

COVID-19 cases explode in Brazilian schools

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The beginning of the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil has been characterized by a huge increase in cases among teachers, students and school staff. Refuting the claim of the Brazilian and world ruling class that schools are safe, in recent weeks numerous schools across the country have suspended in-person classes and some cities have again mandated the wearing of masks in classrooms.

In May, COVID-19 infections again rose in Brazil. On Saturday, the moving average reached 29,824 daily cases, a 104 percent increase from two weeks ago, and 84 deaths were recorded. These numbers, however, are huge underestimates. In addition to massive under-reporting, 15 of Brazil's 27 states have not reported pandemic data due to alleged technical problems.

"We have never sailed so in the dark," declared infectologist Fernando Spilki to the daily *Folha de S. Paulo*. "Very little is tested and registered. Besides, with the [recent] possibility of self-testing... several cases end up not being registered," he explained.

In what he called a "recipe for disaster," Brazilian neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis warned on Twitter on May 26: "This is one of the riskiest moments of the pandemic, basically because all measures to contain the transmission of the virus have been eliminated, the window of immunity created by vaccines is closing, new variants are circulating without barriers."

In fact, today in Brazil the most infectious and vaccine-resistant BA.2 Omicron subvariant is dominant, but cases of the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants, responsible for the recent increase in cases in South Africa and Europe, have also been identified. Although it remains mandatory in public transportation and hospitals, the mandate for the use of masks in classrooms and other closed places was abolished in early April in all Brazilian states. Vaccination is stagnant, with 77.4 percent of Brazilians completely immunized and only 44 percent of the population with the booster shot. This situation has led the transmission rate to grow since mid-April, reaching 1.48 on June 1.

It is under these conditions that COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire in Brazilian schools. Far from a surprise, outbreaks in schools are yet another clear confirmation of their role in the spread of COVID-19. And, as has happened before, keeping schools open is driving this fourth wave of the pandemic in Brazil.

However, even with the prospect of a worsening pandemic in the coming weeks, state and municipal governments in Brazil are doing everything they can to make the population "learn to live" with COVID-19. Few cities have restored the mandate for the use of masks in classrooms, even though several scientific studies point out that a simple measure like this can contain up to 80 percent of the transmission of the virus.

This is particularly true in the state of São Paulo, Brazil's wealthiest state and financial center. According to the state government's own data, there has been a 370 percent increase in COVID-19 cases in public state schools since the beginning of May. Even though hospitalizations are expected to triple this week, after a 120 percent increase over the past month, on Wednesday the state's so-called Scientific Committee only *recommended* the wearing of masks in classroom and other closed places.

In several Facebook groups, thousands of teachers in São Paulo have expressed their anger in recent days, both commenting on recent outbreaks and advocating school closures. A teacher commented: "7 teachers caught Covid at the school where I work, including me... The teachers' families were also infected, including my 82-year-old mother... I think that when it is necessary, you should yes, close it to avoid an outbreak... This disease is no joke, I lost my brother a year ago... Besides, it is known that it causes sequelae."

At another teacher's school, where "several classes with in-person activities [were] suspended, we had 3 babies hospitalized due to SARS. São Paulo Municipal Secretary of Education acts with denialism, not updating the protocol and [not] demanding the use of masks... The reality is here, 4th wave, schools closed [due to the disease] and we don't even have a look or care for early childhood, which has not yet been immunized."

In fact, of particular concern is the increase in cases and hospitalizations due to COVID-19 in children in the present wave. In Ceará, one of four Brazilian states ruled by the Workers Party (PT), more than half of last month's COVID-19 cases were registered among children under 9 years old. As of June 1, only three of the state's 226 pediatric ICU beds were unoccupied. In the Federal District, where numerous schools were forced to suspend in-person classes in recent weeks, all pediatric ICU beds were occupied earlier this month. The states of Pernambuco, São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul and Santa

Catarina are experiencing similar situations.

The result of this policy of letting the virus spread, particularly using the early reopening of schools to infect children and achieve a supposed herd immunity by contagion, has produced tragic results in Brazil. In 2020 and 2021, there were 2,625 deaths of children and young people between zero and 19 years of age, an average of four deaths per day. Between January and May of this year, just within the age group from zero to five years old, almost 300 COVID-19 deaths were recorded. This number is double that of the same period last year, and debunks the claim widely spread by the international media earlier this year that Omicron is “mild.”

However, this situation could not have been achieved without the assistance of Brazilian unions, which from the very beginning have aligned themselves with the ruling elite’s interests in keeping schools and workplaces open during a raging pandemic. Totally ignoring the risks posed by COVID-19, the unions are acting amid this new outbreak with a combination of complacent silence and cosmetic recommendations to capitalist governments.

The website of the National Confederation of Workers in Education (CNTE), affiliated with PT-controlled CUT union federation, only at the end of May, with the increase in cases in schools in São Paulo, broke a three-month silence and spoke of the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year, a CNTE manifesto, ignoring all accumulated scientific knowledge on the impacts of COVID-19 on children and the role of schools in community transmission, had proposed that “In situations of stability or decrease in epidemiological indicators... These measures [to control the pandemic, including school closures] outweigh the direct risks arising from the coronavirus.” Today, schools opened under a supposed “situation of stability” are boosting this fourth wave of the pandemic.

Brazil’s largest teacher union, São Paulo’s APEOESP, for its part, has advanced the fraudulent demand “For the return of sanitary protocols in schools,” also recommending that teachers wear masks. Like the CNTE, it ignores what science has long established both inside and outside the classroom: in schools with precarious infrastructure, sanitary protocols are wholly insufficient measures against a virus that spreads predominantly through aerosols, in addition to the rise of community transmission provoked by increased urban mobility due to open schools.

But more significantly, the CNTE, APEOESP and other Brazilian teachers unions have acted to demobilize a growing anger among teachers that has been escalating since the beginning of the pandemic, now increased by rising inflation. Throughout the first half of last year, before and amid the pandemic’s second deadly wave, the unions sabotaged strikes in “defense of life” that demanded school closures to contain the pandemic. More recently, in March and April, unions isolated dozens of teachers strikes that broke out across Brazil against low wages.

In this third year of a pandemic that is far from over, Brazilian teachers and the working class must assimilate the fundamental demands that have been advanced only by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) based on a careful analysis of the scientific and social aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and of the transformation of trade unions into agencies of capitalism under the process of globalization.

The ICFI has warned that if the novel coronavirus is not eliminated, all the suffering and death caused by the pandemic will continue for years to come. The elimination policy, which articulates all mitigation measures, such as lockdowns, vaccination, and school closures, is the only one that responds to the challenges posed by a virus as infectious and mutable as COVID-19. It has been successfully implemented in China since the beginning of the pandemic, and recently its zero-COVID policy has managed to reach virtually zero transmissions in Shanghai. However, if not implemented globally, all countries—including China—will still be susceptible to new and more dangerous outbreaks.

In April of last year, the WWS and the ICFI launched the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to “develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale” to put an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this struggle, the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil was created in September last year.

In this beginning of the fourth wave in Brazil, we call on teachers, students and parents, as well as the Brazilian working class as a whole, to break with the unions and fight for the global elimination of COVID-19. Contact us immediately to take part in this struggle.



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