

Latin America emerges as new COVID-19 epicenter

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The Americas have for the first time surpassed Europe in terms of the total number of confirmed coronavirus cases, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced on Wednesday. The total number of officially reported infections in the Western Hemisphere reached 1.74 million, compared to 1.73 million in Europe.

While this shift has undoubted significance, the figures themselves are universally regarded as a gross underestimate of the real spread of the deadly virus, both in the United States and through ever-expanding areas of Latin America.

With five percent of the world's population, the United States accounts for more than a quarter of the confirmed cases across the globe (over 1.4 million) and nearly a third of deaths worldwide (nearly 85,000). There could be no more irrefutable indictment of American capitalism and the criminal incompetence and indifference to human life on the part of the Trump administration and the entire US ruling oligarchy.

But the shift of the pandemic's epicenter from the Old World to the New is also driven by its increasingly uncontrolled surge in Latin America, where the rate of increase in the number of infections is among the highest on the planet.

Fueling the spread of the deadly virus are pre-existing social and economic morbidities that have made Latin America the most socially unequal region on the face of the Earth. A century of oppression and economic exploitation by US imperialism, along with the rule of rapacious national bourgeoisies determined to place the full burden of the region's crisis onto the backs of the working class, have left the working masses of Latin America among the most vulnerable to the pandemic.

The spread of the coronavirus has had region-wide impacts, including soaring unemployment and poverty, bloody revolts among the continent's 1.5 million prisoners trapped in overcrowded jails that have claimed

the lives of hundreds, and a growing intervention of the military into political and social life.

The horrifying scenes that first played out in Ecuador's coastal city of Guayaquil, with bodies left lying in the streets, have been repeated in the Amazonian cities of Manaus, Brazil and Iquitos, Peru and elsewhere. In country after country, health care systems that have been mercilessly cut in the fulfillment of successive structural adjustment programs have been overrun, along with morgues and cemeteries, with mass graves being dug in a number of major cities.

The starkest examples of the uncontrolled spread of the virus and the criminal neglect and indifference of the capitalist ruling classes towards its cost in human life are to be found in the region's two largest countries—in terms of both population and economy—Mexico and Brazil.

Both saw their largest single-day confirmed COVID-19 death toll on Tuesday, 881 in Brazil and 353 in Mexico.

In both countries, these new highs in fatalities are largely of a symbolic character. Everyone knows that the real number of dead is far, far higher.

In Brazil, the 881 deaths represent not the number who died over the previous 24 hours, but the number of deaths that were confirmed, some of them from days earlier. At the same time, the government acknowledges that it still has 2,050 fatalities that are presumed to be from COVID-19 but have yet to be confirmed. On top of this are countless thousands more impoverished Brazilians who have died in their homes in the crowded working-class neighborhoods and *favelas* of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and other cities without any medical care.

A study done at the University of Sao Paulo Medical School estimates that the number of infections is 15 times higher than the official figure; in other words, close to 3 million. There has been barely one-tenth the amount of testing done in Brazil, compared to the US, where testing is still grossly inadequate.

In Mexico, the 38,324 confirmed infections and 3,926 confirmed deaths are a fraction of the real toll of the pandemic. In Mexico City alone, medical authorities have tallied thousands of deaths that have gone unreported by the government. Hospitals are overflowing with COVID-19 victims, unable to admit new patients. Caskets have been piling up outside the city's crematoriums. Mexico has done the least testing among the 36 member nations that make up the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development).

Despite this reality, the governments in Brasilia and Mexico City have joined with capitalist employers to force workers back into factories and workplaces, exposing them to disease and death to further profit interests.

Brazil's fascist President Jair Bolsonaro has expressed the interests of the Brazilian capitalist class and world finance capital in the most brutal fashion, proclaiming all industrial and construction activities "essential services." He joined leading capitalist businessmen in a "march" on Brazil's supreme court to demand that it strike down limited quarantine measures imposed by the states.

While previously derided as a lunatic for dismissing the coronavirus as "a little flu," Bolsonaro has now emerged as the most consistent spokesman for capitalist interests. On Wednesday, he crudely summed up, in a speech to his far-right supporters, the ultimatum being delivered to the Brazilian working class: "The people have to go back to work. Whoever doesn't want to work, then fucking stay at home. End of story."

Meanwhile, 4,000 miles to the north in Mexico City, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador held a news conference Wednesday in which he proclaimed that there was "a light at the end of the tunnel" and a "new normal" was dawning in Mexico. What he meant was that Mexican workers are to be herded back into the maquiladora sweatshops and auto plants on the border, as well as into mining, construction and other industries, after hundreds of workers have already lost their lives to COVID-19.

López Obrador was not only acting in the interests of Mexican capitalists, but on the orders of the Trump administration and the US automakers, arms manufacturers and other US industries, whose supply chains are dependent upon production in Mexico.

Workers in both Mexico and Brazil have already struck and protested against the attempts to force them to keep working even as their co-workers grow sick and die on the job, from the maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juarez,

Tijuana, Mexicali and Reynosa, to the call center and delivery workers across Brazil. The redoubled back-to-work campaign in both countries can only lead to an explosion of class struggle.

In the face of the deadly coronavirus pandemic, the sociopathic and fascistic ex-army captain Bolsonaro and López Obrador—who has been promoted by the international pseudo-left as a "progressive", "left-wing" and even "socialist" representative of the Mexican people—have arrived at the same policy, defending the interests of native oligarchies and international finance capital at the expense of workers' lives.

Nothing could demonstrate more starkly the indispensable necessity for the independent political mobilization of the working class throughout Latin America against all of the existing political parties and institutional structures representing the interests of the capitalist ruling classes and imperialism. This includes not only the far-right governments of Bolsonaro, Piñera in Chile and Duque in Colombia, but also the supposed "left" bourgeois nationalists like López Obrador, the "Bolivarian socialists" of Venezuela and the corrupt bourgeois apparatus of the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil.

The decisive task posed by the coronavirus pandemic and its sharpening of the class struggle is the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class based upon the fight to unite workers across Latin America, together with workers in the United States and internationally, in a common struggle to put an end to capitalism. This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Brazil, Mexico and across the hemisphere.



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