

Brazilian Trotskyists issue call for working-class action against pandemic

What will be the cost of implementing this program? Who will pay for it?

Statement of the Brazilian Socialist Equality Group (In Solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International)

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This statement of the Brazilian Socialist Equality Group has also been posted in Portuguese.

With tens of thousands of new cases being reported every day, Latin America has become the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as June began, had already infected over 6,000,000 people and left some 375,000 dead worldwide.

Brazil, with more than half a million confirmed cases and some 30,000 reported deaths, is responsible for half of the region's numbers. With the virus spreading rapidly, Brazil already has the second highest number of cases and fourth highest number of deaths of any country in the world, according to official figures. In the last weeks, Brazil has registered more daily deaths than the United States, the leader in COVID-19 fatalities so far. Even before the drive to reopen the economy, death projections for Brazil ranged from 68,000 to 220,000.

But such numbers have no credibility. The government admitted more than a month ago that it did not even know how many tests had been carried out, which means a total loss of control over the pandemic. This is the explanation for the frightening reports coming from Manaus since April, with the health system collapsing in the city just 33 days after the first known infection in the state.

According to Brazilian and international researchers, the actual number of cases is up to 20 times higher than the official count, already close to 8 million, which also explains the more than 600 percent increase in hospitalizations for respiratory problems in the country compared to the same period last year. And that's before the arrival of the dry season in much of the country, known to aggravate hospitalizations for respiratory illnesses, accentuated by the increase in criminal deforestation.

The number of deaths, in turn, may be more than 50 percent higher, with the government itself admitting that at least 11,000 suspected COVID-19 deaths can never be confirmed. Increasingly frequent are reports of people dying at home, unable to be seen in crowded hospitals.

As a consequence of the explosive growth of the virus, the country's precarious health system is collapsing in all regions. In a number of states and capitals, ICU beds have already reached their limit. In COVID-19 treatment centers, the most basic requirements are lacking: personal protective equipment, respirators, sufficient number of professionals and even water. At least 150 nurses have already died under these conditions, and 17,000 have already been infected. The massive dismissal of sick health workers places an even greater burden on frontline workers.

The danger of the rapid increase in infection rates is being heightened by the premature and irresponsible campaign to "reopen the economy" and "get back to work." The suffering of health care workers is an anticipation

of what will be seen in many workplaces.

The Bolsonaro government, as well as governors and mayors across the country, are reopening businesses and factories. States from north to south are "easing" and, in some cases, lifting all restrictions on economic and recreational activities.

Bolsonaro's open campaign for the infection of the entire population of Brazil, which months ago differentiated the fascist president from the other political authorities and from the official public opinion propagated by the media, is already being embraced by all these sectors.

By promoting economic reopening, all of them ultimately adhere to the idea that "the coronavirus is like a rain in which everyone will get wet." They justify their own negligence and the incompetence of their governments with reactionary theories about "herd immunity"—that is, that the disease will be contained once the majority of the population has been infected.

São Paulo Governor João Doria, praised by all political forces and the press as the voice of reason and science against Bolsonaro, is an example of the criminal efforts of the ruling class in this direction. His reopening plan allows for the resumption of nonessential activities in industrial cities like São José dos Campos and Jundiaí, where the weekly growth rate of the disease is 100 percent, higher than that registered in the most affected countries which were forced to do the opposite: close down such activities. In general, cities in the interior of São Paulo have rates of infection up to four times higher than the capital.

The aim of this campaign is to boost the return of companies' profit flow. Without a careful, scientific and rigorously applied plan to implement a safe return to work, there will be a huge increase in the rate of infection, resulting in serious illness and more deaths.

Over the past few weeks, work has resumed in a number of sectors with great potential to become new centers for the outbreak of infections among workers and their families.

Vehicle manufacturers, which had stopped production in the name of low market demand—not the risk posed to workers—have resumed operations all over the country. Their reopening is also dragging back into activity the auto parts producers that have, in general, more risky working conditions.

Meatpacking plants, shut down by health authorities after proven to be real COVID-19 breeding grounds were reopened with the help of state governments and the courts. In Rio Grande do Sul alone, more than 500 slaughterhouse workers tested positive, another 2,500 had symptoms, and about 30,000 were exposed to the disease in the state's 30 plants that registered outbreaks of coronavirus.

The reopening of shopping malls, street stores, restaurants and even soccer stadiums that is being implemented in large cities increases the risk for workers in the service and transportation sectors. Cities like Belo Horizonte, which have reopened trade in the past week, have seen queues at bus stops and crowded transportation, threatening passengers, fare collectors and drivers.

App delivery workers, who struck and protested against inadequate security equipment and a huge overload of underpaid work during the pandemic, conditions accentuated by the greed of companies to extract maximum profit from the calamity, will have to face crowded streets and increased contact with the population. Call center workers, who also staged nationwide strikes during the pandemic, are at serious risk of massive contamination, working in closed environments that concentrate hundreds.

Recently released data from the construction industry, which continued operating during the pandemic, are a grim sign of what workers in all sectors will face in the coming days. In São Paulo alone, at least 57 construction workers, along with their wives and children, have died of coronavirus. No less than 28 percent of them had already had contact with the disease, detected by laboratory tests, and without knowing it may have transmitted it to their colleagues and loved ones.

The Brazilian Socialist Equality Group (GSI), in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), opposes this irresponsible campaign for a return to work and reopen nonessential workplaces while the pandemic continues to spread. To prevent more people from becoming infected, getting sick and dying, it is necessary to create a new form of organization in the workplaces that supervises and imposes safe working conditions.

To this end, the GSI advises workers to form rank-and-file work safety committees in all factories, companies and workplaces. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, should formulate, implement and supervise measures necessary to protect the health and life of workers, their families and the wider community.

We cannot “return to normality”! The pandemic exposes the urgent need for a complete restructuring of production processes, distribution and economic activity in general. The lives of workers and their families do not have to be sacrificed in the name of corporate profit and the private wealth of the billionaire oligarchy.

In response to the demands of Bolsonaro, the politicians of the big bourgeois parties and the media for the “reopening of the economy,” it is necessary to ask: “Whose economy? The economy of Joesley Batista (the corrupt billionaire who heads the JBS transnational meatpacking company), of the businessmen who marched with Bolsonaro to the Supreme Court (STF) to ask for the reopening, and of the richest 5 percent of the population? Or the economy of the working class, which produces all of society’s wealth but whose salaries—of those who still have a job—barely suffices till the end of the month?”

The Bolsonaro government’s response to the pandemic

The deadly situation workers face is the product of a deliberate class policy. Epidemiologists have been warning for decades that a pandemic was not only possible, but inevitable. These warnings have been ignored. Instead of investing in viral and bacterial research and building hospitals, Brazilian capitalists and international investors demanded the dismantling and privatization of public health infrastructure.

Bolsonaro, with his criminal response to the pandemic, is a consistent representative of the interests of the ruling class. The same basic sociopathic outlook guided the response of the world bourgeoisie to the

coronavirus crisis. It was the explosion of workers’ revolts in Europe, with wildcat strikes in the automotive industry, that forced the adoption of policies of closing schools and economic activities.

The initial concern of governments and the ruling class around the world was to protect profits and not life. In the United States, the unanimous passage of the CARES Act by Democrats and Republicans authorized the multitrillion-dollar rescue of Wall Street and the corporate elite without restrictions. Every day, more than \$80 billion is channeled to Wall Street by the US Federal Reserve, a figure that far exceeds even the measures taken after the 2008–2009 financial crisis.

This policy was replicated by the Brazilian Congress. A corporate rescue package of 700 billion reais (US\$130 billion) was approved, of which less than 15 percent was directed to providing the miserable aid of 600 reais (US\$112) for three months to the self-employed and unemployed. By a vote of 505 to two, the House of Representatives approved the “war budget,” which allowed the Central Bank, for the first time in history, to buy corporate junk bonds. Now, the minister of “austerity,” Paulo Guedes, has already revealed that the government will enter as a partner to avoid bankruptcy of airlines and save their profits.

The greatest advocates of such policies, along with Bolsonaro and Guedes, were the parties of the so-called “opposition” led by the Workers Party (PT) and supported by the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) and the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), whose leaders cynically stated that opposing the rescue of large companies would mean blocking aid to workers.

Although the Bolsonaro government is leading the campaign to reopen the economy, it is supported by the entire political establishment. On the one hand, the government is mobilizing extreme right-wing forces that are waging a feverish struggle against quarantines, ignoring all the risks to which the workers are exposed, with only one end: to confuse the population, including the owners of small businesses that have been ruined, and to defend the interests of the big capitalists for a return to work.

All the pseudo-scientific arguments put forward by these fascist groups for this purpose have already been disproven by reality. It was said that a warm climate would generate a deceleration of contagion, that the virus would be dangerous for only a minimal part of the population, and that there would be a need for mass contagion to contain the virus. Now they promote untested cures.

But the reality is that extreme poverty has made some of the country’s hottest regions the most vulnerable, and the poor living conditions of the Brazilian working class mean that, even though it is younger than in other severely affected countries, no less than half of the country’s population is in the so-called at-risk group.

As for “herd immunity,” it would require no less than millions of deaths. Even in the hardest hit country, Spain, with the highest rate of infection in the population, only 5 percent of the people have antibodies, and there’s no certainty about being safe from a second contamination. Even if that were true, “herd immunity” would require the sacrifice of at least 10 times more people.

The same can be said for supposed of quack cures like hydroxychloroquine—promoted by both Bolsonaro and Trump—and the promise of imminent vaccines, whose safe development can take years. This deliberate attempt to generate false hope is directed at the sole purpose of driving people back to work to produce profits.

On the other hand, the so-called opposition tries by other means to reach the same end. The governors of the PT and PCdoB are promoting a rapid reopening of their states and, through the unions that their parties control, are trying to convince the workers that the companies responsible for thousands of accidents annually have adopted safe conditions for a return to work.

Through the growing campaign for an “industrial reconversion” during

the pandemic, the unions and parties of the so-called “opposition” show their loyalty to the upper bourgeoisie and the military. Their reactionary defense of the “competitiveness” of Brazilian industry and the open attack on the “dependence” on goods produced in China express the need for Brazilian capitalism to accommodate itself to the growing US trade war against China. Like the Bolsonaro government, they repeat the equally reactionary speeches of Donald Trump and the US political establishment that China is a threat to the “West” and to an unhindered US imperialist leadership.

The nature of the novel coronavirus

The interests of two classes stand in direct opposition to each other. The aim of corporate executives and managers, acting in the interests of Wall Street investors, is to increase profit and extract the largest quantity of work in the shortest amount of time. For workers, it is a question of maintaining a safe environment that ensures their health and safety.

Rank-and-file safety committees must be organized to demand and implement measures to protect workers’ lives. These measures must be based upon a scientific understanding of the nature of the disease.

The coronavirus is highly contagious and spreads through liquid droplets when people talk, breathe, cough or sneeze. People are infected when virus particles enter their mouths, noses or eyes through direct transmission or after touching a surface where the particles have fallen.

Scientists have shown that the pathogen is also present in tiny airborne particles, known as aerosols, which can be suspended in the air for longer periods and travel much further than the recommended six feet of social distancing. The distance that the virus can travel is also affected by how loud someone is speaking.

Large factories where thousands of workers labor close to one another on an assembly line are particularly vulnerable to becoming vectors for the rapid spread of the disease. “The plant is an environment where it’s loud and people have to shout at each other to be heard, there could be a lot of virus being transmitted through the air,” Julia Heck, an epidemiologist and Adjunct Associate Professor and researcher at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Studies show that an infected person can be contagious two or more days before showing any symptoms. Therefore, the measures being implemented in many workplaces, like daily temperature taking and handing out substandard facemasks, are inadequate. By the time someone has a high temperature, they could have spread the disease throughout the plant.

After attending a choir practice in Washington state in early March, 52 out of 61 people were diagnosed with COVID-19 and at least two died, even though they had not shaken hands or stood close to one another. In the American meatpacking plants, controlled by the same companies as in Brazil, it is widely suspected that the virus, which has infected more than 12,000 workers and killed more than 50, is spread through high-pressure air-conditioners that shoot airborne particles through an enclosed area.

In addition to the danger workers face when they congregate to enter and leave plants, or during meal and bathroom breaks, workers on an assembly line, in a warehouse or in a retail business are handling the same tools and moving products. The virus can remain on surfaces for varied times: metal (five days), glass (up to five days), plastics (2–3 days), stainless steel (2–3 days), cardboard (24 hours) and aluminum (2–8 hours).

The tasks of the basic work safety committees

What will be the function of the basic work safety committees?

They will represent and fight for workers’ safety, opposing both company management and the profit principle. They will draw up detailed regulations and standards that must be monitored and complied with. Where conditions are violated, work must be stopped.

The central objectives of these committees shall be:

1. Controlling work hours and line speeds. In every factory, business, office and workplace, rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with a panel of trusted scientists and health experts, must determine working conditions and production rates and schedules. Working hours and line speeds must be reduced to allow for sufficient rest, health care monitoring and regular deep cleaning.

2. Guaranteeing personal protective equipment. Each worker should be properly fitted with the highest quality facemasks (including N-95, N-100 or P-100, according to conditions) as well as gloves, face shields and other necessary PPE. These must be regularly changed out, to make sure they continue to provide maximum protection. Workers should also undergo training for donning and removing PPE.

3. Ensuring safe and comfortable working conditions. Of concern is not only the amount of protective equipment. To be safe, workers must be able to wear protective equipment for extended periods of time. All plants must have adequate air conditioning and ventilation, particularly with the beginning of summer, that is organized in such a way that it does not contribute to the spread of the virus.

4. Enforcing regular testing. All workers must have access to regular testing for the coronavirus. Rapid tests approved by the National Health Surveillance Agency and pushed by governments even in pharmacies have already been proven ineffective, with up to a 70 percent error rate. Workers must decide which tests should be used. Production schedules must be organized to accommodate testing and contact tracing. If a worker tests positive, the facility must be closed for at least 48 hours for deep cleaning.

5. Demanding universal health care and guaranteed income. Any worker who tests positive must be isolated and provided immediate medical treatment, while his or her full income is guaranteed. All workers who came in contact with the infected workers must be quarantined and regularly tested, while receiving their full income. In addition, if anyone’s family members report symptoms, the worker should be tested and isolated until cleared by a medical professional—with no loss of pay.

6. Ensuring the distribution of information. To preserve their safety, workers must have access to all information about infected workers so that appropriate measures can be taken, including halting production if necessary.

7. Ensuring job security. No worker should be victimized for calling attention to unsafe working conditions or refusing to work. Any worker who has been fired for speaking out against unsafe conditions must be rehired with full back pay.

The working class cannot be made to pay for ensuring its safety. The costs necessary to ensure safe working conditions, as well as to provide health care and full income for all workers, must be borne by the corporations and the capitalist ruling elite.

The maintenance of a safe working environment is an immensely complex task that can only be achieved through a scientific and rational plan, in active consultation with health care experts in every workplace.

No confidence can be placed in corporate management to secure workers’ safety. Nor can workers rely on the trade unions. Only a small minority of workers are unionized, and the unions that do exist function as little more than arms of corporate management. They support the return to work and are collaborating with the companies to enforce it.

This is why workers require their own organizations. In every factory, workplace and office, workers should organize and elect trusted and respected workers who will represent them. They should utilize all available tools, including social media, to reach out to workers throughout their industry and in other sectors to coordinate their activities and share information.

A critical task of these committees is to organize workers internationally. In every country, there are a growing number of strikes and job actions by nurses, meatpacking, transit, auto and other workers demanding safe conditions.

The struggle for socialism

Mobilizing society's resources against the pandemic requires scientific planning, which at every point comes into conflict with the pursuit of private profit and individual wealth.

The GSI insists that the fight against the pandemic is inseparably linked to the workers' struggle against the ruling class—the corporate and financial oligarchy—and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is, therefore, a struggle against capitalism and for socialism, the restructuring of society based on social necessity and not private profit.

This is by its very nature a global struggle. The pandemic is a world problem and can only be fought through the international collaboration of workers and all those committed to defending human life. In the fight against the pandemic, workers must reject all efforts to divide them along racial, ethnic and national lines. In particular, the campaign of the Bolsonaro government, in alliance with the ruling class in the United States, to blame China for the crisis and to divert attention from its own criminal role must be opposed.

The pandemic has exposed the reality and bankruptcy of the capitalist system, which is a barrier to human progress and the very survival of the human species. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic will produce enormous social opposition and resistance.

A socialist political leadership in the working class must be built! The Brazilian GSI is fighting to build that leadership as part of an international movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The Socialist Equality Group and the *World Socialist Web Site* will give all possible assistance to workers who want to create rank-and-file safety committees. We urge all workers to study the program of the International Committee and make the decision to join us.

Please contact us and receive updates on the pandemic and working-class struggles. We also ask workers to submit reports on conditions in their workplaces. All requests for anonymity will be honored.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact