

Brazilian federal education strikes expose broad attacks by Lula government

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Since the beginning of March, workers at federal education institutions have been on strike in Brazil, challenging the claim by the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party – PT) that “there is no money” for public education.

The strike movement was launched on March 11 by employees of 66 federal universities. It was followed on April 3 by teachers and staff at 522 federal basic, professional, and technological education units and on April 15 by teachers at 31 federal universities. It is the largest strike against the Lula government since his inauguration at the beginning of last year.

This week, students at several federal universities have also gone on strike for better educational conditions. They are also protesting against a cut of 4 billion reais (782 million dollars) from the health and education budget announced on April 11 by the Lula government.

In the most recent negotiation between representatives of the Lula government and the teachers and staff unions, on April 19, the Lula government maintained the previous year’s proposal for a wage freeze this year, only increasing food, health, and daycare benefits. These benefits do not cover retirees.

The Lula government has also proposed increasing wage increases from 9 percent to up to 13 percent in 2025 and 2026. These figures, however, far from cover losses in real wages, which since 2016 have totaled 39 percent for teachers and 53 percent for employees of federal education.

The staff and teachers’ unions, controlled by the PT and the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), have played a treacherous role not only in launching separate strikes on different dates and isolating the struggles, but also in ignoring past and future wage losses. They are negotiating with the government for an increase of 22.7 percent for teachers and 34.3 percent for staff, divided equally between 2024 and 2026, and disregarding the losses caused by inflation over this period.

After supporting Lula’s candidacy in the 2022 election against the fascistic ex-president Jair Bolsonaro and serving

as an important support base for the Lula government, the unions have advanced the claim that “only pressure will get the government out of inertia,” as expressed by the National Association of Higher Education Teachers. In practice, this means subordinating the struggle of teachers and staff to negotiations with the Lula government and covering up the PT’s long-standing attacks on education.

Since the beginning of the last decade, as the commodities boom waned and Dilma Rousseff’s PT government (2011-2016) began to place the growing weight of the capitalist crisis on the backs of the Brazilian working class, teachers and staffs of federal education held countless walkouts and strikes. Under the Rousseff government alone, there were strikes in 2011, 2012 and 2015. In the largest of these, in 2012, teachers went on strike for four months for better salaries and working conditions.

After Rousseff’s fraudulent impeachment in August 2016, a broad movement of student occupations in hundreds of universities and secondary schools took place against the pro-corporate high school reform and a bill that limited social spending by the government of Michel Temer (2016-2018), Rousseff’s successor.

In all the attacks by the Temer and Bolsonaro (2018-2022) governments, such as the 2017 labor reform and the 2019 pension reform, the unions have isolated the struggles of teachers and staff at federal universities from the other sectors of the Brazilian working class, diverting all the walkouts and protests towards Lula’s election in 2022.

As the strikes under the Dilma government show, far from representing a break with the PT government’s previous policy, Temer and Bolsonaro only intensified the attacks begun under Rousseff. Today, in turn, the Lula government is continuing these attacks.

In an attack on the right to strike, on April 10 the Lula government demanded that negotiations with the unions be conditional on the end of the strikes. Faced with a backlash, it was forced to back down. Even so, on April 16, Camilo Santana, the Lula government’s minister of education and defender of both the 2016 high school reform and pro-

corporate programs in education, criticized the strikes, insisting that “A strike for me is when there is no more dialogue, when negotiation or any possibility of improvement is over.”

Earlier, on April 10, Lula’s finance minister, Fernando Haddad, bluntly declared that “the federal budget is closed” to the demands of teachers and employees of federal education. Last year, Haddad, on behalf of the Lula government, managed to pass a “new fiscal framework” that replaced the Temer government’s “spending ceiling” to offer “more rational” management of the Brazilian budget and a “zero deficit” target for this year’s budget. Both measures, widely welcomed by the international financial markets, now threaten the constitutional spending floors for health and education.

Committed to establishing a good business environment in Brazil, Lula celebrated on X/Twitter an April 23 report from the economic daily *Valor Econômico* that the country “has returned to the list of the 25 most attractive countries for Foreign Direct Investment developed by the consultancy Kearney.” Occupying position 19, it is the country’s best result since 2017. Significantly, the Argentina of fascistic president Javier Milei, hailed worldwide as a model of austerity and repression, also returned to the list, ranking position 24.

Almost a year and five months after Lula took office, the reactionary character of his third term has been exposed on a number of fronts.

Last week, the Brazilian media reported that, after ruling out universal vaccination against COVID-19, the Lula government had postponed the COVID-19 vaccination campaign due to a delay in the purchase of doses. This week, organizations of indigenous peoples in Brazil, who were brutally attacked under the Bolsonaro government, excluded Lula’s participation in their annual event because of the delay in demarcating indigenous lands.

The Brazilian pseudo-left has played its part in covering up the Lula government’s attacks on workers and sowing illusions that it and the unions controlled by the PT and PSOL can be pushed to the left. This includes not only Pabloite and Morenoite organizations in the PSOL, but also those that claim to want to carry out an “independent struggle” and end up providing a “left” cover by posing instruments of pressure on the Lula government.

This is the case of the Morenoite Workers Revolutionary Movement (MRT), the sister organization in Brazil of the Socialist Workers Party (PTS) in Argentina. In *Esquerda Diário*, its youth organization, Faísca Revolucionaria, wrote on April 24 that it is a “mistake” for the unions and youth organizations to concentrate their “demands on budget recomposition, outside the fight against this neoliberal

measure [the ‘new fiscal framework’] of the Lula government.”

However, the Lula government’s attacks on education and the Brazilian working class are not just the result of its neoliberal measures, but of the pro-capitalist character of the PT, PSOL and the unions and youth organizations they control as a whole. This, in turn, is ignored by the MRT, which considers the PT a “worker-bourgeois” party and insists that “the trade union federations, as well as the student organizations, can play an essential role in coordinating the struggle nationally in a united front.”

In fact, the PT’s “workers’ base” collapsed as it shifted increasingly to the right since its foundation in 1980. In a period marked by capitalist globalization, it became, from 2003, when Lula was elected for the first time, the preferred governing party of the Brazilian and international bourgeoisie for thirteen years. Today, one of the PT’s main bases is the union bureaucracy and the middle class, of which the MRT itself and other pseudo-left organizations are a part.

The only way forward is to build a movement of teachers and staff of federal education with other sectors of the Brazilian working class, allied with their class brothers and sisters internationally, against the capitalist system, the source of the universal claims by representatives of the world’s ruling elite, including the Lula government, that “there is no money” for education and social services.

The objective conditions of this unity, associated with the process of globalization, have manifested themselves with increasing force in countless struggles around the world.

This week, more than a million people marched in Argentina against Milei’s attacks on universities and public education, and protests on countless university campuses against the genocide in Gaza are facing massive repression from the Biden administration in the US.

Teachers and staff at universities in Brazil must be aware of this process and the bourgeois character of the Lula government, overcoming the dead-end nationalist and parochial illusions peddled by the unions and the Brazilian pseudo-left. The way to establish this unity is through rank-and-file committees armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective, united in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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