

# Unions end four-month strike of Brazilian teachers against São Paulo school reopenings

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In a criminal maneuver, the municipal educators' unions in São Paulo have ended a four-month strike against the homicidal reopening of schools.

Teachers are being sent back to deadly classrooms at a critical moment of the pandemic in Brazil and around the world. According to the Brazilian public health institution Fiocruz and prominent scientists, the country is entering a third, even deadlier wave of cases and deaths, driven by the nationally promoted "back to normalcy" policy and the dangers of the new Delta variant already circulating in the country.

This week, the state of São Paulo reached its highest COVID bed occupancy rate since April, and registered a 35.1 percent increase in the number of infections, with an average of more than 14,000 daily cases. There has also been a 19.5 percent rise in the number of deaths in the state, with an average of 417 daily. On Tuesday, Brazil as a whole registered 2,693 new deaths, the highest number in more than a month, of which 767 occurred in São Paulo.

Faced with these deadly prospects, the SINPEEM and other unions that comprise the so-called Forum of Entities "negotiated" a return to in-person classes posing the same deadly dangers to educators, students and families, as well as a potentially catastrophic effect on the circulation of the virus in Brazil's largest city.

The proposal presented by the Forum for ending the strike placed the sole demand on the government that it pay wages denied teachers for the days on strike with them now working extra hours. This means that the strike will be paid by the workers themselves who, for the next few months, will have to increase their shifts to make up for the four months on strike, consequently increasing their exposure to the deadly virus. Meanwhile, the unions maintain their multimillion coffers untouched at the disposal of the bureaucracy, without having spent a single penny on strike pay.

The unions tried to sell as "achievements" a series of vague promises by the government, such as allowing part of the extra hours to be worked online, studying the establishment of a relay of teachers working in-person, and an acceleration of the vaccination of teachers, which had already begun.

This sell-out agreement was endorsed in online meetings that took place on Monday night, the determining one being held by SINPEEM (the largest union), which was widely denounced by the workers as a scam.

A number of educators reported being improperly excluded from the online meeting halfway through the event and prevented from returning. The union also ended the voting process early, before everyone had voted, and with a narrow 48.5 percent to 44.6 percent margin of approval (with 7 percent abstaining). Even the chat on the

online event was blocked, according to union president Claudio Fonseca, to avoid "disturbance"—that is, any expression of opposition from rank-and-file workers.

This criminal decision and the whole bureaucratic process surrounding it provoked a wave of anger among the teachers. They pointed to the hypocrisy of the union organizations that only days earlier were proclaiming their "unconditional defense of life."

On May 18, SINPEEM had issued a statement pretending to oppose government policy, declaring: "The occurrence of increased COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths and warnings of a third wave of the disease require that the government recognize that maintaining face-to-face classes and activities in educational facilities puts everyone at risk."

But the unions have now unquestionably exposed their decisive role in the imposition of the murderous herd immunity policy that has as its greatest advocate Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro.

On the Facebook pages of the SINPEEM and other unions, hundreds of comments from infuriated workers rained down. Teachers wrote:

"He closed the vote before the time was up. Didn't wait three minutes to secure the right to vote! Why is that? Chat closed! Why? It wasn't a plenum. I don't know what it was! Actually, we did not decide, the union decided!"

"This meeting was a disgrace! They removed members from the meeting without any justification."

"The strike came to a frightening end, and the worst thing is for someone to think it was a victory. Not even the minimum of demands were accepted. ... face-to-face return, no vaccine, no tests, nothing. Otherwise, dreams. ... No guarantees. ... Total servility. A pity. Very incoherent, where is the 'stay at home', 'to fight in the streets is incoherent' and other such lines? The strike demands, which were fair, thrown into the trash."

"A singular kind of denialism [i.e., to deny the existence of the pandemic, as Bolsonaro has systematically done]. When the Genocidal President of the Republic does it, everyone identifies it. But when we accept returning to the schools with empty promises, and putting our lives and the lives of family members, as well as the lives of students, at risk, it is called an 'evaluation of the correlation of forces.'"

"Congratulations on the beautiful maneuver. Who will take responsibility for the deaths? It's past time to disaffiliate [from the union], that's the solution."

"A real shame. ... Returning with our tails between our legs, looking like an idiot and worse, for NOTHING. ... When they say that the unions run together with the government, from today, I don't doubt it anymore. ... It's shameful and revolting."

"I am not believing that I will go back to school tomorrow, take buses without being vaccinated until the end of July. What good is this strike? Tomorrow I am resigning from the SINPEEM and APROFEM. The worst thing is that there are people who don't even know about it and will be absent tomorrow. Irresponsible unions, all of them!"

The revulsion of workers over such a grotesque betrayal is absolutely legitimate. But it must be recognized that it began long before last week's negotiations, which were only the conclusion of a long process of sabotage of the teachers' resistance to the herd immunity policy of the ruling class.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has widely documented, the unions called a strike only after the emergence of a movement in the ranks against the reopening of schools scheduled for February. Aware that they could lose political control over the workers, the unions called a strike on the eve of the return to school, without any prior preparation.

Over the following four months, the unions acted to isolate and wear down the most militant workers. No action was taken to make the strike effective. No pickets or campaigns to join the movement were organized at the school gates. The unions left the strikers completely in the dark, without communicating how many schools were on strike or how strong the mobilization was. Despite this, estimates made independently by the workers pointed to an important growth of the movement in this first period, overcoming the unions' sabotage.

But the protracted isolation and actions of the unions to disarm the teachers, and the wage cuts that were promoted by the governments (which were not compensated by any form of strike payment from the unions), served to wear down the most militant workers and open the way for a betrayal.

An especially great effort was employed to keep this strike isolated from struggles that were breaking out in other school districts and other sections of the working class against the same homicidal policy in relation to the pandemic.

In the same week that the teachers struck in the municipal network, educators in the São Paulo state network went on strike against the reopening of their schools. To prevent a unification of these movements, which together would have joined hundreds of thousands of workers, the unions of municipal educators, together with the APEOESP (the state teachers union), and the pseudo-left groups made a joint effort. They were able, however, to bury the state teachers' strike much earlier, through a maneuver as criminal and bureaucratic as the one implemented last week by the SINPEEM.

Other teacher strikes against school reopenings have erupted in different states in Brazil—from Acre in the far north to Paraná in the south. These strikes continue to happen, as was the case last week in Manaus, capital of Amazonas, and are being systematically kept in isolation from each other by the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), which brings together education unions from all over the country.

The WSWS also reported how Brazil's union federations have actively worked to prevent the powerful strike movement that has erupted among bus drivers and other transport workers against the pandemic began from developing into a general strike.

As with the municipal educators in São Paulo, the unions acted in all these struggles by pretending to represent the legitimate interests of workers to defend lives and for the implementation of a scientific program to fight the pandemic. However, their actions were aimed at the opposite: isolating and wearing down these movements, diverting them from a direct confrontation with capitalism, and making them culminate in empty appeals to the bourgeois state, such as the

acceleration of vaccinations.

Because of this betrayal by the unions, the massive protests that exploded in cities all over Brazil two weeks ago against the murderous conduct of the pandemic by the Bolsonaro administration did not include the presence of the working class as an organized force. This was critical for the corrupt leaderships of these protests, linked to the Workers Party (PT) and its allies in the Party for Socialism and Liberty (PSOL) and others—the same forces behind the corporatist unions—being able to render these demonstrations harmless to Brazilian capitalism.

The next period, of deepening political and social crisis and of the COVID-19 pandemic, will see an eruption of even more intense struggles among the Brazilian and the global working class, bringing them into conflict with their illegitimate union leaderships.

It is necessary to prepare for these struggles by drawing the necessary political conclusions. Workers need to break definitively with the unions that shackle them and sabotage their struggles.

This means a battle as well against the middle-class forces of the pseudo-left that are fighting at all costs to sustain these decadent unions. This was demonstrated in the São Paulo educators' strike by the actions of the PSOL and other organizations such as the Morenoites of the PSTU and the MRT, linked to the *Esquerda Diário*, which tried to channel the workers' revolt against the unions into a program of union reforms.

They have created so-called "strike committees," which have as their real goal that of reinforcing the authority of the discredited unions over the workers' movement. Despite pointing the finger at the SINPEEM's "lifetime" president, Cláudio Fonseca, these "committees" had nothing to offer to the workers once the union decided to end the strike against their will. They didn't even denounce it on their public pages.

Workers need to create real rank-and-file committees, directly elected by them, representing their interests, and completely independent of the unions. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is the one political force promoting this initiative among workers' struggles internationally. This initiative is inseparable from the struggle to build a true revolutionary leadership among the working class, a Brazilian section of the ICFI.



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