

Roberto Leher* Capital versus public education
defended by the working classes**ABSTRACT**

Developing an antisystemic strategy by the world working class against capitalist totalising offensive over the education of peoples is an urgent and non-deferrable task. To this end, a correct diagnosis of the correlation of forces in worldwide education is essential and is an effective contribution that can be made nationally and internationally by research collectives committed to the emancipation of workers from the capitalist order. It is undeniable that, at some point, such efforts—combined with persistent struggles against attacks on public education—may coalesce into a “party,” as occurred with the International Workingmen’s Association in the second half of the nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS

Commodification of education
Financialization of education
Education policies
Private apparatuses of hegemony
Socialist education

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I Understanding capital's systemic offensive against education requires a proposition of Marx's method, incisively grasped by Karl Korsch:

*"The first fundamental tenet of the new revolutionary science of society is the principle of the historical specification of all social relations and conditions. Indeed, Marx conceives all institutions and relations existing in bourgeois society in terms of their historical singularity, thereby criticising all categories treated by bourgeois social theory in which the specific character of historicity has been effaced."*¹

The current correlation of forces is very different from that of the so-called "Thirty Glorious Years" (1945–1975)², during which the affirmation of social rights—conceived as achievements of the working classes resulting from proletarian organisation and struggle—was a cause that galvanized a broad and polysemic spectrum of left-wing forces. The advance of austerity³, in the context of the structural crisis of the 1970s, unfolded through neoliberal statal reforms, the flexibilisation of workers' rights—which weakened trade unions—and the hollowing out of popular sovereignty over public affairs, via new forms of state management and governance anchored in technocracies that detach education from the struggles of peoples.

Therefore, the understanding of today's context cannot ignore specific differences engendered by the development of productive forces and transformations in labor relations and ideologies. The contradictions between the productive forces (expressed in changes in organic capital) and relations of production materialise in even greater expropriations and exploitation of labor power. Capital's political agency, historically imbued with the ideology of human capital, is increasingly coordinated to effect ever greater control and domination over human formation, encompassing both the means and the ends of education.

This article argues that the new forms of capital's saturation of human formation over the past two decades are systemic and planetary, and are embedded in the everyday life of schools and universities, in state apparatuses, and—of immense political importance—in popular common sense.

A new type of commodification of education

In the wake of the Great Crisis intensified in 2008⁴, capital propelled the conversion of fundamental rights formerly public and conceived as duties of the state into commodities, or into policies under the direct or indirect control of capital. Commodification is occurring on an unprecedented scale and with entirely new characteristics. This movement has resulted in an impressive process of concentration, centralisation, and monopolisation of capital and, consequently, in the rapid diffusion of ideologies congruent with the order of capital⁵. From the privatisation of water and energy to social security and health—and, with particular vehemence, education—the major achievements of the working

classes over the last hundred years are increasingly under the dominion of capital, not only as "tangible properties," in the form of businesses, holding companies, and the like, but also in the realm of ideology, as anticipated by Marx in the 1859 Preface⁶.

Indeed, privatisation has penetrated every pore of education, materialising a new type of commodification expressed:

- a) directly, through the expansion of the provision of the education commodity via private schools, universities, and institutions;
- b) through the introduction of Trojan horses for the private interests of big capital into public schools, especially "teaching systems," technological platforms, books and workbooks, "school management systems," platforms for assessments, and university endowments;
- c) in mediated form, through private apparatuses of hegemony (PAH) instituted by the ruling bloc⁷, which determine the fundamentals of state educational policies—particularly curricula, guidelines for teacher education, the modeling of financing, forms of evaluation, and conceptions of the management of school systems and schools based on principles imported from corporate management—and, in sum, the ideological conceptions of basic education that naturalise the generalised precarisation of the labor of new generations on the basis of notions such as resilience and entrepreneurship
- d) through neoliberal austerity policies that bar popular sovereignty over public affairs, strangle the budgets of public institutions, and precarise teaching work. Aiming to remove the public character of education, ministries of education and education secretariats are reconfigured and placed under the direction of technocrats linked to corporate PAH. The management model established by these technocrats is structured around public-private partnerships that shift what is fundamental in education to corporations, the Brazilian Civil Society Organisations, foundations, think tanks, and institutes linked to big capital;
- e) through curricula elaborated under the direction of corporate PAH, based on "essential" competencies imbued with epistemological relativism and on social-emotional competencies that seek to conform students to the order of capital in an extremely regressive context of brutal flexibilisation of labor rights. To this end, they marginalise—or even disregard—the centrality of science, culture, art, reflection on technologies and the world of work, and the critical and inventive use of language;
- f) through learning targets measured by assessments external to schools, calibrated by the values and demands of capital; and
- g) through pedagogies that advocate learning without teaching, in which the teacher is re-signified as a tutor or facilitator charged with operating the platformisation of educational labor.

Direct corporate presence in education

In a growing number of countries, the direct control exercised by capital over what is fundamental in education is unprecedented in the history of peoples, eroding the foundations of national

1 Korsch, K. Karl Marx. Tradução de Gilda Lopes Encarnação. Lisboa. Antígona, 2018, p. 32.

2 Hobsbawm, Eric. A Era dos Extremos: O Breve Século XX (1914-1991). São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995.

3 Mattei, C. A ordem do capital: como economistas inventaram a austeridade e abriram caminho para o fascismo. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

4 Kliman, A. A Grande Recessão e a teoria da crise de Marx. Revista Outubro, São Paulo, n. 24, 2º sem. 2015.

5 Mattei, C. A ordem do capital: como economistas inventaram a austeridade e abriram caminho para o fascismo. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

6 Marx, K. Resoluções do Congresso de Genebra (1866). In: MUSTO, M. (org.). Trabalhadores, uni-vos! Antologia política da I Internacional. São Paulo: Boitempo; Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014.

7 Poulantzas, N. O Estado, o poder e nós. In: BALIBAR, E.; POULANTZAS, N. et al. (org.) O Estado em discussão. São Paulo: Edições 70, 1981.

education and the principal pillars of public education won by the working classes.

Although private education was a significant phenomenon throughout the twentieth century in many countries, the current period exhibits specific differences with respect to earlier forms of privatisation and commodification. Among the distinguishing features is the strong presence of investment funds and private equity firms that control educational corporations structured as companies and governed by boards of directors composed of investors, many of which are listed on stock exchanges—including NASDAQ—and headquartered in tax havens.

Educational corporations have been transformed into a sector linked and subordinated to rentiers and to operators in the finance world. The scale of business has thus shifted, reverberating in an accelerated change in the organic composition of capital. The educational business sector and related activities are undergoing a disconcerting intensification of technology that crushes labor and commodifies curricula. From this unprecedented mobilisation of large volumes of capital there results a vertiginous process of monopolisation of educational groups. In Brazil, there are 2,500 higher education institutions, 2,200 of which are private; however, only about a dozen of them account for more than 40% of total enrollments and roughly 80% of distance education offerings, which, as noted, attract more than 60% of new students.⁸ Moreover, the control exercised by publishing groups and labor platforms enhances the implementation of technological packages in schools that accelerate the refunctionalisation of educational institutions and promote a new scale of expropriation of teachers' intellectual labor.

Commodification of higher education in Brazil

The commodification of higher education in Brazil by investment funds, private equity firms, and banks is at the global vanguard of the commodification of education, constituting the most advanced stage of the financialization of education⁹, which justifies the prominence accorded to it in this article.

The major leap in the financialisation of Brazilian education—expressed in acquisitions and mergers—coincided with the governments of the Workers' Party, especially from 2008 onward, the year of the Great Crisis that prompted investment funds to seek real assets worldwide. In that year, 53 striking acquisitions occurred in the education sector, placing it third in the national ranking of acquisitions, behind only information technology and food and beverages.¹⁰

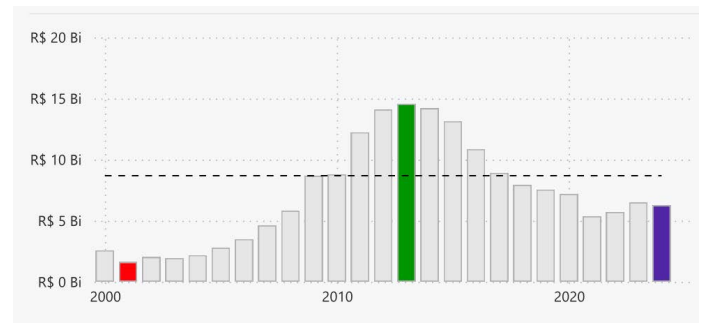
One factor explaining investment funds' interest was the granting of tax exemptions to for-profit educational companies through the University for All Program (ProUni, in the Brazilian Portuguese acronym) in 2005. This robust transfer of public funds to commercial educational groups was a key variable, as attested by the corporations themselves. During Dilma Rousseff's presidential term (2011–2014), the Student Financing Fund (FIES, in

the Brazilian Portuguese acronym) was resized and flexibilised, enabling an exponential increase in direct transfers of public funds to educational groups that were then in the process of going public on stock exchanges, converting into publicly traded companies, and expanding the control of investment funds and private equity firms over their ownership.

Although during Lula da Silva's second administration (2007–2010) and at the beginning of Dilma Rousseff's term (2011–2014)—the period of neoliberal neo-developmental accumulation¹¹—there was an expansion of federal education, it is easy to observe, based on allocated resources (Graph 1), that this growth process amounted to a "chicken flight." Between 2007 and 2013, funding increased for the expansion of federal universities—funding that was insufficient and unsustainable, yet enabled the near doubling of the number of students in federal universities, from 640,000 to just over 1.2 million during this period.

From the orthodox neoliberal turn of the Dilma government in 2015, through the 2016 Coup, the constitutional amendment that froze increases in public spending for twenty years (Constitutional Amendment No. 95/2016), and the Bolsonaro government (2019–2022), austerity policies financially strangled public institutions with the aim of rendering them unviable—under the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022), within the framework of a culture war. Nevertheless, due to austerity, this situation has persisted into Lula da Silva's third term (2023–present) (see Graph 1).

Graph 1
Discretionary resources of federal universities (Brazilian reais, constant values).



Source: ANDIFES¹²

The takeoff of the commodification of education engendered by government policies was also shaken by the worsening commodities crisis in 2015. In 2016, the coup carried out by the ruling bloc against the legitimate government of Dilma Rousseff was consummated. The deterioration of state finances affected the Brazilian Federal Student Education and Credit Fund (FIES, in the Brazilian Portuguese acronym), which has since drastically reduced new contracts. At its peak, in 2014, 732,000 contracts were signed underwritten by the educational fund; in 2015, 287,000; in 2016, 203,000; and in 2018, only 82,000. However,

8 BRASIL. Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (Inep). Censo da Educação Superior 2024: resumo técnico [recurso eletrônico]. Brasília, DF: Inep, 2025.

9 Leher, R. Mercantilização da educação básica, sistemas de ensino e plataformas de trabalho como expressões da pedagogia do capital. Paradigma (Maracay), v. XLIV, 2023, p. 34-60.

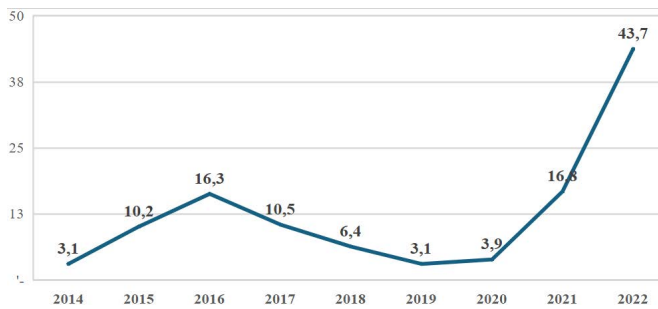
10 Fusões e aquisições em educação: melhor resultado desde 2008. Monitor Mercantil, 09/03/2022, <https://monitormercantil.com.br/186731-2/>, access: 10/01/2026.

11 Saad Filho, A. Moraes, L. Brasil: neoliberalismo versus democracia. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018.

12 Associação Nacional dos Dirigentes das Instituições de Ensino Superior - ANDIFES. Orçamento das Federais. Disponível em: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrjoiZWE0YTQzY2EiN2RjMS00NDZlKlWEwZTYtNzViN2Q1OGVmOGRIiwiidCl6lJmYMTExODk1LEwNzIiNDFiZS04MjVjLWExNzlhNmYyMzFiNiJ9>, access: 21/11/2025

within the framework of the financialisation of education, the decline in contracts did not entail a reduction in transfers; on the contrary. The stock of public debt securities held by FIES enabled gains until 2022 (Graph 2).

Graph 2
Public funds transferred to the private sector through implicit subsidies to the Brazilian Federal Student Education and Credit Fund (FIES)
(constant values, National Treasury Secretariat)

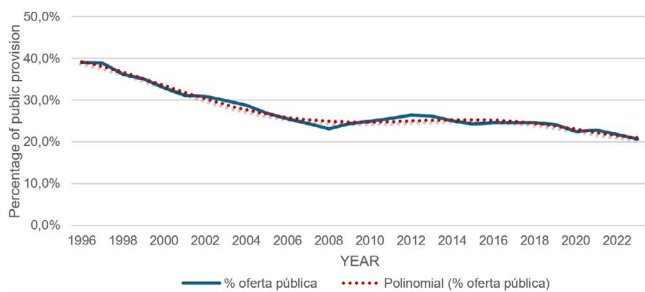


Source: INEP: 5th Monitoring of the Brazilian National Education Plan¹³

Graph 2 confirms that it was not the invisible hand of the State that drove the exponential expansion of the private-mercantile sector, to the detriment of the expansion of public institutions (Graph 3). Currently, less than 8% of newly enrolled higher education students attend a public institution. According to the Brazilian National Education Plan, at least 40% of newly enrolled students in higher education should be at least 40% in public institutions.

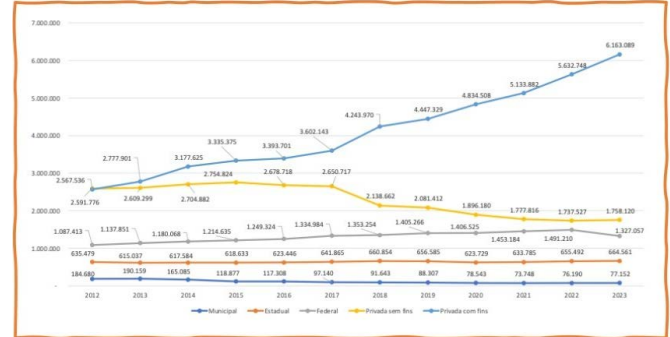
With the decrease in enrollment in public institutions (Graph 3), aggravated by budget constraints (Graph 1), and with incentives resulting from the transfer of public funds to the private sector, it is the private-commercial sector that is driving the expansion of Brazilian higher education (Graph 4).

Graph 3
Share of the public sector in the provision of higher education



Source: Censos do Ensino Superior INEP, organised by Bielschowsky, 2023.¹⁴

Graph 4
Expansion of enrollments by public, private, and private-mercantile segments (2012–2023)

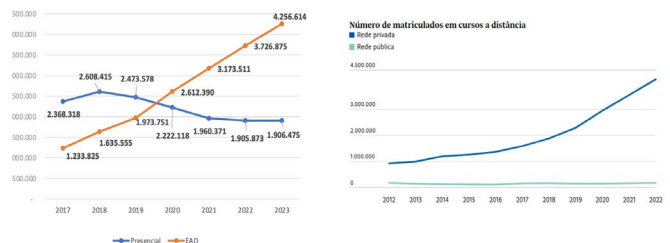


Source: INEP (2024)¹⁵.

The decline in FIES contracts triggered an environment of uncertainty in educational business, expressed in falling share prices of major groups. As a result, under pressure from investors fearful of losses, new strategies of mercantile expansion were consolidated, encompassing both higher education and basic education. Thus, the feverish process of acquisitions and mergers among educational groups between 2005 and 2024 (505 acquisitions, according to KPMG¹⁶), leveraged by funds and private equity firms and intermediated by the wholesale banking sector—especially Itaú BBA, Bradesco BBI, BTG Pactual, XP Investimentos, and Bank of America—assumed new configurations.

A crucial aspect stemming from the crisis of public financing was the segmentation of market “niches.” Corporations, which until then had been supported by FIES, chose to differentiate their higher education offerings: a) for the upper classes, a few high-tuition in-person courses, such as medicine, for example; b) for the most impoverished working classes, massive low-quality distance learning undergraduate courses (Graph 5): over 60% of these courses have a rating of 1.5 out of a total of 5.0 in the Ministry of Education’s precarious assessment, indicating that they fail to meet the minimum requirements.

Graph 5
Trend toward conversion from in-person education to distance education



Source: INEP (2024)¹⁷

13 INEP. Resumo técnico do Censo Escolar da Educação Básica – 2024. Brasília: INEP, 2025.

14 INEP. Censo do Ensino Superior 2023. DF: INEP 2024; Bielschowsky, Carlos (coord.). Expansão da Educação Superior no Brasil: análise das Instituições Privadas. São Paulo: SoU_Ciência, 2023.

15 INEP. Censo do Ensino Superior 2023. DF: INEP 2024.

16 KPMG, Fusões e Aquisições 1o Trimestre de 2025, junho de 2025.

17 INEP. Censo do Ensino Superior 2023. DF: INEP 2024.

These trends allow for three partial conclusions.

I. First, commodification immediately and directly affects the most pauperised and expropriated fractions of the working classes. Approximately 80% of higher education students—most of them from more pauperised fractions—study in private institutions. Roughly 70% of private enrollments are linked to large corporations. Indeed, the private sector offers around 22 million places in distance education programs¹⁸, far exceeding student demand. The growth of distance education programs has been truly exponential: in 2010 there were 750,000 enrollments; by 2023, 4.3 million. Currently, *65% of newly enrolled higher education students are already studying remotely*. Even the remaining in-person courses have become hybrid: Ordinance No. 2117/2019, issued by the Bolsonaro administration, allowed for the expansion of distance learning courses to up to 40% of in-person courses. This percentage was modestly redefined by Decree No. 12,456/2025, which now allows for distance learning courses to comprise 30% of the total course load and, worse, creates a hybrid model with a mere 30% of the course load being in-person.

II. There are approximately 2,500 higher education institutions in the country, and only eight of them account for more than 65% of distance learning enrollments. Publicly traded corporations (Cogna, Vitru, Yducs, SER, Ânima, Afya, Cruzeiro do Sul) and large privately held corporations (Universidade Nove de Julho -Uninove, Universidade Paulista - UNIP) account for a large portion of these institutions, confirming the centralisation and concentration of capital and the formation of monopolies.

III. The current commodification is driven by investment funds and private equity firms that, in practice, drain like vampires the acquired institutions and, above all, the work of their professors: classes are scripted by primers and teaching materials that do not involve faculty creativity; evaluations are increasingly done with robots; and curricula are managed by algorithm-customised competencies. Institutional command is displaced to the select sphere of boards of directors, whose seats are held by investors and whose decisions are governed by the temporality imposed by stock market dynamics.

Commodification of basic education

Unlike higher education—where 80% of students are enrolled in the private sector—in Brazil compulsory basic education¹⁹ is predominantly public and free of charge, serving around 80% of students.

The comprehensive turn of large corporations toward basic education is a recent but consistent phenomenon. Between 2000 and 2024, the public sector lost 1.8 million enrollments, totaling approximately 38 million students (2024). Over the same period, the private sector grew from 7.5 million enrollments (14.7% in 2000) to 9.5 million (20.2%)²⁰.

As important as the expansion of private schools—driven by

a rapid process of capital concentration carried out through aggressive acquisitions of schools and school networks by corporations since 2016—is the growing interest of holding companies in the production of platforms and “teaching systems” for the entirety of basic education. This segment encompasses pedagogical materials; platforms offering customised lessons designed to comply with the new curriculum elaborated by capital’s entities and structured to discipline teaching labor; as well as systems and platforms for school assessment and management.

Holding companies such as COGNA/ VASTA and ARCO have created subsidiaries specialised in teaching “systems” and labor platforms, initially going public on NASDAQ. All major publicly traded groups—COGNA, SALTA, BAHEMA/BIOMA, ARCO, and SEB—operate in the sector of teaching “systems” and platforms. Publishing houses within the COGNA holding company are responsible for approximately 40% of the textbooks in circulation across the country’s 180,000 basic education schools. A large share of municipalities has already contracted “systems” and platforms from these corporations for use in their schools.

In this way, corporations define the bases of what is thinkable in the everyday life of schools, expropriating the creative and intellectual dimension of teaching labor. As a result, students from working-class backgrounds experience a downgrading of access to scientific, technological, and cultural knowledge, being adapted to simple and precarious labor and deprived of the subjective and socially necessary formation required to confront the ongoing barbarism.

The need for children to be physically present in institutions so that the labor power of parents and guardians could be freed was a very concrete experience during the interruption of in-person classes in schools throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital education has emerged as a new watchword for virtual schooling. Corporations seek to dissociate it from distance education, which is associated with a technological stage already nearing exhaustion and deemed unviable in basic education. Digital education is enabled by new technological bases associated with telecommunications (especially 5G), artificial intelligence (machine learning), big data, and algorithms, and is distinguished by the growing customisation of courses. Consequently, this new business niche is based on the possibility of customising courses according to student profiles and, at the same time, performing them (the student profiles).

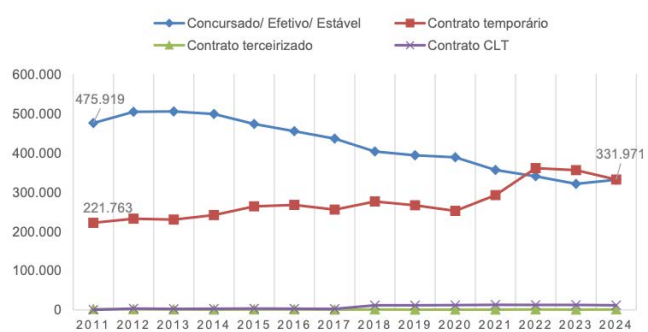
Accordingly, although students in basic education remain physically present in schools, pedagogical activities can be increasingly reconfigured through digital education. The objective of corporations is to convert schools and classrooms themselves into spaces virtualised by systems and platforms in which the precarisation of labor is complete, as illustrated in Graph 6.

¹⁸ Busnardo, F. de M. G. et. al. O Ensino Superior a Distância no Brasil: onde estamos e para onde queremos ir?. Ead Em Foco, v. 14, n. 2, p. e2230, 2024.

¹⁹ Since 2009, compulsory basic education in Brazil has covered the age range from 4 to 17 years. It is divided into early childhood education (ages 4–5), elementary education (ages 6–14), and secondary education (ages 15–17).

²⁰ INEP. Resumo técnico do Censo Escolar da Educação Básica – 2024. Brasília: INEP, 2025.

Graph 6
Teachers in state schools with stable and precarious contracts (2011–2024)



Gomes de Sousa, 2025²¹.

Educational holding companies particularly target the public sector, marketing systems and platforms for use in public schools. Another trend gaining prominence is the *outsourcing of the administrative management* of public schools. In states governed by the far right—such as Minas Gerais, Paraná, and São Paulo—corporations aim to outsource the very pedagogical management of schools, bringing them closer to charter schools. Thus, public schools could portray themselves as schools with the “quality” standards of corporate education systems, displaying the “brand name” of one of their labels.

Private Apparatuses of Hegemony of capital and forms of consciousness of the working classes

The private apparatuses of hegemony (PAH) of capital are, ultimately, condensations of ideological forces with well-defined economic interests, determined by their founders—namely, large corporations, with particular prominence given to financial institutions such as banks, investment funds, and the like. These financial groups are active in enabling acquisitions, designing *business models*, carrying out initial public offerings, and conducting corporate restructurings. For this reason, they have achieved an extraordinary presence in the educational field. Their PAH function as collective intellectuals that organise a horizon compatible with the control of education, in its entirety, by capital.

The conglomerates of Private Apparatuses of Hegemony of big capital²², the agency of International Organisations (IOs), and governments committed to the austerity demanded by the General Staff of Capital across different countries act as organisers of a new global educational order. There is an ongoing coordination among PAH and corporations that, despite political frictions—particularly with the far right, and conflicts of varying relevance depending on national conjunctures—aims to promote and disseminate their educational conceptions through a myriad

of Civil Society Organisations of Public Interest subordinated to these PAH conglomerates. In Brazil, this is especially evident in organisations such as Todos pela Educação (All for education, in literal translation) and the Lemann Foundation, which operate at municipal and state levels and are increasingly present across a growing number of countries. PAH conglomerates influence the creation of new education laws, new curricular guidelines, and assessment systems; in short, they define the social function of education within national states, whose ideological cement is provided above all through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank.

In the case of public universities, the function equivalent to that of corporate PHA has been performed by endowment funds, which increasingly influence university life. A recent example of this is the pressure exerted by Zionism, through endowment funds, to dismiss Ivy League university presidents who were considered lenient in their repression of student protests against the genocide in Palestine in the United States in 2024²³. In Lula da Silva’s third administration, the Ministry of Education is run by Lemann Foundation²⁴ in partnership with *Todos pela Educação*. In state and municipal governments, the undisputed leader is the conglomerate PAH *Todos pela Educação*, which has strong ties to the Itaú-Unibanco holding company (and to financial groups, major media outlets, big tech companies [Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon, Microsoft - GAFAM], mining companies, agribusiness, and industry). With regard to curriculum guidelines and secondary education reform, *Todos pela Educação* has established an alliance with the Lemann Foundation and, in partnership with the organisation Movimento pela Base (Movement by the Base, in literal translation) has developed the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC for its initials in Portuguese). Together, they structured an extensive and capillarised network of PAH, steering the educational conceptions of state and municipal secretaries of education and enabling their proposals to reach 38 million students in more than 140,000 public schools nationwide, according to the 2024 Basic Education Census.

Since 2007, *Todos pela Educação* and its associated PAH have been operating on several fronts: inclusion of Brazil in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA/OECD); creation of a Basic Education Development Index (IDEB, in the Portuguese acronym), benchmarked on competencies, to be used in each of the 143,000 public schools; development of a new BNCC, which shifted the curriculum focus toward competencies, especially social-emotional skills, resilience, entrepreneurship, life projects, and other neoliberal precepts²⁵; redefining literacy, with a focus on the “right age” and “skills” that have nothing to do with the critical use of language; reforming secondary education by hollowing out propaedeutic training and strengthening vocational training dissociated from scientific training; encouraging the use of technologies that can expropriate teachers’ knowledge²⁶, consistent with the objective of the

21 GOMES de SOUSA, Artur. Zonas de silêncio nas relações de trabalho docente Na educação básica brasileira (2011–2024). Tese de Doutorado. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2025.

22 Fontes, V. O Brasil e o capital-imperialismo: teoria e história. 2 ed. Rio de Janeiro: EPSJV/Editora UFRJ, 2010.

23 Leher, R. Liberdade de cátedra: limites impostos pelo capital e pela extrema-direita na educação dos EUA. In: IRISMANN, A.; COUTINHO, J. A. (org.). O futuro da universidade: perspectivas críticas sobre a liberdade acadêmica, precariedade e autonomia universitária. São Paulo: Lutas Anticapital, 2024.

24 The Lemann Group, led by Jorge Paulo Lemann and his partners Marcel Telles and Carlos Alberto Sicupira, operates across multiple sectors, notably beverages, food, retail, finance, and education. Its more prominent companies include AB InBev (the world’s largest brewery), Kraft Heinz (one of the largest food and beverage companies), Restaurant Brands International (owner of Burger King, Tim Hortons, and Popeyes), and Lojas Americanas. The group’s investment fund, 3G Capital, plays a central role in its acquisition and management strategies. Gera Venture Capital focuses on education. The Lemann Foundation trains leaders and operates as a PAH in shaping educational policy.

25 Areosa, J. Os efeitos iatrogênicos das técnicas de gestão. Cadernos de Psicologia Social do Trabalho, 25, 1-17, 2022.

26 Antunes, R. (Org.). Iceberg à deriva: O trabalho nas plataformas digitais. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

corporations discussed in the previous subsection.

All these prescriptions align with corporate interests, which in effect appropriate them, given that corporations do not systematically develop their own pedagogical conceptions. These proposals also enjoy support from governments led by the Workers' Party, as well as from right-wing parties and, with nuances, from far-right parties that govern a significant part of Brazil.

The teaching profession is becoming increasingly de-intellectualised and deprofessionalised²⁷ (through flexible contracts and task-based pay)²⁸; currently, 90% of future teachers undertake distance learning at the higher education level. In schools, due to the use of technologies and workbook-style materials in classrooms, teaching work ceases to be creative. Teachers' conditions have been further aggravated by successive State reforms. This reality has resulted in the *precariousness of teaching work*, a situation that cannot be separated from the actions of capital's APHs, which seek to expropriate teachers' knowledge and weaken the political power of the profession, a situation aggravated due to the fact that major trade union sectors representing education workers have adopted the agenda of capital.

Trade union adherence to capital

A first line of resistance and struggle against the manifestations of capital in education has been led by education workers and students. At present, education workers—numbering more than 100 million members—constitute a segment of the working classes that stands among the global vanguard of struggles. It is undeniable that year after year, fierce struggles arise, filled with criticism of *certain* neoliberal measures across the entire world.²⁹ Millions of women and men workers fight daily for better working conditions, higher wages, public recruitment through competitive examinations with stable contracts, and the right to a career that enables full dedication to educational work; they oppose neoliberal measures based on technocrat-driven evaluations, defend academic freedom, and fight for migrants' rights. In short, these struggles seek to obstruct the most severe consequences of capital's offensives.

Nevertheless, labor relations in recent decades—generally precarious, shaken by the intensification and expropriation of labor accelerated by the technological replacement of teachers, as well as the influence of postmodern epistemological relativism—are compromising the political power of education workers, a situation that has repercussions on the social consciousness of the category.

However, the concepts most trade unions have regarding education, unionisation, organisation, and strategy are not being

developed as alternatives to the capital order. Education International (EI)³⁰, the largest global trade union organisation, offers a living example of this condition. IE reproduces fundamental aspects of education promoted by capital, albeit with selective anti-neoliberal overtones, focusing on *petty politics*³¹, conjunctural confrontations, and, above all, a propensity to negotiate within the exclusive spheres of power of the power blocs³².

At its 10th Congress, held in Buenos Aires from July 29 to August 2, 2024, EI approved resolutions that fall squarely within the agenda of capital's PAH conglomerates, as well as of international organisations such as the United Nations (Millennium Development Goals, among others), the World Economic Forum, and the OECD. EI—and the unions that predominantly lead it—claim to be engaging in “high politics,” whereas their actions unfold within the realm of *petty politics*. In the case of capital's agencies, the situation is quite different: they work to restrict trade-union struggles to the sphere of *petty politics* and thereby succeed in consolidating *their high politics*. The difficult correlation of forces in global education confirms this assessment.

Indeed, the resolutions of EI's 10th Congress propose that the problems of education and of teachers' working conditions will be resolved through the *joint* efforts of governments, trade unions, and corporations, within the framework of the failed United Nations system³³. Notably, EI claims the relevance of their actions at the World Economic Forum, the very forum that brings together a significant portion of the General Staff of Capital to manage neoliberal austerity worldwide. Hence, EI corroborates the proposition that the underlying problem is not the offensive of capital, removing (or attempting to remove) the unions associated with it from the internationalist struggle against the order of capital. The Resolutions Document³⁴ associates neoliberalism solely with conservatism, the far right, and extractivism, as if neoliberalism were not the very system of capital accumulation in the present era—one that is also present in governments deemed progressive³⁵, a theme ignored by EI.

Overall, the document does not focus on the decommodification of education or on the need for an educational program embedded in the strategic and autonomous plan of the working classes. Instead, it posits solutions through an educational agenda concerted with capital, hence the pedagogical proposals such as “resilient societies,” “schools as symbols of resilience,” “education as a global public good” (a position advocated by the World Bank), “global governance,” “resilient” teachers, social-emotional skills, and the diversification of education. It is unequivocal that such resolutions suggest that educational problems could be overcome within the bounds of the order of capital, at a historical moment marked by the relentless advance of austerity that has been devastating public education and the living conditions

27 Novoa, A. (Org.). *Profissão professor*. Porto: Porto Editora., 1995

28 Leher, R. e Moreira Da Silva, A. Mercantilização financeirizada da educação, ensino superior a distância e jornadas de trabalho jamais vistas. Dossiê Fim da Escala 6x1 e Redução da Jornada de Trabalho. 2025.

29 An overview of relevant strikes around the world can be found at: Global Rights Index. Right to strike, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2023/violations/right-to-strike>. Accessed on: Jun 30 2025; Timeline of Strikes in 2023, Wikipedia. Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_strikes_in_2023. Accessed on: Jun 30 2025.

30 Education International brings together more than 32 million teachers and education workers, organized in 383 unions across 178 countries and territories. It is the main representative body of education professionals worldwide, present on all continents.

31 Gramsci, A. *Cadernos do cárcere*. Caderno 8, § XXVIII, 1931–1932.

32 Poulantzas, N. *O Estado, o poder e nós*. In: Balibar, E.; Poulantzas, N. et al. (org.) *O Estado em discussão*. São Paulo: Edições 70, 1981.

33 Bello, W. *A dying multilateral order*. 28 jun. 2025.

34 *Internacional da Educação. Resolução del 10º Congreso Mundial, Buenos Aires, Argentina, del 29 de julio al 2 de agosto de 2024.*

35 Saad Filho, A. *Morais, L. Brasil: neoliberalismo versus democracia*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2018.

of education workers. In an interview about the Resolutions, EI President Susan Hopgood (2024) states that:

“...here has never been a moment like this (...). The importance of teachers to the achievement of quality education for all has not always been universally recognised. But now, because of our campaigns, our advocacy and coalition building, there is a strongly shared belief that solving the teacher shortage crisis is a critical global priority. (...) [We are] reaching out to be part of global governance, including advising organizations like the WHO (World Health Organisation) and the World Economic Forum. The UN High Level Panel on the Teaching Profession (...) looked at the education crisis and a sustainable path forward and essentially said that global policy and governance and the world’s teachers are in this together: governments must increase investment in public education systems, including quality teacher training and professional development, guarantee labor rights and decent working conditions, involve teacher unions in policymaking and trust and respect teachers and their professional expertise.”³⁶

IE’s 10th Congress Resolution does not associate the presence of financialised educational corporations with the precariousness of work resulting from the unprecedented intellectual expropriation of teachers. Nor does it specify that contemporary educational corporations are financialised holding companies listed on stock exchanges and operating technologies customised by algorithms. Instead of foregrounding confrontation with corporations, it emphasises themes whose hegemonic meanings have been defined by the dominant pedagogy:

“Technology in general and AI in particular are changing the world of work, highlighting the importance of a diversified and high-quality education that provides students with social-emotional skills, critical thinking capacity, collaborative aptitudes, and problem-solving skills. These competencies are difficult to teach and assess through technology and AI.”³⁷

Characterising AI as something that aims at quality education is only plausible in terms of the pedagogy of capital imbued with social-emotional skills, as the Resolution acknowledges. Even more subservient is the defense of collaboration with corporations that, in practice, categorically reject any national regulation and refuse to address the performative character of algorithms, threatening legitimate governments with destabilisation:

“Strengthen the capacities of affiliated organisations to collaborate with technology companies in determining content and methodologies that enable professional learning and teaching.”³⁸

The supposed counterpoint provided by postmodern criticism, also present in the EI Resolutions, has in turn proved incapable of confronting the advance of capital. In fact, it often corroborates the scientific and cultural impoverishment of schools on behalf of an epistemological relativism in which “everything is discourse

and discourse is everything,” as if nothing existed outside it and signs lacked materiality in social relations and, objectively, in class struggles³⁹.

In the disputes surrounding the discourse, what stands out is the defense of pedagogical practices that are supposedly critical of far-right fundamentalism, but which distance teachers and students from the arena of struggle against the totalising force of capital. As if the far right were a reality unrelated to capital. Indeed, the far right conveniently directs its actions against the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) agenda. Nevertheless, defending this agenda against the far-right forces, without considering their roots in class struggles, limits the debate to rhetoric. Such an approach ignores, for example, that the far right is strongly linked to big capital, which is actively engaged in hollowing out the scientific and cultural education of the most exploited segments of the working class.

Despite occasional clashes, the far right and big capital converge in their attempt to reframe education by stripping its scientific, technological, artistic, and cultural substance. It is not possible to ignore the fact that in recent years the links between capital and the far right have become increasingly explicit, showing that the latter is not something external to the capital order⁴⁰. The widespread support of United States big tech companies for Donald Trump and of the ruling bloc for the election of Bolsonaro in 2018 and Milei in Argentina confirms the relevance of the thesis that fascism is inseparable from imperialism and the agency of big capital.

The major trade union struggles that continued to defend public education became essentially defensive and sectoral. As a result, they lacked the utopian-strategic force to confront education under the domination of capital. Furthermore, the concerns summarized by Adorno in his important manifesto *Education after Auschwitz* (1965)⁴¹ are not even outlined in a context in which, dramatically, the same questions can be asked about the technocratic trivialization of genocide in Palestine, worsened in 2024 and 2025, and also about the gradual advance of the far-right movements, including neo-fascists, in many parts of the world.

Public education as a political strategy of the working classes

Educational corporations, conglomerates of capital’s PAH, international organizations, and far-right initiatives converge in seeking to defeat the perspectives of public education grounded in the unitary school of labor⁴² and in the self-organisation of schools and universities.

Despite relevant encounters within the World Social Forums and struggles against Free Trade Agreements, it has not yet been possible to organise alternative internationalist agendas in favor of public education from the strategic perspective of the working classes. It is necessary to emphasise that this has not always been the case. In other historical contexts, public education

36 CONFEDERAÇÃO NACIONAL DOS TRABALHADORES EM EDUCAÇÃO – CNTE. Mesmo com ataques e retrocessos, nossa solidariedade é maior do que nunca, avalia Susan Hopgood, no 10º Congresso Mundial, realizado na capital argentina de 26 de julho a 2 de agosto de 2024.

37 Internacional da Educação. Resolución del 10º Congreso Mundial, Buenos Aires, Argentina, del 29 de julio al 2 de agosto de 2024.

38 Internacional da Educação. Resolución del 10º Congreso Mundial, Buenos Aires, Argentina, del 29 de julio al 2 de agosto de 2024, p. 37.

39 McNally, D. “Língua, história e luta de classe.” In: Wood, E. M.; Foster, J. B. (Org.). *Em defesa da história: marxismo e pós-modernismo*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1999, p. 33.

40 Mattei, C. *A ordem do capital: como economistas inventaram a austeridade e abriram caminho para o fascismo*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2023.

41 Adorno, Theodor. *Education After Auschwitz*. *Filosofia osvity*, Philosophy of Education. 25. 82-99, 1965.

42 Gramsci, A. *Cadernos do cárcere*. *Caderno 12*, § XXIX, 1932.

occupied a place within the high *politics*⁴³ of the proletariat.

Although earlier references can be found, it was within the International Workingmen's Association (IWA, 1864–1872) that education came to be conceived as an integral component of the proletariat's class-struggle *strategy*, aspiring to confront the order of capital from an internationalist standpoint. Particularly notable were the contributions of Marx and De Paepe, who conceived public education as a significant dimension of class struggles⁴⁴.

Marx's defense of public education⁴⁵ rests simultaneously on four foundations: (i) without public education guaranteed by the state, it would not be possible to provide basic education for the entirety of the working classes; (ii) common public education must break with localist worldviews based on family values and local life contexts, aiming to insert new generations into secular and lay life through science, art, and culture as universal rights; (iii) the education of the working classes cannot be detached from the educational principle of labor—a complex theme present throughout Marx's writings on education and later developed by Lenin, Gramsci, and Mariátegui with the concept of the unitary school; and (iv) in confrontation with liberal-bourgeois conceptions, Marx argued that defending the state's duty does not mean attributing to the state the role of educator of the people—on the contrary, a theme later developed in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875)⁴⁶.

The crux of the heated debates within the IWA and, subsequently, in the Commune concerned how (and whether) it would be possible to ensure that public schools—conceived as a duty of the state—could be self-determined by educators, students, and popular councils, thus materialising Marx's proposition that one must categorically reject the state itself acting as the educator of the people.

This political-strategic perspective on education was practiced by the working class as an experiment in the vibrant experience of the Paris Commune of 1871. The socialist conception of public education was further developed during the educational experience of the 1917 Russian Revolution, particularly between 1917 and 1924, prior to the consolidation of Stalinism within the Commissariat of Education. From 1917 onward, movements such as *Proletkult* sought an entirely new education, without a dialectical overcoming of the most advanced revolutionary experiences of the bourgeois revolutions⁴⁷. On the other hand, Lenin, Krupskaya, Trotsky, and Lunacharsky defended the need to incorporate elements inherited from bourgeois education, science, technology, art, and culture. In the case of education, as in Condorcet, a commitment to public, secular, free education—fully grounded in coeducation and dedicated to forming non-submissive citizens within universal cultural horizons that transcended *particularisms* and *localist* conceptions of culture—was vigorously defended within the Commissariat of Education. The defense of incorporating the educational principle of work that rejects the separation between intellectual and manual labor, as well as the

commitment to socialist education, however, aimed to overcome it (the bourgeois education, even if radical) due to its class limits.

The revolutionary experiences were extremely important in removing the issue of education from the exclusive domain of pedagogues, giving it a prominent place in the political strategy of training the working class as a “class for itself”—a necessary condition to ensure that each and everyone could become organizers of the new socialist society. This prism guided educational thought in the early years of the 1917 Revolution; Gramsci's elaborations on the unitary school; struggles against colonialism in Africa and Asia; the Cuban Revolution; the student movements of 1968—not only in the United States and Paris, but also in Mexico, in October 1968 at Tlatelolco; the Carnation Revolution; the early years of the Sandinista Revolution; the Penguins movement in Chile; the Zapatista *caracoles*; the occupations of schools and universities—such as the occupation of the National Autonomous University of Mexico—and, in Brazil, the struggles against the counter-reformation of secondary education and the new capital-oriented curricular bases, as well as the ongoing educational struggles of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and many dispersed experiences that, in different ways, seek to forge an education beyond the order of capital.

It is undeniable that workers are aware that education is traversed by class struggles. However, there are no proper political means to forge a national-popular will based on internationalism that would make it possible, on the one hand, to develop comprehensive knowledge about the various expressions of capital's systemic offensive on education—it is necessary to know the enemy in all its forms—and, on the other hand, to forge unifying ideas capable of inspiring and mobilising educational struggles from the perspective of the class for itself. Around the world, Marxist research groups and critical scholars in general are seeking to understand capital's systemic offensive against education. Many of these collectives are linked to education workers' unions, student collectives, and social movements. However, without the organisation of collectives, unions, and left-wing parties, critical theory loses its vigor and transformative power; after all, universities and intellectuals cannot replace the leading role of the working classes. The debate on the role of the state in the development of the economy is a necessary and decisive one in order to create alternatives to the barbarism of capital in a new destructive stage of wars and the destruction of the socio-metabolic living conditions of peoples■

43 Gramsci, A. *Cadernos do cárcere*. Caderno 8, § XXVIII, 1931–1932.

44 Musto, M. (org.). *Trabalhadores, uni-vos! Antologia política da I Internacional*. São Paulo: Boitempo; Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014.

45 Marx, K. *Resoluções do Congresso de Genebra* (1866). In: Musto, M. (org.). *Trabalhadores, uni-vos! Antologia política da I Internacional*. São Paulo: Boitempo; Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014.

46 Marx, K. *Crítica do Programa de Gotha*. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2012.

47 Leher, R. A pedagogia socialista nos processos revolucionários, organizações políticas e movimentos sociais. In: CALDART, R. S.; VILLAS BOAS, R. L. *Pedagogia socialista – legado da revolução de 1917 e desafios atuais*. São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2017.