Mexico’s government seeks to place burden of virus crisis on the backs of the working class

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By Wednesday March 25 reported cases of COVID-19 in Mexico had risen to 475, from an initial three reported on February 25. Six had died from the virus.

On Tuesday, Undersecretary of Health Hugo López-Gatell said that the Health Ministry expected a “long epidemic that could last into September or October,” with the highest number of cases expected in August.

López-Gatell had previously recommended on Saturday, March 21 that people stay home, while announcing an initiative he dubbed “Sana Distancia” or Healthy Distance, calling on people for the next month not to get too close to others, and to forego the customary hug, kiss or handshake when greeting each other. Earlier, on March 14, the Education Ministry had extended the two-week Easter school break to four weeks, from March 20 to April 20, to keep students at home.

Mexican President Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), while also recently calling on people to stay home, recklessly repudiated López-Gatell’s advice Sunday, releasing a video message showing him in a crowd in Oaxaca state and encouraging Mexicans to maintain their “normal rhythms of life” and “don’t stop going out.” Yet it is precisely in the packed urban areas filled by masses of workers and poor such as Mexico City and its extensive metro area that the virus is most likely to propagate.

AMLO and his government were very slow to react to the coronavirus threat. As recently as March 16, López Obrador ignorantly belittled its threat to Mexican workers and their families. “Pandemics … won’t do anything,” he boasted. So little was done to attempt to contain it until this last week.

The Mexican government failed to take more timely and serious measures to contain the virus outbreak in substantial part because the economy was already struggling before the virus hit, and it did not want to risk a further slowdown.

The investment bank Credit Suisse and Bank of America have both been predicting that the Mexican economy will contract by 4 percent in 2020, following on a 1 percent drop last year. According to a report by the bank BBVA Mexico, the jobs of 18 million are at risk because of a virus induced recession, and 42,000 businesses in Mexico City alone could close according to the Canacop business chamber.

The Mexican stock market fell to a record low on March 10. With oil prices skidding, Mexico’s crude prices dropped this year to their lowest level since 2002, a huge blow to government revenue. The Mexican peso fell to a record low of over 25 to the dollar on Monday, only gaining some ground in the wake of the massive actions of the US Federal Reserve and the US Congress to prop up markets and big business.

Tourism, which normally contributes upwards of 10 percent to Mexico’s GDP, has collapsed. For example, tourism fell 76 percent in one week on Mexico’s Caribbean coast.

In Mexico City, street vendors have reported crashing sales, at the same time that prices for essential food items soared. A kilogram of the Mexican staple, corn tortillas, recently increased more than 40 percent. A kilo of eggs rose almost 20 percent, from 38 pesos to 45.

This in a country where even the minimum wage of full-time employees in the official sector is a paltry $5 a day, 56 percent work in the informal sector and 54 million live below the official poverty line.

Given this downward maelstrom the Mexican ruling oligarchy will not make serious resources available to contain and treat COVID-19, or to compensate workers and the poor for their economic dislocation. The well-being of the working class is of no import.

On Tuesday the president asked business leaders not to lay off employees, exposing workers to the choice of not being able to feed their families or threatening their own and their families’ health.

AMLO said there would be no “bailouts” because “we have to take care of the budget.” He said the federal government would make loans bearing no interest or low

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interest to some small businesses, such as restaurants or workshops, but he provided no detail as to the budget for the program. No aid was offered to workers who lose their jobs.

Similarly Mexico City's mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, of AMLO's Morena party, has announced help to "vulnerable sectors" that amounts to little more than crumbs: zero interest loans for four months to small businesses of $400, a $20 grant per child to low income households until the epidemic wanes, and $40 to $60 to indigenous vendors to return to their home regions.

AMLO has also ludicrously claimed that the government has prepared enough medical infrastructure to weather the virus storm. In that respect, the government specifically claims that it will provide an additional $150 million in medical supplies and will hire 42,000 doctors, nurses and other medical professionals.

But even were that true, it would be much too little too late.

Mexico's public health system was already notoriously underfunded. Yet after AMLO entered office in January of last year he slashed health spending by 30 percent, in line with his austerity drive. In response, the head of Mexico's Social Security Institute stepped down and issued an unusual public resignation letter declaring that "excessive savings and controls in health spending are inhumane."

The health care afforded the Mexican working class is through the network of public hospitals and clinics operated by the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS)—except for those who work in the informal sector are not even covered, and must incur debt to get private care.

In the IMSS system, lengthy wait times for procedures are the norm. Often, doctors and nurses are forced to ask patients to buy them surgical masks, gowns and other basic supplies. This is the health care afforded to the working class.

The grim reality of this system has been laid bare by the pandemic.

Medical staff treating the virus have already protested the shortage of personnel protection and medical equipment, complaining that a lack of masks, gloves and other supplies is putting them at risk.

Medical workers held strikes and walkouts across the country this week, warning that a lack of resources increases the risk for them and their families as well as for patients.

"We can't work without equipment," implored a nurse in Tabasco state in a widely viewed video on Twitter.

One doctor who screens dozens of people a day for COVID-19 at a public hospital in the impoverished state of Mexico, which surrounds Mexico City, said she is allotted just two disposable masks for each 12-hour shift, when one should be used for each patient.

As to COVID-19 test availability in Mexico, authorities have given a range of figures, from about 9,000 to 35,000. Given the rate of increase of the infection, these numbers are grossly inadequate. The government has to date conducted fewer than 3,000 tests.

If this disaster is already brewing in the official medical system, one can only imagine the horrors that will arise when the virus spreads to the crowded, unhygienic conditions in migrant camps along the US border or on Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, with AMLO serving as junior partner in Trump's criminal immigration policies.

The response of the Mexican ruling elite to the epidemic inevitably is to shift its cost, both monetarily and in health terms, onto the working class.

Perhaps more ominously, last week AMLO announced that he had called on the armed forces to develop an "emergency plan to address the public health crisis." This is yet another threat to the Mexican populace that is in reality designed to prepare to meet popular opposition to the criminal policies of the oligarchy.

When Mexico City was devastated by an earthquake in 1985, the populace independently organized itself to meet the critical needs of those afflicted, because the ruling class and its state would and could not do so.

Workers now must organize their own independent response to the coronavirus crisis, by forming committees of action in workplaces and neighborhoods to ensure that society's resources are directed at combatting the impact of the virus on the entire population on the basis of social need, rather than private profit, which dictates the polices of those now in control. Moreover, workers must organize jointly across borders to accomplish this. This is the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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