

São Paulo teachers' union shuts down one-month strike

By our reporters
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Last Friday, March 8, 30,000 São Paulo teachers gathered in front of the City Hall saw the union's president, Claudio Fonseca, shut down their strike even after most of the teachers there had voted to continue the action.

The teachers of São Paulo carried out a 33-day strike against the reactionary pension reform introduced by the city's right-wing mayor Bruno Covas (PSDB) and approved at the end of last year by the City Council.

"It's quite revolting," Marília, a teacher at the rally, told WSWs reporters. She continued, "Our expectation was different; we did not get anything we wanted. He [the mayor] only negotiated the issue of the non-payment of wages [for the days teachers were on strike], and we have left a 33-day strike the same way we began it."

Her friend, Juliana, also explained, "the president of the union [Fonseca], who was elected to the city council in 2016 [by the right-wing party PPS], supported the party [Covas' PSDB] that is now in power in the city of São Paulo ... We imagined that this would happen. The teachers decided to continue the strike, because we did not even get the 10 percent wage increase," another demand made by the teachers, in addition to the repeal of the pension reform.

Paula, a pedagogical coordinator, recalled, "The same thing that happened today happened in 2012 with the same union [SINPEEM]," when Fonseca also decided to end a seven-day strike against the will of teachers. That year, after the assembly, outraged teachers surrounded a sound truck from which Fonseca was speaking, holding him for two hours before he was able to flee with the aid of the police.

However, unlike the 2012 strike, in addition to being much longer, this year's strike, which occurred under conditions of the country's worst-ever economic crisis and greater attacks on all workers, also showed a greater determination of teachers to struggle.

In the last weeks, in addition to the strike committees organized by regions of the city of São Paulo, regional protests, and unified demonstrations that led up to 80,000 teachers and other public sector workers also on strike to take to the streets of São Paulo, there were signs of a much greater radicalization among teachers.

On February 27, a group of almost 100 teachers occupied the Regional Education Office in the district of São Miguel Paulista and interrupted a meeting between the union and the government on the mayor's decision to deny pay to the teachers for every day they were on strike. And a day before the strike ended, on March 7, public sector workers also occupied the offices of the São Paulo health secretary. In addition, at the February 19 demonstration, the union president was able only at the last moment to prevent teachers from blocking the largest and busiest avenue in São Paulo, the *Marginal Tietê*, after a decision was taken at a mass assembly to carry out the blockade.

After the president of the union decided to end the strike, the teachers shouted, "*Não tem arrego!*" ("We will not give up!"), "Pelego!" ("Scab!") and "Vendido!" ("Sellout!"), and threw empty plastic bottles at him as he addressed the assembly from a sound truck. After the assembly, just as in 2012, the teachers surrounded the sound truck, and Fonseca was only able to leave it only hours later.

After the union's betrayal, on the Facebook group "Professores do Município de São Paulo" (São Paulo Municipal Teachers), with almost 20,000 teachers, posted videos denouncing the union's maneuver. One of them said, "Against images, there is no maneuver! The membership was clear in its desire to continue the strike." Other Facebook posts demanded the impeachment of the union president, Fonseca, and a mass campaign was initiated for disaffiliation from the union. Comments on posts said: "The moment we need the union most, it did not represent us" and "I'm tired of giving money to this pack of thieves, bandits and bums of the SINPEEM."

Many teachers with whom the WSWs reporters spoke also drew attention to one of the union's opposition leader, Laura Cymbalista (of the Socialism and Liberty Party –PSOL), who proposed the continuation of the strike, but did nothing to counter the union president's decision to end it. A Facebook comment said, "If the teacher who defended the continuity of the strike had stayed on the truck... but [she] ran away."

Another teacher with whom WSWs reporters spoke, Lurdes, said, "There was a great lack of commitment from the union during the strike," which kept it isolated during its 33 days. When asked if APEOESP, the São Paulo state teachers' union which is affiliated with the CUT union federation, could have joined the municipal teachers' strike, she replied, "Yes, of course, because the fight is together. If the teachers of the state and municipal schools do not join hands, then it is more difficult to fight."

However, she also recalled the long record of betrayal of APEOESP and its president, Maria Isabel Noronha, known as Bebel, who is affiliated with the Workers Party (PT) and was elected state deputy last year. According to her, "Bebel, in 2005, when thousands of teachers took *Avenida Paulista* [one of São Paulo's main thoroughfares], ended a strike without anyone raising their hands."

The same thing happened again years later, in 2013, when municipal and state teachers struck at the same time, but the two unions did everything to keep them separated. After a three-week strike, state teachers saw Bebel shut down the strike not in order not to politically undermine the Workers Party Mayor of São Paulo, Fernando Haddad, who by the end of 2016 would send his pension reform to the City Council three days before leaving office and opening the way for Covas to deepen his attacks.

Juliana also recalled, even though it is linked to the PT, “APEOSP did not have the strength to stop the [PSDB’s] government attacks on education, which made the quality of state public education worsen a lot.” Marília explained, “The union have accepted the government’s proposal, allowing the government to carry out its plan in return for very fragile guarantees for teachers.”

“We do not want the situation of municipal schools and our salaries to reach the levels of state schools [where workers are paid 30 percent less]. The state schools have no structure, and we see that the situation of the municipal school is moving in the same direction,” Juliana added. Marília agreed pointing out that, “the PSDB [also the party of the governor of São Paulo, João Doria] has also created other types of contracts in which teachers cannot go on strike and have much fewer rights.”

When WSWs reporters pointed out that teachers around the world have been facing the same type of betrayals at the hands of their unions, Lurdes said, “We [she and the pedagogical coordinator Paula] were talking here and wondering: is this a global movement? There must be something wrong in the country, because [workers’] rights are being lost, rights that were conquered with struggle and death, [and] you do not see in Brazil the unions mobilizing workers; sometimes they make one move or another, but it’s no use.”

What happened at the March 8 assembly of the São Paulo teachers, just as it has been happening with teachers of the state of São Paulo and with all categories of workers around the world, is a vindication of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s (ICFI) analysis that trade unions do not represent the workers’ interests, and that new organizations of struggle, rank-and-files committees independent of the unions, must be formed.

This analysis is in complete contrast with the position of the pseudo-left organizations in Brazil and internationally, which continue to sow illusions in the unions, as well as covering up their betrayals. After the end of the São Paulo teachers’ strike, no pseudo-left organization has denounced the union president’s betrayal.

The tendency of PSOL *Resistência*, and its website *EsquerdaOnline* – which has published some articles from the US group ISO’s Socialist Worker, just as it has published articles by *Resistência*’s members recently – has kept silent about both the end of the strike and the betrayal of the union.

With the title “Despite the SINPEEM and the leadership, workers of São Paulo end strike overturning the non-payment of wages,” the report of the Brazilian section of the Trotskyist Fraction (the tendency led by the Argentine Morenoites of the PTS), posted not a single line on its website *Esquerda Diário* about the union president’s decision to end the strike against the will of the teachers.

Already teachers linked to another tendency of PSOL, *Liberdade Socialismo e Revolução*, the Brazilian section of the Committee for a Workers’ International, whose US affiliate is Socialist Alternative, took four days to write on its Facebook page, *Luta Educadora*, that teachers cannot “conclude [that the answer to Fonseca’s betrayal] is disaffiliation from the union. Trade unions are historical instruments of the working class and need to be defended, especially at a time when the ultra liberal Bolsonaro government declares war on the trade union movement saying it will not allow any kind of activism.”

However, Bolsonaro’s war against Brazilian workers is being directly facilitated not only by these organizations, but also by the largest unions and union federations in Brazil. The complete accommodation of the pseudo-left organizations to the unions takes

place at the same time that Brazil’s largest union federation, CUT, which is controlled by the Workers Party, has approached the Bolsonaro government through its vice-president, the right-wing general Hamilton Mourão.

The presidents of CUT and of the ABC metalworkers union, Vagner de Freitas and Wagner Santana respectively, held a meeting with Mourão while Bolsonaro was hospitalized at the end of January to “build a channel for dialogue with the government” and “negotiate the interests of workers,” according to Freitas. Santana met Mourão once again on March 1 to discuss Ford’s shutdown of its São Bernardo do Campo plant. In a Facebook post, Santana said Mourão was “sensitive ... and committed to help.”

The coverup that the pseudo-left is providing for the union’s betrayal in ending the São Paulo teachers’ strike has a parallel in the approximation of CUT with Mourão. According to teacher Juliana, the Bolsonaro government “is very disjointed, ... always discredited by what it says, and therefore for what it proposes.” For this reason, she added, “the *esquerda cirandeira* [a derogatory term for the petty bourgeois left] says that the Mourão is reasonable. But in fact he is not.”

The São Paulo teachers’ strike, like similar struggles around the world, is an anticipation of the mass resistance that will develop in Brazil against the Bolsonaro government and its austerity measures. CUT has already been forced to call strikes and demonstrations against Bolsonaro’s pension reform by Friday of next week, March 22.

However, the record of betrayals by SINPEEM, APEOESP and all unions linked to the CUT should serve as a critical warning for teachers and all workers entering into struggle against the Bolsonaro government.

The authors also recommend:

Sao Paulo teachers' strikes confront union betrayal
[18 May 2013]

Sao Paulo teachers, public workers strike against attack on pensions
[25 February 2019]

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