

# São Paulo university strike: 10,000 march on governor's palace in largest demonstration yet

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On May 20, 10,000 students, professors and staff from the three largest state universities in São Paulo—USP, Unicamp and Unesp—brought their strike to the gates of the Palácio dos Bandeirantes, the seat of the state government, in the largest demonstration since the movement began on April 15. The three-hour march to the official residence of far-right governor Tarcísio de Freitas marked the high point of a growing mobilization in defense of campus conditions and public education under attack in Brazil's largest economic center.

Although the Military Police (PM) itself acknowledged the march as peaceful, demonstrators faced intense provocation and police intimidation.

Several buses bringing students from interior campuses to the capital were stopped and searched by the Highway Military Police, delaying the arrival of the caravans. The most serious incident involved Unesp students approached by heavily armed officers and ordered to disembark for searches. The State Secretariat of Public Security offered no legal basis for the operation.

During the demonstration itself, fascist former state deputy Douglas Garcia (Republicanos) appeared with private security guards to film and harass the protesters. As in an earlier demonstration on May 11—when two far-right União Brasil city councilmen provoked a brawl that triggered police repression of the protesters—Garcia unsuccessfully attempted to manufacture an incident at this week's march.

The use of police violence has been escalating since striking students occupied the USP rector's office on May 7. The occupation was brutally repressed in a warrantless police operation in the early hours of May

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Tarcísio's response to the university strike cannot be understood outside of its broader political context. The São Paulo governor is a local exponent of the fascist agenda being driven by US imperialism across Latin America. The privatizations, budget cuts to universities and police violence against strikers are local components of an internationally coordinated class offensive promoting militarization, austerity and the destruction of the social gains of the twentieth century.

Under these conditions, the striking students are not only confronting the police apparatus and far-right forces, but also the efforts of the pseudo-left to divert their movement into the harmless political channels of "pressure" on the bourgeois state.

Throughout the march, students chanted: "Worker, look over here—I am in the streets so your child can study," demonstrating a correct political instinct in appealing to the working class. But it is not toward this social force that the leaderships of the student movement are oriented.

The march ended several hundred meters from the Palácio dos Bandeirantes, where it was blocked by a heavy police cordon. After an hour at a standstill, a delegation of student union (DCE) leaders from the three universities, accompanied by state deputy Mônica Seixas of the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), entered the palace to meet with a representative of the fascist governor and present their demands.

At midnight, the National Union of Students (UNE) posted on social media: "The pressure of the streets worked! The demonstration called by the student movement finally secured a meeting between DCE representatives from the striking universities and the

São Paulo government to present their demands.” The focus of that negotiation was demands centered on the elimination of the current model of state budget transfers to the universities.

The question of budget transfers to the universities carries significant social consequences. Under a federal tax reform approved in 2023, the ICMS—the state consumption tax that since 1990 has guaranteed the annual transfer of billions of reais to the budgets of USP, Unesp and Unicamp—will be abolished as of 2029. New transfer rules will have to be voted on in the State Legislative Assembly (Alesp), dominated by the far right, in an agreement with the governor himself.

It is no accident, however, that this is the terrain onto which the movement has been steered. Rector Aluísio Segurado announced his candidacy last year with precisely this plan of negotiation with Tarcísio de Freitas and the Alesp as part of his platform. The Unicamp rectorate had already, in a statement dated May 18, adopted the same framing: acknowledging the deterioration of the campuses, but conditioning any improvement on “stability in the collection of state ICMS quota shares and on negotiations mediated by Cruesp [Council of Rectors of the State Universities of São Paulo].”

The result is that the students’ legitimate demands—housing allowances, accommodation, food, infrastructure—are being recoded as pressure for a budgetary reshuffling to be decided among university administrative bodies, ne

More than a tactical error, this policy serves a precise ideological function: to sow among students the illusion that the social conditions that produced the strike can be remedied through reforms within capitalism—through pressure on governors, rectors and state assemblies. It diverts the movement away from the opposite path: a conscious orientation toward the working class, which shares these same intolerable conditions and is the only social force capable not of reforming, but of overthrowing, the system that produces them.

The presence of a PSOL deputy in the delegation that entered the Palácio dos Bandeirantes illustrates the role that this and the other pseudo-left parties leading the DCEs play in this process: to legitimize, behind a left-wing facade, the channeling of the movement into the institutions of the bourgeois regime.

Meanwhile, the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da

Silva and the Workers Party (PT) fears that the São Paulo university strike may become the focal point of a broader working class movement sweeping Brazil on the eve of the presidential elections.

Senator Eduardo Suplicy, who presents himself as a more left-wing figure within the PT, marched alongside students at the May 13 demonstration on Avenida Paulista, calling for “dialogue with the university rector.” During the rally, Suplicy appealed to the rector to engage with the strikers and act “like Mahatma Gandhi.”

Suplicy, known for proposals such as a “basic citizens’ income,” plays a prominent role in the PT’s drive to sell Brazil’s youth on its rotten electoral program of a new “broad front” of bourgeois parties under Lula. The day after the Avenida Paulista rally, the senator joined Lula at a ceremony to launch a subsidy for ride-share drivers and taxi drivers for the purchase of hybrid and sustainable vehicles. It is one more piece of the PT’s strategy to recover support among young people, the age group that, according to an April Datafolha poll, disapproves of the Lula government more than any other.

The impasse confronting the movement at São Paulo’s state universities points to crucial questions of perspective. It is the logical consequence of a policy that sows reformist illusions and keeps the movement within the limits of the bourgeois regime. It systematically forecloses the only real way forward: the subordination of student demands to the struggle of the working class, mobilized as a conscious political force against the capitalist system that produces the deterioration of universities, austerity and repression. Building that connection requires an internationalist and socialist political organization and its arm among young people—International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



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