

# Protests by medical workers grow as hospitals overwhelmed across Mexico

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Mexico has seen a growing wave of strikes, roadblocks and other protests by medical workers during the last two weeks in response to COVID-19 outbreaks inside hospitals as they become overwhelmed with infected patients.

This follows an earlier wave of protests by medical workers in March, which involved actions across 12 states and Mexico City, to denounce the lack of any measures by the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to contain the global pandemic and prepare hospitals with the necessary equipment.

At the time, hospital workers were already suffering major outbreaks. For instance, in the General Hospital in Monclova, Coahuila, management asked workers not to wear protective equipment in March to “not cause panic.” By the first week of April, 51 medical workers had been infected and three had died.

A health emergency and lockdowns were not ordered until March 30, more than a month after the first confirmed cases in the country. But the measures taken have been criminally inadequate. Along with Brazil, Russia and India, Mexico continues to see an exponential increase in COVID-19 deaths, doubling every five days. As of this writing, Mexico had more than 74,560 confirmed cases and 8,134 deaths, with a large share of these among medical workers.

According to the latest available count on May 19, the confirmed cases among medical workers had seen a 33 percent increase in a week to 11,394, while 149 health workers have died. This constituted 21 percent of all cases in Mexico at the time, and most were concentrated in Mexico City, the neighboring State of Mexico and Baja California.

The resulting unrest among medical workers is an international phenomenon. As Latin America becomes the new epicenter of the virus, protests by medical workers have spread across Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador,

Honduras in recent weeks, raising the same basic concerns, including the lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), medicines, respirators, testing and personnel.

Yesterday, dozens of workers of the Tlalnepantla Hospital in Mexico City carried out a roadblock to demand proper PPE. Reports on news outlets and social media of such protests have inspired overwhelmingly positive comments from workers in hospitals and other sectors, with many calling for a joint struggle.

Carmen, a nurse in Naucalpan, State of Mexico, writes on Facebook: “Those working in the COVID areas have not received any hazard bonus even though it’s a risk to be in those areas. If the union does nothing for workers; I think it’s best to go on a general strike. I’m tired of so much corruption... I’m on the first line at the 194 IMSS Clinic and I have seen several of my coworkers die over a COVID infection.” Several posts from health workers are calling for a national demonstration on July 1.

On Monday, a group of 15 doctors and nurses carried out a protest at the Vicente Guerrero hospital in Acapulco, Guerrero to demand adequate PPE. That evening, dozens of doctors and nurses at the National Institute for Respiratory Diseases in Mexico City carried out a demonstration and roadblock to protest the lack of personnel and equipment. One protester held a sign: “We are all getting infected to save a few pesos.” Another said: “We want protection, not reutilization.”

On May 19, hundreds of medical workers of the General Hospital of Tula, Hidalgo, in central Mexico, blocked two highways to demand the sanitization of the facilities and security for patients and doctors. On top of the dire working conditions, medical personnel have been at the receiving end of many threats and violent attacks as anger, fear and desperation among patients, families and others find no progressive outlet.

The previous week, hospital workers at the Hospital La

Raza in Mexico City blocked the key internal highway bypass to protest the lack of equipment after several coworkers died of the virus. In Texcoco, State of Mexico, about 50 workers at the General Hospital carried out a roadblock to protest the death of three nurses from coronavirus and to demand sanitization, proper PPE, personnel, timely tests and other urgent measures. National Guard troops and state police ended their protest.

The protests have also spread along the cities on the US border. For instance, in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, doctors and nurses shut down the area for treating COVID-19 patients in the Zone 13 Hospital after three medical workers died from COVID-19 and 40 others tested positive. In Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, which has seen overwhelmed hospitals for several weeks, workers at the Women's Hospital carried out a demonstration to protest dangerous conditions and demand a 30 percent raise for hazard pay.

After decades neglecting public health, the federal and state authorities have been scrambling in recent weeks to buy respirators and personal protective equipment, while a handful of the unfinished buildings have been quickly retrofitted to accommodate COVID-19 patients. However, this is proving to be too little, too late.

Next to Turkey, Mexico has the lowest health care budget as a percentage of GDP in the OECD countries—5.5 percent—but enormous shares of the budget for certain departments are not even spent.

López Obrador's supporters had denounced that his predecessors left 326 abandoned hospital construction sites, which would require \$421 million to conclude. However, out of the \$800 million budget for health care infrastructure and equipment approved by Congress in 2019, his administration left \$510 million unused.

At the same time, the López Obrador administration increased the military budget 7.9 percent to \$6.5 billion, more than the entire Health Ministry budget, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

This has left the country entirely unprepared to deal with the pandemic. By May 19, Mexico City hospitals reported the highest occupancy rates in the country. In the entire metropolitan area, which includes part of the State of Mexico, 55 of the 60 hospitals for COVID-19 patients were full, representing an 80 percent total occupancy rate. Only 33 percent of beds for patients needing intubation were available.

This data, however, might not only be incomplete, but it could be misleading when considering the capacity to treat patients safely. Dr. Iván Juárez Ramírez, a

pneumologist in Mexico City, explained on Twitter that, while 10 percent of patients who get pneumonia need a ventilator, “the number of ventilators is known to be scarce, and we don't have the full data, but it's important to have the data to prepare.” Moreover, specialized doctors and nurses with proper training, equipment and working spaces are also necessary, he explains “since a ventilator is a producer of aerosols and will contaminate everything around the patient.”

During the last week, major outbreaks in hospitals have been recorded in new localities as the virus hotspots become more widespread. In poorer and more remote states, respirators and equipment were transported to the larger cities where the initial outbreaks occurred, but now these regions are being overwhelmed with cases. This happened in Tapachula and Comitán in the southernmost and impoverished Chiapas state, where hospitals got full and began turning away COVID-19 patients this week.

Amid a general shortage of equipment, medicines, personnel and infrastructure, the government has dismissed warnings by the World Health Organization and local epidemiologists and opposed mass testing, systematic contact tracing and quarantines. In other words, medical staff are being forced to respond blindly to an avalanche of cases fueled by the gradual lifting of restrictions.

With the official reopening of the economy on June 1, the López Obrador government has made clear its willingness to sacrifice the lives of tens of thousands of workers in order to resume the capitalist extraction of profits from the working class and continue its austerity program to service interest payments and provide tax benefits to the financial oligarchy.



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