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One of the movement's defining features – be it in struggles against the potential closure of 100 public schools in Sao Paulo in 2015, for better conditions at schools in Rio de Janeiro in February 2016, or the current struggle against MP 746 and PEC 241 – is the autonomous character it assumed in relation to political parties and mainstream student organisations. The students' struggles have been driven by the students themselves and they have defended the movement from attempts, by some student organisations and political parties, to harness it for their own interests.

High school students in Brazil show us a form of struggle that does not need or rely on the old bureaucratic and centralised structures of the traditional student movement and unions. By rejecting class reconciliation, maintaining their independence and relying on direct action and direct democracy the students have defended public education, won victories and could even galvanise other sectors into struggle against austerity and attacks on the working class. Whereas, like in South Africa, ordinary members of traditional unions and student organisations are often held back from engaging in meaningful strike and protest action because of their bureaucratisation and centralisation, participation in corporatist bargaining structures and relations with political parties, the students struggling in Brazil offer another way for working class organisation and resistance – one based on direct action, direct democracy, political independence and working class autonomy.

And it is in this way that a broader struggle of the working class should be built to confront the neoliberal onslaught – not only in Brazil but globally.

optional – and students would select subject modules according to their professional interests. Students fear some schools would only offer technical courses and subjects that fall under “human sciences”, for example, would be scrapped. Students wishing to study things other than the technical training offered at schools nearby would either have to go to faraway public schools or to expensive private schools. This would disadvantage students from working class families and shows a clear class bias, whereby those students whose families have the money can study whatever they want; and those that don’t have to resign themselves to a future of underpaid precarious work.

The reforms would also increase the number of compulsory working hours from 800 hours per class per year to 1400.

However, MP 746 also recognises work experience, among others, as a possible way to achieve the required hours. Because working class students often already have to work part-time out of economic necessity this would lead to students working longer hours, for low wages and with limited workers’ rights, in order both to make more money to support themselves financially but also to meet the compulsory hour requirement – while spending less time in a classroom receiving actual instruction and having less time to do homework etc.

However, in various struggles in 2015 and 2016 students in Brazil were able to defeat government attacks on education through mass resistance. There is thus hope to believe that students will be able to resist the current attack on their education and their future.

Key lessons

What lessons, then, does the Brazilian secondary student movement offer struggles elsewhere?

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In September 2016 the Brazilian government published a Provisional Measure (MP 746) outlining a reform in secondary education that would have devastating consequences for the education system, disproportionately affecting majority-black working class students.

Students occupy schools

Students responded with direct action and occupied schools in the state of Paraná, with occupations soon spreading to at least six other states. One month later 600 high schools in Paraná alone had been occupied to protest the government's attack on public education – which comes in the context of a broader attack on the working class through a Proposed Constitutional Amendment (PEC 241) that threatens to freeze public spending on health, education and social welfare until 2037.

Reforms an attack on the working class

The reform seeks to change the high school curriculum, making it more technical skills-focused and orienting it more towards the production of students as a labour supply for the market; as opposed to widening and deepening their knowledge base and developing their intellectual faculties. It would also open secondary education up to greater private sector involvement, including the outsourcing of high school teaching. Student protesters say it is an attempt by the ruling class to profit from public education and make employment and career opportunities more precarious, by restricting the type of education the working class has access to produce lessqualified workers with less capacity for critical thinking and social analysis.

The number of mandatory subjects would be slashed by half – art, sociology and philosophy, among others, would become