

Militarized schools spearhead attacks on public education in Brazil

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As part of a broad attack on public education, Brazil has witnessed a rapid growth in the militarization of basic education over the last five years. Boosted under the government of fascistic former president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022), the so-called “civic-military schools” have the fundamental aim of ending supposed leftist indoctrination in education and forging a constituency among youth and their parents for the return of military dictatorship to Brazil.

Despite Bolsonaro’s National Civic-Military Schools Program termination by the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party-PT) in July 2023, state governments have still managed to keep the civic-military schools open and create new ones.

This was the case in Brazil’s richest and most industrialized state, São Paulo, as well as in others throughout this year. Governor Tarcísio de Freitas, a former minister and close ally of Bolsonaro, managed to push through his Civic-Military Schools Project in São Paulo last May amid brutal police repression of students protesting against the measure.

However, at the beginning of August, the São Paulo Court of Justice suspended the first stage of the program’s implementation due to “serious controversies about [its] constitutionality.” It also ruled that the program can only continue after Supreme Court Justice (STF) minister Gilmar Mendes rules on a Direct Action of Unconstitutionality filed by the PT and the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). Minister Mendes has scheduled a public hearing at the STF for October 22 to debate the issue.

The argument made by sectors of the Brazilian ruling elite in support of the civic-military schools is that they provide a solution to indiscipline and violence in the schools and the unsatisfactory learning of students. In reality, the proposal shows how far to the right the Brazilian political establishment has shifted in recent years. Recently, numerous reports in the bourgeois media have refuted the main claims made on behalf of militarized public schools, showing that they are more expensive, exclusionary and have no proven results.

Despite having numerous characteristics in common with what was implemented in basic schools in the country under Brazil’s bloody US-backed military dictatorship (1964-1985), other measures are unprecedented, such as the overt presence of “civic-military monitors,” linked to the Armed Forces or state military security forces, and the wearing of military-style uniforms.

There are multiple models of militarized schools in Brazil. The

first military schools, run by the Brazilian Armed Forces, were introduced at the end of the empire, in early 1889. From the late 1940s onwards, the first schools run by state military security forces, such as police and firefighters, emerged. In addition to the basic curriculum, these schools offered specific military subjects, taught by both military and civilian teachers.

Soon after the end of the military dictatorship, in 1990, the first “civic-military schools” began to open. In these schools, management is shared between personnel from the Armed Forces, military police or firefighters and the state and municipal education secretariats, while teachers remain subordinate to the respective education systems. As well as dealing with disciplinary issues, the “civic-military monitors” are also responsible for extracurricular activities.

Students in civic-military schools must wear military-style uniforms and follow strict rules of conduct. Long hair for boys and loose hair for girls are forbidden, as are colored hair, piercings and dating in school. Numerous reports of intimidation, along with sexual harassment of students by “civic-military monitors” have been extensively reported in the media in recent years.

All of this has been accompanied by a broad effort to combat any educational content that is even remotely critical of capitalism, which the youth of Brazil and the world are increasingly convinced is incapable of providing a decent future. The growth of the militarization of schools in Brazil was anticipated by hysterical and fascistic tirades of Bolsonaro and his sons, all of whom are parliamentarians, in support of bills dubbed “schools without a party” since the middle of the last decade.

Their reactionary intention was to create a climate of censorship and witch-hunting in the classroom in the midst of numerous teachers’ strikes driven by an acute economic crisis in Brazil, as well as a radicalization of the youth, who in 2015 and 2016 carried out thousands of occupations of schools and universities against numerous attacks on education, such as the pro-corporate high school reform. This paved the way for Bolsonaro, in the very first year of his government, to try to revise the history books about the 21 years of military dictatorship in Brazil and start his National Program of Civic-Military Schools.

Since then, these schools have grown exponentially in Brazil. According to a report on the *UOL* website, civic-military schools grew from 39 in 2013, to 230 in 2018 and 792 in 2023, with 550,000 students that year. By 2024, 947 militarized public schools were operating in Brazil.

The northeastern state of Bahia, governed by the PT since 2007, had created the most civic-military schools by 2019. Under a “Technical Cooperation Agreement” between the state’s Military Police and local governments established by the former governor and current chief of staff of the Lula government, Rui Costa, 79 civic-military schools were founded in 2018 and 2019.

In 2020, the southern state of Paraná began creating civic-military schools during the first term (2019-2022) of far-right Governor Ratinho Júnior and his education secretary, Renato Feder. A technology businessman, Feder is an enthusiastic advocate of pro-corporate policies in education, and in 2020 was tapped by former president Bolsonaro to take over the ministry of education.

Paraná has led the country in militarizing education since then. According to the UOL report, there were two militarized schools in the state in 2018, a number that had exploded to 320 by this year, around 15 percent of the state’s public schools. The midwestern state of Goiás has the second largest number with 82 such schools.

Feder is now the education secretary in the Tarcísio de Freitas government in São Paulo and intends to pursue the same course in the state. The essence of the program is reactionary to the core, imbued with educational conceptions and patriotic trappings that date back to the military dictatorship in Brazil.

According to the bill approved in May by the Legislative Assembly, a retired military police officer, the “civic-military monitor,” will work among the school community, and will be responsible for disciplinary issues and “extracurricular activities,” such as “the weekly raising of the flag at the school,” a ritual event in Brazilian schools under the military dictatorship.

The “civic-military monitor” will also be responsible for operationalizing the “Values Project,” which includes a “two-hour class” per week that “will cover ethics and civics contents.” These topics, in turn, are part of the subjects of Philosophy and Sociology, which successive governments and the pro-corporate high school reform of 2017 have targeted for being part of an alleged leftist indoctrination of students.

The parallels with what happened under the military dictatorship are clear. In 1969, after major strikes and youth protests, the military regime introduced the subjects of “Morals and Civics” and “Social and Political Organization of Brazil” into primary and secondary education, replacing the subjects of Sociology/Philosophy and History. The main objective was to justify the 1964 US-backed coup and the military regime it brought to power and to combat left-wing organizations. This was accompanied by mass censorship during the period under the infamous “National Security Doctrine.”

According to São Paulo’s secretary of education, Renato Feder, the civic-military school “model is focused on pedagogical practices where students are encouraged to cultivate respect for the homeland, national symbols and the rights and duties of citizenship.”

Governor Tarcísio went further, declaring in October of last year, during the launch of the Mixed Parliamentary Front in Defense of Civic-Military Schools in the Brazilian Congress, “We look here at the students of the civic-military schools and see that

we are facing a new Bolsonaro up ahead. ... How good it is to have a moment of love of country, to have discipline.”

Bolsonaro, whom Governor Tarcísio de Freitas recently called a “professor,” is not just an open defender of the military dictatorship in Brazil. Critically, he is being investigated by the Federal Supreme Court as the intellectual mastermind of the January 8, 2023 coup attempt, which was backed by a significant portion of the upper ranks of the Brazilian Armed Forces and which had an important support base among the state military police—the same institution responsible for supplying the “civic-military monitors.”

As exposed by the proliferation of these schools in Bahia and by the Lula government’s acquiescence to states passing their own civic-military school bills, any claim by the PT and the teachers’ unions it controls that it is opposing the militarization of education, as well as other attacks on education in Brazil, is a complete fraud. The attitude of the PT government is determined by its wider aim of placating the Armed Forces in the wake of the January 8 coup attempt.

What the Lula and Tarcísio governments, the union bureaucracy and the entire Brazilian ruling elite fear most is that the growing crisis of global capitalism, which has an acute impact on education in Brazil and around the world, will unite the explosive youth and teachers’ struggles with a growing movement of the Brazilian and international working class.

Far from a uniquely Brazilian phenomenon, the attacks on public education are part of a shift by the world’s ruling elite as it prepares for dictatorship at home and war abroad. In this sense, schools and universities have been a frequent target, with teachers and students around the world mobilizing against militarization and censorship, pro-corporate education reforms and austerity policies and, more recently, against the genocide in Gaza.

As the recent critical programmatic statement of the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (US) stated, “Educators and workers throughout the world are entering into struggle and face the same threats of austerity, war and dictatorship. We cannot fight these issues separately on a national basis but only together in a unified struggle” for socialism. We call on teachers and school staff to set up independent rank-and-file committees affiliated to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to take forward the struggle in defense of public education in Brazil and around the world.



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