

## **Student Dissent and Politics at the University of São Paulo**

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On May 3, a group of students took over the Rector's office of the University of São Paulo, USP, and, as of this writing, May 31, are still there. They claim to represent the university's 40 thousand students, and have the support of the unions of the university's administration personnel, the teacher's union and of a group of professors, mostly from the Faculty of Philosophy, Letter and Human Sciences. The Rector, Suely Vilela Sampaio, is a professor at the Faculty of Farmaceutical Studies in the campus of Ribeirão Preto. She was chosen by the University Council and designated by the state governor, which traditionally nominates the person chosen by the Council. Rectors in Brazilian public universities are always chosen from their own academic staff.

### **Universidade de São Paulo (USP)**

USP is a state institution, supported by the State of São Paulo, and one of the most important in Latin America. One third of its students are in master and Ph.D. programs. There are 15 thousand administrative employees, and about 5 thousand academics, most of them with a doctor's degree. In 2004, the university granted 2,100 PhDs, 3,300 MAs and 5,500 professional degrees in all fields of knowledge in 68 units in the main campus in the city of São Paulo and in other campi in other cities in the state – São Carlos, Ribeirão Preto, Campinas, Piracicaba. To pay for its costs, the university receives 5 percent of the State of São Paulo's tax revenues, which amounted last year to about 2.2 billion reais, or 1.1 billion dollars. Within its budget, the university is free to

use the money as it sees fit, and can also obtain revenues from other sources. To enter the university, students have to pass an exam that can be extremely competitive in fields like medicine, engineering or law, and there is no tuition. Most doctoral students are able to get fellowships as stipends, and the professors at USP are the major receivers of research grants from the Brazilian National Research Council and São Paulo's Science Support Agency (FAPESP).

### **The justifications**

The main justification for the occupation was to protest against a decree of the newly elected State governor, José Serra, requiring that the three state universities (USP, the University of Campinas and the State University of São Paulo, UNESP), which, together, receive about 10% of the state revenues, should post their routine financial transactions in a transparent state system open for inspection in the Internet. The students argue that, as an autonomous institution, the University should not make their accounts transparent. This decree followed the nomination of a State Secretary for Higher Education, which, given the autonomy of the universities, was feared as attempt to bring them under the governor' control (previously, the universities were nominally under the Secretary for Science and Technology, which had however other functions, and did not interfere in their activities). The students declared that this was an attack against university autonomy, in spite of reassurances from the state government, and acknowledgement by the university authorities, that this was not so. The students demanded that the governor should revoke the decree, and presented a long list of other demands, from full participation of students in all university decision bodies to the construction of new buildings for student residence and open restaurants with subsidized meals on Saturdays and Sundays. They also have been demanding that the state should increase the percentage of its tax revenues it gives to the universities.

The political and ideological agenda of this movement is very clear. Most of the students in this movement, as well as their supporters, are from small, extreme-left groups that dominate the

unions and associations, given the passivity and lack of interest of most of the others. José Serra is from the PSDB party, was a candidate for President in 2002, and is a leading personality in the opposition to the Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva government. The students accuse him of being “neoliberal” and of having a hidden agenda of privatizing the university. By privatization they do not mean necessarily selling it or giving its control to a private group, but any movement from the university or its departments to establish links with industry, or of generating additional revenues by – God forbid! – charging tuition.

Several departments in the university, particularly in the areas of engineering, agricultural research, economics and business administration, have developed strong links with external clients, private and public, and generate resources from research, technical assistance and extension courses, which are used to equip the units, complement the salaries of the professors, and generate overhead for the university. In the last few years, because of the pressures from the unions, the Rectors’ office has introduced several limitations and restrictions on these activities. These gestures to appease the unions were not enough, however, to stop the occupation of the Rector’s office, and now the Rector is caught between the political demands of the militants and the growing annoyance of most of the academics and students with this interruption of their work. Public opinion, which often looks at the students with sympathy, seems to be turning against them. The Rector has obtained a court order requiring the students to vacate the building and could, legally, ask the police to dislodge them by force, but neither she nor the state governor wants to risk a physical confrontation.

### **Higher education in São Paulo**

In the State of São Paulo, 85% of the enrolment in higher education is private, and there has been a constant demand from different sectors to increase the size and coverage of the state system. Besides the three universities, the state also has a small network of vocational schools, the Centro Paula Souza. The cost of the state system is already very high, given the assumption that

all academics are full-time researchers, which is not generally true, and the impossibility of charging tuition, and it is difficult to justify an increase in the 10% tax base which already goes to public higher education, given the pressing needs of basic education, health, security, and other social needs. For several years, persons related to the higher education sector have been trying to formulate a project for the expansion of higher education in the state which would be similar to the system of California, with USP and UNICAMP playing the role of the University of California, UNESP playing the role of the State University system, and the Paula Souza system expanding into a much larger network similar to the community colleges, in partnership with municipalities and the private sector. There is no sign, however, that this plan is being endorsed by the current state government, and most of the pressure, which seems to be prevailing, is to change the University of São from a high quality, internationally minded research university into a mass-oriented, highly subsidized, local and politically dominated institution.

## **Impact**

Eventually, the students will abandon the Rector's office. Already, most of the university departments are working as usual, in spite of the decisions of the unions to use the opportunity to strike for higher salaries. The main consequence of this episode is likely to be a stalemate, and this is worrisome. On May 31<sup>st</sup>, the state government revised the decrees, making explicit that they do not limit the autonomy of the universities, in a conciliatory movement. The students and unions will not get most of their claims beyond some minor concessions, like weekend busses and more subsidized restaurants. However, the university authorities, as well as the state government, will be very afraid of implementing policies for making the universities more efficient in the use of their resources, with strong links with the productive sector, and to grant more autonomy to the departments and institutes to raise additional resources. It will also thwart the proposals to create a more differentiated, California-like system. Needless to say, the issue of charging tuition for high-income students in public universities will not be raised. This is

forbidden by the Brazilian constitution, and no politician in Brazil has dared to openly defend its need, in spite of many agreeing with it in private, because of the inevitable backlash from the radical students and unions.