

Occupying schools in Brazil: the youngest protest

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A new generation of activists is breeding among secondary school students in Rio de Janeiro, in a context of sharp expenditure cuts, long lasting strikes and violent police repression. [Español](#)



A student crosses a bridge to arrive to his school in Rio de Janeiro (Photo AP / Silvia Izquierdo)

Classes have been running in Luis Compositor Carlos da Vila school in Benfica, a working-class neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, since early April. Alongside swimming and dance classes and preparation for the ENEM (the general entrance exam for public universities), the timetable includes discussion circles to cover topics such as the militarisation of police in favelas. This is all happening despite the ongoing teachers' strike across the state since March this year. Or perhaps because of it. Students are cleaning floors, painting walls and making food. They have taken over their school in support of their teachers, and in protest to spending cuts which have been part of the PT's programme of austerity which has left funding for public services, wages and unemployment in freefall since last year.

Contrasting a historically combative teaching sector in Rio de Janeiro, and a university student movement with a long and complex history, the radicalisation of secondary school students is a first in Brazil. In late 2015 students took over more than 200 schools in the state of Sao Paulo. The occupations forced the suspension of a scheme to close nearly 100 public schools. In March 2016 occupations began in Rio growing to 82 occupied schools, and have recently spread to other states in the south and north-east. In Rio and Sao Paulo occupations forced out the state Secretary of Education. The brutality of police repression against school students in Sao Paulo last year has since prompted an investigation by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, whilst school occupations in Rio have faced multiple threats and attempts at de-occupation by the military police, and groups of students organised against the occupations. Students from across different schools in Rio recently occupied the building of the Secretary of Education, and were violently evicted a few days later.

These events are part of an ongoing process which began in June 2013, when some of the biggest street protests in Brazilian history broke through the hegemony of the PT. Central to these protests was a rejection of an urban

model composed of increasingly privatised, expensive and substandard public services, and the fantastical sums spent on the World Cup and the Olympics; there was a spectrum of ideological influences present, from the Left and the Right. One segment of the working class was particularly represented in the 2013 protests, a new demographic created by the contradictory policies of the PT themselves: young university students and graduates who are the first in their family to study at university level, but who remain in precarious, low-wage employment, particularly in the telecommunications sector. Protests that began in 2015 over the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff have been palpably lacking this demographic, both on the side of for and against impeachment. Protesters were typically older and from a higher income bracket, according to research by Instituto Datafolha. The common denominator between these movements in 2013 and 2015 is a university education, which bears witness to the changing nature of university education brought about during the PT's time in power.

Dilma's slogan of the "Educating Nation" (Patria Educadora) echoes successive PT administrations' declarations of commitment to education. However the PT's policy was characterised by the prioritisation of expansion of access over improvement in the quality of the education system. The sector remained poorly funded. Students and teachers' unions continue to fight for an allocation of 10% of GDP towards education - a prospect which Lula vetoed before leaving office.

The current economic recession in Brazil brings the limitations of the PT's politics into sharp relief. In 2015 Dilma backtracked on her 2014 electoral promises, and cut spending to public services drastically. In Rio de Janeiro, where the municipal government is run by the PT's electoral ally the PMDB, the biggest cuts were to the education sector. One occupier at Luis Compositor explains, *'the projects that we had were taken away from us through funding cuts. Now we're bringing them back for the people; we want the community who live around here to come back into our school.'* Finding concealed facilities and resources has become synonymous with the occupations. When I visit Monteiro de Carvalho school, also in Rio de Janeiro city, students guide me through a basement floor with laboratories for physics and cooking, and a computer room. They discovered this floor when they began to occupy, alongside hundreds of textbooks they were told the school did not have. In numerous schools students have discovered unused uniforms, books, computers, musical instruments and other resources.

Over half a million public sector workers across different sectors in the state walked out in April, following delays of over two months in the payment of their salaries. The school student movement has been bolstered by the paralysis of the state university, UERJ, by workers with up to seven months without salary.

Occupying in support of the teachers' strike, students in Rio have also taken up the historic demand of teachers' unions for elections of school directors. The installation of school directors remains a powerful means by which local politicians have maintained networks of patronage and influence developed during the military dictatorship. In Luis Compositor Carlos da Vila, another student describes the director as *'a homophobic, racist ex-military personnel.. it's really hard to study at this school. The lack of infrastructure makes it really hard to study and there's no dialogue.'* The reform, which was suspended for thirteen years, has now been passed by Rio's Legislative Assembly (Alerj).

Although many students I speak to say that the protests' experience has fundamentally changed how they relate to their education, and to the potential of collective organisation, after two months the movement is beginning to show signs of losing momentum. Unlike the Sao Paulo students, the demands of Rio students have not been singular, or as clear-cut. A few schools have taken the choice to leave their occupations, some after a series of invasions by the military police. The department of education has now attempted to announce the return of classes, in an effort to break up the occupations, however with the ruling rejected by the teachers' union, the strike continues.