

Brazil's Bolsonaro threatens dictatorship over COVID-19 crisis

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In a nationally televised broadcast Tuesday night, Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro stepped up the campaign of attacks on the working class unleashed by the ruling elite since the first cases of the new COVID-19 disease were recorded in the country's largest city, São Paulo.

Just one month after the first case was detected, Brazil has 2,915 confirmed cases and 77 deaths. The Health Ministry admits that this is a gross underestimate, as only patients with serious symptoms are being tested. A London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine study found that underreporting in Brazil is likely as high as 90 percent, bringing the total cases to 30,000.

Tuesday was the first day of decrees ordering the shutdown of retail stores in the country's most populous state, São Paulo, and in Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in the country, as all states have shut down schools, and several others have ordered partial shutdowns in other sectors.

In his address, Bolsonaro called press reports on the number of dead in Italy "panic-mongering," saying that the pandemic would be over "soon" in Brazil and calling the partial retail shutdowns across the country a "scorched earth" policy that should be abandoned.

He dismissed medical evidence to claim that "90 percent" of the infected "would feel nothing" and that he, in particular, "with a history of athletics," would at most feel the symptoms "of a little cold."

The next day, Bolsonaro told reporters gathered in front of the Alvorada presidential palace that the quarantine measures would result in chaos "that would dwarf what was seen in Chile," where millions of workers took to the streets against social inequality. He warned darkly that this "might spell a break with democratic normalcy that you [the press] defend so

much."

This threat of a coup was anticipated days before when Bolsonaro declared that "it would be easy" to decree a state of siege and suspend the constitution in the case of social unrest caused by the pandemic.

The world over, the ruling classes are using the catastrophic socioeconomic toll of the pandemic to amass huge wealth through bailouts and quantitative easing and to intensify the exploitation of workers threatened with having no money to eat.

But few rulers have spelled out this attitude in such a cruel and blunt fashion as Brazil's Bolsonaro. Even more criminal declarations have been offered by businessmen, with the heir of one of Brazil's largest fast food chains saying that workers should fear unemployment more than COVID-19.

With 23 members of his entourage on a visit to US President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago, Florida resort in early March testing positive for the coronavirus, Bolsonaro has refused to reveal documents on his own diagnosis, citing his lack of symptoms as proof of his thesis that the disease is not serious and implying that he would somehow be invulnerable to the disease.

Having founded in late 2019 his new fascist "Alliance for Brazil" party, based on "loyalty to his principles" and the belief that his presidency is a fulfillment of divine providence, Bolsonaro has sought to make the issue of his health a means of solidifying support among his far-right base.

He has repeatedly sounded this theme since his endorsement of and attendance at the March 15 fascist marches drawing thousands of his supporters to call for the Army to close down Congress and the Supreme Court in order to grant him unlimited powers. A central theme of these marches was a denial and mockery of the pandemic.

Army Commander Gen. Leal Pujol on Wednesday said that the Army High Command faces in the pandemic “the greatest challenge of its generation.” Bourgeois editorialists have chosen to paint this statement in rosy colors and claim, without a shred of evidence, that, in the words of leading pundit Maria Cristina Fernandes, “the Army has shown it will not act as Bolsonaro’s praetorian guard.” Indeed, it may rather signal that the military is once again considering whether to seize power.

For its part, after initially dismissing the pandemic as an “excuse” used by Bolsonaro for the economic stagnation that has plagued Brazil during his term, the Workers Party (PT) has now sought to exploit the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to curry favor with dominant factions of the ruling class, especially those dissatisfied with the dead end of Bolsonaro’s unprecedented attempt to subordinate Brazil’s foreign policy to the interests of US imperialism.

The PT’s leader, former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, declared on Wednesday that Bolsonaro lacks the “psychological conditions” to rule and should be impeached or resign. This was a nod to the declaration days earlier by former Bolsonaro allies that he should be evaluated by a medical board and declared unfit for office, as an impeachment would be “too painful.”

The whole of the ruling class is united on imposing upon Brazilian workers the choice of either getting sick and infecting their loved ones or starving to death. One recent report found that 10 million workers in the country’s slums have no savings whatsoever and would lack money for food after a one-week lockdown. The quarantine measures will do little for a population crammed with three generations of relatives into single-bedroom homes in the densely packed settlements.

These conditions can only lead to an explosion of class struggle. Bolsonaro’s ravings are an expression of the desperation of the Brazilian ruling class as it prepares for unprecedented acts of repression.



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