Teachers and health workers strike amid back-to-school campaign in Brazil

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While Brazil's health care workers are striking and demonstrating against the lack of supplies and equipment to face the spiraling COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' strikes are spreading across the country against the campaign for a return to schools.

The pandemic has resulted in a total of 242,178 recorded deaths and 10 million cases in Brazil, surpassed only by the United States. More than 300,000 new cases were recorded last week along with 7,520 deaths, the second highest number of COVID-19 deaths in a week since the start of the pandemic.

Health care workers are confronting the direct impact of the herd immunity policies implemented by governments in Brazil and around the world. In Brazil, the first and second waves were in reality uninterrupted, with the number of coronavirus cases never having registered less than 100,000, and deaths never less than 2,000 per week. According to data compiled by the Federal Council of Medicine, more than a thousand doctors, nurses and technicians have died since March 12 in Brazil, with hundreds of deaths having occurred since last month.

A residents' strike at São Paulo Hospital (HSP) that began last week was extended until at least last Friday. Throughout the week, more residents joined, bringing up to 600 out on strike. Last Friday, they demonstrated in front of the hospital to denounce working conditions, while keeping 30 percent of staff on the job for urgent and emergency care in the facility, which also treats COVID-19 patients. The strikers' placards read: "We are out of medicines, exam kits and materials"; "We refuse to work under such conditions." The HSP unit serves an area with more than 5 million people and is one of the three main high complexity medical centers in the capital, alongside Hospital das Clínicas and Santa Casa.

Also last week, 14 doctors from a Basic Health Unit (UBS) in the state went on strike to demand months of back wages. The strike was suspended last Friday, but may be reignited if doctors continue not to be paid.

At the beginning of February, workers at the University of São Paulo Hospital (HU) in the capital went on strike to demand the vaccination of all hospital workers, including cleaning staff and contract workers. This is the third strike at the HU in less than a week. According to the union, only part of the workforce received the vaccine. The HU employees are also demanding the enforcement of the injunction that relieves workers at higher risk of serious illness. According to the union, two HU employees have died from COVID-19 so far.

Meanwhile, defending the interests of the ruling elite, the unions are trying to prevent a wave of teacher strikes in all states, driven by opposition to the back-to-school campaign being promoted by the government. By the end of February, more than half of the 27 states in the country plan to have their schools reopened.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro in southeastern Brazil, 39,000 state teachers and 13,000 school staff are in the third week of a strike. In a virtual assembly held last week, 80 percent of teachers voted for continuing the strike action. In Itaguaí, on the outskirts of the state capital, teachers and staff went on strike starting on Monday.

In the city of Campina Grande in the state of Paraíba in the Northeast, teachers have been on strike against the return to schools since the beginning of the month, while the union is trying to block the spread of the struggle to the other 180 municipal school systems in the region.

Faced with enormous opposition from teachers to in-person classes, the Brazilian ruling class fears that the simultaneous reopening in the beginning of the school year will provoke a wave of struggles, raising the possibility of a unified mobilization of education workers in all states, beyond the control of the unions and pseudo-left parties. Under these conditions, unions are being forced to call strikes, while keeping the teachers' struggles divided and seeking ways to quickly suppress their mobilization.

On Tuesday, the state teachers union (SINTE-SC) in the southern state of Santa Catarina called off a strike set to start on Thursday, using as a pretext the postponement of in-person classes in 53 of the state's 295 municipalities. The strike would have coincided with a teachers strike in the

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adjacent state of Paraná. Both states combined have a workforce of 300,000 teachers.

On Wednesday, the right-wing governor of the state of Paraná, Ratinho Júnior, was forced to suspend the start of in-person classes on the next day in the face of the state teachers strike. In response to the governor's announcement, the Paraná state teachers union (APP) hastily called an assembly, barely 12 hours before the Thursday strike deadline, to "collectively decide on the beginning of the strike" that teachers had already voted for and approved a few days before. With less than four hours left to midnight, the APP posted on Facebook that "We want the return to schools, with safety," without giving any information on the results of the assembly.

Last week, the APEOESP, the São Paulo state teachers union, criminally ignored the result of the teachers assembly vote, with the majority having voted to continue the strike, and cynically declared that the strike would continue, but that teachers should still go to the schools to punch in. The APEOESP's haste in suppressing the teachers' struggle was largely due to the beginning of the strike by 60,000 municipal teachers in the state's capital just two days later.

The unions' deceptive campaign for a "safe return" to the classrooms is being exposed by the outbreak of cases immediately after the reopening of schools in São Paulo. By Wednesday, the APEOESP had received reports of coronavirus infections of teachers and employees in 266 state schools, and registered 448 cases in private schools, with dozens of new schools reporting cases daily. This means that there will be a surge of cases and deaths in a few weeks as a direct result of the reopenings.

Yet the unions declare, in unity with the government, that schools can be reopened following "health protocols," that is, putting hundreds of students and teachers in closed and unventilated environments for hours in schools with one or two bathrooms and with teachers and students commuting in overcrowded buses. Under these conditions, the distribution of hand sanitizer and masks becomes little more than a cosmetic gesture.

The official statements of the unions, that the vaccination campaign should prioritize teachers, are a justification for carrying out the herd immunity policy of the ruling class, since, even if teachers were inoculated, most of the people who attend the schools—the students—will still be vulnerable. All members of the school community will remain potential vectors of coronavirus transmission.

The unions' covering up the back-to-school campaign with the demand for the vaccination of teachers is a desperate attempt to deflect enormous anger among both teachers and health care workers toward the ruling class' criminal response to the pandemic. However, teachers must be warned that if the unions are allowed to impose their agenda, the direct result will be a renewed upsurge of the coronavirus throughout the country.

On Tuesday, in the southern-most state of Rio Grande do Sul, after Governor Eduardo Leite of the right-wing Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) openly promoted the policy of herd immunity in schools, declaring the relaxation of the 50 percent limit on the number of students per classroom, the state teachers union (CPERS) published what amounts to a letter to Leite, calling for him to speed up the vaccination program. The statement ends: "We demand immediate vaccination for all education professionals, respect, and minimum safety conditions," without calling for a teachers strike or making any reference to the struggles being waged in other states.

The SINTE-SC, APP, CPERS, APEOESP, and all the other state unions affiliated to the Workers Party (PT)-controlled National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE) defend the interests of the ruling oligarchy. On Monday, the president of the CNTE, Heleno Manoel Gomes Araújo Filho, declared: "We don't see any change in the political conditions or in health security to carry out the return to schools." The "political conditions" for the reopenings include the suppression of the teachers strikes against the back-to-school campaign that are spreading all over the country. Like the ruling elite they serve, the unions fear above all the development of a unified struggle of teachers, independent of the unions, crossing both state and national borders and developing in alliance with health care workers and all sections of the working class.

Education and health care workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to oppose the herd immunity policy and fight for the closure of all non-essential production until the population is vaccinated, with full income guaranteed.

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