

Who is behind the drive to reopen São Paulo's schools?

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As teachers in São Paulo take a stand against the murderous herd immunity policy of the ruling classes internationally, speaking for millions of workers who refuse to accept the alternative between starvation and exposure to the COVID-19 pandemic, local authorities are organizing a media blitz to slander them as lazy and opposed to science. They are attempting to convince parents that it is safe to send their children back to chronically underfunded and precarious schools.

Two unions, representing a total of 250,000 teachers in the state of São Paulo (APEOESP) and the capital city of the same name (SINPEEM), were forced by overwhelming membership votes to declare a strike which they are already seeking to sell out through bogus negotiations over “safe” conditions for a return to in-person classes.

The government propaganda blitz for school reopenings is enthusiastically supported by the corporate media, even as the state of São Paulo records a rolling average of 245 COVID-19 deaths a day, the highest since August. Brazil as a whole has so far recorded over 237,000 COVID-19 deaths and 9.7 million cases, the second worst toll internationally after the United States. And despite the horrific scenes emerging daily from the Amazonian capital of Manaus, the state of São Paulo remains the country's pandemic epicenter, with over 55,000 deaths.

Instrumental in the push to reopen schools is the back-to-back promotion by the government and corporate media of “popular movements” of parents and education think-tanks that have adapted the herd immunity policy promoted by Brazil's fascist President Bolsonaro to school reopenings. Echoing the mantra that “the cure cannot be worse than the disease,” they have insisted that school shutdowns are provoking an unprecedented wave of mental health and

nutrition problems for the most impoverished students.

These efforts reek of hypocrisy, coming from forces that have no interest in controlling the pandemic, and have previously concentrated their main efforts on promoting the privatization of education and the slashing of teachers' wages and pensions. They are following a common script which stresses the social burden of isolation for children, while claiming that in-school transmission is low if a number of protocols are in place, and that pupils are not subject to serious repercussions from the disease.

In São Paulo, these efforts have been spearheaded by a handful of lobbies that are old acquaintances of teachers and parents, including the Todos pela Educação (“All for education”) NGO and the Ayrton Senna Institute. In addition there is the newly-formed “Open Schools” movement.

The first two entities have been at the forefront of the promotion of World Bank-backed “reforms” in Brazilian schools. As early as April, these same forces were promoting the permanent adoption of distance learning, with the World Bank area coordinator for Brazil writing that “In educational terms, it's crucial to evaluate which distance education practices could be maintained after the reopening of schools, benefiting from the structure put in place during the pandemic.”

Priscilla Cruz, the president of Todos pela Educação who today sheds crocodile tears about the impact of the pandemic on children, declared in an April online conference, where she was strongly opposed by teachers, that “People say that ‘distance education can generate inequality.’ It could produce some inequality, but we need to measure what the impacts are.”

Now Cruz has ditched her earlier promotion of distance learning in order to back the reopening of schools as the “pillar of support for economic

recovery,” i.e., the restoration of capitalist profits through the unrestrained economic activity sought by the ruling class.

The Ayrton Senna Institute had promoted the reopening of schools in September, a prescription that was followed most significantly by Manaus, leading to the uncontrolled resurgence of the pandemic in that city. This resurgence is viewed by experts as the fundamental process behind the emergence of the new Brazilian variant of the virus now spreading throughout the country and internationally, with the deadly potential of overwhelming current vaccines.

For its part, the “Open Schools” movement is the most recent addition to this pack of lobbyists, and purports to represent a majority of parents who want a reopening of schools, but whose demands are supposedly silenced by the corporate media. The movement is petitioning the São Paulo courts for the full reopening of schools in the city. It also promoted a staged demonstration of 50 people in front of the apartment of São Paulo Mayor Bruno Covas on January 13 against what they derided as the slow reopening of schools.

The movement has posted a lavishly produced ad on social media to gather support for its petition. It features less than a handful of workers from the impoverished Água Branca housing project in the western sector of the city declaring that they cannot work because they have to look after the kids. They add that a few weeks into the pandemic they had run out of resources to pay for internet, and so their children were not able to follow classes anymore.

Far outnumbering these workers among the original signatories of the petition featured in the video are wealthy representatives of the capitalist ruling elite. It was first launched in the WhatsApp group for the parents of students at the elite private Saint Paul’s School, which is attended by the children of São Paulo’s multimillionaire governor João Doria. They include Tide Setubal Souza, heir of Brazil’s largest private bank, Itaú—with 90,000 workers and 60 million clients—and Ilona Becskeházy, a Bolsonaro loyalist who worked in the Education Ministry under the fascist minister Abraham Weintraub, who was fired last year to appease the Chinese embassy after promoting theories that China had deliberately created the new coronavirus and for using anti-Chinese racist slurs.

The concerted media blitz is designed to break the resistance of teachers and workers more broadly to the deadly herd immunity policy, against which scientists have expressly warned.

Reviewing scientific data on the carnage being produced by the ruling class in Manaus, where patients are being given morphine to alleviate the pain of death by suffocation, British health experts Devi Sridhar and Deepti Gurdasani wrote in *Science* magazine less than a month ago: “Even a mitigation strategy whereby the virus is allowed to spread through the population with the objective of keeping admissions just below health care capacity, as is done for influenza virus, is clearly misguided for SARS-CoV-2.”

Those promoting the reopening of schools in São Paulo and seeking to spread such a policy throughout the whole of Brazil, amid an uncontrolled pandemic that is breeding and evolving through new variants, have blood on their hands. The striking São Paulo teachers, for their part, speak for the millions who stand opposed to this policy and have no trust in the government protecting the lives of their children.

In the September interview with the head of the Ayrton Senna Institute first promoting the reopening of schools, Brazil’s largest daily *Folha* gave a backhanded acknowledgment of popular sentiment, declaring that “among groups of parents, there is little impact of content favorable to the reopening [of schools], while alarming news is highlighted.”

The struggle to place the defense of human life over capitalist profits must be carried out through the formation of rank-and-file committees to organize teachers in conscious opposition to all those seeking to facilitate the herd immunity policy of the ruling class by negotiating a “safe” reopening of schools that the ruling class has absolutely no interest in assuring. Chief among these forces are the APEOESP and SINPEEM unions and their pseudo-left apologists, which are doing everything in their power to sabotage the strike by São Paulo’s teachers.



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