

# São Paulo teachers continue strike for better wages and against school privatization

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25 April 2025

Teachers at the São Paulo municipal public school system, one of the largest education systems in the Americas, decided on April 23 to continue an indefinite strike that began on April 15 for better wages and against the privatization of education. On April 16, São Paulo's public sector workers also went on strike against sweeping attacks on social services by Mayor Ricardo Nunes, a close ally of fascist ex-president Jair Bolsonaro.

The São Paulo teachers' strike began after a one-day strike on March 18 and regional walkouts between the end of March and the beginning of April.

The trigger for this movement was the change in the working hours of "readapted" teachers (those removed from the classroom, mainly due to mental health problems, and given administrative work) and those on sick leave for more than 30 days. This led to their salaries being cut by a third from April.

Mayor Nunes also intends to review the status of readapted teachers, potentially forcing them to return to the classroom. In addition to the numerous effects on them, this could have a cascading effect on schools, with the possibility of many teachers having to leave their classes and being fired.

Even with this prospect, the largest teachers' union in the municipal public education network, SINPEEM, refused to start an immediate strike, which the teachers had widely supported. At the March 18 assembly held during the one-day strike, the union bureaucracy deliberately sowed confusion among the teachers to approve regional walkouts and a new general assembly with a strike call only for April 30.

This allowed the Nunes administration to present a bill on April 10 to increase teachers' salaries by only 2.6 percent this year and next. This figure is below the general inflation rate of 5 percent and is even lower

than last year's 10 percent food inflation in São Paulo. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers in São Paulo have accumulated a 44-percent loss in real wages due to bonuses not being incorporated into salaries and rising inflation in recent years.

As part of the attack on public education by ruling elites across the globe, intensified by the worsening economic crisis over the last decade, working conditions in São Paulo's municipal schools have become intolerable. Among educators, there is a growing sense of physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from exhausting working hours and the increasing precariousness of teaching work.

Precarious temporary contracts have proliferated, there is a lack of staff to deal with the growing number of students with learning difficulties, and pro-corporate programs in education have increased, with the implementation of many external evaluations and unrealistic targets for schools to meet. This process is paving the way for the widespread privatization of public education in São Paulo, with Nunes having already announced a public-private partnership (PPP) for the construction and management of schools by the private sector.

Aligned with former president Bolsonaro and the far-right governor of São Paulo, Tarcísio de Freitas, Nunes has also been a vocal supporter of the militarization of schools. This includes the implementation of so-called civic-military schools in the municipal public network and the overt presence of the Municipal Civil Guard in 20 schools in São Paulo considered violent, a number that could rise to 800 in the next period.

In an attack on the right to strike, Nunes went to court to declare the strike abusive and obtained an injunction demanding that schools operate with 70 percent of the

teachers. He also threatened the striking teachers, saying that education is “an essential service,” that they “use partisan political actions to disrupt the pedagogical process,” and that the mayor’s office is “monitoring [the schools] to punish those who use this type of resource against education, against children.”

As a result, the Regional Education Departments have been asking schools for the names of striking teachers. Schools receive daily emails asking them to “collect information about the strike” and warning “school staff about the need to comply under penalty of fines.” The teachers, however, are defying this threat.

The current strike is the most recent expression of the combative militancy of São Paulo’s municipal teachers in defense of their working and living conditions. Over the last decade, they have faced successive attacks on public education and social rights by different governments, including that of Fernando Haddad of the Workers Party (2013-2016). Given this record and an explosive global situation, this strike raises crucial questions from a political perspective.

Firstly, there needs to be a critical assessment of the role played by the unions, which have a long history of isolating and diverting the teachers’ struggle behind bourgeois political parties. As a result, there is a growing feeling among teachers that the union bureaucracy will betray their strikes and struggles.

The two municipal public school teachers’ unions, SINPEEM and APROFEM, scheduled walkouts and protests on different days before the strike was declared. With the approval in the first vote on April 23 of the bill that includes the 2.6 percent salary increase for teachers this year and next, SINPEEM’s union bureaucracy unilaterally decided to cancel the protest that was scheduled for Thursday and call a new assembly and protest for April 29 in front of City Hall, when the second vote on the bill is scheduled.

Fearful that the struggle could get out of hand, the union bureaucracy is also doing everything possible to prevent a de facto unified struggle between the teachers and other sectors of the municipal public sector workers on strike. In addition, municipal teachers have a widespread desire for this movement to unify with the teachers of the São Paulo state public school system, who began a strike on Friday against Governor Freitas’ similar attacks on education and social rights.

The unions’ inability and unwillingness to unify their

struggles is not merely the result of a corrupt bureaucratic leadership, but is deeply rooted in the transformations they have undergone under capitalist globalization. Breaking their stranglehold over teachers will require a struggle that emerges from below—organized through independent rank-and-file committees capable of challenging both the bureaucracy and the capitalist system it serves.

Secondly, the São Paulo teachers must see their strike as part of a broad movement of the Brazilian and international working class. Teachers and public sector workers in several Brazilian cities and states have been on strike frequently since the beginning of the year, demanding better salaries and resisting the constant attacks on public services.

In the international arena, this movement is also gaining strength, especially in the United States, where the mobilization against the government of President Donald Trump and the head of the Department of Government Efficiency, Elon Musk, is growing. Their unprecedented attacks are dismantling the centuries-old social conquests achieved by the massive struggles of the American working class.

Finally, there is an intrinsic link between the attacks on education in Brazil and around the world and the growing turn of the world’s ruling elite towards war and fascism to solve its intractable crisis. It is, therefore, impossible to fight the attacks on education without carrying out a fundamental struggle against the origin of fascism and war, the capitalist system.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) made clear in its call for this year’s International May Day Online Rally, the explosive situation in Brazil and around the world “underscores the urgent need for a unified international movement of the working class, which is increasingly mobilizing against war, inequality, and repression.” We call on all those interested in learning about the socialist and internationalist program advocated by the ICFI to take part in its May Day Rally by registering here.



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