

Brazilian nurses fired for striking in Manaus over PPE

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Thirteen Brazilian nurses were fired after participating in a strike Monday, along with hundreds of their colleagues at the 28 de Agosto Hospital, in the Amazonian capital of Manaus, which has seen one of the worst outbreaks of the coronavirus pandemic in Brazil. They will supposedly be reassigned to other health care units.

Hospital 28 de Agosto is the largest hospital and treatment center for COVID-19 in Amazonas and is operating under extremely precarious conditions for both patients and health care professionals. The strike was an act of revolt against the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), which has led to widespread illness and the deaths of several health care workers, as well as the failure to pay nurses's salaries, in some cases for up to eight months.

Since the weekend before the strike, nurses were already being threatened by the administration, which was appointed by Amazonas' extreme right-wing governor, Wilson Lima, of the Christian Social Party (PSC). On Saturday, a worker posted an online video in which he claimed to have received calls from the 28 de Agosto management demanding that he delete an earlier post defending the strike.

These threats were not enough to repress the nurses' protest. As one of them said during Monday's demonstration: "We don't have to end [the demonstration], no. We have to have courage, as we are having now."

The same tone has dominated the workers' responses to the firing of their colleagues, posted under the hashtags #naovaonoscalar (they won't shut us up) and #devolvamnossoscolegas (return our colleagues). In one of these tweets, which got more than 700 shares in 24 hours, a hospital employee says: "There is already a lack of employees, because we are contaminating

ourselves and others are dying. The 28 de Agosto administration returned the professionals who were at the demonstration and the temporaries are being fired. Revolt against this management."

A professional from another hospital responded to the post saying: "They are not persecuting people, they are persecuting a class! We will not remain silent."

One of the fired nurses, Tatiane Lima, declared in an interview with G1: "We held the demonstration and we will hold as many as it takes, because our main objective is to provide working conditions for everyone on the team, and give quality care to the patients."

The nurses' struggle arose amid the collapse of the health care system in Manaus, long before the epidemic has reached its peak. The latest government figures, presented on Thursday, record 5,254 cases of the disease in Amazonas and 3,273 of them in Manaus. However, the government itself acknowledges that due to the absence of even minimally adequate testing, the real numbers are tremendously higher.

The same is true for deaths. While backhoes are digging mass graves for thousands of people in Manaus, officially only 312 have died of COVID-19 in the capital of Amazonas. One estimate indicates that in the week of April 21–28 alone, more than 700 people may have died of the disease.

Health professionals account for a significant share of those infected. According to the government, more than 400 have been diagnosed with the disease. But on Monday alone, when a drive-thru testing system was set up exclusively for health professionals, more than 90 of them tested positive for the coronavirus.

The fired nurse Tatiane Lima said about 25 percent of the employees at the Hospital 28 de Agosto were sent home with symptoms of the disease.

Underlying the firing of the strikers is the state

government's effort to stifle any opposition under conditions in which it has been undermined by charges of corruption directly linked to the coronavirus crisis.

Governor Lima is accused of making an overpriced purchase of 28 respirators, which were strangely acquired from a company specializing in wine distribution. The government paid four times the market price for the respirators, using the state of emergency to avoid bidding. In addition, medical associations reported that the devices are only support respirators, inadequate for COVID-19 treatment, which requires mechanical ventilators.

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The Lima government also paid more than 2.5 million Brazilian reais (around US\$500,000) to rent a deactivated private hospital for three months and turn it into a specialized treatment unit for COVID-19. Questions have been raised as to why this money was not used to equip the collapsing public health system.

In his defense, Wilson Lima declared to the TV show *Conexão Repórter* that “everyone is a [victim of exploiters] at the moment... It is the law of the market, the law of supply. Today everyone is looking for it, so it's a price that increases significantly.”

It is possible that Lima's arguments hold some truth. Amazonian workers are most likely the victims of two different crimes, but with the same essential source: government corruption and the profit interests of the capitalist economy, which override the interests of the working masses.

Similar cases of corruption involving the purchase of ventilators and the transfer of funds from the fight against COVID-19 to the private sector have been registered in several states, including São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Santa Catarina. These corrupt governments are all conspiring to organize a “return to work” that will generate new profit streams for the banks and companies and result in the massacre of thousands of workers.

On Monday, a day after a record 140 burials were recorded in a single day in the Amazonian capital, Harley Davidson resumed its production of motorcycles at its plant in Manaus. On Thursday, it was Yamaha's turn. Honda and BMW plan to resume their activities at the Manaus industrial zone on May 18,

when the pandemic is likely to reach its peak.

The coronavirus crisis has made it clear that in order to defend their most basic right to survival, the working class must openly confront the capitalist class. Workers around the world need to unify their struggles against the murderous resumption of economic activities in all countries, which is aimed at benefiting the major shareholders of the giant transnational corporations.

In hospitals, health care professionals need adequate equipment to ensure their safety and infrastructure to treat their patients. Workers need to expropriate the wealth of the super-rich and allocate it to meet public interests; and they need to establish control over production, democratically defining what production is necessary and under what conditions it will be carried out.



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