

Lula government appoints pro-business officials to Brazil's Ministry of Education

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In his January 2 inauguration speech as Minister of Education in the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party, PT), Camilo Santana painted a devastating portrait of Brazilian education after four years of attacks by the government of fascistic ex-President Jair Bolsonaro.

According to Santana, the Bolsonaro government's wholesale "neglect" of education, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought "immeasurable damage to millions of children and young people in this country." Santana provided alarming statistics: "650,000 children up to 5 years old have dropped out of school in the last 3 years," and the number of "children of 6 and 7 years old who can't read and write at the right age has increased 66 percent."

Repeating the Lula government's slogan of "Unity and Reconstruction," Santana stressed that his mission is to "help rescue education in our country" from "dark times."

However, Santana's eight-year record as PT governor of the Northeastern state of Ceará (2015–2022), which includes the repression of a 107-day teachers' strike in 2016, attacks on public sector workers' pensions in 2020 and the early reopening of schools during the pandemic, points to a very different agenda. So do recent nominations to key positions in the Ministry of Education of pro-corporate policy advocates with umbilical links to corporate-backed educational think tanks. What is being prepared is an intensification of the attacks on teachers and public education in Brazil.

For secretary of basic education, Santana has chosen Katia Schweickardt, an adviser to the largest corporate educational think tank in Brazil, Todos pela Educação, and a fellow of the Lemann Foundation, linked to the second richest man in Brazil, João Paulo Lemann. As secretary of education of Manaus, the capital of the Northern state of Amazonas, between 2015 and 2020 in the administration of Arthur Virgílio, of the right-wing Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), she established educational projects with the private sector, particularly with Brazil's largest bank, Itaú, implementing the neoliberal education guidelines proposed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

Schweickardt's administration was marked by imposing a salary squeeze against teachers and the emphasis on improving results on the IDEB index, which includes students' results in Test Brazil (Prova Brasil). In 2017, she denounced as "criminal" a teachers' movement protesting the way Manaus City Hall was divvying up federal funds for education based on students' Test Brazil scores.

Her appointment as secretary of basic education has generated widespread protests among teachers in Manaus.

Test Brazil, created in 2005 by then minister of education and current minister of finance of the Lula government, Fernando Haddad, is a census-based standardized test that has served as the basis for the implementation of business management in schools and pro-corporate reforms in Brazilian education, such as the 2016 high school reform.

Another instrument that has also advanced the privatization of public education is the Brazilian National Common Curriculum (BNCC), implemented by one of Brazil's leading experts in standardized testing, Manuel Palácios, when he was secretary of basic education in the PT government of Dilma Rousseff between 2015 and 2016. Far from representing an appreciation of humanistic, artistic and scientific knowledge, the BNCC promoted a "flexible" curriculum ever more closely tied to the needs of the market, including the expansion of technical education. Under the current PT government, Palácios has been appointed president of INEP, the body responsible for the evaluation of basic and higher education.

For the position of executive secretary, the second most important in the Ministry of Education, Santana appointed Izolda Cela. She was vice-governor of Ceará under the Santana government and, before that, worked for the secretary of education in the city of Sobral from 2001 to 2006 and then was Ceará's secretary of education from 2007 to 2014. In Sobral, she and her husband, the vice-mayor (2005-2011) and then mayor (2011-2017) of the city, Veveu Arruda (PT), established a fruitful relationship with the Lemann Foundation, which led it to establish an educational center in Sobral.

After Lula's election victory, the Lemann Foundation and other pro-corporate educational think tanks advocated that Cela become minister of education for having implemented standardized testing in Sobral and Ceará and "material and financial incentives for municipalities to improve student learning," according to a report in the daily *Estado de S. Paulo*. Ultimately, this means replacing regular salary increases for education professionals with bonuses based on student test results.

Summarizing this model, retired UNICAMP professor Luiz Carlos de Freitas wrote in his blog in 2016: "With the emphasis on 'beating goals' in the IDEB, the 'successful' schools will be those that train students to do well on Math and Portuguese tests. A total inversion of the goals of human formation. ... What matters

is that the result increases—for better or for worse. The clearest example of this is Sobral in Ceará [which] ... put the educational development of the cities as part of the conditions for sharing the state tax on goods and services.”

In a devastating 2017 article, former secretary of labor and economic development of Sobral, Marcos de Aguiar Villas-Bôas, also wrote that the IDEB “has become information for political/electoral use,” such as for the cities to get more educational resources, and therefore “is very manipulated.” He also wrote that Sobral’s “IDEB boom is not strongly reflected in a boom in income equality,” or in higher university admissions.

As he made clear in his inauguration speech, Santana’s intention is to replicate Sobral and Ceará’s supposedly successful educational strategy, which he characterized as “a new methodology, with meritocracy, with fiscal stimulus, with awards, where schools started to have goals and metrics,” for all of Brazil through a “national pact to support basic education.”

While all this points to a broad attack on Brazilian education, the Brazilian pseudo-left, including the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) and the teachers unions, are advancing the fraudulent position that the Lula government and the Ministry of Education are “in dispute” and that they can be “pressured” to implement more “progressive policies.” The very appointment of Santana over Cela is presented as the fruit of this “dispute,” with the PT’s own parliamentary base and the pseudo-left having denounced Cela’s connection with “business sectors in education” in a “Letter in defense of Brazilian public education” in early December.

In the last three weeks since Lula’s inauguration, this claim has been debunked in the face of growing demands from teachers and students for his government to reverse a series of attacks waged upon public education in recent years. These include a constitutional amendment that has limited the increase in social spending to inflation, which since 2017 has taken more than 70 billion reais (US\$13 billion) from education, and the pro-corporate high school reform, both approved in 2016 by the government of President Michel Temer after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff on trumped-up charges.

Besides the fact that the Ministry of Education is full of officials linked to pro-corporate educational think tanks that helped draft and approve the high school reform, the vice-president, Geraldo Alckmin, referred to it as “important” and “very correct” last Monday in a conversation with businessmen, adding that the Lula government does not intend to repeal labor (2017) and pension (2019) reforms. Significantly, the Ministry of Education was forced to delete a January 5 Facebook post that praised the high school reform, following an enormous negative reaction.

Regarding the constitutional amendment (CA), which at the time it was proposed was popularly dubbed the “End of the World CA,” Minister of Finance Fernando Haddad declared at the World Economic Forum in Davos that a new “fiscal anchor” will be reformulated with the help of the International Monetary Fund. This came after Haddad refused to raise the monthly minimum wage by a paltry 18 reais (US\$3.50), a central promise of Lula’s election campaign.

Given the PT’s record of attacks on public education in Brazil

and these events during the little more than three weeks of Lula’s new government, there are no grounds to expect it to bow to “pressure” to “correct” supposed mistakes. The Lula government’s choices in the Ministry of Education and the other ministries, on the contrary, express the pro-capitalist character of the PT and its supporters, including the PSOL and the unions, against which teachers, students and the Brazilian working class must immediately prepare to fight.

As part of a growing international working class offensive against rising inflation and decaying living conditions, the end of last year and the beginning of this year have witnessed education protests and strikes in Angola, Mozambique and Nigeria, the US and Canada, and in Germany, Scotland and France. Today, that struggle is centered in Portugal, where teachers, on strike since early December against attacks by the Socialist Party government, held a massive demonstration on January 13 in defense of public education.

In Brazil, youth held huge protests late last year against the Bolsonaro government’s cuts to higher education. Teachers in Curitiba (Paraná), Campo Grande (Mato Grosso) and Novo Hamburgo (Rio Grande do Sul) held strikes and protests in December against attacks on pensions and low wages. In São Paulo, state public school teachers have held weekly protests since the end of last year against precarious work contracts. At the beginning of this year, these struggles will certainly develop, particularly in defense of compliance with the minimum wage for teachers, which saw an increase of almost 15 percent last week, but which is guaranteed by only 31 percent of the Brazilian municipal and state governments.

These struggles need to be unified nationally and internationally and taken out of the hands of the unions. In recent years, the unions have isolated all the struggles of teachers and students and directed them toward the election of Lula. Today, in less than three weeks of government, the reactionary and right-wing role of the Lula government and of the unions themselves has been fully exposed.

The most urgent task facing teachers, youth and the Brazilian working class as a whole is to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-And-File Committees, of which the Rank-And-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR) is a part. Along with its fight against the disastrous safety conditions facing schools due to COVID-19 and to protect the health of teachers, students and their families through the struggle for its global elimination, the CBES-BR insists that the guarantee of quality public education is inseparable from a political struggle against the capitalist system and its representatives, including the PT.



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