

Pro-corporate Workers Party signals sweeping attack on public education in Brazil

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13 July 2022

In the run-up to Brazil's October presidential elections, the right-wing, nationalist and pro-corporate character of the program of Workers Party (PT) candidate Luís Inácio Lula da Silva has emerged ever more openly. In recent weeks, Lula and PT officials have met with businessmen and bankers to assure the markets that a PT government will place the full weight of the growing global capitalist crisis upon the backs of the Brazilian working class. They are promising to escalate the attacks carried out under the PT when it governed Brazil between 2003 and 2016 as the party of choice of the national and international ruling elite.

A central figure in these meetings has been Lula's vice-presidential running mate, the right-wing politician Geraldo Alckmin, now in the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). Before joining the PSB to run with Lula, Alckmin's entire political career was in the hated Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), which under former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso pursued a brutal "neoliberal agenda" against the Brazilian working class. During the 14 years that Alckmin was governor of São Paulo, Brazil's richest and most populous state, he followed the script of Cardoso's administration, applying pro-corporate programs in public education and harshly repressing social protests.

In pursuit of the PT's right-wing agenda, Alckmin met in mid-June with representatives of the pro-herd immunity movement, Escolas Abertas (Open Schools). The meeting took place during an offensive by this movement against any measures to close classrooms in the face of the rising fourth wave of the pandemic in Brazil.

With the rapid spread of more transmissible and vaccine-resistant Omicron BA.2, BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants in the schools, where the most basic mitigation measures, such as mask mandates, have been abandoned, Open Schools protested on social media against "schools that are illegally closing entire classrooms! There hasn't been a [National Public Health Emergency] as a result of coronavirus since May 22, 2022."

Working closely with the ruling elite, Open Schools met in late June with São Paulo Mayor Ricardo Nunes, who soon after issued a decree abandoning the recommendation to send students with confirmed COVID infections home from class.

The Open Schools movement was created in 2020, ostensibly by a small group of elite private school parents who were protesting against temporary school closures. Behind it, however, were powerful sections of the ruling elite determined to carry out the full reopening of the economy and end all measures to contain the

spread of the virus. Before denouncing the suspension of classes in this current wave of the pandemic, Open Schools played a prominent role in making education an "essential service", enabling schools to reopen even with the pandemic out of control, and in ending the mandatory wearing of masks in the country's precarious classrooms.

Like the ruling classes around the world, the Brazilian capitalist elite saw the pandemic as an opportunity to increase corporate profits and personal wealth. The Open Schools' pro-herd immunity program, aimed at keeping parents in their workplaces, is connected to its broad defense of the privatization of public education and attacks against teachers, whom the movement claims are "left-wing indoctrinators."

Recently, the movement has allied itself with fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro in promoting homeschooling, and has been one of the most vocal advocates of "vouchers" in public education, a policy modeled upon the brutal experience of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.

Members of Open Schools have been received on several occasions by the João Doria (PSDB) government of the state of São Paulo. After being elected governor on a far-right platform and directly supporting Bolsonaro in 2018, Doria broke with the fascistic president, demagogically posing as a "defender of science", while fully reopening both schools and the economy during the pandemic. Doria copied the strategy of the global ruling elites, limiting pandemic control measures to vaccinations. The same strategy was followed by PT state governments in the Northeast, and Lula praised Doria for his supposed fight against the pandemic in São Paulo.

Alckmin was Doria's principal political patron, preceding him as governor of São Paulo. Alckmin's terms as governor were marked by extensive attacks on public education, with the introduction of full-time charter schools, external evaluations, and corporate management policies, which cut teachers' salaries in the state to among the lowest in Brazil. In 2015, he announced a sweeping "school reorganization" that would result in the closure of 1,000 schools across the state. The announcement sparked an explosive school occupation movement by high school students in 2015-6, forcing the government to abandon its project.

The rapprochement between Lula and Alckmin was largely mediated by Fernando Haddad, one of the most right-wing figures within the PT. Haddad is one of the biggest advocates of a "broad front" against Bolsonaro, i.e., the subordination of the popular

anger against the fascistic president to the same sections of the ruling class and bourgeois state that enabled him to freely implement his herd immunity policy and attacks on the Brazilian working class. During his time as minister of education in the Lula administration (2005-2012) and as mayor of São Paulo (2013-2016), Haddad, like Alckmin, had a record of attacks against teachers and public education.

In 2005, he implemented the first national external evaluation for basic education, the Prova Brasil (Brazil Exam). Like external evaluations around the world, it opened the way for privatizing public education, as was the case with the high school reform during the government of President Michel Temer in 2016. Haddad himself, as education minister, had defended key aspects of the educational reform later implemented by Temer.

It was also during the period when Haddad headed the education ministry that Brazil saw exponential growth in private higher education. The increase in university enrollments, driven by the “commodities boom” during Lula’s administrations, was fueled by massive federal subsidies to low-quality private colleges, which turned Brazilian higher education into a highly profitable business.

One of the greatest beneficiaries of this process was education businessman Walfrido dos Mares Guia, who also served as a minister under Lula. In 2013, he created Kroton Educacional, which became the largest private educational group in the world. Returning favors received from PT governments, he provided million-dollar donations to Haddad’s campaign for mayor of São Paulo in 2016, to the Lula Institute, and even lent his private jet to Lula. Today, Mares Guia is serving as one of the intermediaries between the PT and the corporate world, repeating that “businessmen need not be afraid” of Lula.

As mayor of the city of São Paulo, Haddad’s policies also benefited private education, which now administers practically all the day care centers inaugurated under his mandate. Haddad’s administration was also marked by large strikes of municipal teachers. In 2015, he attempted to force through a pension reform that would result in cutting the pensions of teachers and other public employees and create a retirement plan administered by private funds. After Haddad vowed to withdraw his pension reform plan, he sent the proposal to the São Paulo City Council three days before leaving office, paving the way for it to be approved the following year with even harsher attacks on São Paulo’s teachers and public employees.

It was during his term as mayor that Haddad began his fruitful political relationship with Alckmin, then governor of the state of São Paulo. In a recent interview, Haddad said: “I have a well-known personal relationship with Alckmin, and when I was mayor I got along very well with him as governor. We had disagreements, but we knew how to build together and we built a lot of things.”

Among the things they “built together” is the brutal repression unleashed by the São Paulo Military Police against demonstrations over the increase in public transportation fares in 2013. This crackdown sparked what became known as the “Brazilian Spring,” the largest mass movement in the last 30 years against widespread corruption, poor social services, social inequality, and the entire political establishment, including the PT governments.

The attacks on public education by Alckmin and Haddad could

not have happened without the complicity of the São Paulo state teachers union, APEOESP, and its pseudo-left apologists, particularly the so-called opposition to the PT leadership in APEOESP headed by Morenoite and Pabloite groups within the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). They have a long record of isolating and sabotaging teachers’ strikes, which allowed then governor Alckmin to carry out his broad attacks on public education in the state, while Haddad did the same as mayor of São Paulo.

During the pandemic, the betrayals of APEOESP and the pseudo-left took on a criminal character as they sabotaged strikes “for life” before the second deadly wave early last year. Today, these political forces are supporting Lula, Alckmin and Haddad, who will be the PT’s candidate for governor of São Paulo, claiming that these bourgeois politicians will “rebuild Brazil. Quite the contrary, for decades they have spearheaded the destruction of public education and the living conditions of the working class, paving the way for the election of Bolsonaro in 2018.

In the midst of a growing global economic crisis and a pandemic still out of control, the world ruling elites are unleashing a broad assault on social and democratic rights, with the advancing threat of dictatorial forms of rule and a nuclear world war. Under these conditions, the guarantee of quality public education is ever more inseparable from a political struggle against the capitalist system. This means confiscating the wealth of the likes of Mares Guia and the other Brazilian billionaires with whom Lula and Alckmin are now meeting to assure the financial markets that there is nothing to fear from a PT administration.

To this end, we call on teachers, students and the entire Brazilian working class to fight for a policy of eliminating COVID-19 and defending the most basic democratic and social rights through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), of which the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil is a part. The IWA-RFC is a network of committees independent of the trade unions and the bourgeois parties and their pseudo-left supporters, that is being created internationally to unite workers’ struggles across industries and national borders.



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