

São Paulo teachers denounce health care collapse, defend “strike for life” against school reopenings

Our reporters
19 March 2021

With the explosive increase in cases and deaths from COVID-19, as well as the threat of a health system collapse, São Paulo, Brazil’s most populous and wealthiest state, last Monday entered the most restrictive phase of its supposed pandemic containment plan, dubbed “Plano São Paulo.” The so-called “emergency” phase was announced last week by right-wing Governor João Doria (PSDB) and is scheduled to last until March 30.

The “emergency” phase restricts the functioning of services that the government has considered “essential” since the beginning of the pandemic, such as industry, construction and business, and establishes a curfew between 8 pm and 5 am.

A little more than a month after schools partially reopened for the start of the school year, the São Paulo government was also forced to suspend in-person classes in the state public education system for two weeks. Private schools can continue to operate with up to 35 percent of students in classrooms. In mid-December, education was considered an essential service, allowing schools to reopen even as the pandemic worsened.

However, since mid-February, many mayors, who are responsible for regulating services and schools, had already adopted additional measures to contain the pandemic, including the closure of schools. In the state capital, São Paulo, Mayor Bruno Covas (PSDB) announced last week the closure of public and private schools until April 5. On Thursday, when the first death due to lack of ICU capacity was registered in the city, he announced the moving up of five holidays until April 4 to reduce the circulation of people.

São Paulo, like all of Brazil, is experiencing the worst moment of the pandemic. On Tuesday, the state registered a daily record of 679 COVID-19 deaths. In the last two weeks, the moving averages of deaths and cases have increased by 62 and 42 percent, respectively.

As of Thursday, São Paulo had recorded 2.2 million cases and almost 66,000 deaths. With the slow pace of vaccination—only 7 percent of the population has received the first dose—the decrease in temperature as winter approaches and the refusal to adopt more restrictive measures, experts warn that the pandemic may continue to worsen in the coming weeks and months.

The occupancy rate of ICU beds in public and private hospitals in São Paulo is 91 percent. At the end of February, private hospitals of the Brazilian ruling elite in São Paulo reached 100

percent occupancy of ICU beds, and this week many of them requested beds in public hospitals.

Admitting the severity of the pandemic, Governor Doria said on Wednesday, “We have a pretty dramatic situation.... [with the state] on the verge of collapse.” However, Domingos Alves, a professor at the University of São Paulo, told *BBC Brasil*, “saying [São Paulo] is on the verge of collapse is poetic license.” Pointing to the deaths of 90 people waiting for an ICU bed in the state, he added: “If this is not a collapse of the health system, I don’t know what is.”

The Doria government has blamed this situation on the prevalence of the more contagious Manaus variant in São Paulo. However, Marlei, a teacher at a municipal public school in São Paulo, disagrees. “This collapse, which has been occurring since last year, is a consequence of the lack of a plan to contain the pandemic, mainly to reduce the movement of people,” she told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “People who must go to work are taking crowded trains, crowded subways, crowded buses. It is this agglomeration that has generated this chaos.”

Even in the “emergency” phase of the “Plano São Paulo,” this is far from changing. On Monday, the *UOL* website reported that the “most restrictive phase ... [began] with crowded public transportation.” With industry and business still functioning, on Wednesday, the social isolation rate increased by only 2 percentage points from last week, reaching 43 percent. That rate is far from the ideal of 70 percent, according to the very group of experts guiding “Plano São Paulo.”

Alves has been one of the experts most critical of “Plano São Paulo.” At the beginning of the second wave in the state in November, he said that what is behind the plan is the thesis of “herd immunity ... another name for mass murder.” He told *BBC Brasil* that “it’s time for a complete lockdown, not that clownish thing of doing it only on the weekend or some days,” as Doria has been doing since December.

In placing profits over human lives, Doria and the entire Brazilian ruling elite, from Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro to the Workers Party (PT) governors in the Northeast region, are responsible for the “greatest health and hospital collapse in Brazil’s history,” according to a report by the epidemiological institute FIOCRUZ. On Tuesday, when the report was published, Brazil registered a daily record of 2,798 deaths.

After a 48 percent increase in the moving average of deaths in two weeks, on Thursday, the country had a total of 11.7 million cases and 287,000 deaths from COVID-19.

Ivan, also a teacher at a public municipal school in São Paulo, said, “This will be remembered in history as a great genocide, these authorities will be forever remembered for the actions they carried out ... In the future, ... people will be shocked that there was so much omission and neglect in a period like this.”

The premature reopening of schools is part of Doria’s herd immunity policy. For Marlei: “It’s obvious that the reopening of schools [in February] contributed to the increase of cases. What is the most effective prevention measure? It is to reduce the number of people circulating. With open schools, there are more people circulating,” she said. By early March, there were more than 4,000 confirmed cases in São Paulo’s state and private public schools and 21 COVID-19 deaths, including of two students.

São Paulo’s education secretary, Rossieli Soares, has been working with the most powerful sections of Brazil’s ruling elite to reopen the state’s schools. As Ivan explained, these sectors include “the major [private] educational institutions, ... [that] generate profits and cannot stop.” These sectors have tried to posture as a “civil society” movement through the “Escolas Abertas” (“Open Schools”) group, led by parents of elite school students and frantically promoted by Education Secretary Soares in his social media posts.

The main pretext advanced by Soares and “Escolas Abertas” for keeping schools open is the psychological damage suffered by children due to social isolation. This same issue is echoed by Brazil’s fascist President Jair Bolsonaro in his “war on lockdowns.”

“This story of pediatricians going on TV and saying, ‘children are psychologically shaken,’ they need socialization... this is all bullshit, it’s common sense that the media goes on to echo, to justify the unjustifiable... there are ways to solve the psychological issue of children ... and life is more important, obviously,” Marlei replied.

Soares has also been working closely with the corporate media and the state capitalist justice system. Last Saturday, the court overturned the second decision against reopening schools in São Paulo. Commenting on the fact that this decision took a week to be overturned during which schools remained open, Felipe, a private school teacher, said, “São Paulo didn’t comply with the decision because of a sense of impunity. They somehow came to bring public opinion in favor of opening the schools even without many conditions. The media supported it, and in that whole context they felt comfortable to violate the judicial decision.”

The pandemic in São Paulo would be worse were it not for the decision of the vast majority of working class parents not to send their children to school and the strikes that began in February of state and municipal public school teachers. All the teachers the WWS spoke to expressed a principled position against the early reopening of schools.

Amilde, an elementary school teacher, said that this is a “strike for life, it’s not a wage issue, but a survival issue. It’s thinking about lives in general, all lives.” She also stressed the fact that the “children have no way to follow the protocols,” and can “get

sick.... [and] carry the virus from one place to another.”

For Marlei, “the health strike is necessary not only to save lives, but to show all this lack of planning that led to this collapse.” She also believes that “we have to provoke situations in society that show the importance of the movement. We have to call for motorcades, let’s stop the main avenues of São Paulo, let’s make a more aggressive movement to disrupt, to show that we are on strike for life.” Ivan also said that it is necessary to “close the streets, to fight. If it’s not a movement of struggle, really confrontation, I don’t think we’ll ever get attention.”

For Amilde, “what needs to happen for this movement to move forward is unity.” “This strike would have greater strength if everyone were to strike,” Marlei said. However, according to her, there isn’t a “movement within the unions with this perspective ... In fact, I don’t see a commitment from the unions to the strike itself.”

Both the city of São Paulo teachers union, SINPEEM, and the state teachers union, APEOESP, have done everything they could to sabotage and isolate the teachers strike against the reopening of schools. In last Saturday’s virtual assembly, all the political groups in the leadership of the APEOESP—the PT, the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and the Morenoite and Pabloite tendencies of the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL)—decided to shut down the strike in the face of the Doria government’s partial retreat of suspending in-person classes.

Subordinating the teachers’ struggle to the capitalist courts, they wrote in the APEOESP *Bulletin*, justifying the end of the strike, “Our struggle is for full and immediate compliance with the court decision,” i.e., “the [union’s] priority is to file warrants for compliance with the court decision.”

This position leaves teachers unprepared for the Doria government’s next steps in its offensive to reopen schools. Instead of preparing a unified movement with other sections of the working class who are also fighting for their lives in the midst of an out-of-control pandemic, the unions are cooling down a movement that is set to explode. No doubt, the bureaucracy fears that this movement will get out of control of the unions, which have long ceased to be working class organizations.

As the Socialist Equality Group (Brazil) wrote in its latest statement, “The logic of development of the movement that is beginning to take shape in different sections of the Brazilian working class is toward the unification of these growing struggles into a general strike, one that closes down all non-essential economic activities.”

For this to be carried forward, we call for the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions in the different workplaces and neighborhoods, armed with a socialist and internationalist program.



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