

São Paulo's state government, media promote bogus data to drive school reopenings

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Last week Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro replaced key figures in his cabinet and the military. The move is in preparation for a wholesale crackdown on all opposition amid record COVID-19 cases and deaths and just weeks after a wave of strikes by bus workers, oil workers, app delivery workers and teachers.

The country's COVID-19 death toll reached 340,000 on Wednesday, the world's second highest, amid record numbers of new cases and deaths. There were 460,000 new cases and 20,000 deaths last week, and the death toll is expected to be even higher this week after the daily toll surpassed 4,000 more than once. Brazil accounts for one in every four deaths reported worldwide each day and leads the world in the daily average number of new deaths reported.

Amid the incompetent and indifferent response to the pandemic, the political crisis within the ruling class is intensifying. All of its factions are bent on guaranteeing the uninterrupted exploitation of the working class. This has been expressed by the concerted efforts of the leading daily *Folha de São Paulo* and São Paulo's state government to distort COVID-19 data before the reopening of schools set for April 12.

Last week, *Folha* reported a new study supposedly establishing that there was no significant change in cases and deaths following the reopening of schools in the state of São Paulo last year. In its effort to promote this thesis, the *Folha* article showed that the reopening was carried out in tandem with Bolsonaro's herd immunity policy.

Titled "Reopening Schools in the Pandemic Did Not Increase Covid Incidence and Mortality in Brazil," the study uses COVID-19 data from the period between October-December 2020 from 131 cities that reopened schools, comparing it with data from a prior period. It also compares these cities with others that did not reopen during that same period.

The study is mainly based on the growth rate in cases within the *total population* of each city which, when compared to the much smaller universe of school communities, makes it impossible to assert how much they were specifically impacted by the reopening.

Moreover, the authors do not discuss the effect of the actual number of students on their results. They simply argue that the

estimate that "about two million students did come to school" should leave no doubt about their conclusion, glossing over the fact that the government's "safety protocols" allowed for about a million more students inside classrooms. The impact that such an increase would have is left unmentioned, and so is the effect of new more virulent coronavirus variants that became dominant since December.

Folha quoted Guilherme Lichand, the lead author of the study, as saying that the indicators did not get worse, "not only because school communities represent a little fraction of the general population, but also due to the already substantial mobility, making insignificant in total the marginal benefits of keeping schools closed for healthcare."

According to Lichand's article, "data from cell tower triangulation attest that, in large cities like São Paulo, mobility was never below 50 percent even during the strictest periods of lockdown." In other words, contagion was so widespread during the second half of 2020 that no difference was seen in COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Folha can only promote such a study because it has no issue with the fact that hundreds of thousands of people are getting infected and dying from the coronavirus pandemic. Amid Bolsonaro's efforts to end even the partial state and local restrictions imposed to prevent a health care system collapse, *Folha's* report is tantamount to defending the fascistic president's policy of keeping all sectors of the economy open and accepting the deadly consequences.

Since last year, the mainstream media has waged a campaign against the inclusion of schools in any restrictions against the coronavirus, feigning care about "child mental health." It included the promotion of the *Escolas Abertas* (Open Schools) movement, backed by powerful interests in private education and the state government. *Escolas Abertas* maintains to this day the discredited claim that children transmit the virus less than adults.

This campaign is being waged in concert with the state government of São Paulo, with *Folha's* report being published on March 30, one day before the state government authorized the reopening of local and private schools starting on April 12.

Since then, on Wednesday, amid reports that 30 of the 39 cities in the metropolitan region had registered an increase in

their rolling average of deaths for the last 15 days, with a 236 percent increase in Diadema and even higher rates in other cities, the administration's Contingency Center stated that it is evaluating an extension of the state's "emergency phase." This supposedly strictest phase prohibits gatherings at night and restricts some types of commerce, while allowing for the reopening of schools.

In February, right-wing Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) Governor João Doria's administration created the "Medical Committee on Education." The committee coexists with the Coronavirus Contingency Center, having been ostensibly created "to deal specifically with issues related to education." The committee was created to shift gears in the failed campaign of imposing the return to schools last year amid enormous opposition among teachers and parents. It was packed with figures who favor the return to in-person classes amid the greatest surge of the coronavirus pandemic so far.

The committee's first epidemiologic report, based on the period between January-March, claims coronavirus incidence rates would be 33 times lower within both public and private schools than in the state at large, implying it would be safer to bring children to school rather than keeping them at home.

What the report deliberately leaves unmentioned is that the period considered includes 37 days in which schools were shut down for holidays during January and the beginning of February, bringing in only a small percentage who failed their school year. The report also falsely assumes that 100 percent of students attended schools during this period.

Significantly, the report's section related to education workers presents their incidence rate in relation to the entire population of students, a bogus attempt to declare a low contagion of teachers and staff. This effort is being carried out while the state government is promoting a completely inadequate vaccination campaign among educators, which includes only teachers above the age of 47, and requires school staff to prove that they are within the risk group. The partial vaccination of these workers, which will not address the need for immunization among all students, teachers and families, is the latest attempt to justify reopening as part of the drive to get parents back to work.

Underlying the promotion of Lichand's study by *Folha* and Doria's maneuvers to distort COVID-19 data and vaccinate a small percentage of the school community is the essential agreement with Bolsonaro's campaign against any measures to protect the population from the virus that would impinge upon the profit interests of the rich.

Until a week ago, education workers were being pressured into unsafe buildings for months under the threat of being fired for not complying with the state's criminal policy, while many students relied on attending schools for meals. The school reopenings amid the biggest coronavirus surge yet would result in widespread contagion and deaths among students, teachers and their families.

The efforts to impose the return to schools has led to enormous opposition among teachers and school staff, forcing trade unions in the heavily populated states in the Southeast and South of Brazil to initiate strikes "for life" in February and March. In São Paulo, where hundreds of thousands of striking state and local teachers called for a general strike and a unified struggle against the return to schools, and amid calls for a strike from private school teachers, the APEOESP and SINPEEM trade unions worked to divide teachers and prevent their opposition from reaching other sections of the working class.

In March, the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE) president stated, "We don't see any change in the political conditions or in health safety to carry out the return to schools," openly admitting that the unions' "defense of life" is only a different tactic in the ruling class' strategy of reopening.

The unions' efforts to subordinate opposition among teachers to the state courts was expressed in APEOESP's latest article on the reopening on April 1, titled "[Rossieli Soares, state Education] Secretary: abide by court order of no in-person teaching." In the neighbouring state of Rio de Janeiro, teachers and school staff have been on strike for months, while the state education workers union (SEPE) has kept their struggle isolated.

In the southern state of Santa Catarina, where tens of thousands of teachers went on strike two weeks ago, the SINTE-SC state teachers union is trying to bring opposition under control. During an interview with a local radio station, a union official declared that "only the justice system is responsible for declaring a strike illegal."

In contrast to the sabotage of the trade unions, in the industrial city of Araraquara, where an 18-day lockdown resulted in a drop in cases and zero deaths for the last two days, local teachers saw the extension of this life-saving measure as critical to their interests, with 80.2 percent approving a strike, which started on Monday against the reopening of schools on April 12.

Teachers must break from the unions, which have the goal of suppressing and dividing opposition to the reopening of schools. Education workers can only win this fight through organizations controlled by themselves, rank-and-file committees, united with teachers and staff from other states and internationally, in opposition to the deadly policies that begin with capitalist profit rather than human life.



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