

Brazil's schools set to reopen amid record COVID-19 child deaths

Eduardo Parati
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Last week, a news report by *UOL* revealed that COVID-19 became the number one cause of death among 10-to-19-year-olds in Brazil. Just in the first six months of 2021, 1,581 young people in this age group died from COVID-19. In contrast 1,406 died from cancer in the entire year of 2019.

The death toll of younger children is also alarming, with Health Ministry data showing that 1,187 children younger than 10 died from COVID-19 in 2020. However, data from Vital Strategies, which takes into account the surge in deaths from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), points to 3,129 lives lost.

Epidemiologist and professor at the Sergipe Federal University Paulo Martins-Filho said that “this increase in the number of hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19, observed particularly since February and March, is a reflex of the high community transmission rate and the circulation of variants of concern in the national territory.” He added that “For children, the pandemic was also associated with profound educational, social and psychological changes, food insecurity ... which can result in death in poorer regions.” He concluded that “the disease emerged as a new cause of death among children in poor communities, as observed in the North and Northeast regions in Brazil.”

In an interview with *CNN Brasil*, Ana Escobar, a pediatrician from the University of São Paulo said that the Gamma variant, which originated and became the dominant variant in Brazil in the first months of the year, was a direct cause for the deadly disease spreading among young people. She explained that it is able to more easily enter cells in the body, while warning of the potential of a new surge in deaths that won't spare children and teenagers: “the Delta variant, which is already in the country, is even better at it.”

In Brazil, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause more than a thousand deaths every single day, while the moving average is again on the rise, registering 45,094 daily cases. Sunday, vaccinations with first shots were suspended in eight state capitals, pending the delivery of new vaccine batches by the federal government.

Meanwhile, state governors, including those of the Workers Party (PT) and Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), are signaling their support for the profit interests of the ruling class by touting the vaccination of small percentages of the population while reopening schools and the entire economy.

Maranhão Governor Flávio Dino (who left the PCdoB for the Brazilian Socialist Party in June) announced last week the

beginning of in-person classes on August 2, along with the full reopening of theaters, churches, commerce and mass events. He justified his measures stating that “We have the mask mandate and social distancing. This is as critical as the vaccine. From this premise ... we are flexibilizing economic activities.” Meanwhile, Governor Rui Costa of the PT followed the same line, while threatening Bahia's state teachers that they will have their wages cut if they refuse to enter schools.

The reopenings being carried out by the PT and PCdoB show that these organizations defend capitalist interests just as aggressively as their openly right-wing counterparts, promoting the return of children to unsafe schools and their parents to unsafe factories and workplaces. They are acting in tandem with Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro's open campaign against lockdowns and for the spreading of COVID-19 among the population.

So far, 12 states have already reopened public schools, while most are expected to be reopened in August. Some capitals, such as Rio de Janeiro, plan on reopening their municipal schools in September, while private schools are already open in 22 states.

In São Paulo, where there are 3.6 million students enrolled in the state school system, Governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) announced plans on June 16 for increasing maximum capacity in schools from 35 percent to 100 percent. On Wednesday, the governor stated that “Things are going back to normal” and announced the end of all restrictions on opening hours and in-door capacity for all economic activities on August 17, two days after the rollout of first shots for 18-year-olds.

With this announcement, Doria aims to promote the inoculation with the first jab of 56 percent of the population of one state as successful “immunization,” using as a pretext the drop in hospitalization rates and deaths. The drive to reopen the economy at all costs ignores the need to complete second jabs for the entire population, with just 19 percent fully immunized nationally, not to mention the need to immunize all young people under the age of 18.

However, after months of refusal of both parents and teachers to allow their children inside crowded schools and amid ongoing mass protests against Bolsonaro's criminal response to the pandemic, Doria fears that his year-long campaign of bringing students back to schools will provoke an upsurge of opposition not only to the school reopenings but to the entire political establishment and its pandemic policy. The governor announced

that each school will be allowed to decide its maximum capacity and declared that in-person activities will remain optional for parents.

If the governors are able to press for the reopening of schools, it's because they can count on the trade unions, which have isolated and suppressed teachers' struggles at every turn.

During March, just as the second COVID-19 wave was beginning, the São Paulo's APEOESP state teachers union and the state capital's SINPEEM municipal teachers union refused to carry out a joint strike against the school reopenings, much less call for a national strike amid protests by teachers and other sectors of the working class throughout the country.

Both unions are affiliated to the PT-controlled National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE), which published an article on Thursday reporting a study showing that "badly-worn masks could elevate COVID-19 cases by 1,000 percent." Rather than fight against the reopening of schools, the unions are already shifting the blame for a future surge in COVID-19 cases onto the students themselves.

On Monday, covering for Governor Doria's efforts, APEOESP published a supposed defense against in-person activities that actually follows the governor's line. It states that "For the return to schools to happen, it's necessary that all education workers have received their second jab of the vaccine." The union leaves unmentioned the dangers of allowing millions of children inside crowded schools, which could become super-spreader venues.

In an article in *Folha de São Paulo*, state legislator and APEOESP president, Maria Izabel Azevedo Noronha, held as exemplary the fact that "in Germany, students are tested once a week and classrooms are limited to 15 students, with a 2-meter minimum distance." She goes on to mention the UK, the US and France as examples of in-person teaching during the pandemic.

APEOESP is covering up the fact that the UK government's "let it rip" pandemic policy, including in-person classes, resulted in the Delta variant spreading through the country, and that children currently account for eight percent of all hospitalizations.

By allowing in-person classes in August while less than a quarter of Brazil's population is vaccinated, the teachers union gives credit to the lie that children do not transmit the disease, something that was promoted not only by the mainstream media, the governors and the corporate-funded Escolas Abertas movement in Brazil, but also repeated by president Biden in the US.

The deadly results of such a policy are already being seen in the states that reopened schools. In Rio Grande do Sul, where schools were reopened in May, data gathered until July 12 shows that just in the state school system there were 3,696 cases among students, teachers and staff, out of which half were students. Only 186,000 students are participating in in-person activities, or 20 percent, which shows that a full reopening would be a major factor in producing a catastrophic third wave.

Workers must oppose the "new normal" being promoted by the ruling class, in which they and their children continue to put their lives at risk inside crowded workplaces and schools. Just as the virus developed new variants when governments lifted lockdowns and restrictions, it will continue developing new and even more deadly variants, most of all in regions with low vaccination rates.

The struggle of teachers against the school reopenings was only defeated because the unions were able to suppress a unified struggle throughout Brazil and internationally.

The approved continuation of the strike by state teachers in the state of Sergipe and the current meetings between PT Governor Rui Costa and the trade union in Bahia are both based on the same rotten proposal to accept a full reopening in return for a second jab for teachers. Just as in São Paulo, the SINTESE and the APLB trade unions are maneuvering to give up the teachers' struggle, keeping their fight isolated.

Also, as much as the media and the government tries to promote the nationally based campaign to immunize the Brazilian population as the ultimate solution to the pandemic, the spread of the Gamma variant in the entire region has showed that only an international response to the pandemic will be able to stop it.

On May Day, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to give a unified and organized expression to workers' struggles.

The end of mass death and the prevention of the emergence of a new variant, potentially even more transmissible and deadly, requires stopping all non-essential sectors of the economy through the mass mobilization of teachers and all other sections of the working class. Only through a unified struggle of the international working class can the resources of society be directed to guarantee the safety of all workers, with strict hygiene protocols and personal safety equipment in essential workplaces. In the case of teachers and their students, computers and high-speed internet must be provided for all to guarantee high quality remote education.



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