a postponement of only two weeks for a return to classes to supposedly “have a better health situation.”

The unions are also promoting the demand that teachers be vaccinated before other workers so that schools can be reopened safely. This is a fraud! In addition to the fact that the available vaccines cannot yet be applied to children and teenagers, who will continue to be exposed to the deadly virus and bring it to their homes, this aims to block a broader struggle with other sections of workers who continue to suffer from the pandemic.

These trade unions have acted for decades to suppress teachers’ struggles against pro-business and privatizing state policies, sabotaging strikes and helping to implement pension reforms and precarious teacher contracts.

One teacher from São Paulo questioned on social media: “I am in favor and so are many, is there a possibility of striking without unions?” To build a political leadership in the working class independent of the corporate trade unions is not only possible, but the most urgent task.

To do so, it is necessary to establish rank-and-file committees in every school to lead a nationally unified strike movement, driving an all-working-class struggle to confront capitalist interests and implement the scientifically necessary measures to halt the COVID-19 pandemic.

Education workers around the world are confronting the same attacks. In Chicago, where educators have organized a rank-and-file committee, they are entering into a direct conflict with the drive by the Biden administration to reopen schools throughout the US.

Every effort must be made to build these committees among all workers, in Brazil and internationally, to develop a unified movement of the working class fighting for its own interests.



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