

Opposition grows against increasing schools reopening in Brazil

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The Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR) will host a meeting next Tuesday, November 2, at 3 p.m. (Brasília time) on “The need for school closures and the means to end the pandemic.” Register for the meeting by filling out this form or contacting us through the CBES-BR page on Facebook.

Three months after the largest reopening of schools since the beginning of the pandemic in Brazil, governors and mayors are eliminating the last restrictions preventing the country’s precarious classrooms from being fully occupied. This is part of the policy of the Brazilian ruling elite to make the population “learn to live” with the novel coronavirus, with potentially catastrophic results for children and the entire Brazilian working class.

Of the 27 Brazilian states, 16 have already mandated the return of 100 percent of the students to school. In two other states, the Federal District and Minas Gerais, the second most populous state in Brazil, the mandatory presence of students in schools will occur beginning November 3. For this, governors and mayors are abandoning the requirement for one-meter distance between students in classrooms, which limited classroom occupancy and caused many schools to adopt a hybrid learning system. Remote teaching will continue to be offered only to students with chronic diseases.

This effort to fully reopen schools is being carried out by governors of all party affiliations, from the local allies of Brazil’s fascist president Jair Bolsonaro to those of the alleged opposition of the Workers Party (PT). This is a clear expression of the class forces that the so-called “progressive governors” of the PT represent in abandoning their minimum and wholly insufficient mitigation measures in the face of the pandemic and openly embracing Bolsonaro’s herd immunity policy.

Of the four PT-ruled states in the Northeast, only Rio Grande do Norte has yet to order the mandatory return of students to schools. However, since the beginning of October, classrooms in the state have been operating at full occupancy. In Ceará, students have been forced to return to unsafe schools since September 20, while in Bahia and Piauí this has been occurring since October 18. In these states, virtually all restrictions on business activities have also been lifted.

In Brazil’s most populous state, São Paulo, a return to classrooms became mandatory on October 18. However, until November 3, it is still mandatory to maintain one meter between students in classrooms, which has meant that many schools are still operating in a hybrid system. In the state capital, the city of São Paulo, although attendance is not mandatory, classrooms have been able to receive 100 percent of the students without social distancing since October 25.

Also on October 25, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s third most populous state, reopened its state public schools to 100 percent of students. In a

move that echoes the infamous choice that the fascist president gave to the Brazilian people at the start of the pandemic, between starving to death or dying of COVID-19, the Rio government forced the return of students by suspending both the distribution of food staples and credit on food cards.

As has been the case since the beginning of the pandemic worldwide, the claims advanced for the expansion of the reopening of schools in Brazil have no scientific basis. Brazilian political authorities, speaking on behalf of big business through the corporate media, are sowing the illusion that the end of the pandemic is near with the advance of vaccinations and the supposed control of the pandemic in the country.

Brazil has 52 percent of its population fully vaccinated, with large regional inequalities in vaccine distribution. São Paulo, the richest state, has 66 percent of the population fully vaccinated, while in Roraima, the poorest state, this number drops to 27 percent. As the models of Dr. Malgorzata Gasperowicz, of the University of Calgary, have clearly shown, vaccination of the population at this level alone cannot control the spread of the virus, particularly of a more infectious variant such as Delta.

Brazil is in the 126th testing position in the world, making it impossible to get a real sense of the severity of the pandemic. In recent months, the country has also registered numerous problems in the system for registering cases and deaths from COVID-19. As of October 26, Brazil registered a moving average of 409 deaths and 13,424 new cases, but experts state that the real figures are up to two and ten times higher, respectively. In total, there are 606,293 officially recorded deaths, second only to the US, and almost 22 million cases.

The drive for reopenings also ignores the role of schools as vectors for the transmission of the novel coronavirus. Several scientific studies have shown that closing schools is one of the most effective ways to prevent the transmission of the virus, and a recent study showed that the increased urban mobility in Manaus, because of the reopening of schools in September 2020, gave rise to the most infectious Gamma variant. In addition, the abandonment of social distancing in classrooms with poor air circulation, and where students do not have access to safe masks, will be a powerful ally of a virus whose transmission is predominantly airborne, including via aerosolization.

The effects of the reckless opening of schools could be even more catastrophic for the pandemic in Brazil. Contrary to what has happened around the world, it has not yet experienced an outbreak of the already prevalent Delta variant, which will certainly be fueled by the escalation of school reopenings throughout the country.

Undoubtedly, the number of cases and deaths among children and

adolescents will increase even more in the country that is already the world leader in deaths in this age group. In Brazil, there are 35 million children under the age of 11 for whom there are still no vaccines available, and only 8 percent of children and young people between 12 and 17 years old are fully vaccinated. In addition to this entire age group susceptible to contracting the virus and developing all the known and unknown effects of long COVID, 194,000 children in Brazil have already been devastated by the loss of one of their caregivers, according to a study by Imperial College London.

Parents and teachers have expressed anger in comments on social media posts by education secretaries and governors announcing the extension of school reopenings. Teachers in Rio de Janeiro wrote to the governor: “They haven’t done any work to adapt the schools’ structures! There are still schools with rooms without windows and ventilation!”; “Classes with more than 40 students. Teachers with chronic diseases! You are irresponsible, incompetent and cruel.”

In response to a social media post by São Paulo Secretary of Education Rossieli Soares, who claimed that “There is no technical or sanitary justification for the school not being open today,” one teacher wrote: “Sanitary justification: no cleaning staff.” Another stated that in addition to cleaning staff, “There is a lack of staff in the courtyard and corridors. Lack of testing.”

In another post by Soares announcing the mandatory attendance of students, a mother wrote in the comments, “I am pro-life! My son is not coming back ... MY SON LOSES THE SCHOOL YEAR, BUT NOT HIS LIFE!”

This mother’s sentiment is shared by countless other concerned parents, who in recent months have created numerous groups on Facebook and other social media against the reopening of schools, for the right to remote education throughout the pandemic and against mandatory in-person classes. In recent weeks, many online petitions against mandatory in-person classes have been created and shared countless times on social media.

This movement in defense of the most alienable of rights, the right to life, is part of a broad, international movement of the working class all over the world. Refusing to put their lives and the lives of their loved ones at risk in service of the profit interests of corporations and the governments that represent them, workers have been staging strikes and protests internationally since the pandemic began.

Far from having diminished, this movement has only grown. Over the past month, the strike call by British parent Lisa Diaz, who has refused to send her two children to schools where increasing numbers of children have been infected, has gained global support. In the US, tens of thousands of workers are engaged in one of the largest strike waves in the country’s history against wage cutting due to rising inflation, poor working conditions, and the herd immunity policy of the American ruling elite.

In Brazil, in recent weeks, these same reasons have led to a 15-day strike of more than 4,000 GM workers in the ABC industrial region of São Paulo, and a two-day strike of fuel truck drivers in six Brazilian states. On October 25, metro workers in the Federal District ended a six-month strike that shut down up to 40 percent of the train fleet every day. Countless other walkouts and strikes in virtually every sector of the Brazilian working class—health, transport oil and railroad workers, teachers and school employees—have erupted since the pandemic began, in addition to massive youth-driven demonstrations against the Bolsonaro government.

Every chance they had, in all parts of the globe, the unions, backed by the pseudo-left, worked to isolate and suppress this explosive

potential of the working class and youth.

With the announcement of the mandatory return to school, they followed the same traitorous script, best expressed by the Rio de Janeiro teachers’ union (SEPE). Besides promising to appeal to the deputies in the Legislative Assembly and to the Public Attorney’s Office against the “dangerous ... return to classes,” it asked teachers and parents to “send photos or reports of the situation in the schools.” While one teacher ironically asked in the comments on this note on social media “What are you going to do with the photos??? A souvenir album of the pandemic???” another stated, “they are making workers and children guinea pigs to justify a New Year’s Eve and Carnival that will bring profit and the virus. The union is aware, but is waiting patiently, even with overwhelming evidence that protocols are not being followed. What to expect? You have talked and now is the time to act.”

Against the open sabotage of the unions, parents, teachers and school staff must turn to that immense social force that is the Brazilian and international working class, the only one capable of putting an end to the entire COVID-19 tragedy. Based on a scientific understanding of the pandemic, the working class must be mobilized to eliminate the novel coronavirus internationally. Otherwise, COVID-19 may become an endemic disease, with the possibility of an even more contagious and more lethal variant emerging, and continuing to cause death and suffering on a global scale.

This effort has been advanced first and foremost by the WWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which last Sunday organized the webinar “How to end the pandemic” to arm the international working class with the scientific knowledge to defend its very lives. In Brazil, the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education was recently created, which has been advocating the closure of schools and non-essential services, with full financial support to all those affected, until the pandemic is over.

We urge everyone to watch the webinar presentations and participate in an online meeting that the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR) will host next Tuesday, November 2, at 3 p.m. (Brasília time).

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To contact the WWS and the
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