

With Brazil on course to become new COVID-19 epicenter, Bolsonaro escalates back-to-work campaign

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Amid growing evidence that Brazil is becoming a new coronavirus epicenter, fascist President Jair Bolsonaro has escalated a pressure campaign to force local authorities to lift limited restraints imposed on economic activity to slow the spread of the pandemic.

According to official data, Brazil currently has close to 175,000 cases and over 12,000 deaths, with the number of infections growing 6.5 percent a day, as opposed to 3 percent in Italy during the same stage of the virus's spread. According to official data, Brazil trails only the United States in the daily growth of the pandemic, even with all 26 of its states and the self-governing capital, Brasília, already in the second month of partial quarantines.

With the number of tests in Brazil at only 1,600 per million—as opposed to 28,000 per million in the US and similar numbers in other hard-hit countries—such figures have no credibility. The number of infected is likely higher than the 4.2 million estimated on May 8 by Imperial College London, with an unknown number of deaths. In Amazonas, the worst-hit state, where victims are being thrown into mass graves, Imperial College estimates that fully 10 percent of the population is already infected.

Nonetheless, yesterday the government sought to ramp up its pressure campaign against local administrations, which have made limited efforts to slow the pandemic's spread through partial economic shutdowns. In a demagogic appeal to economically desperate small business owners, it further expanded its list of “essential activities” to include barber shops and hairdressers. The decree comes five days after a previous measure declaring all of industry and construction essential services. The decree, issued after a meeting with a handful of businessmen whom Bolsonaro portrayed as representing “45 percent of the Brazilian GDP,” provoked widespread opposition.

The declaration of industry and construction as “essential activities” was accompanied by a “march” by Bolsonaro and the assembled businessmen from the Planalto presidential

palace to the Supreme Court (STF) in a bid to pressure justices to allow the Federal government to override state and city quarantines.

This political stunt was joined by the creation of a fascist encampment in front of the court building in support of the same goal. The leaders of the self-styled “300 of Brazil,” the uniformed group organizing the encampment, with financial support from pro-Bolsonaro business moguls, declared that their objective is to “Ukrainize” Brazil—a reference to the violent fascist-led 2014 putsch in the former Soviet Republic.

In Brazil and internationally, the ruling elite's back-to-work campaign has been justified with the lie that a resumption of economic activity in capital-intensive sectors such as auto and oil production, not to mention the food industry that was never shut down, is safe due to stringent workplace regulations.

The meatpacking industry has become the focal point of the pandemic in many small towns, with more than half of their cases traced to the plants located there. The industry has also been one of the main vectors of the pandemic's spread to the impoverished countryside. In the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, a regional leader in animal derivatives production, the government estimates 16,000 meatpacking workers may have already contracted the coronavirus.

In the state-owned energy giant Petrobras, where operations, including remote offshore oil drilling, have continued, at least 800 workers have already been infected, and another 1,600 are known to have been exposed to the virus.

In Brazil, as in the rest of Latin America and other poor countries only beginning to be affected by the pandemic, infections among workers are further exposing the reactionary claims that only a minority of those infected—and generally only the elderly—have serious complications from COVID-19.

A quarter of the dead in Brazil have had no associated

preconditions and are below the age of 60, while most of those in serious condition are younger than 50. Last week, deaths in the working class district of Brasília, in the country's COVID-19 epicenter, São Paulo, were 10 times higher than those in wealthier districts. The criminal lack of testing hides a much worse situation in the rest of the country's crowded working class areas, where chronic conditions such as diabetes, obesity and hypertension are prevalent among young workers.

Bolsonaro and his nominal opponents in the ruling elite are all preparing for mass working class opposition by building up far-right groups such as the "300 of Brazil," already portrayed by one of the country's leading papers, *Estado de S. Paulo*, as "Bolsonaro's brownshirts." Despite their tactical differences—exposed on the surface by the threat of an impeachment of Bolsonaro based on charges made by his former Justice Minister Sérgio Moro—the ruling class is united in its determination to force workers back into the factories.

None of the country's governors, from former Bolsonaro allies such as João Doria to members of the Workers Party (PT) and other opposition parties in the Northeast, has imposed restrictions on the operations of industry or construction, despite their daily denunciations of Bolsonaro as a lunatic "unfit for office."

In Congress, the Workers Party, Bolsonaro's supposed chief political opponent, has jumped on the back-to-work bandwagon with a "reopening" bill presented by its former health minister, infectious disease specialist Alexandre Padilha. Padilha claims the bill will guarantee "the best practices" of countries that have reopened their economies, concealing the fact that in these countries—Germany and South Korea, for example—such protocols have led to a new surge in cases. A month ago the PT joined in the vote for the government's massive quantitative easing program, amounting to 15 percent of the Brazilian GDP, while less than 5 percent of that amount was directed to provide poverty relief for the poorest 25 percent of the population.

With the mobilization of far-right forces attracting virtually no mass support, the ruling class is relying on the unions to both lie to workers about the safety of going back to work and poison public opinion with chauvinism and anti-Chinese appeals, portraying the reopening of factories as necessary to fight foreign competition and minimize job losses.

As the auto industry leads the way in reopening its factories—which in April produced a mere 1,800 vehicles out of its 400,000 monthly capacity—the unions have dispatched officials to factory gates to convince workers to trust safety measures and even promote the "opportunity" represented by the pandemic of reducing imports from China. The

president of the largest Brazilian trade union federation, the Workers Party (PT)-controlled CUT, wrote that under the "war conditions" imposed by the pandemic, "the first problem is Brazil's position in the global value chains," which "deepens the vulnerability of our industry."

At Embraer, the global leader in the production of medium-range planes, which recently had its merger plans with Boeing frustrated by the latter's insolvency, union leaders hailed the fact that "jobs were being cut in the United States," but not in Brazil.

In a May Day article in the leading Brazilian newspaper, *Folha de S. Paulo*, Ricardo Patah, the president of the second largest trade union federation, the UGT, described the murderous coronavirus pandemic as a "great opportunity for Brazil" to launch an "industrial reconversion" to produce medical equipment.

He advocated policies "to beat Chinese competition and avoid the humiliation" of being relegated to second place by the Chinese in the sale of medical equipment. He blamed China—rather than US imperialism and its trade war—for the global disarray in the provision of medical supplies. Amid Washington's condemnations of China to distract public opinion from its own criminal incompetence in dealing with the pandemic, and the growing drumbeat for war, Patah is providing a "nationalist" cover for Brazil's realignment with US imperialism—much like the pro-Nazi "nationalists" promoted by Bolsonaro and his right-wing big business supporters.

Brazilian workers, engaged in a growing strike wave against pay cuts and the attempt to force them to choose between dying from COVID-19 or starvation, can carry forward their struggle only by means of a conscious break from the straitjacket imposed by the ever-more right-wing unions and their political allies—above all the PT and its pseudo-left satellites.



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