

São Paulo reopens schools, eases restrictions amid mass COVID-19 deaths

Gabriel Lemos
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São Paulo began a new phase of easing measures against the spread of the coronavirus yesterday after having recorded the deadliest week of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil's most populous and wealthiest state. Last week, the government of right-wing Governor João Doria (PSDB) also allowed public and private schools to partially reopen for in-person classes.

The new “transitional” phase, between the “red” and “orange” phases of the supposed pandemic containment plan, the São Paulo Plan, will allow the reopening of nonessential businesses between 11 a.m. and 7 p.m. and the holding of in-person religious ceremonies, both with a maximum capacity of 25 percent. From April 24 on, gyms, bars and restaurants will be allowed to reopen under the same criteria.

It was the second week in a row that the Doria government updated the São Paulo Plan after the state spent 28 days in the “emergency” phase, between March 15 and April 9, in which even services considered “essential” were restricted. The main justification for these changes was a slight decrease in ICU bed occupancy rates in recent weeks. On April 9, when the state moved from the “emergency” to the “red” phase, the rate was 88.3 percent, dropping to 85.3 percent on Friday, when the “transitional” phase was announced.

The “transitional” phase is the latest change made to the criteria of the “São Paulo Plan” in order to reopen the economy, even with pandemic raging. Before, the state could leave the “red” phase with an ICU occupancy rate below 75 percent, and only essential services were allowed to operate. According to the state's economic development secretary, Patricia Ellen, this new phase “was born” from “dialog with the [economic] sectors and their request was that we need to resume activities.”

Domingos Alves, a professor at the University of São Paulo, told AFP that this change “is absurd. How are these new flexibilization measures announced when everything indicates that next week or the week after we'll have a shortage of supplies to keep people inside the hospitals?” He referred to the lack of medications needed to intubate patients in many hospitals in São Paulo, which is causing many of them to refuse new patients even with available beds. Since March, 543 patients have died waiting for an ICU bed in the state.

After recording 1,282 deaths last Tuesday, the third deadliest day of the pandemic, last week ended with a record 5,690 COVID-19 deaths, a number almost three times higher than at the peak of the first wave in July. It is the eighth week in a row with an increase in

deaths, which has led to the number of deaths in Sao Paulo surpassing the number of births for the first time in history. São Paulo, which has 21 percent of the Brazilian population, accounts for 28 percent of the deaths in Brazil. The country, in turn, has registered 25 percent of the deaths in the world. By Saturday, the state had recorded a total of 88,000 deaths and 2.7 million cases.

These figures demolish all attempts by São Paulo's millionaire governor, who claims to be guided by “science” in fighting the pandemic, to differentiate himself from the open herd immunity policy of Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro. Having deemed a number of services “essential”—including industry and several business sectors—since the beginning of the pandemic in March of last year, Doria's policy of putting profits above human lives led São Paulo's GDP to grow by 0.4 percent in 2020, compared with a 4.1 percent drop in the national GDP.

Last December, São Paulo moved to also deem education as an essential service, allowing schools to reopen at any phase of the São Paulo Plan. However, the severity of the pandemic forced the government to move school vacations forward by two weeks during the “emergency” phase and suspend in-person classes in state public schools.

After January recorded the most cases in São Paulo along with the detection of community transmission of the most contagious variant from Manaus, in February schools partially reopened and business operations were extended. This explosive result came in March, which saw a 135 percent increase in the number of deaths over the previous month, from 6,459 to 15,159. In the first half of April alone, the state recorded 11,883 deaths, the second deadliest month of the pandemic after March.

During the entire “emergency” phase, the social isolation rate reached a maximum of 45 percent, 2 percentage points higher than in the previous period and far from the ideal of 60 percent established by the very group of specialists that supposedly guide the actions of the São Paulo government. This week, even the bourgeois media could not remain indifferent to the increased circulation of people in the streets and crowded public transportation. According to the director of the Brazilian Society of Immunizations, Monica Levi, this will lead to new outbreaks and “an endless cycle [of the pandemic]” at the moment when “the medical community is calling for total lockdown.”

The criminal indifference of the São Paulo government to this situation has clear motives: force the population to “learn to live” with this daily risk, avoid the implementation of more restrictive

measures and maintain the extraction of profits from the working class. Part of this policy is the frenetic social media campaign by São Paulo's Education Secretary Rossieli Soares, repeated incessantly by the bourgeois media, insisting that education is "essential" and that schools will remain open at any cost.

This effort has been accompanied by the promotion of distorted scientific studies to supposedly show that the reopening of schools does not contribute to the worsening of the pandemic. However, a study released on Wednesday showed that the incidence of COVID-19 cases among teachers in February was three times higher than that recorded by the general population of São Paulo. Conducted by the Network of Public School and University Researchers (Repu), the study was based on data collected by the APEOESP teachers' union after the government refused to report the number of infections among teachers via access to information law.

Besides distorted data, another element that has helped confuse the public debate about the seriousness of the pandemic and convince the population to expose themselves to the risk of being infected is the propaganda carried out around the vaccination campaign in São Paulo. This has also been used by the government to justify the end of the "emergency" phase. However, by Sunday, just 3 million of the state's 44 million inhabitants had received two doses of the vaccine, while the first dose had been administered to almost 6 million people. This week, São Paulo started immunizing 65-year-olds, while most of the people hospitalized today are younger than 40.

Even though vaccinations are advancing significantly, top health officials are warning that this cannot be an excuse for abandoning lockdown measures. Last Monday, World Health Organization (WHO) Director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, "Make no mistake. COVID-19 vaccines are a vital and powerful tool, but they are not the only tool."

On Saturday of last week, as part of the effort to reopen schools early, the São Paulo government began vaccinating teachers and school employees over the age of 47. According to Secretary Soares, this will allow even teachers who were assigned to remote work as part of the coronavirus risk group to return to unsafe schools.

Beginning the vaccination of teachers has also been a demand of the teachers' union for a supposed safe return to in-person classes. The APEOESP has attempted to differentiate itself from Governor Doria and Secretary Soares by demanding that "all education professionals be vaccinated, regardless of age group," which is far from guaranteeing minimal control of the pandemic.

Since the partial reopening of schools in São Paulo in February, the APEOSP has subordinated the teachers' struggle against in-person classes to the capitalist courts. On Thursday, the full São Paulo Court of Justice confirmed the overturning of a late January decision that banned in-person classes in the "red" and "orange" phases. However, the union has relied on another court decision, from early March, to do nothing to promote a broader struggle against the murderous reopening of schools. For its part, the São Paulo government is claiming that Thursday's decision also overturned the March ruling.

The APEOESP has impotently insisted that the "Government has

to comply with the court decision ... and there can be no in-person classes until all education professionals are vaccinated." It has repeated that the union's "priority" is for teachers "to file warrants for compliance with the court decision." The union shut down the state teachers' strike with the beginning of the "emergency" phase in mid-March and failed to prepare a broader struggle against the foreseeable government offensive. Now, its decision to limit the struggle to individual actions by teachers in the courts only exposes the APEOESP's complicity with the reopening of schools.

Meanwhile, teachers in São Paulo's municipal public schools continue to strike against in-person classes. The strike, which has already lasted 70 days, has also been isolated by the municipal teachers' union, the SINPEEM, which, like the APEOESP, fears that the movement will develop outside of the control of and the limits imposed by the union bureaucracy.

This month, the state and city governments of São Paulo began to deduct teachers' wages for every day on strike. Even though this was easily foreseen as early as February, the APEOESP and SINPEEM failed to organize strike pay in advance, forcing many teachers to return to schools.

On social media groups, municipal teachers have expressed their outrage: "Who can handle going on strike without getting paid?" one questioned. Another teacher wrote that unions need to "distribute the strike pay," while another suggested disaffiliating from the union to "save the amount and make their own strike fund." One teacher summed up the union's strategy: "Divided and weakened. We have the 'with' and 'without wages,' as well as those 'in remote' work and those 'in-person.' Soon we will have the 'vaccinated' and the 'unvaccinated' ... And the unions acting through repudiation notes and timid actions that don't effectively solve anything."

São Paulo teachers should be aware that this is not just one more traitorous action of the union bureaucracy, but rather the expression of a long process of the unions' transformation from working class organizations into instruments used by the national ruling elites to divide workers and prevent a unified struggle of the working class. Now, with the pandemic, this struggle is in defense of the most alienable right of all: the right to life itself.

The struggle against the reopening of schools, besides demanding a unified movement of the public and private school teachers of São Paulo with those throughout Brazil, must develop into a broader struggle with other sectors of the Brazilian working class against the herd immunity policy of putting profits above human lives. For this, the Socialist Equality Group in Brazil calls for the formation of rank-and-files committees, independent of the unions and armed with a socialist and internationalist program.



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