

Brazil's Bolsonaro demands return to work as health care system collapses

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The rapidly spreading coronavirus pandemic is reaching catastrophic dimensions in South America, with more than 250,000 cases and some 13,000 deaths recorded. In the countries with highest rates on the continent, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador, the contagion and death curves are growing rapidly.

Brazil accounts for more than 140,000 officially confirmed cases and 10,000 deaths. But for weeks, researchers have been warning that the real numbers are far higher and are being concealed by one of the lowest testing rates on the entire continent.

A recent study, published by the University of São Paulo's School of Medicine, points out that the country may have more than 2 million people infected, making it potentially the next global epicenter of the pandemic.

And even this frightening number may be an underestimation of the real toll. The projection made by the researchers is based on the total number of deaths attributed to COVID-19, "although there are also reports of underreporting of deaths," the study states, which would make the real numbers substantially higher.

This situation manifests itself in the collapse of health care systems and morgues in several Brazilian cities, producing a macabre reenactment of scenes recorded in Guayaquil, Ecuador a month ago.

In cities like Manaus, the capital of Amazonas, and Belém, the capital of the northern state of Pará, authorities no longer know what to do with the dead. Images released last weekend show a line of dozens of hearses parked in front of the Legal Medicine Institute (IML) of Belém. With the IML crowded with corpses, families wait for days for the release of bodies of their loved ones, which are in some cases being kept under the sun and rain.

At least four states—Roraima, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro and Ceará—and eight capitals—Manaus, Recife, Rio de Janeiro, Fortaleza, Boa Vista, São Luís, Belém and São Paulo—already have more than 90 percent of their ICU

beds occupied, *Folha de São Paulo* reported in its Thursday edition. A number of other states and cities are moving rapidly in the same direction.

This is the result of the malign neglect of all of Brazil's governments, which failed to prepare for an entirely predictable situation. The deepening crisis has been highlighted by strikes and demonstrations on the part of nurses all over the country, who, besides demanding personal protective equipment, have denounced the extremely precarious conditions in the hospitals.

With the virus beginning to spread in the poor neighborhoods of large cities, the Brazilian working class is faced with even bleaker prospects.

In São Paulo, the country's largest city with the largest number of infections, the 20 poorest districts had nearly a 50 percent increase in cases between April 17 and 24, while in the 20 richest areas the increase was about 20 percent. Brasília, a crowded district of the city with more than 260,000 inhabitants, has the most deaths—more than 100—and no hospital.

The health disaster is merging with growing misery, which has been exacerbated during the pandemic by wage cuts, layoffs and the loss of income by countless thousands of "informal" workers.

Its effects are expressed in numerical terms in the reduction of between 50 percent and 100 percent of the income of most families in the so-called classes D and E, which represent the 58 million poorest Brazilians, with per capita income below R\$500 (less than US\$100) per month. Scenes of workers spending the night in long lines to get emergency aid from the government, amounting to only R\$600, make clear the dimension of the social crisis.

But this catastrophe for the overwhelming majority of the population represents no obstacle to the plans of the ruling class. No consideration of human costs can halt their frenetic drive for profit. In fact, they intend to exploit the economic despair of the working class as a

weapon to force a premature return to work.

Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, who has been painted by the national and international media as a lunatic because of his dismissal of the coronavirus threat, is emerging as a sober and consistent representative of the criminal interests of the entire capitalist class.

Accompanied by his ministers and a group of businessmen, he led a march Thursday across the Praça dos Três Poderes (Three Powers Square) in Brasília to the Federal Supreme Court (STF). He personally delivered an appeal, on behalf of the national bourgeoisie, for the court to immediately order an end to all quarantine restrictions on economic activity throughout the country.

This week, four Brazilian states are entering supposed lockdowns, with very lax rules, allowing a series of economic activities to continue. Even this is too much from the point of view of capitalist interests. The direction should be exactly the opposite, making the containment measures even more flexible.

Bolsonaro appealed to Dias Toffoli, president of the STF, for a review of the decision that gives local governments the authority to restrict activities, stating that the states "have already gone too far." He made it clear that he will not respect any impediment, announcing that he is signing decrees defining a series of industrial activities as essential during the pandemic.

Among the industrialists who accompanied him were representatives of the associations of the chemical, machinery and equipment, construction, electrical and electronic and textile industries, of vehicle manufacturers, foreign trade, and other sectors. They expressed their concern that the worldwide resumption of economic operations, including in Asia, threatened the competitive edge of Brazilian companies. According to them, all the conditions for the general resumption of production in the country would be ready.

Outside, a fascist group supporting Bolsonaro was pressing for the shutdown of both the Congress and the STF. Financed and assisted by cadres within his government like deputies loyal to him in the Congress, they have announced that they are training their members in "techniques of non-violent revolution and civil disobedience, techniques of strategy, intelligence and investigation, organization and logistics of counter revolutionary movements."

In delivering his demand to the supreme court, Bolsonaro made an appeal on the part of the entire ruling class, warning of the danger of an uprising of the working class.

"We have a much greater good than life itself, which is freedom," he said. "If the economic question continues in the same way in which it is going, [we could see] looting, see the popular demonstrations that we've seen in the past in situations not even close to the present one ... The economic measures taken by [the Minister of Economics] Paulo Guedes ... the emergency aid of 600 reais, among others, is keeping the population in a situation of balance, of reason above emotion."

But an open explosion of class struggle in Brazil is inevitable.

The forced return to economic activity will mean the death of thousands upon thousands of people. And the working class knows this. The wildcat strikes that have broken out since March in opposition to the deadly conditions in the workplaces are only an anticipation of the resistance that the working class will mount to the demands of the capitalists.

This resistance will gain an ever-broader character and find support in an international movement of the working class, which in every country is facing the same murderous pressure of capitalist governments for a return to work.

Only the independent political movement of the working class, repudiating any form of nationalism, is capable of defeating the growth of fascism promoted by the ruling class and its state.

The objective situation requires workers to organize themselves to govern society. It is necessary that the immense wealth concentrated in the hands of the capitalists be expropriated and re-directed to finance, in the first place, health care for and the economic survival of the broad masses of working people.

The entire health care system, including the facilities owned by private companies, must be made available to the entire population, and managed by the health care professionals. And the decision as to what production is necessary and under what conditions it will be carried out must be made by the workers themselves.



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