

Teachers denounce homicidal school reopenings across Brazil

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August, which kicked off the second school semester of 2021, has witnessed the largest reopening of schools in Brazil since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine states, where until this month schools had remained closed, decreed the return of in-person teaching. And in states where classrooms had already been opened, protocols have been reformulated to allow an even greater influx of students to the classrooms.

The full reopening of schools is the centerpiece of the Brazilian ruling class's campaign to "promote a return to economic activities" and a new status quo based on the mantra that it is necessary to "live with the pandemic," as stated by Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga.

The adoption of this reckless policy by rulers all over the country has caused the "resumption of the circulation of people in the streets in a pattern close to the one prior to the pandemic," declared the August 26 bulletin of the Fiocruz's COVID-19 Observatory. The Fiocruz researchers emphasized, however, that "the positivity rate of the tests remains high, which shows the intense circulation of the virus, with the expansion of the Delta variant" and warned that the "relaxation of preventive measures by people and managers contributes to the high spread of the virus."

Keeping schools open under such circumstances represents a barbaric experiment with human lives, particularly those of children. While capitalist managers spread the lie that young people don't get infected or sick from COVID-19, the explosion of the Delta variant is leading to an unprecedented crowding of children's ICUs in countries such as the United States.

Even before being hit by this virulent strain, Brazil already recorded catastrophic levels of COVID-19 deaths among children and teenagers. Official data, acknowledged as a significant underestimate, has recorded more than 1,200 deaths of people under 18 in 2020, 45 percent of whom were under the age of 2. A *Uol* survey revealed that 1,581 young people between the ages of 10 and 19 died from COVID-19 in the first six months of this year alone—an average of 263 deaths in this age group per month.

Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro is now the epicenter of the spread of the Delta variant in Brazil. Delta has already become the dominant variant in the state, accounting for more than 60 percent of the samples collected. Simultaneously with the spread of the new variant, Rio has registered an increase in infections and deaths among the elderly and an explosion in hospitalizations, which has led to 96 percent occupation of ICU beds in the capital.

The terrifying evolution of the virus in Rio de Janeiro contrasts with the policies adopted by state and local governments. The mayor of the capital, Eduardo Paes of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), had set September 2

as the date for initiating a series of measures to fully resume economic activities in the city, which included mega events and the end of mask mandates. Although Paes announced the postponement of these measures in view of the rise of Delta cases, Rio's City Hall kept municipal schools fully operating.

Educators from dozens of schools in the Rio de Janeiro municipal network have revealed that their units are being kept open even in cases of coronavirus outbreaks. The Sepe teachers union reported having received, as of August 26, reports of 94 schools functioning with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infections. These numbers have grown exponentially over the last two weeks: on August 23 there were 76 schools operating under these conditions; on August 19, 49; and on August 17, 31. In addition, there are 53 municipal schools completely closed, and 47 with classes suspended due to infections.

São Paulo

The current conditions in Rio de Janeiro underscore the catastrophic prospects for the pandemic's development in the coming weeks and months in Brazil. This is especially true for São Paulo, which has already seen the prevalence of the Delta variant rise to 43 percent of analyzed samples.

A projection of the evolution of the Delta variant produced by the Info Track, a platform developed by researchers from the University of São Paulo (USP) and the São Paulo State University (UNESP), concluded that São Paulo will have an "explosion [of cases] from the second week of September."

The São Paulo state government is, however, promoting the largest "flexibilization" of social distancing measures since the beginning of the pandemic. Opposing this criminal policy, UNESP professor Wallace Casaca told *GI*: "Delta is a very aggressive strain. We see the outbreaks with great concern. We have to accelerate now as much as possible the vaccination with the second shots, but the vaccine alone is not a solution for everything."

Governor João Doria of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) responded to these warnings by reaffirming his complete indifference to science and the preservation of human lives. On August 18, he dissolved his COVID-19 Contingency Center and responded to criticism from the São Paulo Infectious Diseases Society by declaring that his sociopathic measures were being taken "in due time."

Despite reported outbreaks in more than 1,200 schools and the deaths of more than 100 educators and students in the state public school network alone, the government of São Paulo is keeping the schools open and has expanded their capacity, reducing the distance between students within the classrooms.

The capital of São Paulo has the largest school system in Brazil, with more than 2 million students enrolled, and its in-person operation has potentially devastating consequences. A teacher in the city's municipal public network told the *World Socialist Web Site* that educators have been reporting an increasing number of outbreaks in schools. He declared:

"Last week, cases started appearing among staff at my school, so far there are three confirmed. Although the protocol for school reopening says that two cases already constitute an outbreak, so far my school has not been closed.

"We have news of other schools that had outbreaks and remain open. A teacher wrote on Facebook that in a single week 14 staff members and one student were sent home due to COVID infections. Not only does the school remain operating, but students from different classes were brought together due to the lack of teachers.

"A few months ago, a case like that would have made newspaper headlines. But today the situation is being covered up, both by the government and by the union. Me and my colleagues have even called the SINPEEM [teachers union] to ask about their orientation regarding the outbreak in the school, and they didn't have any. They only repeated the government's official position.

"This is very revolting because the union broke our strike and sent us back to in-person work with a bunch of promises that protocols would be reviewed to increase safety and celebrating the vaccination of teachers as the big solution to our problems. Now we are working endless overtime hours to 'pay' for the strike days, being even more exposed to the virus, and people are getting infected regardless of whether they are vaccinated."

Bahia

The universal character of the homicidal policies promoted by the Brazilian ruling class is highlighted by the fact that it is being equally adopted in the states governed by the so-called "left-wing" opposition to the extreme-right government of President Jair Bolsonaro.

The government of Rui Costa, of the Workers Party (PT), in Bahia recently clashed with a movement of educators opposing the reopening of state schools. Costa has publicly threatened striking workers with dismissal and has effectively cut their pay to force them into classrooms.

Last Friday, the APLB teachers' union—which is also presided over by the PT—announced a deal reached with the government behind the workers' backs that agreed to the return of in-person classes on September 1. The rotten agreement, which was celebrated by the union officials as a "victory," imposes face-to-face classes even on Saturdays to compensate for the days on strike.

The APLB union's maneuver against teachers of Bahia followed exactly the same script as the union's betrayal of teachers in São Paulo and was received with the same outrage by the workers. On social networks, rank-and-file teachers posted hundreds of comments denouncing the union's coup and demanding truly safe conditions for the reopening of schools.

One teacher wrote: "Union leadership and government united as always. Students without immunization, some schools with suspended classes due to COVID-19, the Delta variant still feared, scientists recommending a third dose of the vaccine, and the union leadership accepted in-person classes for September 1."

Another teacher stated: "I didn't see any victory there. They didn't listen to or even consult the workers regarding the return, the possibility of a return was not even mentioned. And if it was going to return on September 1, why were there salary cuts? For me this was a defeat. The victory was to Rui Costa and Luiz Caetano [the government's

Institutional Relations secretary], they were victorious."

A third teacher declared: "What was the 'victory'? Unless they are referring to the government's victory, because the students will return without vaccines and without even testing. The COVID-19 infections in the state schools are there. That's helping to normalize an abnormal situation."

All over Brazil, similar situations are being faced by educators, parents and students, and are provoking a sharp growth of social opposition.

In Amazonas, in northern Brazil, where the most catastrophic experiments with the herd immunity policy have been conducted, teachers are denouncing the extraordinarily unsafe conditions in their classrooms, while parents are protesting the government's forcing their children back to in-person classes.

At the opposite end of the country, in Rio Grande do Sul, educators are reporting growing outbreaks in schools, which has been acknowledged by the health secretariat in the capital, Porto Alegre, where the number of individuals exposed to outbreaks in schools jumped from 3,125 on July 1 to 3,999 on August 25.

These movements across the country express the rise of a renewed wave of class struggle among Brazilian educators. The development of this struggle requires that fundamental conclusions be drawn from the crucial political experiences of the last year and a half marked by the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On every occasion that teachers attempted to mount an opposition to the ruthless policies of the bourgeois governments, they have faced the efforts of the unions to sabotage their struggles. At this extremely critical moment of the pandemic, no resistance is being organized by the National Confederation of Education Workers (CNTE) and its affiliated unions. On the contrary, teachers can be sure that union officials are discussing, among themselves and with state representatives, the best strategies for suppressing workers' struggles against the pandemic.

Without any illusions in the perspective of reforming of the corrupted trade unions, educators must form rank-and-file committees to organize a struggle for the immediate closure of schools throughout Brazil and to organize a movement of the entire working class to eradicate the COVID-19 pandemic.



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