

Brazilian nurses strike over deadly conditions as COVID-19 deaths mount

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Nurses and other health care workers have carried out strikes and protests in several Brazilian cities over a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) that is leaving many of them sick and some dying from the COVID-19.

After rising rapidly throughout the week, the number of officially confirmed coronavirus cases in Brazil reached 30,425 on Thursday, while the death toll stood at 1,924. However, a study carried out by the Health Intelligence and Operations Center (NOIS) points out that, due to extreme underreporting and lack of testing, the actual number of cases would be 12 times greater—i.e., more than 350,000 infected. And many COVID-19 deaths are going unrecorded.

The situation has been exacerbated by the actions of Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro who, since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, has waged a criminal campaign to sabotage any measures to contain the epidemic that conflict with immediate profit interests.

This scenario is leading to the collapse of the Brazilian health care system. Health care workers have been denouncing the precarious conditions of both care and work since the outbreak of the pandemic in the country. This week, protests, including work stoppages, have spread to hospitals and other health care units in various parts of Brazil.

In Sao Luis, the capital city of Maranhao, in the northeast of the country, health professionals from Djalma Marques Municipal Hospital, known as “Socorrão 1”, threatened to carry out a wildcat strike on Monday. The workers were outraged after two co-workers died from COVID-19, victims of the lack of the most basic protection measures.

“What’s happening in Socorrão 1??? Two dead employees, already identified the source of infection,

technicians testing positive... Where is the washing of the terminal, or the interdiction of the sector, where is Coren (Regional Nursing Council), where is the Sindhosp (Union of Hospitals, Clinics and Laboratories), the Municipal Secretary... Nobody will speak about it?! For God’s sake, there are already MANY infected, so take action,” an employee protested on Facebook.

The next day, in another unit, “Socorrão 2”, 40-year-old radiology technician Sérgio Costa died after contracting the virus under the same conditions.

In Maranhão, of the 797 confirmed cases, 79 work in the state’s health care network. The real number of infected workers in the area is undoubtedly much higher as other sectors are also acting in the front line in the fight against the virus. In São Luís, for example, there are three large private hospitals treating COVID-19 patients.

Over 2,500 kilometers south of Maranhão, nurses, technicians, physiotherapists, psychologists and hospital administrative staff of the Minas Gerais State Hospital Foundation (Fhemig) carried out a work stoppage on Wednesday morning.

In addition to the conditions of insecurity, with the lack of PPE, the workers were protesting against their exclusion from a temporary bonus granted by the state government to doctors only.

“It was very frustrating ... to benefit only the medical professionals, because the hospital contains everything, from the doormen at the entrance. It’s absurd, because we’re working like them in an inhumane fashion, without equipment, but we are here,” a Fhemig worker told the TV station *Record*.

Another one commented: “Why reward only a class of workers, given that we are a team? Besides the stress, the constant fear because we have relatives at

home, is our work of less value?"

The governor of Minas Gerais, Romeu Zema, responded by stating that the workers' protest was "incomprehensible," since "a few years ago these professionals did not get paid on time, and this month they did."

On Wednesday night another protest by health workers took place in Belém do Pará, in northern Brazil. The nurses of the Emergency Room Mário Pinotti left work and blocked the avenue in front of the hospital, demonstrating against the deadly conditions to which they and their patients are subjected.

In an interview with *Rede Liberal*, nurse Socorro Brito declared: "This is the worst crisis we have gone through, because the virus has been inside for more than two months and there is still not a project to work with these people. The patients enter through the same door as the other patients, including children. It's revolting."

Nauza Araújo, another nurse said: "Working without masks, without a gown. Entering the isolation without PPE means assured contamination, means professionals leaving, and that can't happen. In a few days you won't have anyone else to look after the patients. We just want dignity to work, to do our job."

Although more than one health care provider has already been removed on suspicion of infection with the virus, professionals who are in the highest risk groups continue working normally. "I will turn 70 in June, I am diabetic and hypertensive... I am there working but I am not feeling well", said Maria das Graças.

The following night, on Thursday, professionals from another health unit in Belém paralyzed work. In a video posted on Twitter, the workers, from the Emergency Care Unit in the Sacramento neighborhood, appear holding posters demanding appropriate PPE. In addition to extremely precarious conditions, such as a lack of water during the night, they denounced the fact that 15 professionals in the residence are sick and without assistance.

"I need us to be heard and to guarantee us minimum working conditions. That's all we need to attend to this population that needs us," appealed a nurse who says she's been working for eight years as a permanent employee. "Those who know me know my commitment to my work, and we just want the

minimum conditions so we don't get sick, so we don't take the disease home."

The mayor of Belém, Zenaldo Coutinho from the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), responded to the protest on Twitter: "I wanted to say that the demonstration that took place yesterday in front of the PSM da 14 was a serious mistake because the employees went to the street with their PPE and uniforms. It was a mistake that we lament."

Zenaldo also said, in an interview on the TV program *Jornal Liberal*, that the lack of PPE in hospitals is due to a shortage of products on the world market. However, he claimed that professionals have necessary equipment guaranteed until at least next week.

An interview given to the *G1* by an anonymous doctor, who works at Pronto-Socorro Mário Pinotti, or PSM da 14, completely refutes the mayor's claims. According to him, the absence of basic working conditions, in fact, came much earlier than the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic.

"A month ago, when cases in Belém began to appear, we doctors began to demand minimum working conditions: water, soap, paper towels and PPE. But unfortunately the problems of the PSM da 14 are also structural, there is not much room for an illness that requires social distancing. The lack is not only of PPE, but also of materials such as oxygen catheters.

"I have been in the unit for two years, I have never seen anything like it. The patients' situation is sad. There are no stretchers, not enough oxygen plugs. It's a real war scene in there. I've never seen so many people in need of oxygen and intubation like I've seen lately. Unfortunately, the public system in Belém has already collapsed."



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