

São Paulo teachers continue strike against deadly school reopenings despite union sabotage

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Teachers voted on Saturday, February 27, to continue their strike against the murderous reopening of public schools in São Paulo, the state with the highest number of coronavirus cases and deaths in Brazil.

The vote, carried out through virtual assemblies, came the day after Brazil reported the highest number of COVID-19 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic over a year ago.

Despite the deadly implications of school reopenings amid this surge in the pandemic and with the imminent threat of a national collapse of the health system, the political groups within the São Paulo teachers union APEOESP executive board—the Workers Party (PT), the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and the various tendencies of the pseudo-left Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL)—continue sabotaging the teachers strike.

The strike began on February 8, when schools partially reopened for the beginning of the 2021 school year. Since then, the various tendencies of the PSOL, especially the *Morenoite Resistência*, have tried their best to end the strike, while the PT and PCdoB have advocated prioritizing teachers for coronavirus vaccinations and that the strike be limited to teachers who are not part of the COVID-19 risk groups and must go into the schools.

The “health strike,” as they are calling it, still implies that teachers continue to do remote work with their students. In the only official account of teacher participation in the “health strike,” APEOESP reported that 15 percent of the 170,000 teachers had not gone to school on the first day back.

Since it began, the “health strike” has been directly attacked by São Paulo’s right-wing Governor João Doria (Brazilian Social Democracy Party, PSDB), who has stopped paying teachers who have not gone back. Last week, there were reports of striking teachers being removed from “Google Classroom” by school principals, preventing them from conducting remote classes, and of striking temporary teachers having their work contracts terminated.

The “health strike” is also being undermined by the actions of the APEOESP executive board. A week after the strike began, on February 12, it presented a proposal in the virtual assemblies that called for teachers on “health strike” to return to the schools and “register attendance” in order to “dialogue” with the school community.

This, in practice, meant the end of the strike. This proposal,

which was approved by teachers participating in virtual assemblies amid a deliberate effort by the executive board to sow confusion, put the executive board, in effect, on the same side as Governor Doria in his effort to reopen schools.

The APEOESP has also done everything possible to subordinate the teachers struggle against school reopenings to the capitalist courts. It has urged teachers who are on “health strike” to file a request to their schools to have their workday done remotely, and, if it is denied—as it is, in fact, occurring—to file a case in court. This same court, working in close collaboration with the state government, reversed in late January a decision that had prevented the reopening of schools because of the worsening of the pandemic in São Paulo.

This same treacherous script was followed by the groups that control the APEOESP executive board in the last regional virtual assemblies on Saturday afternoon. In the Greater São Paulo regional assembly, executive board member Stenio Matheus of the PSOL defended ending the strike without making a single reference to the seriousness of the pandemic in São Paulo. Ignoring the long history of betrayals by the APEOESP that has destroyed the union’s credibility among rank-and-file teachers, he blamed the teachers themselves for the low participation in the strike.

For those executive board members who pointed out the seriousness of the pandemic, these were just empty words. Richard Araújo, from the *Morenoite Resistência* tendency, defended the need for a “general lockdown” in São Paulo and Brazil as a whole. But he quickly added, “Now, how we are going to do this fight? That’s the big question. ... The best way to reorganize the troops for the war we are waging is to suspend the strike.” Since the first assembly, *Resistência* has opposed the action, and its website, *Esquerda Online*, has published only one article on the São Paulo teachers strike.

Rank-and-file teachers have expressed a principled position against these moves by the union’s executive board. In the online chat, they responded to the proposal to suspend the strike. “It was already dangerous to be in school [a month ago], imagine ending the strike now at the height of contaminations and deaths from COVID, and hospitals with no vacancies!!!” wrote one teacher.

“These people keep measuring this strike by the low numbers and not by life, which was and is the main reason it exists,”

commented another.

“What is this tactic of making striking teachers return to the classroom? [This] will do nothing to increase the strike. It will only favor the infection and deaths of more teachers,” was another angry response.

One teacher further pointed out that there is a “strike [that] is strong, the one carried out by parents who are not sending their students to schools. This is driven by our struggle for the defense of life.”

Since the first day of reopenings, the APEOESP has reported that student participation, which is optional, had been less than five percent, a number well below the 35 percent expected by the government.

After a month of partial reopenings in São Paulo, the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths increased among the school community. As of Sunday, the APEOESP had registered 1,489 coronavirus cases among teachers in 726 schools, with 22 teachers dying from COVID-19. The first teacher victim of the disease, Maria Tereza Miguel Couto de Lourenço, was only 32 years old and died on February 20, two days after her mother died of COVID-19.

The São Paulo reopening of schools has also led to an increase in COVID-19 cases and deaths among children. In mid-February, the daily *Folha de S. Paulo* reported that “public children’s hospitals register an increase in COVID-19 hospitalizations.” The health secretary of the third largest city in São Paulo, Campinas, with more than one million people, reported last week an increase in hospitalizations of children and adolescents. A 13-year-old child has already died from COVID-19 in the city.

After Campinas registered a 100 percent occupancy of ICU beds in public hospitals last week, it postponed the start of in-person learning in its municipal public school system from March 5 to the beginning of April. This example has also been followed by many other cities. A report on the *G1* website showed that, until last Thursday, 11 cities in the São Paulo metropolitan region were forced to postpone the reopening of schools to mid-March. Among those cities are the largest in the state outside the capital, São Paulo: Guarulhos, São Bernardo, Santo André and Osasco, all with more than 650,000 inhabitants.

These decisions to keep schools closed come at the most critical moment of the pandemic in São Paulo and Brazil. Last Thursday, Brazil recorded the highest number of deaths in 24 hours since the pandemic began—1,582. In São Paulo alone, there were 345 deaths. It has already seen 38 days with a daily moving average of over 1,000 deaths, the longest period since the pandemic began.

On Sunday, Brazil had more than 10.5 million cases and 254,000 deaths. This is the third largest number of cases and second largest number of deaths of any country in the world

Last week, this dramatic situation was expressed in the highest occupancy rate in the national health system since the beginning of the pandemic, with a huge increase in the occupancy of ICU beds. According to the leading epidemiological institute FIOCRUZ, at least 12 of the 26 Brazilian states reached 96 percent ICU occupancy last Friday, and 17 state capitals have an ICU occupancy higher than 80 percent.

Against this backdrop, 12 states have stepped up measures to

contain the spread of the virus. However, many experts have advocated tougher measures. Miguel Nicolelis, one of Brazil’s most prominent scientists, said in an interview with *O Globo* last Friday that Brazil needs an “immediate 21-day national lockdown.” Otherwise, there is a “great chance of a national [health care system] collapse.”

In only a few places in the country is the clash between what science says should be done to fight the pandemic and the actions of governors who align themselves with the herd immunity policy of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro so clear as in São Paulo, the richest state and financial center of the country.

Last week saw four straight days of record ICU bed occupancy. Physician Paulo Menezes, coordinator of the scientific committee that guides the actions of the São Paulo government, warned that São Paulo’s health system could collapse in three weeks. The *UOL* website reported that experts on the scientific committee are “increasingly unhappy with the governor” after advocating a “lockdown for at least 10 days” and Doria refusing it. The report also noted that this decision was due to pressure from the “‘economic sector’ of the government,” which does not want to “upset business.”

Despite the catastrophic situation, São Paulo’s Education Secretary Rossieli Soares wrote on his Facebook page: “São Paulo’s education will not suffer changes, schools will remain open within the permitted hours.” Based on last year’s disastrous “European experience” of keeping schools open, even with the pandemic out of control, the São Paulo government moved to consider education an essential service in December, allowing schools to partially reopen, even as the pandemic worsened.

Against the Doria government’s murderous policy of keeping schools open, aided and abetted by the pseudo-left and the APEOESP, São Paulo state school teachers should build rank-and-file committees independent of the union. Such committees are needed to coordinate their strike actions in defense of life, not only with the entire school community, but also with São Paulo municipal teachers on strike and those from all over Brazil and internationally fighting against the reopening of schools.

These committees should make the broadest possible call to other sectors of the working class and fight for the immediate closure of schools and non-essential services, with financial compensation to all those affected.



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