

# On eve of Brazil's presidential run-off, National Student Union sabotages struggle against Bolsonaro's attacks on education

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Continuing the treacherous course it has pursued since the inauguration of Brazil's fascistic president Jair Bolsonaro in 2019, the National Student Union (UNE) has responded to the federal government's latest attack on public education by isolating the struggle of Brazilian students from the growing working class movement and diverting it behind the bourgeois state, particularly the election of the Workers Party (PT) presidential candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The Bolsonaro government has carried out a general assault on social rights and education, which includes attacks on university autonomy with the appointment of allied deans and the creation of a climate of witch hunts in universities against alleged leftist indoctrination. On October 5 it announced a broad cut in the federal budget, whose main impact will be upon higher education. According to the association of deans of federal universities, the 5.8 percent cut in the discretionary funding puts "at risk" the 107 federal universities and institutes, threatening to "make it impossible" for them to function.

On the same day of the announcement, spontaneous protests by Brazilian student youth began to erupt. In São Paulo, students from the Federal Institute occupied the university canteen because of the 40 percent increase in the price of meals caused by the cuts. In the states of Bahia, Alagoas and Paraíba, as well as in the Federal District, massive street demonstrations took place. Faced with this initial mobilization and fearing its political consequences for the presidential run-off on October 30, the Bolsonaro government suspended the cuts on October 7.

Earlier, the UNE rushed to ease the growing pressure from the Brazilian youth and prevent it from getting out of its control. On October 6, it called a national protest against the cuts only for October 18, while announcing support for the PT's candidate, Lula, in the second round of the presidential election in order to divert protests behind his campaign. In addition to youth organizations of the PT, the UNE is headed by elements from the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and Pabloite tendencies within the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), which are part of Lula's electoral coalition.

Although the demonstrations scheduled for October 18 brought tens of thousands of students to the streets in 73 cities in 19 states and the Federal District, they were much smaller than previous ones, particularly those in May 2019, when students joined massive protests by teachers against the Bolsonaro government's pension reform.

Bolsonaro's early October cuts also hit several other social areas and were announced after he had sent Congress the federal budget for

next year. The funding for early childhood education and the infrastructure of Brazil's precarious schools has been cut by an alarming 96 percent and 97 percent, respectively. Cuts in 12 healthcare areas affected the treatment of cancer and AIDS patients, as well as indigenous health and the national immunization program, threatening the only remaining control against the pandemic in Brazil and the return of numerous infectious diseases.

Even in the face of this broad attack, the UNE and the Brazilian teachers' and health workers' unions, run mainly by the same organizations that control the UNE, worked to isolate the student struggle. After numerous strikes by municipal and state teachers had been isolated in the first semester, the teachers' unions refused to mobilize teachers even though the students protest took place right after Teachers' Day, October 15, a historic day of struggle in defense of public education in Brazil.

Throughout September, two massive protests by nurses in this third year of the pandemic were held demanding compliance with the national minimum wage for the sector, the same demand that had led teachers to strike in the first semester. At the end of September, 35,000 employees at federal university hospitals also went on strike against low salaries. Last Friday, an unprecedented protest by AIDS patients was held in São Paulo against the cuts.

The latest events repeated the UNE's course throughout the Bolsonaro government. Since his inauguration, the UNE has advocated that the protests against Bolsonaro's attacks on education assume a nationalist character, replacing the red banner identified with the left by the green and yellow of the national flag. This is articulated with the UNE's characterization of the attacks on education and the Bolsonaro government as a threat to "national sovereignty" and Brazilian capitalism, the central complaint voiced by the PT. As a result, the UNE has been one of the leading proponents of a "broad front" against Bolsonaro together with dissident right-wing factions of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. This has only served to demobilize opposition to Bolsonaro and to divert it into safe channels within the capitalist state.

This policy was clearly expressed from May of last year, when massive demonstrations led by Brazilian youth erupted against the Bolsonaro government's genocidal response to the pandemic. The UNE, as well as the PT, PSOL and PCdoB, advocated that the political right participate in these demonstrations in order to supposedly broaden them. At the same time, they began to maneuver behind closed doors with reactionary figures from the Brazilian right, such as the liberal organization MBL linked to the Koch brothers and

which supported Bolsonaro's election in 2018. Their aim was to either pressure Congress to put forward a reactionary "super impeachment" petition against Bolsonaro or to adjust the timing of the demonstrations to the work of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry investigating the federal government's actions in the pandemic.

As a result, youth attendance in the demonstrations decreased as the participation of the right increased. In September of last year, UNE agreed to participate in an empty protest against the Bolsonaro government called by the MBL and all the bourgeois opposition parties. Justifying the UNE's presence at the rally and its intention to suppress a new explosion of Brazilian youth, UNE president Bruna Brelaz said in an interview at the time, "I believe we need to build a broad front ... [with] different sectors of the left, the right and the center. Our concern is: if Bolsonaro remains in power, the social chaos tends to get worse."

The foundation of the reactionary UNE policy is the Stalinist two-stage theory, which is advanced by the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), whose youth wing has controlled the UNE for decades, but also by sections of the PT and the Pabloite tendencies of the PSOL. The UNE's defense of a "broad front" against Bolsonaro repeats the PCdoB's policy in the 1980s of ignoring the vast workers' strikes and subordinating the struggle against the military dictatorship (1964-1985) to the regime-approved opposition of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) and calls for direct elections and a constituent assembly. After supporting the first civilian government after the dictatorship, led by the MDB until 1988, the PCdoB found in the PT a suitable substitute to carry out its "broad front" policy. Since 1989, the PCdoB has been a perennial ally of the PT in presidential elections, and this year joined it in a single congressional block.

### **The struggle for the right to quality public education as part of the struggle for international socialism**

Brazilian youth face an unprecedented social and economic crisis that combines high unemployment, a lack of prospects for the future, and numerous mental health problems. The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified this crisis while radicalizing young Brazilians who have seen themselves infected by the new coronavirus, who are now suffering the effects of the long COVID and have watched their loved ones die as a consequence of the herd immunity policy implemented by all parties of the Brazilian ruling elite, including the PT.

Data from August of this year showed that 36 percent of Brazilians between 18 and 24 neither work nor study—much above the already high OECD average of 17 percent. Those who work do so under increasingly exploitative conditions, particularly with delivery apps and call centers. During the pandemic, these sectors led numerous strikes and stoppages against low wages and unsafe working conditions, which were ignored by student organizations and unions controlled by the PCdoB, PT, and PSOL.

Brazil today has one of the world's lowest rates of 17- to 24-year-olds enrolled in higher education (17 percent). The officially celebrated tripling of the number of students in undergraduate courses from 2.7 million in 2000 to 8.6 million in 2019, particularly during the commodities boom under the PT governments (2003-2016), took place mainly in low-quality courses at private colleges, which

funneled public funds for loans into the pockets of billionaire education tycoons. Far from solving access to higher education or good employment, this program created a generation of low-paid, indebted young people—a total of 1.2 million former students—which undoubtedly contributed to Brazil's record high of 80 percent of families unable to pay all their bills in September.

The PT government's student loan program helped create in 2013 the world's largest private educational group, Kroton, whose president is one of the biggest enthusiasts for Lula's candidacy in the business world. In the last ten years, the private colleges aided by the PT governments have continued to grow, with their distance learning courses increasing their enrollments by more than 400 percent. In contrast, there has been a 14 percent decrease in in-person course enrollments, particularly in federal public universities that have suffered a series of cuts and attacks by the Bolsonaro government.

This situation has thoroughly exposed the decades-long campaign for the implementation of racial quotas in public universities as a way out for impoverished youth. This campaign only succeeded in hiding the problem of Brazil's unparalleled social inequality, expressed in the restriction of college education to a few privileged students enrolled in elite schools, behind the reactionary language of racialism. Its goal was to hamper the unified and independent struggle of Brazilian multiracial youth against the enormous social inequality in Brazil.

The right of the youth to education, as well as to a well-paid job, will only be realized by uniting the struggles of the youth with those of the working class to expropriate the wealth of the ruling elite and massively increase investment in education. This, in turn, is inseparable from the struggle to unite the Brazilian youth and working class with their sisters in all countries as part of the struggle for international socialism.

This is the perspective that the Socialist Equality Group, which is fighting to build the Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), advocates. As part of this effort, we call on Brazilian youth to join the actions of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to build an international movement against the threat of a nuclear war, as well as study the long struggle of the ICFI against Stalinism, including its Maoist variant, and all forms of Pabloite revisionism that control a large share of the student organizations in Brazil.



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