Brazil's Bolsonaro escalates coup threats as ruling class pushes "back-to-work" orders

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As ever more ominous reports emerge from across Brazil of the collapse of health systems and an increased death toll due to the uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, last weekend saw two days of fascist marches denouncing the partial economic shutdowns decreed by governors and mayors and calling for an immediate return to normal economic activities.

Brazil currently has more than 42,000 confirmed cases and 2,700 deaths, but authorities admit the real number of cases is up to 15 times higher than the official count, and that thousands of people have died with symptoms of COVID-19 but were never tested. Images of rows of fresh graves dug in São Paulo and videos of convoys of hearses heading to cemeteries have already circulated in the international media.

On Saturday, large Brazilian cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, Fortaleza and Porto Alegre saw convoys of hundreds of upper-middle-class demonstrators hypocritically calling for the economy to be "reopened" from safely inside their cars, only to be heckled and pelted with eggs when they drove through working class neighborhoods. On Sunday, Brazilian Army Day, fascist demonstrators gathered in front of the Army headquarters in the capital Brasília to demand that Bolsonaro shut down Congress and the Supreme Court for supporting the partial economic shutdowns decreed by governors and mayors.

They once again called for the revival of "AI-5"—i.e., "Institutional Act number 5"—a 1968 decree by the 1964-1985 military dictatorship that outlawed opposition, suspended habeas corpus and legalized political kidnappings, torture and executions.

Facing opposition from Congress, state governors and the Supreme Court against his attempt to override the partial economic shutdowns, Bolsonaro has charged that the Congress is attempting to provoke an economic crisis in order to force him out. On Sunday, he ranted before the demonstrators that "we don't want to negotiate anything," and that politicians "should understand they are subject to the will of the people" to reopen the economy, adding that "now the people should be in power."

For over a year, fascist movements have used calls for the revival of the vicious methods of the former dictatorship to mobilize the most violent and disoriented layers of Brazilian society in favor of the removal of any restraint to capitalist profit-making and alignment with US imperialism. Now, such forces have been mobilized to denounce the partial economic shutdowns decreed by governors and mayors across the country as an intolerable obstacle to crisis-ridden Brazilian capitalism.

Even before the pandemic, Brazil had already faced five years of economic crisis due to falling commodity prices and declining demand, along with decreased investments from its main economic partner, China. Now. It must rush to keep up with efforts of the imperialist powers to re-open their economies in order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on its competitiveness. But in doing so, it faces growing working-class resistance.

Popular anger is fueled by the consensus among the ruling class, including its representatives within both Bolsonaro's opposition among Brazil's traditional right wing and the "left", led by the Workers Party (PT), that nothing will be done to counter the catastrophic impact of the pandemic upon workers' lives, health and living standards. All that is on offer is starvation aid to the most impoverished layers, equal to less than half their average incomes. Violent means are being prepared to counter social opposition.

Brazilian governors were quick to issue an open letter criticizing Bolsonaro's participation in the fascist demonstration and declaring support for the House and Senate leaders "in face of the declarations by President Jair Bolsonaro regarding their attitude and offending the democratic principles that rule our nation." This was followed on Monday with governors' announcements of back-to-work directives, even as state health authorities warn that not one Brazilian state has managed to control the pandemic's spread.

Both state officials and editorials in Brazil's leading newspapers have denounced Bolsonaro's speech at the rally, while in the same breath minimizing it as inconsequential. They have pointed to perfunctory statements by military personnel to claim that, except for Bolsonaro's behavior, all the other political actors in the Brazilian establishment are defending democratic principles.

This attitude was summed up yesterday in the editorial of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, which regularly features the writings of

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Brazilian military officials in its opinion pages: “It is comforting to realize, however, that, this time, authorities from every institution in the Republic reacted strongly against another offense to democracy by Bolsonaro and his followers.”

Such a statement is wishful thinking at best. *O Estado de S. Paulo* was referring to reports of frantic closed-door Sunday meetings between congressional, Supreme Court and military leaders that reportedly resulted in a Monday statement by the Defense Ministry that the Armed Forces “work to maintain peace and stability in the country, always obeying the Constitution.” The reality is, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed an intense crisis within the ruling class over how to defuse the crisis and threatens to provoke a constitutional breakdown.

These developments come barely days after the dismissal of Brazil’s health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, last Thursday. Mandetta had been universally praised by bourgeois political parties and editorial boards for publicly criticizing Bolsonaro’s photo-ops with crowds of supporters as countering social distancing recommendations. In the crisis leading up to his dismissal, the unanimous prediction of congressional officials and media pundits was that Mandetta would be kept on the job by the “adults in the room”—i.e., the military in Bolsonaro’s cabinet, including his chief of staff, Gen. Water Braga Netto, and his vice president, Gen. Hamilton Mourão. They could be counted upon, it was claimed, to keep Bolsonaro in check.

In fact, Bolsonaro’s appearance at the fascist rally Sunday for the “reopening of the economy” expressed his confidence that the ruling class will close ranks behind his extreme-right policies.

Bolsonaro has for a month put pressure on governors to reopen local economies, reaching the point of requisitioning health equipment production from all national manufacturers, without a timetable for their distribution, forcing governors to engage in direct negotiations with Chinese companies. Now, the Brazilian Internal Revenue Service has opened an investigation against one of the governors, Maranhão state’s Flávio Dino, from the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), for bypassing both the federal government and US imperialism in bringing ventilators from China through Ethiopia.

Only last week, Bolsonaro’s congressional base succeeded in stalling a bill providing states compensation for the drop in sales tax collections, with Economy Minister Paulo Guedes declaring it would provide a “malign encouragement” to governors to extend the shutdowns against the federal government’s will.

Governors, including in the opposition-held impoverished Northeast, previously adopted a tactical criticism of Bolsonaro’s bluntness in stating that workers must return to work and confront infection and death from the coronavirus or starve. Now, they are closing ranks behind the back-to-work orders, while simultaneously adopting Bolsonaro’s reckless promotion, without scientific backing, of hydroxychloroquine for treating COVID-19.

In the country’s epicenter of the pandemic, São Paulo, with more than 14,000 confirmed cases, 1,000 deaths and thousands of unprocessed exams, retail is set to be reopened on May 11, before what the government itself predicts will be the “peak” of the pandemic.

The Army has already admitted that it is searching for mass burial sites in the country’s second-wealthiest city, Rio de Janeiro, while northern states such as Pernambuco, Ceará and Amazonas have declared that their health care systems are already in a state of collapse.

As in every other capitalist country, the COVID-19 pandemic is exposing and deepening the crisis of Brazilian capitalism and laying bare the bankruptcy of all factions of the ruling class, which is unable to formulate any alternative to the unfolding social catastrophe. This includes the social democratic and pseudo-leftist formations claiming to speak for workers, represented in Brazil by the PT and its petty-bourgeois backer, the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL).

Both are terrified of the consequences of breaking ranks with the ruling class and of encouraging, even if accidentally, any social opposition to Bolsonaro’s government. PSOL President Juliano Medeiros reacted to growing public indignation over Bolsonaro’s authoritarian campaign by cynically writing in the pro-PT *Fórum* that “for the president to be removed, it is necessary for the center-right to break with the government.”

He admitted that “when Bolsonaro crosses the line as he did yesterday, those against it become desperate for some initiative. It is normal. On social media the left leaders become the target of all kinds of demands, ‘enough with censure motions’ some say, ‘do something’ demand others,” only to conclude: “but the center parties also need to be addressed. The ball is not in our court, but in theirs. Indignation must be channeled to demands to the presidents of the House and Senate.”

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