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Brazilian youth speak out during São Paulo demonstration against Bolsonaro's attacks on education

On May 15, a total of some one million people took to the streets in more than 200 cities throughout Brazil. This was the largest demonstration the country has seen in recent years, and the first nationwide one against the Brazilian government of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro.



May 15 demonstration in São Paulo

What was to be another isolated and small national teachers' strike called by the National Education Workers Confederation (CNTE), which is affiliated to CUT (the main trade union federation) and controlled by the Workers Party (PT), against Bolsonaro's pension "reform," turned into a mass demonstration when students all over Brazil spontaneously mobilized themselves against the Bolsonaro government's latest attack on education—a 30 percent cut for federal educational institutions. This spontaneous eruption highlighted the inability and unwillingness of the PT and the union bureaucracy to provide any outlet for the immense social anger building up against the Bolsonaro government.

From the early hours of May 15, high school students from both public and private schools were already protesting and blocking streets in São Paulo. By the afternoon, more than 100,000 people went to Avenida Paulista, mainly students from public universities and teachers from both the municipal and state public schools of São Paulo, as well as students and professors from some private universities, such as the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP).

Leo, a high school student from one of the private schools whose teachers went on strike on May 15, said he and his friends are "here in defense of teachers, showing our support," because "the very structure of all education is being attacked with these government proposals, which have been coming for a long time."

His colleague Arthur added, "These threats to education come from the time of the Workers Party government."



Leo and Arthur (center)

They also denounced the sellout deal signed with private school bosses last year by SINPRO, the private schools teachers union, under which the union guaranteed the payment of overtime and other rights for just one year, instead of the five-year contract demanded by the rank-and-file.

Among the changes in Brazilian education in recent years is the pro-corporate high school reform that was passed by the Brazilian Congress in 2017 and is to be implemented next year. Along with the bill passed in 2016 that has frozen social spending for the next 20 years, and which will cut 1 trillion reais (US\$ 240 billion) from education over this period, the high school reform is the biggest change to Brazilian education in the last quarter century, and will open the way for the implementation of full-time private charter schools.

Regarding the cuts announced by the Education Minister Abraham Weintraub in late April, which reach 40 percent for basic education, Leo said that it made him think about the government's far-right policies. He said: "It may seem a bit radical to say this, but people talk a lot about how this relates to anti-intellectualism, which does not mean that it is simply a project to make people dumb, but disinvestment is the result of a historical process."

What Leo refers to as "anti-intellectualism"—the official promotion of historical revisionism regarding Brazil's military dictatorship and Nazism, and the attacks on climate science, together with the budget cuts—is one of the main expressions of the attacks of the Brazilian extreme right on education in face of the growing political radicalization of students in recent years.

The education ministry has been at the epicenter of this process, with former education minister Ricardo Vélez, who preceded Weintraub, going so far as to say that the ministry would review textbooks for their account of the 1964 coup and Brazil's military dictatorship.

This has been part of the bourgeois reaction to the leftward movement of youth, who since 2015 have been the most combative element in the fight against the assault on Brazilian education. In that year, in São Paulo, 200 schools were **occupied** by secondary students against a state government school restructuring plan, which was followed by the **occupation** of more than 1,000 universities and schools in Brazil in 2016 against both the high school reform and the bill that has frozen social spending for the next 20 years.

One of the first responses to this wave of occupations was a massive attack on students and teachers through the bills dubbed "Escola sem Partido" (Schools without [political]

Parties), which was based on the allegation that teachers conduct “Marxist ideological indoctrination” in the classroom rather than teaching students to “read, write and count,” according to a recent post on Twitter by Bolsonaro.

Although clearly unconstitutional for violating freedom of speech and of teaching, the “Escola sem Partido” bills have already been presented in dozens of city councils, state assemblies and in the National Congress. The bills prohibit and criminalize “the practice of political and ideological indoctrination, as well as the propagation of content or the realization of activities that may conflict with the religious or moral beliefs of the student’s parents or guardians.”

The first “Escola sem Partido” bills were presented in 2014 by two of Bolsonaro’s sons, Carlos and Flávio, in Rio de Janeiro. Then, in 2016, another of Bolsonaro’s sons, the federal deputy Eduardo, who has close connections with Steve Bannon and international fascistic organizations, introduced a bill in the Brazilian Congress that, equating communism and Nazism, criminalizes “apologies for communism.”

Since taking office, the attacks by Bolsonaro and his officials on public education also include a bill that regulates homeschooling and the slashing of spending for philosophy and sociology courses, on top of the recent announced cuts. The social anger against these attacks was manifested at the May 15 demonstrations. However, many young people expressed their distrust over the mobilizations having taken place under the control of the unions.



Weber and Toledo on the right, with their friends

Weber, a former sociology student attending the demonstration with his friends from the industrial ABC region south of São Paulo, said that because “education has the capacity to mobilize a lot of people, even the union federations have had to position themselves.” According to him, union federations, like the CUT, don’t want to lead a struggle “because they have deals with the bosses. Moreover, instead of being a tool of emancipation of the working class, unions are an instrument of control.”

According to him, that was why “this demonstration doesn’t denounce the state debt held by the banks, which deprives the government of resources for health care, education, pensions.” Weber was referring to Congressional reports showing that the Brazilian state has pardoned billions of reais in unpaid contributions to the pension system due to the bailout of companies, with official reports estimating that the total amount of these bailouts stands at 480 billion reais (US\$120 billion), more than one-third of the sum the government intends to steal from workers in 10 years with the pension reform.

His friend Toledo explained, “from the ‘Estado Novo’ [of president Getúlio Vargas, which lasted from 1937 to 1945], a union federation only became a union federation if they were able to receive the official backing from the state,” giving rise to “official unionism, also called scab unionism, as with the CUT, the Força Sindical,” today.

One of the ways unions have been linked to the Brazilian state is through the union tax instituted by Getúlio Vargas in 1940 to control the workers’ organizations and reduce tensions between social classes. In 2017, with the labor reform of former president Michel Temer’s government, the union tax became no longer compulsory, which has caused the annual collections of the largest Brazilian union federations to collapse.

According to the daily *O Estado de S. Paulo*, the three largest union federations in Brazil—CUT, Força Sindical and UGT—saw their revenue plummet by 100 million reais (US\$ 24 million) in 2018 compared to the previous year. For Força Sindical, it represented a loss of 92 percent of its revenues.

In March, the Bolsonaro government introduced a provisional measure barring the direct deduction of union dues from workers’ paychecks, which made the financial situation of the union federations even more dire. However, in the National Congress, since May 5, deputies from “Centrão” and other parties, including the PT and PCdoB, led by the former president of Força Sindical, Paulinho da Força, have been trying to obstruct the implementation of the provisional measure, which expires on June 28.

According to the daily *Folha de S. Paulo*, “the main union federations ... pressure their deputies to negotiate an agreement with the government in exchange for the pension reform.” This is what UGT president Ricardo Patah began doing when he met with Bolsonaro on April 29, two days before joining other union leaders of the Força Sindical and CUT in a unified May Day rally. In addition to Patah’s opposition to the general strike called for June 14, he and Paulinho da Força defended Bolsonaro’s pension “reform.”

Toledo told the WSWS, “Because they are aligned with the state and dependent upon the bourgeoisie, the union federations can not speak of socialism.”

His friend Weber went further, saying, “Under capitalism, rights will always be threatened. To overcome this, so that we do not face more dangers, we have to build a socialist society, something that the unions do not talk about.” He concluded, “They do not want to end the system.”

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