

Brazil: São Paulo teachers strike against deadly school reopenings

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Some 180,000 teachers in São Paulo, Brazil began an indefinite strike Monday against the resumption of partial in-person education in the state's public high schools. Teachers voted for the strike action by an 80 percent majority in a virtual assembly held last Friday, February 5.

Teachers went into the schools on the first day of scheduled classes to speak to students and parents about the strike, and are due to stay out beginning today. At the beginning of last week, private schools in the state had already reopened for in-person classes with up to 35 percent of their of students in classrooms. But on Monday, only 5 percent of students attended classes in the public schools.

The reopening of schools in São Paulo came after right-wing Governor João Doria (PSDB) decreed education an "essential service," allowing schools to reopen in the so-called "red" and "orange" phases of the state's supposed pandemic containment plan, dubbed "Plano São Paulo." Before, schools could reopen only in the "yellow" phase, with the pandemic supposedly "under control." Now infections are escalating.

The secretary of education of São Paulo, Rossieli Soares, is working closely with the most significant layers of Brazil's ruling elite to reopen the state's schools. This includes São Paulo's corporate and commercial sectors, associations of private school owners, a section of the Brazilian medical sector, the corporate media, pro-business educational think tanks and the state's courts.

On January 28, São Paulo Judge Simone Gomes ruled in favor of a suit brought by the teachers' unions against the reopening of the schools. Basing her decision on the "protection of the right to life," she barred the reopening of schools in the "orange" and "red" phases of the "Plano São Paulo." One day later, the decision was reversed by the State Court of Justice.

Speaking for São Paulo's governor, the state secretary of education threatened Monday that "appropriate judicial measures" will be taken against the strike, and that teachers who do not return to the classroom will not be paid.

The reopening of schools in São Paulo—Brazil's richest and most industrial state, as well as the country's financial center—will undoubtedly open the way for other states to do the same. Of Brazil's 26 states, 20 have already planned to start in-

person classes in the coming weeks.

The reopening of schools in Brazil, like all over the world, is being driven by the needs of the banks and corporations to reopen the economy. The dynamics of class struggle are increasingly pitting the profit interests of the capitalist class in reopening schools against the interests of the working class in saving lives and keeping schools closed.

The strike in São Paulo began after teachers in Rio de Janeiro decided to strike against the reopening of state and municipal public schools on January 30. Teachers in the southern state of Paraná are scheduled to strike on February 18, when in-person classes begin in the state. On Wednesday, February 10, teachers from the municipal public school system of São Paulo will hold an assembly to decide on strike action against the beginning of in-person classes, scheduled for February 15.

The strike in São Paulo was approved despite the efforts of the pseudo-left organizations working in the APEOESP teachers' union to postpone its start. The Morenoite PSTU had proposed postponing the start of the strike until next Friday, February 12, while Resistência, one of the tendencies within PSOL (Party for Socialism and Liberty), had proposed holding another assembly, only on February 19, to consider action. Their main claim was that it was necessary to "build" support for the strike mobilization, even with the threat of more COVID-19 cases and deaths when schools reopened.

Expressing these tendencies' middle-class pessimism and contempt for the lives of the Brazilian working class, Resistência's union leader, João Zafalão, argued at Friday's virtual assembly that: "The ideal policy, that of dreams, would be to decree a strike [now]. ... The problem is that our will is not capable, at this moment, of overcoming reality." This means that, for him, the COVID-19 pandemic is not part of Brazil's "reality." Until Sunday, Resistência's website, *Esquerda Online*, had not published a word about the teachers' strike in São Paulo.

The teachers who attended the virtual assembly reacted with a revolt against the proposal of the Morenoite union officials. They wrote in the chat of the virtual assembly: "The difference in the calendar can mean more or less LIVES!!!"; "No more excuses. Build what? Graves?"; "The only need to strike immediately is a sense of reality! A year of Pandemic and you

want to wait for more what??? STRIKE FOR LIFE, NOW!"

The reopening of schools is taking place with the pandemic still out of control in São Paulo. In addition to the enormous under-counting of COVID-19 cases and deaths, the Doria government has made constant changes to the criteria of the "Plano São Paulo" to force the reopening of businesses and schools in the state. Writing in the daily *Folha de S. Paulo* at the beginning of the second wave in Brazil in November, three professors at the University of São Paulo denounced the criteria of the "Plano São Paulo" by stating, "it was never a containment plan, but a plan for making economic activity more flexible despite the pandemic."

In late January, Professor Alexandre Naime of the state university UNESP told the *UOL* website that, because of the worsening situation of the pandemic and the detection in São Paulo of the new highly contagious strain of coronavirus identified in Manaus, the state would need "something close to [a] lockdown." However, according to him, "each time the problem worsens, they change the norm to make [the 'Plano São Paulo'] classification more flexible." In addition to the new Manaus strain, at the end of December the more contagious British strain of the coronavirus was detected in São Paulo.

In the last update of the "Plano São Paulo," released last Friday, the pandemic situation in 10 of the 17 regions of the state supposedly "improved," according to the state government. Even so, seven regions of São Paulo are in the "yellow" phase, seven in the "orange" phase and three in the "red" phase. In the "yellow" phase, in addition to non-essential services being allowed to work for more hours, the limit on the number of students attending in-person classes rises from 35 percent to 70 percent.

The main pretext given by the state government for relaxing the "Plano São Paulo" was a small decrease from 71.6 percent to 67.2 percent in the average rate of occupation of the state's ICU beds. However, besides hiding the fact that the number of ICU beds in the state has increased in recent weeks with the worsening of the pandemic, this ignores the high number of cases and deaths still being registered in São Paulo during the second wave of the pandemic.

In the last month, the average number of COVID-19 deaths remained above 200 per day, reaching 365 on February 2, the highest number since September 9. In January, the number of deaths in the state of São Paulo was 37 percent higher than in December. The average number of cases in the state remained above 10,000 per day over the last month, with January the month with the highest number of cases since the beginning of the pandemic in São Paulo. The state has recorded a total of more than 1.8 million cases and 55,000 deaths. By comparison, California, the US state with the most coronavirus cases, has 3.4 million cases and almost 43,000 deaths.

The partial reopening of private schools for in-person classes and of state public schools for teachers' meetings since

February 1 has already led to dozens of new coronavirus cases and outbreaks in schools. APEOSP has registered 147 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in 79 state schools over the past week. In a private school in Campinas, in São Paulo's countryside, 39 employees and eight students had tested positive by last Thursday, and one teacher had to be hospitalized.

APEOESP, whose president is the Workers Party (PT) state deputy Maria Izabel Noronha, known as Bebel, has insisted that the return to school should occur after teachers are vaccinated. This proposal, however, ignores the fact that the licensed vaccines in Brazil have not been certified for children and adolescents, who are a significant vector for coronavirus transmission and will continue to be infected and transmit the deadly virus to their families.

More importantly, this proposal blocks a unified fight with other sections of workers to implement measures that contain the spread of the virus in São Paulo and throughout Brazil. Faced with an out-of-control pandemic and the collapse of the vaccination campaigns, the only measure capable of curbing infections and saving lives is the closure of non-essential services and production, as well as schools, with financial compensation to all those affected, until the pandemic is eradicated.

This demand, however, has been ignored not only by Brazilian bourgeois parties, including the PT, but also the pseudo-left tendencies that orbit the PT and are today providing a left cover to a faction of the Brazilian ruling elite that has tactical differences with fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro.

São Paulo teachers are entering the same struggle as Chicago teachers in the US, who are now facing a bitter confrontation with the city's Democratic mayor, the Biden administration and the Chicago Teachers Union.

A genuine fight against the murderous reopening of schools requires the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. Committees like these have been formed in Chicago and in cities and states across the US, as well as in Europe and Australia, led by the national sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International. These committees must be built to coordinate teachers' struggles with those of other sections of the working class in São Paulo, throughout Brazil and internationally to put human life above profits and save lives.



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