

Unions shut down federal education strike in Brazil

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Teacher and staff unions at Brazil's federal institutions and universities earlier this week shut down a strike against the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party – PT) for better wages, working conditions, and infrastructure. The staff had been on strike since March 11, while the teachers began their strike on April 15. It was the biggest strike against the Lula government since its inauguration at the beginning of last year.

From the very beginning, the unions refused to carry out a unified struggle against the Lula government, launching the strikes on different dates and isolating this struggle from other sectors of federal workers, such as environmental staff and employees of the National Social Security Institute, who are also going on strike against the Lula government's austerity policies. During the federal education strike, teachers in numerous state education systems also staged walkouts and strikes against the ongoing attacks on public education.

In this sense, the unions are continuing the traitorous role they played throughout the government of fascistic president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022). After helping to isolate student struggles against Bolsonaro's numerous attacks on universities and helping to channel them into the election of Lula in 2022, they are now covering for the new pro-capitalist PT government in its attacks on education and social services.

Many rank-and-file teachers were determined to continue the strike and refused to accept the dead end of fruitless negotiations with the Lula government that the National Association of Higher Education Teachers (ANDES) subjected the strike movement to. Of the 55 union sections of ANDES, controlled by Morenoite and Pabloite tendencies of the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) and the PT itself, 20 of them decided to continue the strike.

The cynical celebrations of the end of the strike by ANDES contrast with its denunciations of the Lula government during the strike. On its website, ANDES wrote that during the strike the Lula government functioned in a "disrespectful" and "contemptuous" manner towards the strike movement, as it "serves the interests of rentier and financial capital" and "has in its anti-democratic practices towards the trade union movement, anti-union in essence, one of its fundamental characteristics."

ANDES and SINASEFE, the union for staff and teachers at federal institutes, which offer from high school to postgraduate courses, have accepted the Lula government's downgraded proposal for a wage freeze this year and a total increase of up to 14 percent in 2025 and 2026. Since 2016, real wage losses have amounted to 39 percent for teachers and 53 percent for federal education workers.

These figures contrast with the wage increase of up to 27 percent that the Lula government has offered in this and the next two years to the federal police and federal highway police, who form an essential base for *bolsonarismo*.

Similarly, in his attempt to reconnect with the Brazilian armed forces, which were behind the January 8 coup attempt led by Bolsonaro and "turn the page" on the 1964 military coup backed by the US, the Lula government's defense minister, José Múcio Monteiro, is working behind the scenes to increase the defense budget to 2 percent of GDP, while Finance Minister Fernando Haddad is studying scraping the constitutional floors for health and education and decoupling pension increases from the increase in the minimum wage to meet the demands of Lula's "new fiscal framework" and his "zero deficit target" this year.

To end the strike movement, the Lula government announced on June 10 an investment of 5.5 billion reais (1 billion dollars) in stalled construction projects and the expansion of federal institutions and universities. However, as the daily *Folha de S. Paulo* reported, these funds had been earmarked since the middle of last year. The only new investment announced was for the precarious university hospitals (250 million reais, or 46 million dollars), whose employees held repeated walkouts this year and a national strike at the beginning of May.

This amount, however, falls far short of reversing the cuts to education that began during the PT government of President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) and intensified under the governments of Michel Temer (2016-2018) and Bolsonaro. This year, according to *Folha*, Brazil's federal education and science budgets are barely half what they were in 2014.

In an interview with the *Metrópoles* website earlier this month, the dean of the University of Brasília, Márcia Abrahão, declared that "We [deans] are asking for the budget of the universities in 2024 to be 8.5 billion reais (1.6 billion dollars),

but it's at 6.1 billion reais (1.1 billion dollars). And in 2023, it was 6.2 billion reais (1.2 billion dollars). So, we haven't even reached 2023 yet." She also pointed out that there is a possibility that universities will not have enough money to cover their basic expenses until the end of the year.

The Lula government also used the union bureaucracy in the federation of federal university unions, PROIFES, which brings together only six of the 69 federal university unions and is controlled by the PT, to end the strike. At the end of May, the PROIFES leadership signed an agreement with the Lula government, which was rejected by teachers at five federal universities and then reversed by the federal courts because it did not have union registration.

The PT's attacks on education are not restricted to the federal level. In the Northeastern state of Ceará, where the PT has ruled since 2015 and has implemented pro-corporate programs in basic education hailed by the most significant corporate education think tanks in Brazil, last week teachers at the three state universities ended a strike that began in early April for better salaries and the hiring of more teachers.

Also, at the beginning of April, the PT governor of Ceará, Elmano de Freitas, used the support of the APEOC union controlled by the PT, the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and the Morenoite *Resistência* tendency of the PSOL, to prevent the start of a strike that threatened to get out of the control of the union bureaucracy. Outraged rank-and-file teachers tried to reverse the decision and were beaten up by the union bureaucrats, which then fraudulently accused them of being "criminals" and "fascists."

At the State University of Piauí, another PT-ruled state in the Northeast, teachers, and students held a strike for more than two months at the beginning of the year for better wages and working and teaching conditions. PT Governor Rafael Fonteles cut the wages of the striking teachers and went to court to have the strike declared illegal.

Amid the federal education strike, teachers in numerous Brazilian states staged massive walkouts and strikes against the attacks on public education. In the most significant of these, teachers in the Southern state of Paraná, protesting against the proposed privatization of state school management, were brutally repressed by military police in early June. During the strike launched in response, the extreme right-wing governor, Ratinho Jr., allied himself with the bourgeois judiciary to deem the strike illegal and threatened to arrest the union leader if the strike continued.

This powerful movement was also ignored by ANDES and SINASEFE, the latter including teachers and employees of federal basic education. One of its demands during the strike was the repeal of the 2016 pro-corporate high school reform, which is also widely shared by state public school teachers and students who have staged numerous walkouts and strikes since last year.

However, what has been seen since Lula took office is the

opposite of what teachers want. Minister of Education Camilo Santana, the former governor of Ceará and an advocate of pro-corporate measures in education, has defended minor changes to the high school reform that in no way alter its pro-corporate essence or lessen the assault on public education in Brazil that it represents.

Last week, when a bill modifying the high school reform was approved by the Brazilian Senate and will now be discussed in the House of Representatives, the unions controlled by the PT and PSOL refused to mobilize the teachers, fearing that this movement would merge with the federal education strike against the Lula government and get out of their control.

In the most significant example in this regard, the state deputy and president of the São Paulo teachers union (APEOESP), Teacher Bebel, hailed on Facebook the "important changes to secondary education" in the bill passed by the Senate. She said, "it's not the dream bill," but "with a lot of effort, we're restoring dignity to Brazilian education."

Considering all the lies put forward by APEOESP that it was fighting to repeal the high school reform and, more recently, the betrayal of the federal education strike against the Lula government, the least that can be said is: what a fraud!

At the beginning of last year, analyzing the formation of the Lula government's Ministry of Education (MEC), the WSWs wrote:

The Lula government's choices in the MEC and the other ministries ... express the pro-capitalist character of the PT and its supporters, including the PSOL and the unions, against which teachers, students, and the Brazilian working class must immediately prepare to fight.

A year and a half after Lula's inauguration, these words have been fully vindicated. Teachers in Brazil must break with the illusion promoted by the pseudo-left and the unions that the Lula government can be pressured and form independent rank-and-file committees to unify the struggles nationally and internationally based on a socialist program to ensure free, quality public education from kindergarten to higher education.



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