

São Paulo teachers and public employees strike against attack on pensions

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Tens of thousands of municipal teachers and public employees in São Paulo walked off their jobs and demonstrated in front of city hall on Wednesday, October 13. They are fighting against austerity measures being rammed through by Mayor Ricardo Nunes of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), which will deeply erode their pensions and working conditions.

On Thursday, the bill was suddenly brought to a vote and approved, with the support of 37 of the 53 city councilors, the minimum votes required. The bill still needs to go through a second vote before being finally approved. During the protest outside city hall, workers held an assembly and voted for a strike beginning today.

There is a widespread revolt among São Paulo's municipal employees against Nunes' bill, which is seen as just the latest in a series of attacks on their pensions and salaries unleashed by previous mayors from the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB)—Bruno Covas and João Doria—and the Workers Party (PT)—Fernando Haddad.

In 2018 and 2019, massive strikes and demonstrations by São Paulo's municipal employees were betrayed by the unions officially representing them. Those defeats remain stuck in their throats, as one worker stated.

In 2021, the same unions sabotaged a long strike by municipal teachers against the reopening of schools amid the uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the four-month strike, the unions refused to call any demonstrations or assemblies (like those held this week). Just as in 2019, the strike was ended through an anti-democratic coup by the Unions' Forum, led by the SINPEEM, the largest educators union.

The criminal agreement between the Unions' Forum and the government for the unsafe return to in-person classes included the requirement that educators pay back the hours spent on strike. Therefore, teachers are now working grueling overtime, exposing themselves even more to the risk of infection with the coronavirus in order not to have their salaries cut. This situation, which threatens teachers with having their salaries completely cut off if they join the new strike, is seen by many workers as the opportunity the government saw to advance its attacks.

In the face of these threats, the broad participation of workers in the strike movement is a direct response to the terrible social crisis facing the entire Brazilian working class. With millions having fallen into poverty in Brazil since last year, workers are seeing their purchasing power violently eroded by high inflation,

especially in food and fuel prices. Recently, strikes in defense of wages have broken out at General Motors in São Paulo, at the Jurong shipyard in Espírito Santo, among metalworkers in Paraná, and app delivery workers in several Brazilian cities.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed workers participating in Wednesday's protest in São Paulo.

Leandro, who works at a Child Education Center (CEI), serving children under the age of 2, explained to the WSWWS what led him to the demonstration. "We who work double shifts, 12 hours a day, pay the maximum income tax rate of 27.5 percent of our salaries and another 14 percent in pension contributions," he said. "In other words, almost half of what I earn is only for taxes. They want to raise this even more. And after I retire, even though I would have contributed for more than 40 years, I will continue to pay the same tax rate. Today, this percentage is only charged on [monthly] salaries exceeding 6,433 reais (US\$ 1,166). With this new change, it will be charged of everyone who earns more than a minimum wage (US\$200)."

Leandro's wife, **Kauane**, an educator at an Early Childhood Education School (EMEI), serving children from 2 to 6 years old, added that it is inconceivable for "a 60-year-old teacher to remain in an early childhood education classroom, with toddlers [as the new bill imposes]. They won't have the physical or psychological structure to cope with that."

She also noted that "in the last four years we have been without any wage adjustment, not even for inflation. But our latest struggles have been only against the removal of rights. We are losing right after right. We see all the services being scrapped, there is no investment in health care. We are treated as numbers. If something happens to us, tomorrow they'll put someone new in our place. We are not seen as human beings, who have families."

Kauane and Leandro have children, one of them with asthma, and are seriously concerned about the unsafe reopening of schools. On Wednesday, hours before the demonstration, São Paulo Governor João Doria (PSDB) announced the mandatory return to in-person classes in state schools with 100 percent occupation of classrooms, eliminating any mandatory distancing between students. Later that day, Mayor Nunes announced the same measure will be followed by municipal schools.

"Now we've had the news that they're going to fully open schools and we have a very big concern, especially for the children who have not been vaccinated," said Kauane. "As long as it is not safe and I can, my children will stay at home. But we know that

this is not a reality for everyone. There are younger children whose parents need to work, and there are many parents who have no one to leave their children with.”

Sheila, a kindergarten teacher, declared that the strike movement is also “in the name of quality public education.” She and her school colleagues denounced the homicidal operation of schools in São Paulo. “How can we take 1-year-old babies, who are just starting to walk, and have distancing? It was really a reckless act by the mayor,” she declared.

“In the beginning there were only a few children, but now it is practically full,” said Sheila. “As soon as he approved 60 percent [of occupancy of the CEIs] several children in our CEI had COVID. Only 10 days went by, and children already started to show basic symptoms like coryza, malaise. Now I ask myself, how could we guarantee the safety of such small children? Infection was inevitable.”

Sheila said that “in other CEIs near ours, some teachers died of COVID but were not counted. At no time were infections of teachers and children with COVID mentioned by the media. It was simply, ‘teachers return, the families need it,’ they never worried about infections.”

The same situation was denounced by educators in Elementary Schools (EMEFs). **Márcia**, an art educator on the east side of São Paulo, described the situation as “chaos.” She said: “Every week, in my school two or three people are dismissed because of COVID, employees and children. They dismiss only those in the same classroom, but we, who are ‘specialist teachers’ and teach all the classrooms, are not dismissed. These are super unhealthy conditions.”

The demonstration had a significant participation by retired teachers and employees, who will immediately suffer a 14 percent cut in their income with the approval of the bill. **Amalia**, a retired English teacher, declared: “I’ve been in these movements for 40 years and there are few times I haven’t participated. Municipal teachers are always overwhelmed, for lack of staff in the schools, lack of salaries.”

“City councilors should have the role of defending us against authoritarian government projects, but what happens is that we have to fight against both the government and the councilors,” she continued. “The public service is scrapped, everyone says that. In my opinion, the intention of these governments is to privatize them. Meanwhile, we pay absurd taxes that nobody can explain. What I’m looking to learn is what the state is for.”

Tatiana, an English teacher working with Márcia, said that “as long as these people are in power, I think it’s very difficult for us to solve these problems. Until we have a really popular government, for the workers, there isn’t much of a perspective.”

Talking about the latest strikes, she said that “the performance of the union was sad. It is the same thing that I saw [with the São Paulo state teacher’s union, APEOESP] in the 2015 90-day strike. I saw them ending the strike despite the vote to continue it, and here it was the same thing. I think it’s sad, because we don’t know who is really on our side.”

The unions and political parties linked to them, principally the PT and the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), are once again striving to divert workers from confronting the capitalist system

which is responsible for the successive attacks on public employees and the working class as a whole.

These political forces advance as the only viable strategy for the workers’ movement the pressuring of “indecisive council members” to “flip their vote.” In their speeches, the union officials claimed that councilors who vote against the workers should face a settling of scores in the next elections: in 2024! This criminal proposition unequivocally exposes the reactionary character of the trade unions and the pseudo-left, who work to disarm the working class in face of the bourgeois state.

Other union leaders who took the stage also claimed that the election of a new PT government headed by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is the real solution to workers’ problems. This perspective is a complete fraud. Lula is openly working to reestablish his corrupt alliances with the right-wing parties and to present himself to the capitalist class as their best representative to contain an imminent social explosion in Brazil and defend their economic interests against the working class.

São Paulo municipal workers can advance their struggle only by breaking the political control of their movement by the unions, the PT and its pseudo-left satellites. They cannot accept new betrayals, and having their strikes broken through the same antidemocratic maneuvers used in 2019 and earlier this year!

Workers in São Paulo must orient themselves not to the bourgeois state, but to their fellow workers throughout Brazil and internationally who face the same attacks from the capitalist class.

A rank-and-file workers’ rebellion is already taking place around the world. On October 1, parents and rank-and-file workers called an independent strike against the unsafe reopening of schools, receiving global support. A second strike has been called for October 15. Across the United States, the strongest wave of strikes in decades is erupting, with workers rejecting rotten contracts promoted by the unions and the companies.

Brazilian workers must unite their struggles with this global movement, building independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace and joining the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR). The CBES-BR calls upon all workers to participate in the event How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication that will be held October 24 by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the WSWs.



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