

Brazil's unions isolate São Paulo education strikes

Guilherme Ferreira
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Elementary and secondary school teachers, and university staff and students in São Paulo staged a series of protests and strikes in recent weeks against sweeping attacks on public education in Brazil's wealthiest and most industrialized state.

These struggles are part of a growing movement of the international working class against the austerity policies of the global ruling elite, as the capitalist crisis and the effects of the war against Iran intensify their impact on national economies, including Brazil's.

Educators in São Paulo are facing increasingly precarious working conditions and low wages. Attacks on education have been exacerbated in recent years through sweeping pro-corporate measures implemented by far-right Governor Tarcísio de Freitas and the capital's mayor, Ricardo Nunes. These austerity measures have been accompanied by the growing militarization of schools.

Last Tuesday, April 28, teachers at São Paulo's municipal school system held their third one-day strike in April. At a packed rally attended by thousands of teachers in front of City Hall, they unanimously approved an indefinite strike.

Mayor Nunes offered a 3.51 percent pay raise, to be implemented in two installments, one this year and the next in 2027. Teachers are demanding a 14.56 percent raise to offset both last year's inflation and wage losses from recent years. City Hall has not presented any proposal regarding the teachers' demands for better working conditions, including reducing class sizes and increasing staff and hiring teachers for students with special educational needs.

Under the Nunes administration, in office since 2021, temporary teaching contracts have proliferated and numerous external evaluations with unrealistic targets and goals have been imposed on the schools in preparation for the privatization of public education.

In April of 2025, municipal teachers staged their first strike against these attacks. The following month, Mayor Nunes attempted to remove school principals based on poor performance of students on external assessments, a measure widely repudiated by school communities that was ultimately reversed by walkouts and protests.

For his part, Governor Freitas has been the most enthusiastic supporter in Brazil of the "Milei model"—a reference to the sweeping program of repression, austerity, privatization and attacks on social and democratic rights implemented by Argentina's fascist President Javier Milei. Last year, he repeatedly praised Milei, hailing the 5 percent cut in public spending implemented by his administration and stating that Argentina is showing "the path we must adopt."

Funding for the state's different departments has been allocated according to this logic. By the end of 2024, the Freitas administration managed to pass an amendment to the state constitution that reduced mandatory spending on education from 30 percent to 25 percent of

annual revenue. He claimed at the time that the difference would be invested in healthcare, which proved to be a grotesque lie. The healthcare budget suffered a corresponding reduction from 2025 to 2026.

On the other hand, the Freitas administration has increased the budget of the Secretariat of Partnerships and Investments by about 45 percent and raised tax exemptions for large corporations and banks from R\$73 billion (US\$ 14.7 billion) in 2025 to R\$83 billion (US\$ 16.7 billion) this year.

Since taking office in 2023, the Freitas administration and its Secretary of Education Renato Feder have systematically expanded policies of "teacher accountability" and the corporate management model in schools initiated during the successive state administrations of Geraldo Alckmin (2001-2006 and 2011-2018), currently the vice-president in President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's (Workers Party – PT) administration. As a result of those policies, workplace bullying and teacher burnout have skyrocketed in São Paulo's schools.

In social media groups, reports of teachers abandoning the profession, the hellish conditions in classrooms and schools, and even of teachers' deaths due to the debilitating effects of an exhausting work environment have become increasingly common. In 2024, 42,000 teachers were placed on leave due to mental and behavioral disorders, according to the APEOESP union.

Replacing salary increases with bonuses based on external students' performance assessments has led to an unprecedented wage squeeze among teachers in the state public network. Among Brazil's 26 states and the Federal District, São Paulo is 21st in teacher salary rankings.

The grim situation facing São Paulo's teachers could worsen even further if a bill being discussed by the São Paulo State Legislative Assembly (ALESP) targeting career structures and threatening teachers with dismissal based on performance evaluations is approved.

In defense of jobs and working conditions and in opposition to this bill, teachers in the São Paulo state network held numerous protests and walkouts since the beginning of the year, culminating in a two-day strike on April 9 and 10 that shut down 40 percent of the state's public schools. Ten thousand teachers gathered in protest on Paulista Avenue on April 10. On April 28, on the same day that the municipal teachers approved their indefinite strike, APEOESP called for a limited one-day stoppage and protest in front of ALESP.

The treacherous role of the unions controlled by the PT and PSOL in isolating the education struggles in São Paulo

Since the first year of the Freitas administration in São Paulo, in 2023, a number of professional sectors have risen up against plans to dismantle public services and its broad privatization agenda. By the end of that year, protests and strikes had taken place among railway workers and employees of Sabesp—one of the largest and most profitable water and sanitation companies in the world—as well as teachers in the state public school system. There was also a massive strike by professors, staff and students at the University of São Paulo (USP), the largest in Latin America, and at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP).

However, the unions controlled by the PT and by Morenoite and Pabloite groups within the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), as well as Stalinist organizations within the student movement, isolated this powerful movement, preventing the building of a unified struggle against these attacks. The same treacherous role is being repeated today.

Just as in 2023, the struggles of São Paulo’s teachers are taking place amid strikes by USP staff and students—the largest in recent years. On two occasions throughout April, the teachers’ unions in the municipal school system (SINPEEM) and the state school system (APEOESP) held simultaneous strikes and protests, just a few kilometers apart, yet refused to unite the teachers’ struggles against the common attacks on education.

The conduct of the unions in both strikes revealed the same pattern of deliberate isolation. There is a deep-seated fear that any attempt to build unity will spiral out of control and bypass an entrenched union bureaucracy that is completely disconnected from the rank-and-file teachers. APEOESP, in particular, has a long history of calling for protests and strikes and then demobilizing them in order to channel teachers’ anger toward bourgeois politics and elections.

A repetition of this revolting spectacle was seen again in this April’s struggle.

A call for a two-day strike on April 9 and 10 shut down 40 percent of the state’s public schools, according to APEOESP. However, the strike and protest on April 28 drew only a few dozen teachers to the ALESP. Those present had the opportunity to hear all the opportunism of the union bureaucracy and where it wants to take the teachers’ struggle.

The first to speak was the long-time president of APEOESP, “Teacher Bebel,” who is also a state deputy in São Paulo for the PT. Expressing self-incriminating desperation, the PT union bureaucrat spent more than half of her speech saying, “I am not a traitor.” She sought to respond to denunciations from oppositional sections of the bureaucracy that she had been negotiating the anti-teacher bill’s terms behind the workers’ backs.

These minor amendments to the bill were touted by Bebel and APEOESP as a major victory in the teachers’ struggle, directly contradicting their previous statements that the goal was to repeal the whole bill. She also argued that teachers should engage in dialogue and try to convince the representatives in the Freitas administration’s coalition. In other words, opposition to this sweeping anti-teacher bill should remain confined to the parliamentary sphere, as the PT congressmen pretend to fight to block its approval.

APEOESP Director Richard Araújo, a member of the Morenoite tendency of PSOL Resistência, also emphasized the need to pressure state congressmen to remove the bill from the agenda. But he went further, adding: “We know that our struggle goes far beyond that ... another agenda is needed for the state government ... we will choose an agenda that prioritizes public services and serves the majority,

supporting [former Finance Minister under the Lula administration, Fernando] Haddad and defeating the fascists, re-electing Lula.”

Resistência exemplifies a broader shift to the right by sectors of the Brazilian pseudo-left, that have moved closer to the demoralized PT. Recently, it has been one of the most vocal advocates of waging the struggle against the far right in São Paulo and Brazil through a “broad front” involving social movements and bourgeois parties such as the PT.

At APEOESP, Resistência and other PSOL groups once again formed joint electoral slates with the PT after having long presented themselves as a unified opposition to the union leadership. As part of this “unified opposition,” Resistência criticized exactly what it and the entire PSOL are doing today.

In 2017, Richard Araújo himself wrote on Esquerda Online, the Resistência website, an open critique of the PT governments at the beginning of the century (2003–2016), he wrote that a commitment is needed to “a socialist alternative, one of workers’ independence from the project of collaboration with the bosses and the right wing, defended by the CUT/PT, which, through its policies during the 13 years it governed the country, tied the majority of the union movement to the defense of the government.”

What he did not write, but which must be emphasized, is that those 13 years of PT governments paved the way for the rise of the fascist Bolsonaro, who took advantage of the widespread disaffection from the PT to get elected president in 2018. The same can be said of Haddad himself when he was mayor of São Paulo (2012–2015). His austerity policies—including attacks on education and teachers, who responded with massive annual strikes—paved the way for the election of the millionaire candidate, João Dória.

The same could happen again in the October election. The Lula administration is pursuing a sweeping pro-capitalist agenda, including a “new fiscal framework” that slashed social spending, leading to successive strikes. The Ministry of Education is filled with figures who advocate the same pro-corporate policies that Freitas and Nunes represent in São Paulo. This has further exposed the PT before the working masses, who are subjected to a regime of capitalist exploitation overseen by the Lula administration. As a result, candidate Flávio Bolsonaro, son of the former fascist president, is tied with Lula in all opinion polls.

The struggle against the threat of fascism and in defense of social rights, including free, high-quality public education, can be carried forward only by fighting the root cause of these problems: the capitalist system. It is necessary for the teachers and students of São Paulo, as well as the Brazilian working class as a whole, to break with the unions controlled by the PT and the pseudo-left, form independent rank-and-file committees, and adopt a strategy for international socialism, the foundation for the true unity of the workers.



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