

Brazilian teachers union and pseudo-left sabotage strike against São Paulo school reopenings

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In an extraordinarily treacherous move that involved all the groups on the executive board of the APEOESP teachers union—the Workers Party (PT), the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and the various tendencies of the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL)—the teachers strike in São Paulo was sabotaged in virtual assemblies held last Friday, February 12.

São Paulo state public school teachers initiated a “health strike” on February 8, when the partial reopening of schools in the state began. Last Wednesday, teachers in the municipal public schools of São Paulo, the state’s capital, also went on strike against the school reopenings.

Despite not going into the schools, the state school teachers participating in the “health strike” continued to work remotely. They were demanding the total shutdown of the schools, as the pandemic spirals out of control in São Paulo. One day after the strike began, the state government announced that it would stop paying teachers if they did not go back into the schools.

According to the APEOESP, 15 percent of the 180,000 teachers in the state did not go to school on the first day of the strike. An additional 25 percent of the teachers were already doing exclusively remote work as they are part of COVID-19 risk groups. Showing the broad rejection by Brazilian families of the reopening of schools, the APEOESP also reported that only 5 percent of students participated in in-person learning last Monday. The expectation of the state government had been that 35 percent of the students would go to school.

In the four regional virtual assemblies held last Friday, the APEOESP executive board presented a proposal calling for the continuation of the “strike for life,” but asked teachers to return to the schools and register attendance. This, in practice, meant the end of the strike. The entire presentation of the proposal took place amid a deliberate attempt by members of the executive board to sow doubt and confusion among participating teachers.

In the virtual assembly for the Greater São Paulo region—where most of the union’s local branches are controlled by the PSOL “opposition” to APEOESP president and PT state deputy Maria Izabel Noronha, known as Bebel—the proposal of the executive board was presented by João Zafalão, a union leader affiliated with the PSOL’s Morenoite tendency, Resistência. In the previous week’s assembly that voted for the strike, he had tried to postpone it until February 19, even though this could lead to an increase in infections and deaths throughout the schools.

Zafalão began with a long introduction on the severity of the

pandemic, saying demagogically, “reopening schools prematurely is a crime. ... Yesterday there were 1,400 deaths [in Brazil], and this is going to increase more and more.” However, he continued, there is a “contradiction” between “the need to close schools” and the “low participation in the [strike] movement.”

According to him, the proposal presented by the executive board, in a “unified way,” was: “strike for life, all teachers back to school from February 15 to 19 to dialogue with the school community.” In an explicit recognition of the APEOESP’s inability to mobilize teachers, he concluded, “We think this is the way to keep the struggle alive and not have to depend only on COVID to close schools.”

If he genuinely recognized the announced tragedy spelled by the reopening of schools, then he and the union’s executive board would not have proposed in a “unified way” the return of teachers to the classrooms! All the concern he expressed about the worsening of the pandemic with the reopening of schools were empty words. In practice, he and the APEOESP are on the same side as the right-wing São Paulo governor, João Doria (PSDB), in the drive to reopen schools.

The teachers attending the virtual assembly responded with a combination of doubt and indignation. They bombarded the assembly’s online chat: “I couldn’t understand the executive board’s proposal. Is the proposal to end the strike?”; “The proposal would be to return [to school] ... registering attendance?”; “The proposal of the executive board is to go back to school and call [it] a strike”; “Going back to school is to increase infections”; “Going back to school is government policy!”; “To go on strike you need to have teachers alive.”

After the heated online debate, Stenio Matheus, a member of the APEOESP’s executive board and of the PSOL, made it clear: “You have people asking, ‘is it for going back to school?’ Yes ... which means registering attendance.”

This discussion also forced João Zafalão to present another proposal for a vote by the virtual assembly in the Greater São Paulo region. First, 60 percent of the teachers voted to continue the strike. However, in the second vote, concerning the “format of the strike,” the executive board insisted on keeping the “strike for life” proposal, even if it meant the end of the strike. The majority rejected this proposal, voting to keep the strike in its “current format,” with teachers on a “health strike,” not going into the schools and continuing their work remotely.

After the end of the Greater São Paulo virtual assembly, teachers had to wait more than three hours to find out the joint results of the

three other virtual assemblies. In an expression of the APEOESP's contempt for internal democracy and transparency, the union gave no information as to the percentages for and against in each assembly, reporting only that its proposal had passed.

In a statement, APEOESP called for the creation of "inspection and vigilance committees ... to denounce the health security conditions in the schools." The union still insists that "the return to in-person classes will only be possible with the vaccination of education professionals in the first stage and with all the conditions of health security in the schools." In other words, the claim that the APEOESP is in favor of a strike to close schools—as it has advocated throughout last year—to avoid the explosion of COVID-19 cases and deaths is a lie. In schools with precarious infrastructures and with millions of students not expected to be vaccinated, there is no safety protocol to prevent the spread of the pandemic.

The illegal maneuver by the PT, PCdoB and PSOL union bureaucrats to effectively break the strike of São Paulo state school teachers took place just two days after teachers of the São Paulo municipal public school system went on strike against the reopening of schools in the state capital. In a virtual referendum with the participation of more than 5,000 teachers, the strike was approved by a 92 percent majority.

Teachers at APEOESP's Greater São Paulo virtual assembly denounced the move to avoid a united struggle among teachers in Brazil's two largest school districts: "[Suspending the strike] now that the municipal teachers are going [on strike]? Now that we can get stronger? This is absurd," one wrote. "What is the logic of going on strike in the municipal schools and not in the state schools, since the demands are the same? Right to life!" wrote another.

However, the "logic" behind the APEOESP's move is clear: to prevent a unified struggle between state and municipal teachers against school reopenings for fear that it would get out of the union's control. The arguments of the union bureaucracy against this unified struggle couldn't be more ridiculous. PSOL and APEOESP executive board member Stenio Matheus explained: "Someone might say: 'but the municipal schools [went on strike],' but it is another reality. ... Anyone who has talked to teachers that work in both municipal and state schools has heard the following: 'I will strike in municipal schools, I will not strike in state schools.' We can make an assessment of that later."

Another "reality"?! As much as there are differences in salary and working conditions, the objective situation of teachers in state and municipal public schools, as well as that of teachers in most private schools, is the same. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only added to the common interests of these teachers—the struggle for life—but has also united them with all the teachers in the world fighting against the deadly reopening of schools.

The APEOESP has never done, and will never do, an "assessment" of its long history of betrayals, either by ending strikes against the will of teachers or by blocking a unified struggle with the municipal teachers of São Paulo and all of Brazil. In fact, the main reason for the APEOESP not formally ending the strike—and trying to cover it up by calling it a "strike for life" with a return to schools—was its fear of losing even more of its almost zero credibility among teachers.

São Paulo teachers have long since ceased to see the APEOESP as an instrument to defend their interests, and for this reason many teachers refuse to enter the struggle, knowing that they will be betrayed, as last week's events have confirmed. In the Greater São Paulo region virtual assembly, they expressed this feeling, saying:

"One week of strike is not enough to build anything. ... And how will we make a new strike call in face of this retreat? Who will believe in this union that is already so discredited?" and, "People will join [the strike] seeing schools closed by COVID or seeing other teachers strengthened in the strike. Going back this week is demoralization."

One teacher also said: "ending [the strike] now is total demoralization. I dare to say it's the end of the APEOESP."

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the criminal character of the Brazilian and world ruling elites. In Brazil, a second wave is spiraling out of control; last Thursday registered 1,452 COVID-19 deaths, the third highest number since the pandemic began. In São Paulo, last week ended with an 8 percent increase in deaths over the last week of January, with an average of 233 deaths per day. The APEOESP itself reported on Friday, after a week of partial in-person classes, 319 COVID-19 cases in 179 state public schools.

However, the pandemic has also exposed the middle-class pseudo-left organizations that try to give a left cover to the ruling elite's genocidal policy toward the pandemic. This includes Morenoite and Pabloite organizations within pseudo-left parties like the PSOL, as well as unions like the APEOESP that have advocated going back into the schools.

The dynamic of the class struggle is increasingly pitting, on one side, the ruling elite and their pseudo-left apologists, who advocate reopening schools to save profits; against, on the other, the working class which advocates closing schools to save lives. The events of the past week have shown this, not only in São Paulo but also in Chicago, where the teachers' union approved an agreement with the Democratic mayor to reopen the schools. The APEOESP and all of the political tendencies represented on its executive board have stood against the interests of working people.

The recent developments mark not merely one more rotten betrayal on the part of the APEOESP's bureaucratic leadership. They are the clearest expression of a long historical process that has transformed the unions from working class organizations into organizations that defend the interests of the national capitalist elites.

All teachers going through this bitter experience in their struggle to defend their lives against the reopening of schools must draw the necessary political lessons. What is required is a conscious and complete break with the unions and the formation of new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, armed with a socialist and internationalist program.



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