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Leftist Plans Rebirth of São Paulo's Schools

By JAMES BROOKE
Special to The New York Times

SAO PAULO — Twenty-five years ago, Paulo Freire's world as a radical educator crashed around him.

Caught on the losing side of a conservative coup, the 43-year-old Brazilian professor was jailed as a subversive and then exiled for 15 years. During two decades of military rule, his world-renowned education theories were banned in Brazil.

After a quarter-century, Mr. Freire's beard has turned white. But at 68 years old, he speaks animatedly of his new job: education secretary for São Paulo, the largest school system in Brazil.

"We want to create schools where questioning is not a sin," Mr. Freire said of his plans for São Paulo's system, which includes 654 schools and 550,000 students. "It's no sin to make a critical study of Brazil's reality. A small percentage own land. Most people don't."

The turn of the wheel that brought Mr. Freire to the top of the schools here is a part of a large upswing of the left in Latin America's most populous nation. Last November, candidates of Mr. Freire's party, the socialist Workers Party, were elected mayors in three Brazilian state capitals, including this

megalopolis of 12 million people.

In November, Brazilians are to elect a president in the first direct elections since 1960. According to public-opinion polls, the top two favorites are leftists — Luis Inácio da Silva, a deputy of the Workers' Party, and Leonel Brizola, a former governor of Rio de Janeiro who was also exiled in 1964.

During Mr. Freire's exile, his theories became better known around the world than at home. He lectured at Harvard and in Havana. He set up literacy programs in Chile during the presidency of Salvador Allende Gossens, in the new nations of Portuguese-speaking Africa, and in Nicaragua

after the Sandinista revolution.

In his travels, he refined education techniques first devised in the late 1950's in literacy campaigns in Brazil's impoverished northeast. Disseminated through his best-selling book, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Mr. Freire's techniques involve using everyday vocabulary and concepts to teach illiterate people to read — and to question the social and political status quo.

Leaking Roofs, Exposed Wires

His emphasis on consciousness raising was adopted in Brazil by advocates of "liberation theology," a Christian philosophy that encourages poor people to seek social justice in addition to personal salvation.

"We want to impart a critical understanding to students, not just the transfer of an accepted body of knowledge,"

the diminutive educator said in a conversation in his living room here, which is decorated with a Bantu head from Angola, religious figurines from Mexico and a boat prow from Brazil's northeast.

Looking back on his first 100 days in office, the theorist said the most daunting problem he faced was the physical condition of São Paulo's public schools — broken desks, leaking roofs, exposed wires, blackboards without chalk and pools of water in classrooms.

"The military government mistreated public schools," he said. "We have repaired 4,000 desks. When second semester starts in July, São Paulo's 50 worst schools will be repaired."

Deploring Brazilian politicians' "mania for inaugurations and disinterest in maintenance," Mr. Freire vowed

not to build, but to repair. For the 250,000 school-age children in São Paulo who, according to estimates, do not attend school, he proposed starting classes in existing structures like parish halls and community centers.

Turning to the more controversial question of curriculum, Mr. Freire said only that he had assembled a group of 80 university professors to study possible changes. In what may be a sign of things to come, São Paulo's new Marxist mayor returned to schools books by Friar Carlos Alberto Betto, a prominent Brazilian liberation theologian.

A firm believer in community participation, Mr. Freire wants to create "democratic" schools where students, teachers, parents, custodians and cafeteria workers will discuss ways of making schools "happier, more open" places.