

São Paulo's municipal teachers strike grows despite union sabotage

Tomas Castanheira
17 February 2021

On Wednesday, the strike by the nearly 60,000 municipal teachers in São Paulo ended its first week. The return of students to the classrooms, scheduled for Monday, was answered by educators with the expansion of the strike, bypassing the unions' efforts to sabotage their struggle.

A survey by rank-and-file teachers on WhatsApp groups indicates that the strike has spread to hundreds of schools in the city, preventing many of them from reopening. Another 530 municipal schools had the resumption of classes postponed due to the lack of a minimum number of cleaning personnel, exposing the precarious conditions of the educational system and the incompetence of the São Paulo City Hall administration.

The efforts of Mayor Bruno Covas of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) to reopen São Paulo's municipal schools is part of a dirty propaganda campaign coordinated between the corporate media, the state government of João Doria (also from PSDB), and Brazil's fascistic president Jair Bolsonaro. Together, they seek to shatter the widely held conviction that reopening schools will give a deadly boost to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In São Paulo and throughout Brazil, the spread of the pandemic is catastrophic. The country has topped 240,000 deaths from COVID-19, and for almost a month has maintained a terrible average of over a thousand deaths a day. The state of São Paulo has been registering increasing numbers of infections and accounts for 56,700 of these deaths, 398 of them reported on Tuesday.

The threat posed by the reopening of schools is underscored by the circulation of new, more infectious variants of the coronavirus in São Paulo. The state has already confirmed 25 cases of the P.1 variant of COVID-19, originally discovered in Amazonas, 16 of them through community transmission. Most of these cases occurred in Araraquara, a city of 238,339 inhabitants in the countryside of São Paulo, which on Tuesday went into health care collapse, one day after enacting a lockdown.

Studies show that this new variant has spread rapidly among the population of Manaus, with its percentage detected in tests jumping from 52.2 percent of cases to 85.4 percent in less than a month. This is a serious warning of the consequences of the criminal "herd immunity" policy promoted by the ruling class all over Brazil.

This policy, which aims to preserve capitalist profits at the expense of millions of lives, is being directly confronted by the struggle of educators in São Paulo to keep classrooms closed. As the president of the capitalist educational think tank Todos Pela Educação stated, the reopening of schools is seen by the bourgeoisie as the "pillar of support for economic recovery," that is, a necessary measure to force as many workers as possible into insecure workplaces. São Paulo is

regarded as the spearhead of the reopening campaign throughout Brazil.

The logic of development of this movement, which is imposed by the very nature of the COVID-19 spread, is toward the unification of the struggle of educators across state borders and with all sections of the working class to promote a general strike that closes every school and all non-essential economic activities in the country in order to stop the pandemic.

This program has broad support among educators all over Brazil, who in several states are organizing strikes against the reopening of schools. It is, on the other hand, fiercely opposed by the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), the trade union federations, and local unions, which are persistently acting to break the teachers' struggle in São Paulo and isolate it from their colleagues across the country. Last Friday, the APEOESP leadership, composed of the Workers Party (PT), the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), and the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), ended the strike of São Paulo state teachers against the will of education workers. This criminal political maneuver was staged ahead of the return to classes in the municipal schools, preventing the powerful unification of the strikes of São Paulo state and municipal educators.

The aim of the APEOESP to artificially divide state and municipal educators, when there are a large number of teachers who work double shifts teaching in both school systems, was openly expressed by union leaders, who claimed during the last online union assembly that the two systems have "different realities." These efforts to isolate workers are supported by the unions officially representing municipal educators, the main one being the SINPEEM.

Throughout 2020, the municipal educators unions met behind closed doors with the mayor and his representatives in a so-called "Emergency Educational Crisis Committee." A note by the SINPEEM made it clear that at a meeting on August 18 they "once again discussed the return of face-to-face classes." Throughout this period, workers were left in the dark and prevented by the unions from preparing a counteroffensive against the government's criminal plans.

There is a widespread understanding among teachers that the unions only called the strike after strong opposition had grown among rank-and-file workers, threatening to spiral out of control. The *World Socialist Web Site* reported in early February that teachers were discussing on social media calling "a strike immediately, independent of the union."

On the eve of the return of in-person planning activities, the SINPEEM and other unions that make up the Forum of Entities Representing Municipal Education Professionals of São Paulo

declared a strike. This decision was based not on a vote by the rank and file, but on an anti-democratic clause imposed by the union leadership that gives it the power to “decide to call a strike during the pandemic period.” It also guarantees it the power to end the strike without consulting the workers.

Despite having decreed a strike, the unions have made absolutely no effort to carry it out. They didn’t call any kind of assembly, not even a meeting of union delegates elected at the schools. They didn’t picket school entrances, or campaign for the movement. The growth of the strike in the São Paulo municipal schools happened independently of the union and in opposition to its deliberate boycott.

The anti-democratic orientation adopted by educational trade unions against the interests of the workers has been developing over decades. In the last two years, teachers all over Brazil joined a massive strike movement against the generalized attacks on public education, and particularly on workers’ pensions. This movement was systematically isolated and betrayed by the unions. In São Paulo, the state and municipal teachers had their struggle once again divided, and the SINPEEM and APEOESP broke their strikes anti-democratically.

The lack of credibility of these organizations among educators can hardly be overestimated. However, workers have yet to draw the fundamental conclusions from their experiences. Most importantly, that it is necessary to break politically with the bureaucratic control of the unions and establish independent organizations, democratically elected by the rank and file.

A major impediment to the development of this struggle within the working class is the role played by the pseudo-left organizations, which work to deflect the growing opposition among workers with the impotent program of reforming the unions.

In recent weeks, political factions such as the Morenoites of the Resistência tendency, which operates within the PSOL, have completely exposed themselves before the teachers as the main opponents of their struggle to stop the reopening of schools in São Paulo. In a division of labor to disorient the working class, the Morenoites of the Revolutionary Workers Movement (MRT), associated with the Trotskyist Fraction (FT) and the editors of the Esquerda Diário website, have taken a supposedly critical position toward the maneuvers of the trade unions, but one which leads to the same dead end.

In a February 13 article in Esquerda Diário, the Morenoites declared their surprise at the treacherous position adopted by the APEOESP, “which means maintaining the strike only in appearance, but in practice returning to face-to-face work in the schools.” According to the article, it is “unbelievable that the policy of the largest union in Latin America is just a façade.” In response, they demand the creation of a political pole “unifying the opposition” to pressure the “majority leadership of APEOESP.” This means unifying with the same factions that supported the “unbelievable” betrayal against the workers in the first place.

Based on this same bankrupt policy of “pressuring” both the union and the factions of the pseudo-left, MRT militants joined the factions of the so-called opposition in the SINPEEM and staged a demonstration in front of this union, with banners demanding that the union leadership call a meeting of its members.

Unlike the MRT, the Brazilian Socialist Equality Group (SEG) found the APEOESP’s betrayal not “unbelievable,” but rather entirely predictable. The articles published by the WSWs insistently warned workers of the criminal maneuvers being prepared by these political forces. The same policy of staging a façade opposition to the

reopening of schools, while in practice repressing the workers’ struggle, is being adopted by unions worldwide.

The SEG fought to connect educators in São Paulo with their colleagues in Chicago, who through a politically independent rank-and-file committee were posing real opposition to the treacherous policy of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which in its essential aspects was identical to the one promoted by the APEOESP, SINPEEM and other Brazilian unions.

There is a radical difference between the revolutionary internationalist political principles for which the Brazilian SEG fights, and the reactionary maneuvers of the the MRT Morenoites and similar tendencies.

The Morenoites base their politics on a nationalist outlook, subordinating their politics to the bourgeois national state and an absolute rejection of the independent political mobilization of the working class. A series of articles published in Esquerda Diário on January 28 and February 4 by the MRT’s traditional national leader, Gilson Dantas, has made its petty-bourgeois opportunist foundations very clear.

Dantas states categorically: “Our country lives a reality of low class struggle.” According to him, “after thirty-five years of some democratic stability—an historical record—the great expectation of the working class, above all harried by the union bureaucracy, is that of a way out through the vote. At this moment this is the maximum that the masses aspire to, their political imagination still does not go through ruptures: the fetish of democracy reigns. That is the concrete reality.”

The development of the struggle of the São Paulo teachers in opposition to the deliberate sabotage of the unions comes into direct collision with this reactionary petty-bourgeois perspective of the MRT. Desperate, they rush to ensure that workers remain “harried by the union bureaucracy.”

In opposition to this perspective, the Trotskyists of the Brazilian Socialist Equality Group (SEG) place the struggle of Brazilian educators in the context of the global resurgence of the class struggle, to which it offers a unified strategy of international socialist revolution in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (CIQI).



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact