

Brazilian nurses go on strike in Manaus amid collapse of health care system

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Hundreds of Brazilian nurses staged a work stoppage on Monday morning at the 28 de Agosto Hospital in the Amazonian capital of Manaus, protesting the criminal irresponsibility of the government in failing to provide health care workers with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), leading to widespread illness and deaths of co-workers.

Manaus, with a population of over two million, is the first Brazilian city to declare the collapse of its health care system due to the coronavirus. With the height of the pandemic not expected until next month, 90 percent of ICU beds are already full. The 28 de Agosto Hospital is the largest in the state and the main treatment center for the disease. It has been the scene of the most terrible effects of the virus.

Videos taken inside the hospital have shown dead bodies lying in the midst of patients undergoing treatment. The number of people falling sick to the virus is so high and the deaths are so constant that there are reports of ambulances waiting at the hospital's doors until someone dies so that a new patient can be admitted.

"I work in the August 28 ICU, the largest ICU in Latin America, and it's devastated," a nurse reports in a Facebook video. "We don't have any materials, it's one ICU kit per night and we get contaminated with blood, with secretion and there's no other one to change into. I think it's a complete lack of preparation by the government to put us on the front line where everyone needs our services and we're coerced to say nothing."

The strike was a cry of desperation from the workers. In addition to the lack of PPE, nurses in the state have not been paid their salaries, in some cases for up to eight months. "We've been given 40 percent [of salary] for those who work in the ICU and that's not

fair, we're working directly with these cases ... We don't have working conditions, they pay R\$1,500 [US\$ 265] and tell us to shut up."

Over the weekend, a nurse published a video in which he claimed to have been subjected to coercion from hospital administration, after having posted comments on social media in favor of the strike.

"I posted and I reaffirm," he said, "If you don't have the PPE on the table in each sector, the August 28 Hospital will stop. Don't come with this nonsense about the governor providing for us. The governor is providing nothing but for himself, let alone the masks ... The nurses of August 28 are tired of standing still, tired of being humiliated. If you don't have the material we're demanding, it is going to stop!"

On Monday morning the nurses and nursing aides gathered and occupied the street in front of the hospital in protest, holding posters with the demand for PPE and photographs of their colleagues who have died as a result of the coronavirus. They chanted: "Nursing is in mourning!"

A visibly emotional worker, interviewed in the midst of the protest, declared: "There will be a lot of threats, there already are. Our colleagues are already receiving calls to stop this demonstration, that we have to stop this. We don't have to stop it. We have to have courage, as we have now. Do you know why? Because a lot of people are dying, a lot of family. We're leaving here to take the disease into our homes, to our mothers, fathers, brothers. We're outraged, it hurts here in our hearts."

"Look at this, a fighting professional who is gone [she says showing the photo of a colleague who died] ... And I'll be a fighter who may be gone. Because I don't know. I've never taken the test; I've not been seen by a doctor, I'm not seen by anyone. How many times have I

been sick and not seen here? Nobody goes to my house to know if I'm okay or if I'm bad, if I'm dying... Is there a psychologist in my house? No. They want us to kill ourselves here... We're badly paid but we're here giving our love, our lives to help the population. Then there are the privileged ones. The politicians, the managers, the ones with the big positions. We're dying, help the people who are dying in health care!"

The situation exposed by the health care workers, whom the government is trying to suppress, contrasts starkly with official data. To date there are only 304 confirmed deaths in the state of Amazonas. However, in Manaus alone on Sunday, 140 people were buried, and before the beginning of the pandemic the average number of burials was only 30. The municipality states that of these 140, only 10 were confirmed cases of COVID-19; another 47 died from respiratory failure and the rest had no recorded cause of death.

The conditions in Manaus are gradually spreading throughout Brazil, which had nearly 67,000 confirmed cases of the disease and over 4,500 deaths as of Monday. With a lack of any substantial testing, medical authorities recognize that the real number of cases is up to 15 times higher than the official totals.

Over the last two weeks, strikes and protests by nurses have been growing across the country against the deadly conditions to which health professionals are being exposed.

Also on Monday, another demonstration by nurses took place at the other end of the country, in São Paulo, at the Municipal Hospital. Nurses gathered in the morning to protest the lack of PPE and to mourn a colleague who had died of COVID-19.

Criminally ignoring the reality of the pandemic's spread, the Brazilian ruling class is forcing a reactivation of economic activities with the sole aim of ensuring the flow of profits to the corporations and banks. From Maranhão, governed by Flávio Dino of the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), to São Paulo, governed by João Dória, the most right-wing politician of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), Brazilian governments are preparing a premature return to work in the coming weeks, which will cost the lives of thousands of workers, including nurses and other health care professionals who will face a new wave of the sick and dying pouring into ill-equipped hospitals.



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